

Pirates of *The Emerald Dawn*

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Fandom: DC Comics (Green Lantern)

Characters: Hal Jordan/Kyle Rayner

Rating: NC-17

Words: 33,981

Summary: Elseworlds. Kyle Rayner is captured by the notorious pirate Captain Hal Jordan.

I. Captured!

“And who have we here?”

Kyle Rayner looked up at his captor from where he knelt on the deck of the ship. He'd heard stories of pirates all his life, had even played at being a pirate as a boy, but once he got old enough to know better, he'd hoped he'd never meet one. And now the most notorious pirate that sailed the seas was standing before him.

Captain Hal Jordan had a reputation that was known even in the upper crust of society — there was hardly a lord who hadn't lost an investment because of the man. Jordan had once been an Officer in His Majesty's Navy, which only served to rub salt into the wounds of his noble victims.

The stories had always painted him a monster more than a man. It was rumored he'd made a pact with the Devil, ensuring he couldn't be caught. But the man that stood in front of Kyle was no monster or demon. No wild, matted hair. No tattoos on his face. No pidgin English. Not even an eye patch or a peg leg. What stood before him was a handsome, well-groomed man with intelligent eyes. Not what he expected at all.

“Tell him your name, boy,” a brawny, red-haired pirate behind him growled, giving Kyle a shove so hard that he fell forward, nearly going face-first into the deck.

“Careful with our guest, Mister Gardner,” the Captain admonished in a cultured voice. He knelt down and touched Kyle's cheek. “We wouldn't want to hurt this pretty face, would we?”

Kyle gasped and jerked away from the touch. The pirates broke out in laughter and jeers. Kyle's stomach twisted. The stories—passed around after the ladies had left the room—had also said the Captain was a sodomite.

“What is your name?” the captain asked.

“Kyle Rayner,” he ground out. “Son of Lord Aaron Rayner.”

Jordan studied him a moment, then looked up at the red-haired man. “Take him to the *Dawn* and put him in my cabin.” Jordan stepped back and Kyle was hauled to his feet by the red-haired pirate and a stocky man with a large scar down the side of his face.

Kyle panicked. “If you're looking for a ransom, you're out of luck. My father won't pay to get me back.” He cringed. Great, he just gave the captain reason to kill him. “Just take the cargo and leave us.”

Jordan ignored him. He turned to the other pirates and pointed towards the door to the hold. "Let's see what cargo we have here."

Kyle spared a glance back at the rest of the men from his ship. "What about the crew?" he shouted at the Captain.

Jordan turned to look at him. "They'll be taken care of," the captain said with a dismissive wave of his hand. Kyle didn't have a chance to say another word as he was hauled over to the rail.

The scarred man went first, swiftly climbing down the rope ladder to the boat below. The red-haired sailor gave Kyle a shove. "Go!"

Kyle hesitated, contemplating fighting back. But what good would it do him? There was nowhere to go. They were somewhere in the Atlantic, a month away from England. Anything he did would most likely result in his death. He swung his leg over the rail and clambered down the ladder.

The boat rocked precariously when he stepped into it, and the other sailor grabbed his arm and pulled him down. "Sit! Don't move!"

Gardner hopped down after him, seemingly oblivious to the rocking of the boat. "Off we go, Vath" Gardner said. The scarred man took up the oars.

Kyle spared a glance back at the ship. The crew was lined up along the far rail while Jordan's sailors ransacked the hold. He could still hear their shouts and the sound of wood scraping on wood as they moved crates and barrels. His hands gripped the wooden bench tightly. He wondered what would happen when his father refused to pay a ransom. Would Lord Scott pay it for him? He'd already done so much for Kyle already. Kyle hunched over and swallowed hard. Or maybe Scott would be glad to be rid of him, too...

They reached the pirate ship and the two sailors grabbed the ropes that were thrown down to secure their boat with quick twists around the brass fixtures. "Welcome to the *Emerald Dawn*," Gardner said snidely. He turned and went up a rope ladder. Kyle took a deep breath and followed.

A black man was waiting for them on the deck. "Who is this?"

Gardner shrugged. "Seems the captain took a fancy to him." He grabbed Kyle's arm and pulled him forward, across the deck to steps that led below. Kyle went down first and paused at the bottom, squinting in the dim light. A few sailors stared back at him and he dropped his eyes.

The dark-skinned man followed and waved an arm at the sailors. "Back to work!"

Gardner hopped down next to Kyle and gave him a shove toward the cabin at the back of the ship. "Keep moving." Kyle went through the door into the Captain's cabin.

The cabin was just as unexpected as the captain, revealing a man of refined tastes. It was richly decorated and wouldn't have looked out of place in an English manor house, except for the plethora of crates and trunks that lined the walls. Fine furniture, delicate draperies, and silver and china on the table. Under the large windows, there was a padded bench that ran the length of the stern. To the left was a smaller cabin that was the captain's sleeping quarters. It was here that Kyle was unceremoniously deposited onto a large feather bed, face first. His arms were jerked back and his hands bound. When Gardner finished tying the ropes, Kyle rolled to his side to look at the men. "Can I sit up?"

"Don't see the point," Gardner snickered. "The captain's going to want you arse-up anyway," He elbowed his companion. "Right, John?"

John glared at his companion. "Shut up, Guy." He stepped forward and helped Kyle sit up against the headboard.

"Fine, you take care of the little prince. I'm just glad the captain found himself a piece of arse. He's been eyeing me up a bit too much lately." Guy wrinkled his nose and left the room.

John rolled his eyes at his fellow sailor, then turned to Kyle. "Do you need anything? A drink? Food?"

Kyle shook his head, surprised at the man's kindness. "No, nothing. Thank you." He wriggled in his bonds and gave his captor a crooked smile. "Except to be let go?"

John shook his head. "I'm sorry. I cannot do that."

Kyle nodded. It had been worth a shot. But maybe the man was in as bad a situation as he was on board this ship. "Are you a slave?"

"I was a slave in Carolina," John said flatly, "Until Captain Jordan offered me an escape, gave me my freedom. I am in debt to him for that."

Kyle understood the last sentence to mean, *so I can't help you against the captain's wishes*. "I was going to Carolina, to Charles Towne," he said absently. Also as an escape. He looked up at John again. "What will happen to the crew of my ship?"

"You will have to ask the captain," the man said. And then he left, pulling the door closed behind him.

Kyle looked around the small room. The massive bed took up most of the space. It was soft—even softer than the mattress he'd had at home. Captain Jordan certainly liked his luxuries. A small table stood next to it, a candle in a holder nailed to the surface. A wardrobe was on the other side of the room. Kyle leaned forward so he could pull at his bonds, but they were tight and he only succeeded in rubbing his wrists sore. And where would he go even if he could get free? He sighed, resigned to his fate. The sailor named Gardner had hinted that the Captain fancied him. He went cold at the thought. Even if the Captain wanted a ransom for him, there was nothing to prevent Jordan from using him first.

He heard shouts above him, then the ship gave a sudden lurch and heeled over slightly. They were moving. Kyle got up from the bed, feet spread wide to stay upright on the shifting vessel, and pressed his nose to the porthole. But his ship was only a dark blur in the thick glass and he couldn't see if anyone was alive on it.

He fell back on the bed. He was as good as dead. If Jordan asked for a ransom, Kyle was certain his father wouldn't pay it. A pirate's sword was much more efficient than an American colony for getting rid of an unwanted son. If it wasn't for the intervention of Lord Scott on his behalf he'd probably be dead already by the hangman's noose or rotting away in a filthy prison. He was closer to Alan Scott than to his own father, had grown up with Scott's children, Todd and Jenny. Kyle sighed. Even after everything that happened, Alan had helped him as much as he could. Because of Todd. Because Alan loved his son and would do anything to protect him.

Kyle heard the door to the main cabin open and he tensed. Well, here it comes. Rape at the hands of a pirate. The latch on the bedroom door rattled and Kyle turned his face into the wool blanket. He hoped it was over with quickly.

“Are you up for dinner, Mister Rayner?”

It wasn't a question that Kyle was expecting. He rolled over and looked at the man. The captain stood in the doorway, arms crossed, looking at him expectantly. Kyle rolled back over. “I'd rather you just got this over with, Captain Jordan.”

“*This*, Mister Rayner? And what might *this* be?”

“Well, from what you said... Then Gardner said ...” He swallowed hard. “You're planning to rape me, aren't you?”

The captain snorted. “You will have to learn not to take everything Mister Gardner says seriously. And he has a deplorable tendency to be vulgar. I can assure you that I am not in the habit of raping anyone. I prefer my partners to be willing participants.”

Kyle allowed himself a moment of relief, then posed the question that had been weighing on his mind. “Why are you keeping me?” Kyle asked, looking over his shoulder at Jordan. He struggled half-heartedly against his bonds. “You probably won’t get a ransom for me.”

“Yes, well, that is something to discuss over dinner.” He reached into his coat and pulled out a small knife. Kyle sucked in his breath. The captain shook his head and smiled. “For the ropes, Mister Rayner. You can’t eat if you’re tied up.”

Kyle nodded and the captain helped him sit up. “I’m sure you realize escape is not possible,” Jordan said as he sliced through the rope. “All that’s out that door is my men and the open ocean.”

The rope came free and Kyle rubbed his wrists. They were raw from the hemp and sported bloody abrasions in places from his struggles. The captain took Kyle’s hands in his own and turned them over. “We’ll have to take care of those wounds.”

Jordan’s hands were rough against Kyle’s smooth skin, rough from hemp ropes and sea salt and hard work. But they were also large and warm, and Kyle couldn’t help but wonder what they’d feel like on—

He jerked his hands back and looked into the pirate’s brown eyes. “What did you do to my crew?” he asked coldly.

Jordan gave a small laugh. “No matter what you’ve heard, Mister Rayner, I am not a crazed murderer. At least not against the innocent.” His face darkened a moment, then he smiled again. “I sent the crew on their way—minus the cargo, of course. But they have enough provisions to continue their journey or return to England.” He gestured towards the main room of the cabin. “Now, would you care to join me for dinner and then we can discuss your future?”

Kyle stood and went out into the main room. The table had already been set for dinner. It was simple—fish and spiced potatoes—but still better than what he’d been eating aboard Lord Scott’s ship. His stomach growled to remind him of that.

“First things first,” Jordan said. He pulled something out of a drawer, then came over to Kyle. “Have a seat.”

Kyle sat in one of the chairs at the table. Jordan settled in the chair next to him and put the items he had retrieved from the drawer on the table: an amber bottle and what looked like handkerchiefs.

“For your wrists,” he said and uncorked the bottle. The pungent smell of vinegar hit Kyle’s nose. “I apologize for this.” He ran his fingers lightly over Kyle’s wrist.

Kyle sucked in his breath at the touch. He actually welcomed the sting of the vinegar, to drive away the feeling of feather-light touches. The captain expertly wrapped each wrist in a cotton handkerchief. “They should feel better tomorrow.”

He got up to put the bottle away and Kyle studied the man. Captain Jordan was turning out to be *nothing* like the stories he’d heard. “What are you going to do with me?”

Jordan took the seat across from Kyle. “Eat first. Then we’ll discuss what I might do with you.”

The captain winked at him and Kyle’s cheeks burned. He lowered his gaze, concentrating on the meal set out before him. The food was as good as it smelled, and the wine could have come from his father’s own cellars. Kyle ate in silence, not sure what to say to the man who held him captive.

When the meal was done, Jordan rang a bell. Two men came into the cabin and cleared away the dishes, leaving glasses of port behind. Jordan took a sip of his, then looked at Kyle. “And now, you would like to know what I am going to do with you?” He shrugged and took another sip of port. “Nothing, Mister Rayner.” He gave Kyle a smug smile. “Unless you want me to.”

Kyle felt his cheeks go warm again, but he didn’t break his gaze with the captain this time. “Nothing? Then why all this? Why take me from my ship?”

Jordan drained his glass and set it on the table. He looked up at Kyle. “I know why you were traveling to Carolina, Kyle.”

Kyle frowned. Nobody but Alan Scott knew why he was on that ship. “And why is that?” he asked, fighting to keep his voice steady.

“Because *our sort* is not welcome in polite society. Or in His Majesty’s Navy.” Jordan leaned back in his chair. “I know you had an ‘improper’ relationship with Lord Scott’s son. And I also know Alan wants to protect both you and his son. And I know that your own father has disinherited you, that he threatened to turn you in for being a *degenerate* to save his own reputation.”

Kyle’s jaw clenched. “And how could you know this?” he asked through gritted teeth. “Did Lord Scott—?”

“He fears for you,” Jordan said. “He is an honorable man, one of the few truly honorable men amongst a House full of pompous, backstabbing arses. But no matter how hard one may try to keep a secret, knowledge of such things does become known in certain circles. He had to take measures to protect his son. And you. And I owed him a favor.”

“So he knows about this?”

“He planned it, Kyle.”

Alan had sent him off, knowing this pirate would kidnap him? “And what is your ‘favor’?” Kyle asked angrily.

Jordan shrugged. “I can offer you something better than a lonely existence in a backwater colony.”

“Something better?” Kyle blinked at the man. He was handsome, certainly, but Kyle wasn’t about to become the captain’s whore just to buy his safety. “That’s quite arrogant of you to think so, Captain.”

Jordan laughed and shook his head. “I meant an escape, Kyle. I can take you anywhere in the Americas. Or perhaps even a place on my ship, with no law and no church, so you don’t have to hide who you really are.”

“And that’s all?”

“Yes, Kyle. That’s all. I’m not going to rape you.”

“Then why were you making *suggestions* up on deck? Calling me ... ‘pretty’?”

“For show, Mister Rayner. Your crew now believes you have been captured and held against your will by a bugging monster. You can disappear and I will be blamed.” He gave Kyle a cheeky grin. “Of course, if our time together leads to other things, then ...” He coughed. “Well, we’ll see what happens. But it wasn’t an exaggeration or a lie when I called you pretty. I do find you a desirable man.”

He reached out to touch Kyle’s cheek, but Kyle jerked his head away. “You’ve got a ship full of men. Why would you want to bother with me?”

“None of the crew is willing and, as I said Kyle, I do not desire the unwilling.” He chuckled. “No matter how often Guy claims that I’m looking at his arse.”

He couldn’t help it. Kyle snorted at this little jab at the blustering, red-haired sailor.

“I sympathized with your plight, Kyle, because it so closely resembled my own once,” Jordan continued. “I came from a good family. Made an officer in the Navy. Youngest man to get a command. I was one of the best ... maybe *the* best. But none of that matters if they discover you enjoy male companionship. And then most everyone you know turns on you and makes you out as some sort of villain. Because of my connections, because of friends like Lord Scott, because I was the best bloody captain they’d ever had, I was allowed to resign without punishment. Encouraged to take a wife—my uncle even tried to make an arrangement with a

friend of his, Captain Ferris, for me to marry his daughter. But being on a ship is more important to me than a quiet, domestic life of pretending I'm something I'm not." He shrugged. "So here I am. Captain again, even though it's to a band of pirates. But I'm still the best captain on these seven seas."

Kyle bit his lip. Jordan was arrogant, but it was disturbingly endearing. "And if I refuse your offer?"

"I'll drop you off when we reach Havana, or wherever you wish to go, with enough coin to get you started. But you have a few weeks before we reach port to decide what you want."

Kyle nodded. What did he have to lose? He couldn't go home and Carolina had never appealed to him. "All right."

* * *

The Captain had to return to the deck, so Kyle was left alone after dinner. His sea chest had been retrieved from the cargo ship and brought to the captain's cabin. It contained some clothes, a few personal treasures, but not much else because he hadn't had much notice to pack when Alan had arranged his escape. So Kyle spent the time poking around the items that filled the room. Crates full of wine. Chests full of cloth. And in the corner, underneath a tapestry ... Kyle gasped and pulled out the easel. Now, if only ... there. A roll of canvas cloth, a bundle of varnished wood for frames, and a box of paint and brushes. He sat down on the floor to look at the jars of paint. They were still good. He inhaled the smell of turpentine, which reminded him of happy hours in his room, painting and sketching. Art was his first love, which had never sat well with his father. But his mother had encouraged him, had bought him paints, had paid for an art tutor out of her own small fortune. He sighed. As much as he missed her, he was glad she hadn't lived to see him disinherited and disgraced.

"Find something you like?"

Kyle startled and looked up. Captain Jordan was smiling down at him. He'd been so engrossed in the paints, he hadn't heard the man come in.

"I'm an artist," he said, poking through the brushes. They looked unused. Brand new. He wondered where they had been going when the captain had taken them. "That's how my father found out about Todd and I, actually. I had painted him ..." He smiled at the memory, of Todd stretched out in the meadow, the afternoon sunlight setting his naked skin aglow.

Hal crouched down next to Kyle. “They’re yours if you want them. I don’t even know why I kept them around. I couldn’t sell it at our usual ports. Not many painters in Tortuga, apparently.”

He started to stand and Kyle reached out to touch his hand. “Thank you.”

Jordan nodded and stood up. “I just came to check on you, but I see you’ve found something to amuse yourself. I still have duties on deck, but I’ll send John with some water so you can wash up before bed.” And with that, he turned on his heel and left.

John returned soon after, giving Kyle a nod and a friendly smile. He lifted the pitcher in his hands. “The captain asked me to bring you some water.” He poured the water into the bowl on the dresser.

Kyle approached him. “Things are quite orderly on this ship.”

“The captain expects it,” John said. He set the pitcher down and handed Kyle a cloth. “Discipline is a priority for an efficient crew.”

Kyle nodded. He supposed it was a leftover of Jordan’s days in the Navy. Which led to another question. “Why do they tolerate him? I mean ... I’ve heard stories. Even pirates will turn on a bugging captain. Why do *you* tolerate him?”

“Because it is wrong to judge a man on only one aspect of him,” John said. “The captain didn’t assume I was ignorant because of the color of my skin. So why should I care if he takes his pleasures differently than me? He is a good man. An honorable man. He treats us fairly—far better than any other captain I have heard of—and he pays us well and feeds us well. He takes care of our families, including the widows and orphans. We have no reason to turn on him.”

“This is ... nothing like I expected a pirate ship to be like.”

John smiled broadly. “The *Emerald Dawn* isn’t any ordinary ship.”

Kyle frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

John shook his head. “You will have to ask the captain.” He nodded. “Good evening, Mister Rayner.” Then he turned and left.

“Ask the captain...” Kyle sighed. This was a very odd ship indeed.

He peered into the small looking glass over the dresser and grimaced. His hair had been a mess since he first set sail from England, always coming loose in the wind. He yanked out the pigtail at the nape of his neck and ran his fingers through the

dark strands. No matter what he did, he looked like he had just come in from a windstorm.

He took off his shirt and found some soap in a dish. It would feel good to be mostly clean again. He missed the luxury of a bath and wondered if he could get one in Havana. Or did he even want to go to Havana?

He looked in the mirror again. There were dark circles under his green eyes and they didn't come from being kidnapped by handsome pirate captains. There was no guarantee he'd be any more welcome in Havana, or the colonies, or the lands in this New World that belonged to France or Spain. Not unless he resolved to be alone, or found a woman willing to have a marriage in name only. Neither choice appealed to him.

But here on this ship he would be welcome, apparently. It would be dangerous, yes, a life aboard a pirate ship, but considering he risked the hangman's noose—or a slow, wasting death in a prison—just because of who he loved, what difference did it make if he were hanged as a pirate instead? And he wouldn't be alone.

Captain Jordan was handsome and desirable. He inspired loyalty in his men. He showed mercy to the crew of the ship he had robbed. And he had an incredible arse.

Kyle snorted at the stray thought that had invaded his mind. *Less than a day and I'm already falling for the man?*

He dried off with a cloth, then considered what to do next. The cabin was already growing dark and he didn't know where any flints were to light the lanterns. Might as well go to bed.

Which presented him with a question he'd forgotten to ask: there was only one bed. Was he expected to share a bed with Captain Jordan?

He left his shirt off and climbed onto the large bed. His heart was pounding as he pulled the sheet up over him and lay listening for the captain's return. Todd was the only person he'd ever been with, and most of that had been passionate kisses and awkward groping. Until one day, Todd had pushed Kyle back on the grass and taken his cock in his mouth. It had been the most incredible experience of Kyle's life. His cock stirred at the memory and he reached down to loosen the buttons on his trousers. He missed Todd, but he knew it wouldn't have lasted. Todd had found other companions on his trips to London, and Kyle's jealousy had been the cause of many arguments between them, had finally driven them apart. And then Kyle's father had found out about them and it had all come to an end anyway.

And now Captain Jordan was interested in him.

Kyle's cock stirred again and his fingers brushed down the length through the fabric of his breeches. Captain Jordan, with his deep brown eyes, auburn hair that tucked neatly at the back of his neck except for one stray curl over his right eye, skin tanned light brown by the ocean sun — Kyle had the urge to paint him, rich browns on a sea of green.

He realized he was thrusting against his hand and rolled over, trying to ignore the tightness between his legs. He admitted he was attracted to Jordan. Desired him. So maybe he'd let Captain Jordan have his way with him. If nothing else, maybe he'd have a good fuck or two before they reached Havana and he left this whole experience behind him.

He took a few deep breaths, then rolled onto his back again. Now the man only had to show up. What was taking him so long? He sighed and closed his eyes.

2. The Emerald Dawn

When Kyle opened his eyes again, morning light was coming through the porthole. He sat up, blinking, trying to remember where he was. *Right. The pirates. He was in the captain's bed.* He'd come in here to wait for Jordan, but had fallen asleep. And apparently the captain had not come to bed.

Kyle got up and peeked into the main cabin. The captain was at the dresser, carefully shaving. There was a hammock strung between two beams on the other side of the room. Jordan looked over at him. "Good morning, Kyle," he said. "Breakfast will be arriving soon." His eyes lingered for a moment on Kyle and an appreciative smile formed on his lips, then he turned back to the mirror to finish shaving.

Kyle looked down. He was without a shirt and the fly of his trousers was wide open, framing the morning wood pushing at his underclothes. He escaped to the small room that contained the head, the ship's version of a privy that opened over the ocean.

The food arrived before he had finished, and he took the chair across from the captain. Breakfast was as simple as dinner—bread and jam with tea. Kyle suspected Captain Jordan ate whatever the crew ate.

"Sleep well?" Jordan asked.

Kyle nodded and bit into a slice of strawberry-covered bread. Not the finest bread in the world, but at least there were no weevils.

"It should be an easy day today," the captain said. "John's figured a course for us that should knock a few days off the trip if the weather holds. He's brilliant with the instruments and charts." Jordan shook his head. "When I met him he was a slave, hauling nets on a fishing boat. The *Dawn* had become stuck on a sandbar after we lost old Mr. Ganthet, our navigator, and John helped us out. He can read the weather unlike any man I've known, and I think he has the whole night sky mapped out in his head." Jordan shrugged. "So I offered to free him and take him with us."

Kyle stopped in mid-bite of the bread. "Doesn't that make him a runaway slave? With a death sentence?"

"Not when his owner is dead at the hands of pirates and all hands are believed lost." Jordan laughed. "Now, don't look at me like that, Kyle. Only the filthy pigs who owned them ended up feeding the crabs. I took the rest of the slaves to Hispaniola."

“Except for John.”

“I gave him a choice, Kyle. John made the decision to stay on this ship of his own free will.”

Kyle remembered his conversation with John, how loyal John was to this captain. “John said this wasn’t any ordinary ship.”

“No, it’s not,” Jordan said. “She’s got quite a history behind her. Among other things. What did he tell you?”

“Nothing. He said I had to ask you.”

Jordan nodded, studying Kyle as if weighing carefully what to say. “First I need to show you something.” He got up from his chair and got a key from the desk where he kept the charts. He knelt in front of the trunk beside the desk and opened the large lid, then lifted out a bundle of black cloth. He carried it to the table and it made a dull thump when he set it down. There was something heavy in the cloth. “Tell me what you see, Kyle.” He pulled back the cloth.

Kyle squinted at the unexpected glare. Green light filled the cabin, emanating from a green lantern. He couldn’t see any flame, only the glow from its center. *How did it stay lit, locked away in a trunk? Why didn’t it set the cloth on fire?* He squinted at Hal. “Where does the light come from?”

Jordan grinned. “So you can see it?”

“Yes, I can see it! It’s nearly blinded me!”

Jordan wrapped the heavy cloth around the lantern again, then carried it back to the trunk and locked it back inside.

“What is that thing?” Kyle asked.

“It’s the heart of the ship,” Jordan said, turning to look at Kyle.

“The heart?” Kyle laughed. “Since when does a ship have a ‘heart’?”

“This ship does.” Jordan sat back in his chair. “This ship was around long before me. When I first came on board, I was hired as first mate. The captain was a man named Abin Sur, a French-Arab who sometimes worked as a privateer. When he was lost, killed in a deal gone wrong in a back street of Casablanca, the ship passed to me.

“Abin Sur had captured this ship from the British near Barbados and renamed her *Emerald Dawn*. But the lantern is even older than the ship, brought aboard from

Abin Sur's previous ship, also named *Emerald Dawn*. He'd inherited that ship, along with the lantern, from *his* former captain."

"That still doesn't explain—"

"The lantern is old, Kyle. Very old. It's said to be from ancient China. And ... magic, I suppose you'd call it."

Kyle raised his eyebrows. Well this was a new development — Captain Jordan was insane. "Magic?" he asked skeptically.

"It protects the ship, Kyle. I don't know how. I can't even begin to explain it. But as long as we are on this ship, nothing can happen to us beyond minor injuries. We can go up against a British man o' war and the worst injury a man will have is a fractured toe from dropping a cannon ball on his own foot! I'm sure you've heard I made a deal with the Devil?"

Kyle nodded.

"We *are* getting help, but it's not the devil or demons that's helping us, Kyle. It's the lantern."

"Maybe the lantern is ... um ..."

"Evil?" Jordan laughed. "If it's the Devil's work to protect my crew, then I will gladly take evil."

Kyle pondered this. There had been all those stories, about how Jordan couldn't be caught, about the unnatural ability of the man and his crew. Maybe there was truth to it. He looked up at the captain. "Why did you ask if I could see the light?"

"Only those with honor, with loyalty, with a strong will, can see the light." Jordan waved up towards the deck over their heads. "Every soul on this ship can see it. It's a requirement for joining my crew, just as it had been for Abin Sur and for all the captains before him."

"And if I hadn't seen it?"

Jordan smiled. "I would have told you how the ship certainly is extraordinary. That she is the fastest frigate that ever sailed. That she is made of the finest English oak and can stand up to any assault. How my crew are highly skilled and can defeat any foe. And then I would have sent you on your way when we reached a suitable port."

Kyle raised his eyebrows. "Even if I had agreed to your offer?"

Hal grinned. “Well, I had a feeling I had nothing to worry about.” His face grew serious. “You accepted exile to protect your former lover, Kyle. To protect his family. To preserve the ‘honor’ of your own family, though your father is not worthy to lick your boots. Not many would have done so willingly. Only a man of great honor, loyalty and will.”

“I don’t know if I’m any of those things. I just didn’t know what else to do.” Kyle sighed and stared at his hands, folded carefully on the table. He felt more like a coward for running away. He wasn’t anything like Hal Jordan, the brave captain. Or John, the loyal navigator. Or any of these men, who would die for a captain who was considered an outcast of society, who could get them imprisoned or hung just by associating with him.

Warm fingers touched his chin, turning Kyle’s face to look into the captain’s brown eyes. Kyle hadn’t even realized Jordan had moved to the chair next to him.

“The lantern says otherwise, Kyle,” he said softly. “It’s never wrong. And it doesn’t lie.”

Kyle shivered and let out the breath he was holding. Heat coursed through his body and his heart pounded. Without even thinking about it he leaned towards the captain. Jordan smiled and met him halfway.

The kiss was gentle, warm. Kyle sighed and opened his mouth, letting Jordan explore with his tongue. Then the captain pulled back to look into his eyes. “I take it you are now ‘willing’, Kyle?”

“It would seem so, Captain Jordan,” Kyle said, barely a whisper.

Jordan chuckled and reached up to brush a strand of unruly hair from Kyle’s brow. “I think you can call me Hal, Kyle.”

“Hal,” Kyle said, testing the name on his tongue. And speaking of tongues ... He leaned in and returned the favor to Hal. He put his hands on Hal’s thighs, letting them slide over firm muscle to—

Hal grabbed his hands and pulled back. “We’ll have to wait on that,” he said with a smile.

Kyle sat back, trying not to look disappointed, but Hal smiled and tapped Kyle’s bottom lip. “No pouting,” he admonished. He stood up and grabbed his coat from the back of his chair. “You’re welcome to come out on deck, if you like,” Hal said while pulling on his coat. “Or you can stay here and play with your paints.” He fastened the buttons of his coat and grabbed his hat, then gave Kyle a wink before heading out the door.

Kyle leaned back in his chair, looking at the door that the capt—*Hal* had just disappeared through. He touched his lips, still wet from the kiss. It was going to be a long day, waiting for Hal to finish his duties. Kyle rubbed his hand over his face, frowning when he felt the stubble on his chin. Well, he could at least try to make himself presentable.

He retrieved his own razor from his trunk and braced himself in front of the mirror. He'd had his fair share of cuts his first few weeks at sea, but now he could get by with only the occasional nick. And once the stubble was gone and his hair tamed into a pigtail and a fresh shirt retrieved from his trunk, he looked at the door and took a deep breath. He still didn't trust the crew, no matter what John said. They might turn a blind eye to their captain's predilection, but would they be as forgiving about him?

It appeared every head turned to look at him when he stepped out on deck. He tried to find a familiar face—Hal or John, or even Guy. But they were all strangers looking at him. An enormous man who resembled the drawings Kyle had seen of American natives crossed his arms and unashamedly stared at him as if measuring him up. Kyle swallowed and stepped further onto the deck.

“Kyle!”

Kyle turned at the voice that came from behind and above him. Hal was on the deck over the cabin, standing at the wheel. John was beside him, a brass instrument in his hand. Guy was staring down at him, arms crossed.

Hal gave the helm over to Guy, then trotted down the stairs and headed for Kyle. He clapped Kyle on the shoulder, then looked around at his crew. “Men! And lady,” he said, bowing his head toward the left and Kyle was surprised to see there was indeed a woman on board, a woman with soft sienna skin and short black hair. “I have an announcement to make.”

All eyes fixed on the captain. Kyle looked at Hal wide-eyed. *Lord, was Hal going to tell everyone that he'd agreed to—?*

“Mister Rayner has seen the light.”

The change in the crew was instantaneous. No longer did they look at him with suspicion. Now they were smiling, many of them touching their foreheads and bowing in respect to him.

The huge native man came over and grabbed Kyle's hand, enveloping it in his own and nearly shaking Kyle's arm out of his shoulder. “Welcome, *poozer!* You're one of us now!”

They lunched with the “officers” of the crew and Kyle was able to learn more about the other people he had found himself with.

Guy, Kyle learned, was First Officer. He’d been childhood friends with Hal and they had both dreamed of going to sea. Guy had followed Hal up through the ranks, until their final posting in the Royal Navy. Their friendship and loyalty was so strong that Guy had resigned and followed his friend into piracy.

The large man who had congratulated Kyle was named Kilowog. He was a native of Spanish Florida. As a child he’d been captured by British traders and enslaved, first in Barbados and then in the British section of Hispaniola. There Hal had found him, mistreated by his master, and had purchased his freedom. Kilowog was Bos’n, charged with keeping ship and crew in good working order.

Salaak was a Persian, the ship’s Quartermaster, in charge of supplies and keeping order on board. He had served under Abin Sur and had stayed with the ship when Hal had taken command. “And he’s stingy with the rum,” Guy muttered to Kyle.

The woman was the ship’s doctor. Soranik Natu had also been a slave, taken along with her cousin from their home in the jungles of Brazil by the Portuguese when she was a child, their entire village wiped out. They had ended up in Cuba, where Hal’s crew had freed them. “She’s a wonder at healing,” Hal said, and the woman lifted her chin proudly.

Once lunch was over, Hal leaned back in his chair and looked around at the crew. “The ship is yours, Mister Gardner,” he said. “I’ve been sadly neglecting our guest.”

The crew cleared away the dishes without a word, though Guy threw Kyle a smirk as he turned to leave. Then John pulled the door shut after them, and Kyle and the captain were left alone.

Kyle gripped the back of the chair. He was feeling lightheaded and weak-kneed and it wasn’t just because of the wine. His heart was racing again and his breath was coming fast.

“Are you having second thoughts?” Hal asked, coming over to stand next to him.

Kyle shook his head. “No. No second thoughts.” He let go of the chair and turned to Hal.

Kyle tipped his head to the side to kiss Hal. Their arms went around each other, pulling their bodies together. Pressed between them, their hard cocks rubbed together. Hal grabbed Kyle’s arse and ground against him. “Bed,” he murmured in Kyle’s ear.

They broke apart and Kyle staggered after Hal, drunk with desire. Hal was already shedding his clothes when they reached the huge bed.

Kyle's fingers refused to work and he fought the buttons on his shirt. His hands were shaking—he didn't know if it was from nervousness, excitement or both. He dropped his shirt on the floor and looked up at Hal. The captain was already naked, his cock jutting proudly from a cloud of dark curls. Kyle's hands stopped on his trouser buttons, he was so distracted by the sight. He wanted more than anything than to run his tongue down Hal's belly, to take his cock in his mouth.

“Need some help?” Hal reached out and grabbed the top of Kyle's trousers, pulling him forward. He sat on the bed with Kyle standing between his knees.

Hal's fingers did quick work of the trouser buttons, then he pushed the fabric down over Kyle's hips. Kyle kicked off his boots and stepped out of the puddle of wool.

Hal put his hands back on Kyle's hips, holding him in place. “Beautiful,” he murmured. He leaned forward and ran his tongue over Kyle's belly, exactly what Kyle had been wanting to do to him.

Kyle tipped his head back, eyes half closed, and moaned. The fingers digging into his hips, the wet warmth on his skin, was going to drive him over the edge on their own.

Then Hal slid his hands back, gripping Kyle's arse, squeezing as he pulled the Kyle closer. He pressed his mouth in the small hollow inside Kyle's right hip and sucked at the smooth skin there.

Kyle threaded his hands into Hal's hair, as Hal's tongue worked circles on his hip. His cock was pressed against Hal's cheek and he wanted him ... wanted him to move over ... to take him ... “Yes oh yes oh yes,” he chanted when he got his wish.

Hal sucked him hard, falling into a rhythm, and Kyle watched himself thrust into Hal's mouth. He put his hands up to grab onto the beams just above his head, to brace himself as his release built. His body exploded, heart pounding, arms and legs tingling. And then it was over and he clung to the beam, his knees too weak to hold him up.

Hal let the cock slide from his mouth and looked up at him. He gave Kyle's arse a squeeze and smiled. “Need to sit down?”

He did, he really did, but he had something else he wanted more. He let go of the beam and grabbed onto Hal's shoulders to brace himself as his knees gave out. On the way down he stopped for a kiss—he could taste himself on Hal's lips—and then he continued his journey down, going to his knees between Hal's thighs.

Hal smelled of musk and sweat and wool, and tasted much the same—bitter, salty and sweet all at the same time. Kyle explored him with his fingers, pushing back the foreskin to reveal the silky head. He kissed the tip, dipping out his tongue to taste the bead of semen. Then he swallowed Hal's length and was thrilled to hear Hal's satisfied grunt.

He pushed Hal's thighs farther apart and Hal leaned back on his elbow while his other hand dug into Kyle's hair. Kyle lifted his face slightly as he worked, and saw that Hal was watching him through half-lidded eyes. He sucked hard and let his tongue dance over soft skin. A deep moan of pleasure was the response, along with a quickening of Hal's thrusts and Kyle had to pull back to keep from gagging. But he never let up his rhythm and soon Hal's breaths were quickening and his hand was wrapped painfully in Kyle's hair. He groaned and thick warmth flooded Kyle's mouth.

Hal let go of Kyle's hair and collapsed back on the bed. Kyle swallowed and pushed himself up—his legs were thankfully steady again—so he could kiss his way up Hal's body, tongue darting out over sweaty skin. He got onto the bed as he worked his way up to the crook of Hal's neck.

“Nice,” Hal murmured. He sighed and caressed Kyle's cheek.

They shifted around so they were lying next to each other on the bed, Kyle's cheek resting on Hal's chest. Kyle's eyes drifted shut as he was lulled by the beat of Hal's heart, by the feel of Hal's fingers brushing through his hair. It was hard to believe that just yesterday he'd lain on this bed and thought the man was going to rape and murder him, and now he was lying relaxed and sated in Captain Jordan's arms.

* * *

The clang of a bell and the pounding of heavy footsteps on the deck above woke him. Kyle blinked and looked at Hal. Hal was awake, his arms folded under his head. “Shift change,” he said lazily. He rolled on his side and smiled at Kyle.

Kyle did the same, then scooted closer to kiss him. His cock was hard and ready again, and from the feel of things against his belly, so was Hal.

They kissed for a few moments, mouths working, tongues tangling. The man was the best kisser and Kyle could have spent the rest of the day like this. But he wanted more.

He rolled towards Hal, trying to push him onto his back, but Hal pushed back. A short struggle, then Kyle relaxed and let Hal roll him onto his back and move on top of him. *So he had to be in control?* Wasn't surprising, considering his position

as captain. And his arrogance. Kyle didn't care either way, he was just as happy to receive as to give pleasure.

Hal's hand moved between Kyle's legs, gently squeezing his balls for a moment before he grasped Kyle's cock and stroked him as they kissed. Kyle thrust into Hal's hand. It was good when he did it himself, but even better when someone else touched him. And Hal knew what he was doing, squeezing and stroking in all the right places. Kyle whimpered when he felt his body tingle and then he was thrusting hard into Hal's hand, spattering semen between them.

He sighed and melted into the mattress, but Hal wasn't done with him yet. "Now that I've got you good and relaxed ..." He knelt between Kyle's thighs and pushed Kyle's legs up.

Hal spit into his hand and rubbed it over the tip of his own cock. Then he spit on his fingers again and touched Kyle's arse. Kyle startled at the contact.

"Have you been fucked before?" Hal asked.

Kyle nodded. "Only once." And it hadn't been particularly pleasant. They had been rushed, afraid of being discovered, and Todd had gotten impatient with him. It had hurt like hell.

Hal's fingers probed Kyle's entrance and Kyle made himself take deep breaths, trying to relax. *There's no reason to be nervous*, he told himself. *Nothing to worry about*.

Hal's fingers were replaced by his cock, pushing into him. Kyle sucked in his breath, remembering the pain from the last time. Hal stopped and touched Kyle's thigh. "Kyle?"

He took a deep breath, willing the fear away. "I'm fine."

This time he fought the urge to flinch when Hal pushed into him. It stung and Kyle tightened his jaw and grunted as Hal filled him, and then Hal sighed and grasped Kyle's calves. "Good?" he asked. Kyle nodded and Hal smiled. "Good," he repeated and began to move.

Kyle let himself be overwhelmed by the sensations: of Hal pumping into him, the sweat on his skin, the rough wool beneath him. Kyle ran his hands over Hal's back, feeling the muscles move as Hal thrust. "Kyle..." Hal breathed, panting in his ear. Kyle watched his face as Hal gasped and thrust harder, grunting between gritted teeth as he released. He gave a final shudder and collapsed on top of Kyle.

There was a bead of sweat on Hal's brow, and Kyle reached up to wipe it away. "Need to sit down?" he asked, echoing Hal's question from earlier.

Hal laughed. "I'm certainly going to sleep well tonight." He gave Kyle a quick kiss, then rolled off of him. They shifted so that Hal was spooned behind Kyle, his arm holding him close. "It's been a long time for me," Hal murmured into his ear. He kissed Kyle's neck and cuddled closer.

"It's really been that long?" Kyle asked. He thought for sure someone like Captain Jordan would have had his pick of lovers.

Hal chuckled. "I spend most of my time on this ship. And when we're in port ... well, I tend to be picky about my lovers. But if every man was as beautiful as you, I'd probably never leave shore." He sighed sleepily against the back of Kyle's neck. "I'll have to thank Alan for sending you to me."

A rush of warmth went through Kyle's body from Hal's appreciative words. He twined his fingers with Hal's, a smile on his face, and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

When Kyle woke again it was night and Hal was gone.

He rolled out of the bed, wincing from his sore arse, and looked out into the main cabin. Hal, dressed in his breeches and loose shirt, was just finishing setting the table for dinner.

Kyle turned back to retrieve his own breeches and shirt before going into the cabin.

"I was just going to come wake you," Hal said. Then he frowned. "Did I hurt you?"

Kyle shook his head and gingerly lowered himself to his chair. "No, just a bit sore."

"I can ask Soranik to look at you," Hal said. "Maybe she has a salve—"

Kyle shook his head, horrified. "I couldn't!"

Hal chuckled. "You have nothing to worry about from our lady doctor. She is quite down-to-earth about such things." Hal poured the wine. "Among her people it's not unknown for men to be lovers. Or women, for that matter."

Kyle sighed and drank his wine. He wished his own country could be as understanding as Soranik's. "I'll be fine, Hal."

After dinner, they fell into each other's arms again. Clothing was shed and they sank down onto the large bed. They lay side by side and Kyle took the initiative this time, his hands exploring Hal's body. He was a beautiful man, hard muscle and tanned skin, and Kyle resolved to taste every inch of it before they reached Cuba.

He rolled over to kneel between Hal's thighs, to bend down and kiss his hardening cock. Kyle was almost completely hard himself, and one hand explored lower to Hal's entrance, to get him ready...

Hal jerked and squirmed away from the touch. "No, Kyle." He took Kyle's hand, bringing it to his lips to gently kiss Kyle's fingers. "I'm sorry, but I can't. It's not to do with you. I've never allowed it from anyone. It's just ..." He frowned.

Kyle raised an eyebrow, remembering the short wrestling match previously. "Because you have to be in control?"

Hal smiled wryly and nodded. "You know me too well already." He reached up to grasp the back of Kyle's head, to pull him down for a kiss. "I hope that doesn't disappoint you."

It did, but Kyle wasn't going to let it ruin the evening. "No. I don't mind." Besides, he could consider it a challenge to convince Hal to change his mind.

Hal smiled and in a swift movement he pushed Kyle on his back and rolled on top of him. "I'm sure we can find other ways to please each other."

Kyle groaned when Hal thrust against him, their cocks side-by-side and pressed between their bellies. Hal entwined his fingers with Kyle's, holding his hands down, and bent to suck on Kyle's neck.

Kyle met the thrusts with his own, grinding his hips up, squirming as Hal's tongue teased the sensitive skin of his neck. *Yes yes yes yes ...* He could feel the heat pooling in his belly, between his legs, his body tingling with the coming climax.

"Ah, Hal!" he shouted when his release came. Hal thrust harder against him, grunting with the effort, and then he climaxed, shouting into the pillow.

They lay for a moment, breathing hard, bodies slick with sweat and semen. Hal let go of his hands and raised himself up on his elbow to look at Kyle. His dark brown eyes studied Kyle's face. "You are a lovely one," he said softly and touched Kyle's lips gently with his fingers before kissing him.

3. Part of the Crew

“I want to do something. A job. On the ship.”

Hal raised his eyebrows and set down his cup of breakfast tea. “A job?”

“I don’t want to be useless baggage, Hal.” Hal had returned to his duties on the ship after their day of pleasure and Kyle didn’t feel right about lounging in the cabin with nothing to do while the rest of the crew worked. Plus he was bored. The seas had been rough the past few days, so painting was out of the question and reading the books he’d found stashed in a trunk while the ship rocked made his stomach churn. “I want to pull my weight.”

“I don’t know, Kyle,” Hal said. “You’ve never worked on a ship before.”

Kyle frowned. “Do you think I can’t? Because I’m a soft and spoiled nobleman?”

Hal shook his head and reached across the table to touch Kyle’s hand. “No, I don’t think you’re soft,” he said, looking into Kyle’s eyes. “It’s just that if you’re inexperienced with a ship, it can be dangerous and ...” Hal sighed and sat back in his chair. “All right. If you’re going to pout at me like that, then I’ll ask Kilowog what you can help with.”

After breakfast, they approached the large man up on deck. Kilowog eyed Kyle skeptically. “What do you know how to do, boy?”

“I can ...” Kyle thought. What was he good at? What had he done back home? He’d spent most of his time going to parties and drinking himself stupid, like any other young nobleman. He looked around the deck, at the men mending ropes and stitching canvas and ... “There,” he said, pointing at the men tarring the ropes that ran from ship to masts. “I can paint.”

Hal looked skeptical. Kilowog laughed outright. “You know that’s a messy job?” the big man asked. “You’ll be getting your hands dirty.”

Kyle looked at Hal, then back up to Kilowog. Maybe it was the perfect job for him, to prove to them he was capable. “I can do it.”

“All right,” Kilowog said. He clasped Kyle’s shoulder in his huge hand and guided him over to the crew working with the tar. Now that he was standing over the buckets, the pungent smell made his eyes water, and Kyle regretted volunteering for the job. “Isamot, show Mister Rayner how to tar down the ropes.”

“Certainly, Mister Kilowog,” a wiry man said with a wide grin.

Kyle looked up at the men scampering between the lines above him, slathering tar onto the rope. His stomach lurched and he swallowed hard. “Do I have to go up there?”

Kilowog chuckled and clapped him on the back. “Not yet. We’ll get you started down here first.”

Kyle wrinkled his nose, still looking up at the men above him. He didn’t think he’d ever be able to get up that high without tossing his lunch.

Isamot Kol turned out to be a pleasant man. “Just like this,” he said in a thick Slavic accent, showing Kyle how to move the brush over the thick hemp fastened at deck level. “You must cover it completely or we must do it all over again.”

Kyle did as he was instructed, slathering the thick tar into the hemp, blinking to fight the dizziness from the smell.

“After this, we must plug the leaks below with oakum — tar and hemp,” Isamot said cheerily.

“Looking forward to it,” Kyle mumbled. He looked over his shoulder, but Hal and Kilowog had already moved away, heads bent together in discussion. Well, at least they didn’t feel the need to watch over what he was doing. That was a good sign.

“You are not used to this kind of work, yes?” Isamot asked.

“No,” Kyle said sharply, expecting to have to defend his presence. “But I’m quite capable of the job.”

“Ah, no. You misunderstand. I do not question your ability. Just ... making conversation?” Isamot lowered his eyes and shrugged. “I do not meet any noblemen where I come from.”

“Sorry,” Kyle said. “It’s just ...” He lowered his head close to Isamot’s. “The captain’s not sure I can handle this,” he whispered.

Isamot’s brows furrowed. “So why do you have to work? We thought you and Captain ...” The man’s cheeks went ruddy. “You know ...” He made an unmistakable gesture with his hands.

Kyle felt his own cheeks go warm. “Yes. We are. But I wanted to pull my weight. Be a part of the crew.”

Isamot smiled broadly. “That is good. This is good crew. Many here came from bad places, servants and slaves. But here, everybody is equal. Everybody work together. Everybody friends. Watch.” He turned his face up to the man working

above them. It was the scarred man who had taken Kyle from Scott's ship with Guy. "You work too slow, Vath!" Isamot yelled, waving his brush towards the man. "And you need more tar or ropes will rot!"

"Shut up, Kol," the man growled back.

Isamot turned back to Kyle. "See? Back home, he would have jumped down here and cut my throat in an instant! Our peoples have been fighting for ... centuries! But here, we are best of friends!"

Kyle heard the snort from Vath. But the man didn't outright object to Isamot's statement.

* * *

"Well, Kilowog was right about getting my hands dirty."

Kyle tossed the cloth on the table and held up his hands. The whorls on his fingers were stained from the tar, as were his fingernails. The olive oil that Isamot had recommended had gotten most of it off, but he figured it didn't matter anyway—they'd just get covered in tar again tomorrow. He smiled and turned to look at Hal. "My father would have a fit if he saw my hands looking like this."

Hal took Kyle's hands in his own. "Then you can be proud of them," he said and kissed the tips of Kyle's fingers. Kyle touched Hal's cheek, moved closer to kiss him, but a knock on the door interrupted them.

"The others are here for dinner," Hal murmured into Kyle's ear. "We can continue this later." He stole a quick kiss and went to the door.

The officers came in, followed by the sailors carrying dinner, a stew of vegetables. Kyle tried not to be put out by the intrusion—it was he who had come along and interrupted the routine of the ship after all.

After dinner, John laid a map on the table and pointed to a group of islands. "We'll be in the Turks & Caicos in a week, maybe ten days," he said.

Hal nodded. "Then we'll stop for a day or two. Gather some provisions. And have a bit of shore leave."

The officers all smiled broadly at the news. "I'll inform the crew," Salaak said, rising from his seat. The other officers followed him out, sailors came in to clear away the dishes, and then Hal and Kyle were finally alone again.

"Come here," Hal said. He sat in a chair and pulled Kyle down to straddle his lap. "I've been wanting to do this all day." He deftly opened Kyle's shirt and reached

inside to run his hands over Kyle's chest, his thumbs pausing to tease Kyle's nipples until they hardened. Kyle sighed and gripped Hal's shoulders as he watched his lover explore his body, Hal's eyes intent on what he was doing.

Hal slid his hands down to Kyle's waist and pulled him close so he could lay kisses over Kyle's chest, his lips brushing through the sprinkling of dark hair. Then his hands gripped Kyle's arse, squeezing his buttocks. "I want you," Hal whispered against his skin. Kyle stood up and Hal followed, but rather than heading for the bed, Hal grabbed him from behind, wrapping his arms around him. "Right here," he growled. His fingers went to the buttons of Kyle's trousers. "I want you here on the table." Kyle's heart leapt at the command, at the raw desire in Hal's voice. Todd had never spoken to him like this...

Hal pushed Kyle forward so he was leaning over the table, his hands splayed apart to hold himself up. He pulled Kyle's breeches down so they fell around his ankles, then grabbed the bottle of olive oil from the dresser. "There's more uses for this than cleaning the tar from your hands," Hal said.

Kyle shivered when he felt the cool oil dribble into the cleft of his arse, followed by Hal's fingers. Hal leaned over, pressing himself against Kyle to kiss the center of his back. When Hal pushed inside him in one smooth stroke, Kyle arched his back and moaned.

Hal chuckled. "See, the oil makes it nice and easy." Kyle sighed in agreement. Hal filled him, but there wasn't any pain, only the feeling of Hal sliding into him. Hal reached around to grasp his cock and Kyle gasped and dug his fingernails into the varnished wood. Everything became a blur of heat and need as Hal pleased him from both sides and all Kyle could do was try to remain standing.

Kyle came quickly, spurting semen onto the table between his hands, and Hal came right after. They collapsed onto the table, Hal's face pressed into his back and his breath hot through Kyle's sweaty shirt. "That was ... really good," Kyle gasped out. He smiled over his shoulder at Hal.

Hal straightened and gave Kyle a smack on the rump. "No argument from me."

They washed up, then Kyle went to his trunk to get a new shirt.

"Who is this?" Hal asked over his shoulder. He bent down to pick up the small frame that was nestled in the bottom of the trunk.

Kyle stood and looked at the drawing, at the woman smiling out at him. "My mother." He pulled on his clean shirt. "I drew her a few months before she died."

"You were close to her?" Hal asked. He carefully set the picture back into the trunk.

“She always loved me, no matter what. She supported me when I wanted to study art. She knew about Todd and me. She caught us holding hands in the garden and she only admonished us to be more careful.” Memories of Maura Rayner’s cheerful eyes, her Irish lilt, her musical laugh came flooding back. He angrily wiped at his eyes. “My father killed her, Hal. The doctors think he brought some disease home from one of his London whores. Nothing could save her. She died in pain, and that bastard’s still alive.” He looked at Hal, no longer caring that tears were streaming down his cheeks. “And then he had the nerve to judge *me* about who I chose to fuck.”

“I’m sorry.” Hal enveloped him in an embrace.

Kyle nodded into his shoulder. “I guess we both escaped him,” he said softly. “I just managed not to die in the process.” He stepped back and shook his head. “Sorry to burden you with my family troubles.”

“You won’t ever burden me with your troubles,” Hal said. He kissed Kyle’s brow.

Kyle reached out to play with the buttons of Hal’s shirt. “Well, you know about my family now. What’s yours like?”

Hal sighed. “My own story isn’t much better. My father died when I was a boy, lost at sea. My mum and I ... well, she didn’t want me to go to sea like him. But I went anyway. We never reconciled. She died just after I was made lieutenant. My brothers resented me for causing her so much grief. And then ...” He held his hands out, gesturing at the ship. “Then I became a pirate. I haven’t spoken to them in years. Alan told me they’ve both married and have families...”

He trailed off and Kyle could see the hurt in his eyes from being cut off from his brothers. Kyle stepped close and wrapped his arms around him. “I’m sorry.”

Hal shook his head. “They are better off without me.” Then he stepped back and kissed Kyle. “And I’m glad you had such a loving mother to encourage you.” He ran his fingers through Kyle’s hair, pulling out the tie that held the pigtail so it fell loose at his shoulders. “When we are on shore leave, you’ll have solid ground so you can paint all day if you like.” He bent to kiss Kyle’s neck, running his tongue over the soft skin. “Though, I may pull you away from your paints once or twice,” he whispered in Kyle’s ear. “For purely selfish reasons.”

Kyle turned his face so he could gently kiss the line of Hal’s jaw. “And what reasons would those be, Captain?” he asked softly.

Hal grinned and took Kyle’s hand. “Come to bed and I’ll show you.”

4. A Pirate's Life for Me

Kyle looked up as feet pounded on the deck overhead, followed by muffled shouts. "Something going on?" he asked Isamot.

Isamot dropped the rope he was mending and stood up. "Maybe there is ship?" He turned and went up the steps to the deck above. Kyle set his rope aside and followed after him, blinking as he went up the stairs and into the light.

Everyone on deck was either pulling lines or standing at the ready with firearms. Except Hal. He was at the wheel, a predatory look in his eye as he steered the ship towards the small vessel ahead of them. Kyle remembered all too well the sight of the sleek ship coming towards them and the fear that hung over the crew of his ship as they tried their best to get away. He remembered his own fear as the ship hoisted its colors and revealed itself as a pirate's vessel—the black flag with the strange green symbol that he now realized represented the lantern. He'd wondered what was in store for him, whether he'd survive the encounter with pirates. And now here he was, a pirate on that same ship.

He went up to the quarterdeck to stand next to Hal. The captain didn't even look at him, he was so intent on driving his ship towards his prey. It seemed as if he could anticipate every move the other vessel could make, because no matter what they did, the *Emerald Dawn* closed in on them. Finally the cargo ship dropped her colors, the sign of surrender, and let the *Dawn* draw close.

"Doesn't look like they're going to put up much of a fight," Guy said. "I don't see any weapons."

"Is it always this easy?" Kyle asked. The sailors just stood in a group on the deck, seemingly waiting for the pirates to board.

"Our reputation usually precedes us," Hal said. "They know they won't get hurt if they don't fight back. And they're not going to be willing to die over someone else's cargo." He smiled. "They gave a good chase, I will admit." He smoothed his hands over the polished wood of the ship's wheel as if he were caressing a lover. "I always enjoy it when they put the *Dawn* through her paces. Very exhilarating." He looked at Kyle. He still had the predatory gleam in his eyes, but it was of a different type, one that Kyle was already familiar with. He stepped close to Kyle so he could whisper in his ear while his hand slipped discreetly under Kyle's coat to rest on his arse, "It puts me in the mood to put *you* through your paces as well."

Kyle looked over Hal's shoulder at Guy and John. But if they had heard, neither gave any indication. Their attention was fully on the other ship.

“So, are you ready to be a pirate?” Hal asked him.

Kyle heart skipped, and a thrill of anticipation and fear clenched his stomach. He looked over at the ship, then back at Hal. He had a fleeting thought of *this is wrong, it's stealing*, but it wasn't like it was the sailors themselves who were losing anything. It was the wealthy merchants and Lords back in England who would lose. Men who were the same as his father. “Yes. I'm ready.”

Hal smiled. “The ship is yours, Mister Stewart,” he called out over his shoulder. “Mister Gardner, get the launch ready while I go find Mister Rayner a sword.”

Kyle followed Hal down to the his cabin. As soon as Kyle went through the door, strong arms grabbed him from behind. Hal kicked the door shut and pulled Kyle to him. He pushed his hard cock against Kyle's arse. “I want you,” he growled in Kyle's ear.

Kyle grinned and turned his Hal's arms to face him. “Are you always this aroused after giving chase?”

“Usually,” Hal growled. “Though I always have to make do with this.” He lifted his hand and wagged his fingers.

Kyle smiled. “Perhaps I can help this time?” He slid his hand down Hal's belly, down to the hard bulge in his breeches. Hal sighed and bent to kiss Kyle's neck, while Kyle tugged open the buttons on the breeches and slipped his hand inside to grasp Hal's erection.

Hal moaned against Kyle's neck and pushed into Kyle's hand. Then his own hand moved down to pull open Kyle's breeches and Kyle sighed as Hal's fingers caressed him. “This will have to be quick,” Hal murmured into his ear as he started stroking Kyle's cock.

Kyle nodded and ran his thumb over the tip of Hal's cock before squeezing and stroking him. The only sound in the room was their ragged breathing and then Kyle was coming, pressing his face into Hal's shoulder to muffle his cries. His strokes faltered and Hal's hand replaced his until the captain was coming, too, spurting against Kyle's belly. Hal pulled them back a few steps so he could lean against the table, Kyle still in his arms. “Lovely,” he murmured and kissed Kyle deeply.

The door suddenly opened. “Boat's ready, Cap—”

Guy choked on his words and Kyle jerked his sticky hand out of Hal's breeches. Hal just calmly looked at his first officer, his hand still around Kyle's softening cock. “Thank you, Mister Gardner.”

Guy coughed, the color of his face nearly matching his hair. “We can leave as soon as you’re done finding each other’s swords.” He rolled his eyes and left.

Hal grabbed a cloth from the dresser and tossed it to Kyle, then grabbed one for himself. “Now let’s see about finding you a weapon.” While Kyle cleaned up and straightened up his clothes, Hal poked around in a massive trunk next to the dresser. “Here we are.” He stood up, holding a sword in a scabbard. It must have been new, because it gleamed in the light coming through the windows. “I got this from some fat lord heading to Barbados to be governor.” Hal smirked. “I doubt the man even knew how to use it.” He handed the sword to Kyle. “You do know how to use a sword, don’t you?”

Kyle grinned. “Which kind of sword?”

Hal laughed and wrapped his arms around Kyle, pressing his hand to the front of Kyle’s breeches. “I already know you can use this one.”

Kyle stepped back and gave the sword an experimental swing. “I’ve done some fencing.” Of course, the fencing foil was only a fraction of the weight of this sword. But he was sure he could manage. He hoped.

Hal nodded. “Well, it’s rare that a ship like this fights back. Just keep your eyes open and head for the boat if they decide to surprise us.”

“I can take care of myself, Hal,” Kyle said, though he wasn’t entirely sure about that.

Hal looked at him for a moment, then nodded. “Just be careful.”

On the way to the boat, Isamot fell in step beside Kyle. “You really part of crew now, yes?” Isamot said through a toothy grin. He patted Kyle’s shoulder. “Good luck.”

Kyle smiled at his friend, then followed the rest of the group over the rail and into the boat.

They had only a short distance to travel in the boat, and in no time Kyle was scrambling up the side of the other vessel on his first adventure as a pirate. On the deck, the men eyed them with fear. Kyle noticed that a few were finely dressed. And one was very familiar.

“Kyle Rayner?” a man asked, stepping forward out of the group.

“Get back!” Guy shouted, raising his sword, and the man paled and took a step back.

Hal turned to Kyle. “Do you know him?”

Kyle nodded. “Wally West. His uncle is our neighbor and Wally stayed with him often. We grew up together.”

“Ah, yes...” Hal went over to the man and took his arm, pulling him away from the group and over to Kyle. “You’re Barry Allen’s nephew. Your uncle was a good friend of mine.”

“Until you betrayed your King and Country, Jordan,” Wally growled.

“They betrayed me first,” Hal said coldly. He let go of Wally’s arm and gestured towards his crew. “Let’s see what this ship is carrying.” He squeezed Kyle’s shoulder. “You can stay on deck. Catch up with your friend.” Hal winked at him, then took a group of the crew below decks.

“What are you doing out here, Kyle?” Wally asked. “What are you doing with *them*?” He glanced at Guy and Vath, who were keeping an eye on the crew.

“I’ve been disowned,” Kyle said, not quite able to meet Wally’s eyes. “Lord Scott arranged for me to go to the colonies but ... Captain Jordan gave me a better offer.”

“To become a pirate?” Wally exclaimed. “How can you serve under a man like Jordan?”

Guy snorted. “Mister Rayner enjoys *servin’ under* Captain Jordan,” he muttered. Vath choked back a laugh. Kyle glared at them.

Wally frowned at Guy, obviously confused, then his eyes widened. He turned to Kyle. “The rumors about you are true, then? Your father disowned you because you and Lord Scott’s son were...?” His face turned bright red, his eyes wide. “And ... you and Jordan?”

“Yes, it’s true, Wally,” Kyle said. “And I do enjoy ‘servin’ under’ Captain Jordan.” He looked defiantly at Guy.

“I’m glad to hear that, Mister Rayner,” Hal said behind him. He clapped his hand onto Kyle’s shoulder. “And I must say a finer man has never served under me.”

Guy and Vath both burst out laughing. Wally just looked mortified.

“Get some of these men to help bring up the cargo,” Hal said to Vath, gesturing towards the captive crew. He turned away from Kyle, to discuss moving the cargo with Guy.

Kyle moved to follow him, but Wally grabbed his arm. “What’s going to happen to us?” he whispered.

“Nothing’s going to happen to you. You’ll be let go with a ship that’s a little lighter.” Kyle shook his head. “He’s nothing like you’ve heard in the stories, Wally. He’s just—”

“A criminal. A criminal who will get you hanged.” Wally gripped Kyle’s shoulder. “Come with me, Kyle. I’m going to Virginia, as an aide to Governor Garrick. I can put in a word for you, maybe—”

“No.” Kyle stepped back. “I appreciate your concern, but I wouldn’t be any safer in Virginia or Carolina or ... anywhere. No matter where I go, I risk prison or the gallows. So I’ll take my chances as a pirate.”

They stepped out of the way, letting the men go by carrying crates and barrels from the hold to the launch.

“Why take chances at all?” Wally asked. “Is it really worth the risk to whore yourself to a pirate to satisfy base pleasures?”

“I’m not whoring myself,” Kyle said angrily. “It’s more than that, Wally. And I don’t want to leave him.”

Wally narrowed his eyes at him. “Dear Lord, Kyle, are you saying you’re in love with him?” he whispered.

Before Kyle could answer, Guy joined them again. “Captain wants you to head back with the first load,” he said. “Vath’s waiting in the boat.”

Kyle nodded then turned to grip Wally’s hand. “Good luck to you, Wally.” He smiled. “Maybe we’ll meet again the next time you’re out this way.”

“Good luck to you, too, Kyle,” Wally said soberly. He threw a disparaging glance at Guy. “You’ll need it.”

“Wally...”

But his friend had already turned away from him, going back to join the others. Kyle felt a pang of regret that another link to his old life had been cut, but there was nothing else he could do. Like Hal said, *they* were the ones who had abandoned him.

* * *

They reached the Turks & Caicos in good time and while the crew spent the afternoon catching fish and crabs and conch for a feast, Hal and Kyle took the

opportunity to be alone. After Kyle was able to stand on land again (he was certain the island was moving beneath his feet!) they hiked to the the opposite side of the point from the rest of the crew. Hal was lounging on the beach under a palm tree, shirt open and boots off, and Kyle finally had his chance to paint him.

“Can I see it?”

Kyle looked over the canvas at Hal. He smiled and shook his head. “No. Not yet.”

He considered the painting in front of him. Just as he had imagined, Hal was many shades of brown: coppery skin and auburn hair and eyes of deep umber. The colors of earth, of solid strength, of life.

It felt good to have a brush in his hand again. His father had ended the sessions with the art tutors after his mother had died, and he never painted in the house after that. He kept paints, brushes and canvas at the Scott’s home. He’d even started giving Jenny lessons. He felt the usual pang of regret over Jenny. The girl had become smitten with him, maybe even fallen in love with him. And for a while he’d encouraged it, wondering if maybe his attraction to men was a mistake, that he just hadn’t met the right woman. But though he loved Jenny dearly, it was as a sister. As *Todd’s* sister. When she’d found out about them, she’d been far braver about it than Kyle had expected, mostly for the sake of her brother he supposed. She had even provided excuses for him a few times, when he’d been off with Todd and his father wanted to know where he’d been. Jenny had claimed to be the one monopolizing his time. He only hoped she found a man good enough for her.

“Am I that handsome that you can’t even take your eyes off my image?”

Kyle shook himself from his reverie, realizing he was staring at the painting. Hal had gotten up and was now leaning over his shoulder. “What do you think?” Kyle asked.

Hal grinned. “It’s amazing. You’ve got quite a talent, Kyle.”

Kyle shrugged and started packing the paints back into the box. “I don’t know about that. The tutors were always frustrated with me, because I never made exact copies of paintings. I always wanted to change things.”

“Nothing wrong with creativity,” Hal said. He sat down on the sand next to Kyle and lay his hand on Kyle’s knee. “I happen to *like* your creativity.”

Kyle smiled and leaned over to kiss him. Hal met him halfway and it wasn’t long before they were wrapped around each other, pulling open buttons on shirts and breeches while groping and thrusting.

“Captain?”

Kyle groaned into Hal's shoulder when Soranik voice called to them from the trees lining the beach. Hal kissed Kyle, swiping his tongue across Kyle's lips, then sat up. "Over here."

Soranik stepped out of the trees, eyes averted but she had a smile on her face. "Sorry to interrupt, but the food is ready and there won't be any left if you wait too long."

"We're on our way," Hal called out. He stood up, then reached down to pull Kyle to his feet. "We'll continue this later," he said softly.

They gathered up Kyle's paints and trudged back over the point to rejoin the crew. The men—and Soranik—were seated around a blazing bonfire, passing around bowls.

Kyle set his canvas, wrapped carefully in linen, next to a tree, then took a seat with his shipmates around the fire.

"Here. Is conch. Very good," Isamot said, thrusting a bowl filled with whitish meat into Kyle's hands.

It was very good, similar to scallops he'd had back home. After the conch he had clams, then cactus, and then more conch until he was stuffed full, the first time in months.

A bottle of rum made the rounds. Kyle took a swig of rum and passed it on to Hannu. Isamot started singing, a song they often sang while they worked, and they all joined in.

*Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me.
We pillage, we plunder, we rifle, and loot,
Drink up, me 'earties, yo ho.
We kidnap and ravage and don't give a hoot,
Drink up me 'earties, yo ho.*

Hal sat next to him and stuck a cup of wine in his hand, some of the Madeira they'd taken from Wally's ship. "Enjoying yourself?"

Kyle raised his cup and smiled at his lover. "A pirate's life for me."

5. The Amazonia

“What is it?” Kyle asked. Hal had his spyglass out, searching for the identity of the ship in the distance.

“The *Amazonia*. Pirates like us.” Hal collapsed the spyglass and looked over at Guy, who was at the wheel. “It’s the *Amazonia*, Mister Gardner. Hoist the colors and take us in slowly. Don’t want to provoke them.”

“Will they attack us?” Kyle asked, wide-eyed. A cargo ship might give up, but he doubted another ship full of pirates would surrender so easily.

“They’ll only attack if we give them a reason to,” Hal said.

“Not hard to do,” Guy muttered under his breath.

Kyle frowned. “So why approach them at all?”

“Trade.” He slipped the glass into his pocket. “Captain Prince may have something I need and I may have something she needs.”

He turned to go down the stairway to the deck and Kyle followed. Then it hit him what Hal had said. “*She?*” he exclaimed as they went down the stairs to the captain’s cabin. “The captain is a woman?”

Hal grinned. “She may be a woman, but I can honestly say she’s the only captain — pirate or Navy — I genuinely respect. I’m not even sure the Lantern could save us if she decided to remove us from this life. She’s a genuine Amazon princess.”

“An Amazon?” Kyle snorted. “They’re just myths in some dusty old Greek books.”

“That’s what they want you to think. But she’s the real thing.” Hal pulled off his coat and shirt. “So if you’re coming along, you might want to clean up.”

Kyle looked down. His shirt was sweaty and dirty, and, like his hands, spattered with tar. Not exactly appropriate for meeting an Amazon princess. “Do I have to call her ‘Your Highness’?”

Hal shook his head. “Just ‘Captain’ will be fine. Diana’s not one for ceremony.”

Kyle stripped down to wash, then dug his good clothes out of his trunk. He hadn’t worn them since becoming part of the crew, content to run around in shirt, breeches and bare feet like everyone else.

When they returned to deck, they were already close enough to the *Amazonia* to see the crew lining her rails. Kyle stared in amazement at the ship as they came abreast with it. "They're *all* women..."

Hal nodded. "There's been a lot of men who have unwisely underestimated the abilities of Captain Prince and her crew. A few of them even lived to tell the tale." He waved across to the other ship. A woman on the ship's quarterdeck waved back. "Permission to come aboard, Captain Prince?" Hal called out.

The woman held out her arms in welcome. "Permission granted, Captain Jordan."

A boat was lowered and Hal turned to Guy. "You have the ship, Mister Gardner," Hal said. Then he lowered himself down the rope ladder into the small boat.

Kyle followed after him, wobbling a little when he stepped into the boat. He sat down hard and looked up at Hal. "Anyone else coming?"

Hal picked up the oars and shook his head. "They don't usually allow men on board. Not any that will make it off alive, anyway. But Diana and I are old friends."

Kyle looked over at the ship. The women were lining the rail, watching them. They were all in shirts and trousers, and many of them had swords strapped to their sides, a few had pistols at the ready, and one had a crossbow that Kyle was certain was pointed right at his head. They were unlike any women Kyle had ever seen.

They reached the side of the ship and lines were thrown down so they could secure the boat. Then Kyle followed Hal up the ladder.

"Welcome aboard, Hal." The woman who came towards them took Kyle's breath away and he truly believed what Hal said, that she was an Amazon princess. It was as if a goddess had stepped from a painting by Rubens and onto this ship. She was an elegant woman, tall and regal, and she smiled graciously as Hal took her hand to kiss it.

"It's good to see you again, Diana."

Captain Prince looked past Hal at Kyle. "And who is this?" she asked flatly, her dark eyes studying him.

Hal turned to him and lay his hand on Kyle's shoulder. "This is Kyle Rayner. I can vouch for him." Hal winked at him. "He'll be a perfect gentleman on your ship."

The captain nodded to him. "Welcome to *The Amazonia*, Mister Rayner. I am Captain Prince." She looked at Hal again. "If you'll follow me." Kyle followed along behind the two captains, trying not to stare at the strange women around

them. “I have something that might interest you,” Captain Prince was saying as they made their way across the deck. “The question is, do you have anything that might interest me?”

They went down the steps and into the cabin. Kyle raised his eyebrows in amazement. He had thought Hal’s cabin was richly furnished. Captain Prince’s cabin made Hal’s look like a poor hovel. Drapes covered every wall and there were soft couches along the walls along with neatly stacked chests. In the center of the room was a mahogany table laid out with a silver tea service.

“Have a seat,” the captain said, waving her hand towards the table. She didn’t sit down herself. Instead she went to a trunk near the back of the cabin, bending over to search through the contents.

A blonde woman came into the room and shut the door behind her. She turned and grinned at Hal. “It’s been a while, Hal.”

“Dinah.” Hal went to the woman, taking her hands and kissing her cheek. “You look lovely as ever. And how is Ollie?”

“Still on Barbados, trying to instigate revolts against the British. I’m sure he would love to see you next time you’re in port.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “As long as you keep your hands to yourself.”

Hal laughed. “I have no intention of stealing him back, Dinah.”

Kyle blinked and stared at Hal. *Stealing him back?*

Hal must have caught the look on Kyle’s face. “I was involved with Dinah’s husband. Before he was her husband, I might remind her.” He looked back at Dinah defiantly. “I don’t get involved with husbands.”

“It doesn’t stop Ollie,” she said with a slight shake of her head. Then she looked at Kyle, as if seeing him for the first time. “Who is this? Your cabin boy?”

“No.” Hal put his hand on Kyle’s shoulder. “This is Kyle Rayner. He’s my lover.” He gestured towards the woman. “Kyle, this is Dinah Lance. First Officer of this ship and another old friend.”

Dinah looked at Kyle, eyebrow raised, and snorted. “Your lover? He’s just a child, Hal! Did you snatch the cradle along with him?”

Kyle bristled. “I’m twenty! I’m not a child!”

The woman laughed and stepped forward to cup Kyle's cheek in her hand. "Don't worry, sweet. I'm just having a jest." She ran her eyes over him, then turned to smile at Hal. "He's a very pretty boy. Don't let Ollie get a hold of him."

Hal's arm slid around Kyle's waist, pulling him tight against his side possessively. "I won't be letting him out of my sight anywhere near Ollie."

"If you two have finished your banter," Diana said behind them, "I have some business to discuss with Captain Jordan."

They took their seats at the table, Kyle next to Hal and Dinah across from them. Diana remained standing. She lay a leather map case on the table in front of Hal and opened it.

Hal leaned forward to study the maps inside. The first was a map of the Atlantic, with lines drawn between the Americas, Europe and Africa. Hal ran his eyes over it, then flipped to the next map. Kyle recognized a map of the Caribbean. All the writing on the maps was in French.

Hal whistled and looked up at Diana. "Where did you get these?"

"That is none of your business," she said. "But I will tell you that the maps are believed lost at sea, so they aren't likely to change their plans."

Hal stared at the top map of the Atlantic, his chin resting on his folded hands. "How much?" he finally asked.

"What have you got?"

Hal leaned back in his chair, his eyes still on the maps. "A few casks of Madeira. Some bolts of silk. And let's say ... five hundred guineas." He looked up at Diana. "Is that enough?"

"I think we can strike a bargain," Diana said. She closed the map case and picked it up. "What would you do with them?"

Hal chewed his lip in thought for a few moments. "Take them to Wayne. Doesn't hurt to make the Crown indebted to my help whenever I can."

Diana shook her head. "Last I heard, he had a prominent position in Jamaica. Can you even trust him?"

Hal shrugged. "I don't really have a choice. Anyone else, I know they'd arrest me on the spot. I at least have—well, *had* a friendship with Bruce."

“Were you *involved* with him, too?” Kyle asked under his breath. Hal turned to look at him and Dinah giggled. Kyle felt his cheeks grow warm. He hadn’t meant to say it loud enough for anyone to hear.

Hal frowned. “No, I was not.” He stood up and turned to Diana. “I’ll have the items sent over.”

“And I’ll give you the maps as soon as you’ve done so.” She smiled. “It’s always a pleasure doing business with you, Captain Jordan,” she said, nodding her head slightly.

“Likewise,” Hal said, gallantly kissing her hand again.

Kyle followed Hal down the ladder into the boat, stewing a little over what he had learned today. Hal had never talked about former lovers. But apparently he was still friends with them. And their wives.

When they were back in Hal’s cabin, after Hal had sent Salaak and Soranik over with the cargo, Kyle spoke up. “How long were you with Ollie?”

Hal shrugged as he pulled off his jacket. “Almost two years. Though I wouldn’t really call it ‘with’. We weren’t exactly exclusive, just ... having a lot of fun together. Ollie more so, since he spent a lot of time on land. He always had stories of his ‘conquests’, both male and female.” Hal chuckled. “Ollie’s a bit of a trollop, if you ask me.”

Kyle nodded. Todd had the same attitude, coming home from London and talking about his lovers in the city as if Kyle would be interested in hearing about them. “Didn’t that bother you?” Kyle asked.

Hal furrowed his brows. “Why would it? ”

“Because ...” Kyle sighed and shook his head. Hal obviously felt the same as Ollie and Todd. “Nevermind.” He bowed his head. “Are you going to go see him?”

“Someday, I suppose. When we’re near Barbados and ...” Hal reached out to touch Kyle’s chin, to lift his face to look him in the eyes. “Kyle, is something bothering you?”

“Just ...” Kyle closed his eyes. “If you’re going to have any ‘conquests’, I’d rather not hear about them.”

“What are you talking about? Kyle? Look at me.” Kyle opened his eyes. Hal was frowning. “Is this about Ollie? Are you jealous?”

Kyle shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Kyle...” Hal shook his head. “That was a long time ago. And don’t forget you’re on my ship because the father of *your lover* arranged it! You’re not exactly a blushing virgin yourself.”

“But I doubt I’ll ever see Todd again,” Kyle said. “You’re getting invitations to go see your ex-lovers!”

Hal reached for Kyle, taking his hand and pulling him close, then sliding his hands over Kyle’s arse. “Ollie is still a dear friend. But I don’t have any desire to be his lover again. Or anyone else’s.” He wrapped his arms around Kyle and pulled him tight against his body. “Not when I have you.” He kissed Kyle deeply, his tongue pushing into Kyle’s mouth, then he pulled back to look at him. “Now, I’m going to go speak to Guy and John and make sure we’re not disturbed.” He reached up and pulled out the ribbon holding back Kyle’s hair at the nape of his neck. “While I’m gone, I want you to get undressed and into bed.” He combed his fingers through Kyle’s hair. “And when I come back, I’m going to show you just how much I want you. All right?”

Hal left and Kyle went into the bedroom, unbuttoning his shirt on the way. He stripped naked and lay back on the bed. Kyle wanted to believe him, that Hal wouldn’t want anyone else. But Todd had told him the same thing when he’d first gone to London. That he wouldn’t forget him. Then he started spending more and more time in London, and coming back with stories about his friends — and lovers — there.

Hal returned and when he stepped into the bedroom, his shirt hanging open, he smiled appreciatively at Kyle. “Dinah was right. You are a *very* pretty boy.” He shed his clothes and climbed on top of Kyle. “Just lie back and enjoy this,” he said softly.

Kyle sighed as Hal’s explored his body, hands and mouth touching and tasting every inch of him. Kyle arched his back, sighing as warm kisses alternated with cool night air on his skin. And when he thought he couldn’t bear it any longer, Hal pushed his legs up and slowly entered him. “You’re mine,” Hal whispered and Kyle shivered. Hal’s hands stroked Kyle’s cock as he thrust into him, and Kyle watched his lover’s face. Hal was watching himself move inside Kyle, his mouth slightly open as he panted with the effort of their joining. Then he threw his head back and grunted as he came.

Watching his lover’s orgasm pushed Kyle over the edge and he writhed under Hal, spurting over Hal’s hands.

Hal bent over the edge of the bed to wipe his hands on his shirt, then he lay down next to Kyle. “Feeling better now?”

“Yes.” And he meant it. He felt wanted, and maybe even *loved*, here in Hal’s bed. And he decided he owed Hal an explanation for his behavior. “Todd called me a diversion.”

Hal rolled over to look at him. “What?”

Kyle took a deep breath. “When I confronted him, when I told him I didn’t like it that he slept with other men in London, he got angry with me. He said I had no place to make any demands on him. He said I was just a diversion when he had to come home to the ‘wretched countryside’.” He looked at Hal. “When my father found the painting, it was already over. I just ...” He closed his eyes when tears started to prick at the corners. “I didn’t want to believe it. I didn’t want to let go. Then my father found out about me, and Lord Scott sent me on the ship...” He shook his head. “It hurt to lose him.” He looked at Hal. “I’d probalby still be pining after him if I hadn’t met you.”

“Ah, love...” Hal wrapped his arms around him, pulling Kyle onto his chest. Kyle sighed, relaxing in Hal’s embrace. “He was an idiot to treat you that way,” Hal murmured into his hair. “but I won’t say I’m sorry about it, because it means you’re mine now. All mine.”

6. This is what we do

Dawn was just coloring the horizon when Guy came bursting into the bedroom to wake the captain. “There’s a ship, Hal,” he said. “Looks like it might be a slaver.”

Hal pulled away from Kyle and rolled out of bed. Kyle sat up, blinking the sleep from his eyes. He had started to wonder if all the stories he had heard about the excitement and adventure of a pirate’s life were just that — stories — because so far they’d been handed cargo without a fight and had a friendly meeting with other pirates. Beyond that it was days of quiet work, tarring and sewing sails and scrubbing the deck. But he knew this was different, that it was *serious*, because Guy wasn’t joking or making sarcastic comments. He was all business, jaw tight as he waited in the doorway while Hal got dressed. “Will they put up a fight?”

“It’s likely. Ever used a pistol, kid?” Guy asked.

Before Kyle could answer, Hal shook his head. “No. He’s not going.” He stood up and pushed past Guy and out into the cabin.

Kyle scrambled out of bed, grabbing his breeches and stepping into them as he followed Hal. “What? What do you mean I’m not going?”

“You’re not going,” Hal said. He strapped his sword to his side. “You don’t have the experience in a fight and...” He glanced sideways at Guy.

Guy looked from one to the other. “I’ll, uh, be up on deck.” He hurried out of the cabin.

As soon as the door closed, Hal looked at Kyle. “This is far more dangerous than the usual ships. I’m not getting you killed.”

“I know how to handle a sword, Hal!”

“In a back garden for entertainment!” Hal retorted.

Kyle glared at him. “You do think I’m useless, don’t you?”

“No!” Hal stepped towards him and grabbed his shoulders. “No, I don’t think you’re useless. I just ...” Hal caressed Kyle’s cheek. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Kyle pushed Hal’s hands away. “I’m not your wife, Hal! I don’t need you to look after me. I’m a man as much as anyone else on this crew.” He frowned. “Well, except Soranik. But I bet you’d let *her* fight!”

“Yes, I would. But Soranik has been fighting for survival since she was a child.” Hal grabbed his coat and put it on.

Kyle clenched his fists. “I thought I was a part of this crew!”

Hal closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Fine.” He picked up the sword and scabbard and thrust it into Kyle’s hands. “But you’ll stay with me or Guy, and do whatever we say. Do you understand?” Kyle nodded and Hal turned and stalked out of the room.

Kyle finished getting dressed as quickly as possible, then went out on deck. Everyone was in motion, either working the lines or gathering weapons. Isamot was hoisting the flag and Kyle saw it was red rather than black — the flag that told the other ship they would ‘give no quarter’. If they didn’t surrender, they would be killed.

Kyle looked to the other ship. It was flying the flag of the African Company of Merchants, which Kyle recognized because his father was invested in the company. It gave him satisfaction that they would be hurting his father — even indirectly — in some small way today.

“They’re still trying to get away,” John said as the captain came to stand next to him at the rail. “They don’t show any sign of slowing.”

Hal nodded, then turned to shout into the entryway to the deck below. “Let them know we mean business, Mister Kilowog!”

Kyle frowned, wondering what Hal meant, then jumped at the boom of cannon. The balls crashed into the slaver ship, sending wood and bodies flying on the top deck. The slaver fired back. Kyle instinctively cringed, but the destruction he expected never came. There were only heavy thuds and the *Dawn* rocked slightly. Kyle peered over the side of the ship, and was shocked to see she didn’t appear to have any damage at all. The lantern was apparently doing its job.

“They’re dropping the colors,” John called out.

Hal nodded and turned to the crew. “Are we ready to go, Mister Gardner?”

“Ready to go, Captain.”

Hal looked back at Kyle, a frown on his face, and for a moment Kyle was afraid he was going to change his mind. Then he sighed. “Let’s go. Mister Salaak, you have the ship!”

They climbed down the rope ladder into the launch. John and Guy were there, along with twenty other men. Along the rail of the *Emerald Dawn*, the rest of the crew had muskets aimed at the slave ship.

There was no other resistance from the slavers after their cannons failed to inflict any damage. They were a ragged lot and many of them looked ill. They did as they were told, kneeling in a group near the stern of the ship. They knew who they were dealing with, because Kyle heard the occasional whispers of ‘Jordan’ and ‘devil’. Guy had his sword drawn and he stood near the group of men, glaring at them. Kyle stood next to Guy, his own sword out and ready. He could feel it in the air that this was different than raiding the cargo ship, and he had a sudden rush of panic. *What am I doing here? I should have listened to Hal. I’m going to get killed...*

Hal gave the captured sailors a glance, then pointed to the stairs. “Gather some men and we’ll go below, Mister Stewart.”

Kyle swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry, as he wondered if any of the ship’s crew was still below and worried if Hal would be in any danger. He didn’t realize his hand was shaking until Guy grabbed his wrist to steady his sword. “They’ll be fine,” Guy murmured under his breath. “It’s the slavers that had better be making their peace.”

Hal came back soon, barely contained rage on his face. He went over to one of the slaver’s sailors. “There’s less than a hundred people alive down there on a ship built to carry at least two hundred. Why?”

The man quailed under Hal’s gaze. He gave a glance down the line of his crewmates, then spoke. “They tried to revolt. A lot of ‘em got killed. Most of the others died of the flux. Or scurvy.”

Hal turned on his heel and stalked over to a man dressed in a fancy wool coat and tricorne hat. “You’re the captain?” Hal asked coldly.

The man drew himself up. “Yes, I am. And you have no right to—”

Kyle didn’t even see Hal draw the pistol from his belt. In the blink of an eye there was a bang and a waft of smoke, and then the captain fell over in a spray of red with a hole in the middle of his forehead.

Kyle gasped, shocked to see Hal so ruthless, to see the man he shared his body with every night kill another man in cold blood. *So the stories weren’t entirely falsehoods...*

Hal looked at the man next to the dead captain. He was cowering at Hal's feet, the right side of his body spattered with his captain's blood. "For God's sake have mercy, sir!" the man begged.

"God?" Hal sneered. "I am the *wrath* of God." Hal looked over the group of trembling sailors. "If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you." One of the men moaned and crossed himself, and more than a few had their eyes closed, their lips moving in what Kyle assumed was prayer.

Hal weighed the gun in his hand, as if considering who to shoot next, then stuck the weapon back into his belt and turned away from the frightened men to go down the steps below deck again.

John came up next and Kyle watched in horror as his shipmates helped the slaves climb up onto deck. They were naked, filthy, and looked nothing but skin and bones. *How could anyone do this to another person...*

He swallowed hard and glanced at Guy. Guy had his jaw set, glaring at the slaver crew. "What's going to happen to the them?" Kyle whispered, gesturing towards the sailors.

Guy shrugged. "Whatever the captain feels like doing with them." He gave a wry grin and drew his finger across his throat.

Kyle looked back at the sailors. They looked almost as terrified as the people being moved onto the deck and he couldn't help but pity them. "He's going to kill them, isn't he?" he asked, his voice shaking.

Guy shook his head. "Look, if you're going to be a part of the crew, then you're going to have to get a stronger stomach. We're pirates, kid! *This* is what we do. Especially when it's slavers we're dealing with. They get as much mercy as they gave the people they're carrying."

Kyle bit his lip. On one hand he could understand, especially watching the slow progression of the people from the hold of the ship. Some had to be supported, some of the children being carried were limp ... He fought a sudden wave of nausea and wondered if his father even cared about the suffering his investment caused. But he also felt uneasy about killing the sailors. Even cold-blooded murderers got a trial.

"It's amazing these people are still alive," John said, coming up to stand next to Guy. "I'm going to go get Soranik."

"Sure thing, Johnny," Guy said. "We're not going anywhere." He looked at Kyle. "Do you want to go back to the *Dawn*? It might get kind of ugly over here."

Kyle shook his head. He'd demanded to be brought along. And he was going to prove he belonged here.

Hal returned and gestured to Isamot and Vath. "There's chests of coin in the captain's cabin. Take it back with us. Leave everything else." The men nodded and went down the steps. Hal turned cold eyes onto the sailors. "Now let's get this lot sorted out." He drew his sword, and Guy and the others stepped forward to join him.

"Wait," Kyle said, his voice shaking. "You're going to just kill them?"

Hal scowled at him. "Considering how they treated those people in that hold? Yes."

Kyle reached out to grasp Hal's arm. "But, Hal—"

"Do *not* question me, Mister Rayner!" Hal snarled.

Kyle let go of his arm and stepped back. "Sorry, Captain," he mumbled. He turned and went to the bow of the ship, leaning against the rail to look over at the *Emerald Dawn*. The launch had reached the ship and John was already climbing up the ladder.

Behind him, he could hear the begging and pleading of the sailors, then the shouts of pain and the thud of bodies on the deck. Kyle dropped his head into his hands. He didn't know what to think. Of course the men deserved a death sentence for what they'd done to the slaves. It was the idea of Hal single-handedly passing judgement that disturbed him.

It also bothered him, more than he expected, that Hal had shouted at him and called him 'Mister Rayner'.

Well, you did want to be part of the crew, didn't you?

Kyle sighed. It had hurt. And it made him question Hal's feelings for him. Maybe he was just a 'willing' crew member for the captain until he found another willing man to share his bed? Maybe he'd be a 'dear friend' in a few years, just like Ollie, that Hal no longer desired?

The cries of the sailors finally ceased and Kyle spared a glance towards the stern. Only his own shipmates remained alive, standing amidst a mass of bloodied bodies. He looked at the Africans. Some had hidden their faces, but others were watching the carnage, a look of satisfaction on their faces.

The boat returned and Soranik climbed up over the rail, a canvas bag slung over her shoulder. "Are you all right?" she asked Kyle, brows furrowed.

“Fine,” he mumbled. “Do you need any help?” He needed something to take his mind off Hal, to help him *avoid* Hal.

“Always,” she said. She sighed and made her way over to the Africans. Kyle followed. The people looked up at them from gaunt faces, sores and filth covering their bodies, and Kyle started to think that maybe the sailors got exactly as they deserved.

Hal came over to Soranik. “Do you have everything you need?” he asked. “With the condition of this mast you’ll probably need a day longer to reach Hispaniola.”

She nodded. “John went back for food and water. Enough for three days at least.”

“Good.” Hal turned to shout over his shoulder. “The ship is yours, Mister Gardner.” Then he looked at Kyle, his expression stony. “Let’s get back to the *Dawn*,” he said in a low voice. “We need to have a talk about—”

The words just tumbled out of Kyle’s mouth without any thought. “I’m not going with you.”

Everyone paused in what they were doing, staring in surprise at Kyle. Hal looked genuinely confused at first, then his eyes narrowed and jaw set. He was obviously a man who was not used to his orders being refused or ignored. His eyes darted around to look at the crew, who were suddenly finding things to do to ignore the tension between their captain and his lover. “You’re not coming with me?”

Kyle looked Hal in the eye defiantly. “I’m going to stay and help Soranik.”

“Soranik has plenty of help,” Hal said, gesturing at the other crewmembers. “I need you to come with me.”

Kyle crossed his arms. He was angry at Hal, angry that he was going to order him around like this, as if he were guilty of insubordination rather than a lover’s quarrel, and there was no way he was going to give in. “And she can always use more help. It’s better if I stay here.”

Hal looked like he was going to argue, but instead he clenched his jaw and turned on his heel. “Let’s go,” he growled at Isamot and Vath. He went to the rail, swiftly climbing down to the boat below.

“Not a wise choice, kid,” Guy muttered, coming over to stand next to him. “He doesn’t like being challenged.”

Kyle glared at Guy. “Maybe he *needs* someone to challenge him.” He turned to Soranik and gestured towards the slaves. “What do you need me to do?”

* * *

John came back with a barrel of fresh water and canvas bags stuffed with food. “Limes,” he said, dropping a heavy bag at Kyle’s feet. He pulled a knife from his belt and handed it to Kyle. “We’ll need them cut up.”

Kyle nodded and dragged the bag to the bow. He wanted to stay out of the way of the crewmen working on the damage the Dawn had inflicted on the ship. It also put him as far as possible from where Guy and the others were dumping the corpses of the slavers overboard. Kyle had little pity left for the men, but that didn’t mean he had to watch their bodies being thrown to the sharks.

And it was a good place to watch the *Dawn* disappearing into the horizon. She was still close enough that Kyle could see Hal at the wheel. His stomach churned with worry. What if he’d made a mistake?

He hissed when the knife nicked the tip of his thumb, the wound stinging from the lime juice. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and sighed. No, he had to stand up for himself. He’d been ordered around by others his whole life, always trying to please someone: his father, Todd, Alan, Hal. Even an entire society that despised him. It was time he took control of his life.

* * *

By the time their ship caught up with the *Emerald Dawn*, anchored off a small bay on the north shore of Hispaniola, Hal had contacted the nearest settlement of *maroons*, Africans who had fled into the mountains to escape slavery. They were waiting on the beach when the slave ship arrived.

Kyle did his best to avoid Hal while they moved the newly freed slaves from the ship to their new home. He busied himself helping the weaker people ashore, then offered to help Soranik carry her bag of supplies back to the *Dawn*.

She glanced towards Hal, who was talking with the leaders of the settlement, then nodded at Kyle. “All right.”

The *Dawn*’s sickbay was a large room in the bow of the lower deck with hammocks strung along one wall and a long table in the center of the room where Soranik did her work. To the right was a smaller room where Soranik lived. Kyle dropped the bag on the table then turned to the doctor. “Do you mind if I stay here tonight?”

Soranik raised her eyebrows. “Mister Rayner! You *know* I do not get involved with my shipmates.”

“What? No!” Kyle felt the blush burning his cheeks. “That’s not what I meant! I mean—”

Soranik burst into laughter. “I know what you meant. And you are welcome to use one of the hammocks as long as you like.” She crossed her arms and fixed him with a stern look. “But don’t you think you should work things out with the captain?”

“Maybe. Or perhaps I should just leave the ship the next time we’re in port.”

“Kyle ...” She smiled gently and embraced him. “It will work out. You’ll see.” She reached up to ruffle his hair. “You are good for him you know. I have never seen him in such good spirits before you joined us. And it’s good for him, to have someone who will stand up to him.” She grabbed a neatly folded blanket from a shelf and thrust it into his hands. “So you can hide out here in the sick bay tonight,” she said. “But tomorrow, you need to talk to him.”

7. Tortuga

“Kyle?”

Kyle sighed. He'd been on edge all day, waiting for this moment. They'd done a good job of avoiding it since yesterday, with the Captain keeping to the quarterdeck or his cabin while Kyle had been here, on the opposite end of the ship, using the excuse that he wanted to read some of Soranik's medical texts so he'd be more helpful next time she needed his help. He looked up from the book he was reading, open to the chapter on amputations. “Do you need something, *Captain?*”

He got some satisfaction from seeing Hal's jaw tighten. “Come to my cabin. I need to talk to you.”

Kyle looked back at his text. “And I need you to stop ordering me around.”

“Kyle...” Hal's fists clenched and for a moment Kyle thought Hal was going to punch the wall—or punch him. But then he relaxed and took a deep breath. “Please come with me, Kyle. We need to talk this over.”

Kyle sighed and closed the book. There was no use dragging this out and Hal at least seemed willing to listen to him now.

They passed Soranik as they were leaving the sick bay. She smiled at Kyle and mouthed, “Good luck.”

Once inside the captain's cabin, they stood on opposite ends of the table in awkward silence. Then Hal spoke. “Soranik said you were a big help to her.”

Kyle shrugged. “I had to help. They'd been suffering so much. Even the kids.”

“So you understand why I made the decision to kill the crew? They treated those people as nothing more than animals. We are the only hope for innocent people. We are the only way they can get justice. This is what we do, Kyle. Taking cargo pays our way. But freeing those people ... it's more like our *purpose*. Do you understand that?”

Kyle nodded. “Yes. I understand.” Spending time with the slaves — tending their illnesses and injuries, wrapping too small bodies in sail cloth to be thrown overboard — made the hate boil in him for the men who had done this to them. He could now fully understand how Hal could so easily pass a death sentence on the crew. “It's not so much that. It's just you were ordering me around, like...” He sighed. It sounded so stupid now that he had to say it.

“Like you were a part of the crew?” Hal finished for him.

Kyle nodded.

“You have to understand that when we are off this ship and in a dangerous situation, I have to treat you like everyone else. Which means you cannot question my orders. Lives depend on it, Kyle! Outside this room you will be treated like every other member of this crew.” Hal stepped around the end of the table and came towards Kyle. “That’s part of the reason why I don’t want you to come on our raids. I consider you more than just a member of my crew. I will always worry over your safety. I will also worry about being seen as playing favorites because you are my lover.” Hal stopped in front of him and caressed his cheek.

The touch was all the reassurance Kyle needed that he was more than just another member of the crew to Hal. He turned his face into the warmth of Hal’s hand. “I understand.”

“Good.” Hal stepped close and kissed him. “Now come to bed. I’ve missed you.”

They were halfway to the bed when Kyle realized Hal was ordering him around again, and that he hadn’t even noticed. *Damn, what was it about this man that made him bend to Hal’s will so easily?* Kyle decided *that* was going to change. They weren’t out with the rest of the crew or off the ship, after all.

They undressed without saying a word, then Hal lay back on the bed and opened his arms to Kyle.

But Kyle didn’t lie down in Hal’s embrace. Instead he knelt between Hal’s legs and leaned over him to kiss him.

Hal ran his hands over Kyle’s body while they kissed, up his sides and over his back and then down to his arse. He tried to roll them, to put Kyle underneath him, but Kyle braced himself. Hal pushed a little harder, but still Kyle resisted. He broke the kiss and took Hal’s hands, grasping them by the wrists. He pushed them back on the bed, so Hal’s hands were over his head and Kyle was over him. “No,” Kyle said firmly. He shifted his weight forward, pressing Hal’s wrists into the mattress. “You can give the orders out there,” he said, nodding over his shoulder towards the door, “and I’ll obey you without question. But in here, in this bed, you are going to have to obey *me* sometimes. Do *you* understand?”

Hal blinked, surprise on his face. His breathing quickened and he squirmed ever so slightly under Kyle’s weight. But then he licked his lips and nodded. “I understand.”

“Good.” Kyle let go of Hal’s wrists and pushed himself upright, kneeling again between Hal’s legs. He ran his hand over Hal’s arse, then let his fingers drift over to his entrance and gently pushed the tip of his finger inside.

“Kyle!”

Hal squirmed again, but Kyle kept his finger where it was. He leaned forward to look into Hal’s eyes, the tip of his finger gently stroking in and out. “What do you want, Hal? Do you want me to stop?” He would stop if Hal asked. He wanted to take away some of Hal’s control, but he’d never try to force him. “Or will you let me fuck you?”

Hal closed his eyes. He didn’t say anything and for a moment Kyle thought he’d pushed him too far. But then he opened his eyes and looked up at Kyle. “I want you to fuck me.”

Kyle smiled. That was exactly what he wanted to hear. “Like this?” He slid his finger in all the way and Hal groaned and clenched around it. “Is this what you want, Hal?”

“Yes,” Hal gasped.

Kyle gave a few more strokes, then curled his finger. He must have hit the right spot because Hal moaned and his hands clawed at the mattress. Kyle grinned and while he slowly added a second finger to the first, he bent over to take Hal’s cock in his mouth.

“Yes, Kyle, yes, yes...” Hal was thrusting up into Kyle’s mouth, squeezing around Kyle’s fingers. Kyle tilted his head slightly so he could look at his lover. Hal was watching him, his mouth open and panting, and his fingers were rubbing his nipples. *Oh, God...* Kyle’s cock throbbed at the sight.

He replaced his mouth with his hand, stroking and squeezing Hal’s cock. He wanted to watch Hal, watch his face when he climaxed.

Kyle crooked his finger again and Hal thrust harder into his hand. “Soon...” Hal murmured. He thrust a few more times, then grunted and came, his face contorting with pleasure as he released. Kyle leaned down to lick Hal’s belly clean, savoring the bitter-salty taste of him. Hal sighed deeply and ran his fingers through Kyle’s hair.

Kyle gave Hal’s skin one last swipe with his tongue, then lifted his face to look at his lover. “Are you ready for me to fuck you properly?”

Hal hesitated for a moment, a hint of uncertainty in his eyes, then he nodded.

Kyle leaned over to the cabinet next to the bed, to retrieve the small bottle of olive oil that had made its way into their bedroom. He rubbed a splash of oil over the head of his throbbing cock. "This will make it nice and easy," he said, repeating what Hal told once him. He pushed Hal's legs back, then rubbed the oil around the pucker of Hal's entrance, gently pressing his finger inside. Hal didn't flinch this time and Kyle took that as a good sign. He corked the bottle and dropped it on the bed, then leaned forward, guiding his cock inside Hal.

Hal arched his back and moaned. "Kyle!"

Kyle gave a gentle thrust. "How is it?"

"Good," Hal gasped. "Really good." He smiled up at Kyle and squeezed his arse.

Kyle gasped at the sudden tightness around his cock. He looked down to watch himself slide in and out of Hal. Slowly at first, trying to prolong their pleasure.

Hal rocked his hips, meeting Kyle's thrusts. "Harder," he grunted, reaching out to grab Kyle's hips, trying to make him move faster. "Fuck me harder."

But Kyle grabbed Hal's hands and pulled out of him. "Oh, no," he chided, smiling at his lover. "You are not in control here. I am." He had to bite back a laugh at the dirty look Hal gave him. He let go of Hal's hands and leaned forward again, his cock teasing at Hal's entrance. "Ask me nicely."

"Please, Kyle," Hal begged. He was breathing hard and thrusting his arse against Kyle's cock. "Harder ... please."

He pushed inside Hal, just the head of his cock. "Is this what you want, Hal?"

"Yes," Hal whimpered. "Please, Kyle..."

Kyle leaned down so he could kiss Hal, shoving his tongue into his mouth as he shoved his cock back into his arse. Hal moaned into the kiss and wrapped his arms around Kyle, his fingers digging into Kyle's back. Kyle gave him what he wanted, thrusting hard and deep. Hal groaned into his mouth.

A tingle went up Kyle's spine, then his balls tightened and he shouted as he pumped his release into Hal. He collapsed into a sweaty heap on top of him, breathing hard. Hal kissed his brow and ran his fingers through his damp hair.

When Kyle had caught his breath, he looked up at Hal. "Did you like it?"

Hal smiled. "I think I'm going to enjoy taking orders from you."

* * *

Now they were heading to Tortuga, to trade for supplies and allow many in the crew to see their families. Kyle had been surprised when he'd learned that both Guy and John were married. Guy had married a Norwegian girl he'd met in England, before he'd turned to piracy, while John had married Soranik's cousin.

The two families lived together in a village a few miles from the main port, away from the wild lawlessness of pirates and privateers. When they approached the house, four red-haired girls came racing down the path, the youngest just a toddler, along with two dark-skinned children, a boy and a girl.

"Papa! Papa!" Guy was nearly bowled over by the little red-heads wrapping themselves around his legs. John bent down and scooped his own children into his arms.

"This is Johnny and Rosie," John said, smiling proudly. He kissed each one on the cheek. "Say hello to Captain Hal and Mister Kyle."

"Hello," they both said softly. Rosie giggled and turned her face into her father's neck.

Guy picked up his youngest daughter and looked at her in amazement. "When did you start running around, baby girl?"

"She's been doing that for *ages*, Daddy," his oldest daughter said.

"Oh." Guy shrugged and turned to Hal and Kyle. "Let's see, this is Anna, Inger—"

"I'm *Trude*, Daddy," the second oldest girl said with a sigh.

"Right, sweetheart." He went around the group again, touching heads as he said their names. "Anna, Trude, Inger, and little Elise." He gave the toddler in his arms a noisy kiss to make her giggle. Kyle grinned. He'd never imagined gruff, ornery Guy to be such a doting father to little girls.

Guy patted Anna's head. "Go tell your Mama we're home."

Anna took off running into the house and a few minutes later there were tearful reunions as Guy, John and Soranik were reunited with wives and cousin.

While Katma was much like her cousin and very close to what Kyle expected, Tora Gardner was nothing like the wife he'd imagined for Guy. Rather than the big, bossy woman he'd anticipated, Tora was a slight woman, sweet and soft-spoken. Not at all what he expected for the woman who had fallen in love with Guy Gardner.

“I have someone for you to meet,” Tora said to Guy with a playful gleam in her eye before disappearing into the house.

Katma herded them inside as well. She got them settled at a large table in the kitchen and started putting bowl after bowl of food on the table: chicken, goat, rice, fresh vegetables, fresh fruit, bread and cheese that weren't moldy and hard. After months of ship food, Kyle didn't even know where to begin. He shoveled in a mouthful of fresh peas and had the sudden feeling he had died and gone to Heaven.

Then Tora came back with a bundle in her arms. Guy grinned and took it from her. “Boy?” he asked hopefully.

“Her name is Kristina,” Tora said cheerily, apparently not at all surprised or offended by the question.

Disappointment briefly flitted across Guy's face, but then he smiled down at the baby in his arms. “No matter. Just means we have to try again.” He leaned over and kissed Tora's cheek.

A small form pushed between Hal and Kyle. “Want to come see our new puppies, Captain Hal?” Trude asked.

“Let Captain Hal sit and eat,” Tora scolded gently. “They've been on a ship a long time.”

Hal patted the girl's head. “After we've stuffed ourselves on your mum and auntie's wonderful food, we'll go see the puppies.” He looked up at Kyle and winked. “Maybe we can talk Mister Kyle into coming, too.”

* * *

Kyle was feeling *really* good.

They'd left Guy, John and Soranik to spend time with their families and returned to the ship with a jug of rum that Katma had given them. A bottle of rum just for them: no rationing, no sharing. And now they were sprawled on the bench under the windows, the room lit only by moonlight, glasses in hand and a jug of rum that was now half-empty.

Kyle tossed back another glass and shivered as the warmth went down his throat. He licked his lips. This was the best rum he'd ever tasted.

Hal refilled the empty glass, slopping a little over Kyle's wrist. He leaned down to lick the dribble of rum from Kyle's skin. “So that was the first ship I ever

commanded,” he continued. “She was beautiful. Sleek lines ... responsive ... never gave me any trouble.”

Kyle snorted. “Sounds like you’re talking about a wife.”

“A ship’s the closest thing I’ll ever have to a wife.” He winked at Kyle, then drained his glass.

Kyle drank down the rum in his glass, but he shook his head when Hal tried to refill it. “I’m done,” Hal took the glass from him and set it on the floor.

Kyle sighed and leaned back on the cushions. “Guy and John have nice families,” he said.

“Yes. They’re both very lucky.” Hal set aside his glass and the jug. He leaned back next to Kyle, their shoulders pressed together.

Kyle turned sideways to look at Hal. “The kids really like you, *Captain Hal*.” He smiled. “You’re good with kids.” He sighed and traced his finger around the buttons on Hal’s shirt. “Do you regret not having a family of your own?”

Hal snorted. “If you haven’t noticed, Kyle, I’m not overly interested in having a wife.”

“I know. But a situation like this ... you would only see her whenever your ship came into port. And you could just ... close your eyes while you make the babies.”

“Are you trying to marry me off?” Hal asked. He furrowed his brows, searching Kyle’s face. “Or are you thinking about what *you* want?”

“No. I don’t want to marry. I couldn’t even think of Jenny Scott that way and I already liked her as a friend.” He shrugged. “It would be nice to have children, though. To have a family.” He’d had a lot of fun playing with the children today, watching them roll in the grass with the puppies and then joining in their game of hide-and-seek. And he’d liked watching Guy and John with their children, both of them examples of the loving father Kyle had never had.

Hal chuckled and leaned close to kiss him. He rubbed his hand over Kyle’s belly. “I don’t think I’ll be getting you with child anytime soon.”

Kyle snorted and poked Hal in the stomach. “Who said I would be the one having the babies?”

They laughed at the absurdity of the idea, then Hal stood up, a little unsteady at first. He reached down to take Kyle’s hand and pull him to his feet. “Time for bed, I think.” He grinned. “We’ve obviously had too much to drink.”

Kyle laughed and followed him into their small bedroom. Kyle collapsed back on the bed, warm and happy from the rum, and smiled up at his lover.

Hal lay down next to him and ran his fingers through Kyle's hair. "Do you think you can settle for an old pirate captain as your family?"

Kyle raised his eyebrows and blinked. The rum had clouded his brain, so he wasn't quite sure what Hal was trying to say. "What do you mean?"

Hal gave him a rum-flavored kiss. "I mean if it were possible, Kyle Rayner, I would marry you."

Kyle giggled, but his laughter was cut short when he realized Hal wasn't laughing. "You're serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious. I've never been happier in my life than when I'm with you." He caressed Kyle's face, running his thumb over his cheek. "I love you."

"Oh." Kyle's heart started pounding and he felt dizzy, above and beyond what the rum had done to his head. *Hal loved him*. Todd had never said those words to him. Nobody except his mother had ever said those words to him.

"I'm sorry," Hal said, pulling away from him. "It was presumptuous of me to say that."

"What?" Kyle frowned at him, then realized the misunderstanding. "Oh, no. No." He rolled on top of Hal and kissed him, sliding his tongue between Hal's lips, raking his fingers through Hal's hair. "You just surprised me," he said, looking into worried brown eyes. "I love you, too. And if it were possible, I would marry you, too."

They gazed into each other's eyes, then a stray thought tickled Kyle's already fuzzy brain and he dropped his head to giggle into Hal's chest.

"And what is so funny?" Hal asked.

Kyle lifted his head to look at him. "I just imagined the look on my father's face if I told him I wanted to marry a pirate captain. The notorious Captain Hal Jordan, no less."

Hal grinned. "You can write to him when we get to Port Royal."

Kyle giggled again. He was sorely tempted to do just that. Kyle kissed him, a quick peck, then lay his head on Hal's chest, his ear pressed to the thump of his heart. Hal wrapped his arms around him and Kyle sighed contentedly, the rum making his eyes drift closed. "I've never been happier, either," he said sleepily.

8. Port Royal

Kyle peered over the side of the boat into the bay. Below, he could make out the outlines of brick and wood beams and a myriad of objects — the section of Port Royal, Jamaica, that had slid into the sea in 1692.

“What caused it?” he asked.

“Earthquake,” Hal said. “Abin Sur told me he came here just after. The devastation was horrendous, as if the city had melted into the sea. Thousands were killed. If the earthquake didn’t get them, they died of disease.”

Kyle squinted, trying to make out the objects below him. He couldn’t even begin to imagine thousands of people all dying at once.

“Some say it was God’s punishment for Port Royal’s sins, because it was the Sodom of the New World,” Toren said as he pulled the oars.

Kyle turned his eyes away from the ghostly shapes to look at Hal. “Do you believe that?”

Hal shrugged. “I would think there are worse sins in the world for God to concern himself with than sins of pleasure.”

“It *did* burn down when they tried to rebuild,” Hannu added.

Kyle looked at the buildings that lined the shore ahead of them and wondered what sort of sins a whole city could commit to bring about such wrath.

They reached the dock and clambered up onto the battered wood. They had come to Port Royal to meet Hal’s acquaintance, Captain Bruce Wayne, to see if he was interested in the maps they’d gotten from Captain Prince. Hal had served with Wayne in the Royal Navy. Now Wayne was working for the governor of Jamaica in some capacity. Kyle was worried — wasn’t the Crown after pirates? — but Hal assured him that Wayne wasn’t beyond making shady deals to help King and Country. And the French maps in their possession would certainly be of interest to England.

They hired a boy to take a message to Wayne and then there was nothing to do but wait to see if he would actually meet with them. Kyle watched the bustle around him. It was a quieter port than Tortuga, probably because half of it had disappeared into the sea not so long ago. Every now and then a red coat or two would appear, the uniform of the King’s soldiers, which caused Hal to flinch and pull his hat down to hide his face.

“Let’s go get a drink,” Hal said after another pair of soldiers wandered by, far too close for comfort for the pirates. They left Toren and Hannu to wait for the messenger to return and ducked into a tavern, *The Royal Oak*, taking a table in a dark corner. Now Kyle knew why Hal had them dress in old clothes — they would have stuck out like a sore thumb otherwise. It seemed the dregs of the city came here, and these were the ones that had money to spend in a tavern.

“Want a tumble, laddie?” a shrill voice asked.

Kyle looked up. A woman with greasy blond hair and a garishly painted face grinned down at him with rotten teeth. Her pimply breasts were tightly laced into a corset so they were pushed up high on her chest. Kyle turned away, grimacing. Even if he *did* desire women, he would probably still have been disgusted by the woman. She was the complete opposite of sweet, pretty Jenny Scott, the only woman he’d ever seriously considered in a romantic way. “No. Thank you.”

She leaned close and he could detect a sour, unwashed smell under the tang of too-sweet perfume. “Not good enough for you?” she sneered.

“Leave him alone,” Hal said coldly. “He’s not interested.”

“Come on, Gillian,” another woman said, pulling her companion away. “Don’t waste your time on them. They don’t look like they could pay anyway.”

Kyle looked at Hal and blew out a nervous breath. “Thanks.”

Hal leaned close to him to whisper in his ear. “Wouldn’t want you catching the pox,” he said, winking at Kyle. But the possessive hand gripping Kyle’s knee under the table told him that Hal also had no intention of sharing his lover with anyone.

They finished a watery ale before Hannu came in with the return message from Wayne. Hal opened the folded paper, then nodded. “He’s going to meet us.”

Hannu and Toren remained with the boat while Hal and Kyle walked to the center of Port Royal to meet Wayne. The tavern Wayne had chosen for their meeting was called *El Murciélago Diabólico* — *The Devil Bat*. It wasn’t hard to spot. It had a bat on the sign hanging over the door, a frightening creature baring fangs and claws. And though it turned out to be a fairly respectable establishment — clean and filled with people far better off than the patrons at the pub on the docks — Kyle had a bad feeling about this.

But his worries melted away when he actually met the man. Bruce Wayne stood up from his seat at a table near a sunny window and smiled at them with the vapid grin Kyle had experienced all too often when his father would entertain lords —

the dull expression of the bored and spoiled. The man probably had trouble finding his own arse, let alone plotting to betray Hal.

“Good to see you again, old friend,” Wayne said cheerily to Hal, taking his hand and shaking it. He gave the barest of glances at Kyle, most likely assuming Kyle was a servant.

Hal ducked his head down again and dropped into a chair. “A little less attention would be better,” he growled. Kyle took the chair next to him, across the table from Wayne.

“Sorry, right.” Wayne sat down and leaned forward, head in hands. “So what do you have for me?” he whispered, in the bright-eyed, inquisitive manner of a small child getting a birthday present.

Hal frowned at him a moment, then set the map case on the table. “French trade and exploratory routes.” He pulled open the case to reveal the parchment inside. “And naval movements for the next year.”

“Ahh. Very interesting.” Wayne reached for the case but Hal pulled it back out of reach. “Right, right. Payment first.” Wayne dug into his coat and pulled out a bag of coin. He dropped it on the table. “Five hundred. That’s the most Governor Kent has authorized for ... well, let’s just say ‘information from less than reputable sources’.”

“Five hundred,” Hal said with a slight nod. “And lay off my ship while she’s in Jamaica. And my crew.”

Wayne pursed his lips for a moment and Kyle thought he caught the barest hint of hardness in his eyes. But then he blinked and the vapid fop was back. “Very well. *The Emerald Dawn* and your crew will remain unmolested.”

Hal nodded, then slid the map case over to Wayne. He picked up the bag of coin and handed it to Kyle. Kyle took it, playing the servant, and tucked it inside his coat pocket without a word.

Hal stood and Kyle did the same. Hal bowed slightly to the man across from them. “Bruce.”

“A pleasure doing business with you, Captain,” Wayne said, still with a smile on his face. “It was a shame to lose you to ... other interests.”

Hal frowned again. “And we both know why. I did not abandon my country. She abandoned me.” He turned on his heel, gesturing for Kyle to follow. “I don’t trust him,” Hal mumbled as they left the tavern. “Something was off.”

“How so?” Kyle asked as they hurried down the busy street towards the docks. “He seemed friendly enough.”

“That’s what was off,” Hal said. “Bruce is *never* friendly. He was a bastard to his crews. Men dreaded serving with him. I don’t know what game he’s playing now, but ...” Hal glanced over his shoulder, back towards the tavern. “Just keep an eye open.”

They reached the market that separated the center of town from the docks and the crowd got thicker. Hal was glancing left and right now and Kyle noticed he’d picked up the pace.

“There’s far too many of the King’s men around for my liking,” Hal whispered.

Kyle nodded. It seemed that now there was a red-coated soldier on every street corner. Chances are they weren’t even looking for Hal, but then again they *could* be looking for Hal. Someone with a good eye and a good scope could have spotted the *Dawn*, and of course they wouldn’t know about Wayne’s deal to leave her and her crew alone.

They were near the center of the market now, close enough to the docks that Kyle could see the masts of ships, but it was slow going through the heavy crowd. Hal had got ahead of him, and Kyle was having a hard time keeping him in sight. The press of bodies was slowing him down, but he didn’t dare call out Hal’s name in case the soldiers *were* looking for him.

He bumped into a woman, spilling the parcels of bread out of her arms. “Sorry,” he mumbled as she shouted at him in heavily-accented English. He bent down and scooped up the loaves, shoving them unceremoniously back into her arms, but when he stood up, Hal was completely out of sight now. *Damn!*

The woman was still screeching and the nearest soldier was looking his way. Kyle apologized to her and fished a coin from the pouch to press into her hand, which thankfully quieted her. He pressed back against the nearest shop to get his bearings, trying to figure out the best way to get back to the docks which would avoid the soldiers.

A hand grabbed his arm and fear shot through him. He turned, expecting to come face to face with a soldier, but instead he looked down into the wizened face of a round, elderly, oriental man with cloudy eyes.

“You are the Torchbearer,” the man announced.

Torchbearer? Kyle shook his head. “I’m sorry? I don’t know what you mean.” He tried to pull his arm away, but gnarled fingers gripped him tightly with an amazing strength for an old man.

“You are the Torchbearer,” the man said again, his mouth breaking into a toothless grin. “When times are dark, when the greatest one has fallen, they will look to you.”

“I think you have me confused with someone else.” Kyle tried tugging his arm away again but the man wasn’t letting go.

“Uncle!” A woman came out of the candle shop behind them and wrapped her hand around the old man’s wrist. “Leave this gentleman be!”

“He is one of us,” the man said, nodding and smiling at his niece. But he released his grip on Kyle’s arm. “And *he* is the Torchbearer.” He turned to Kyle again. “The oracle said you would come to me today!” He cackled happily and patted Kyle’s arm. “Wait here, I have something for you.” He turned and disappeared into the shop.

“I’m so very sorry, sir,” the woman said to Kyle, bowing her head to him. “My uncle . . .” She leaned in close to Kyle’s ear. “His mind is not what it once was. He’s become obsessed with his oracles, waiting for this ‘torchbearer’ to arrive, always going on about magic lanterns and the legends he’d heard as a boy in China.”

The man came out of the shop again, still grinning madly. He grabbed Kyle’s hand and pressed something small and round into his palm. “This once belonged to my ancestor, Jong Li. And now I have found you and it is *yours*. Use it well.”

The woman gave Kyle an apologetic smile, then took the old man’s arm to pull him back into the shop. “Come back inside, Uncle Mogo. I’ll make you some tea.”

Kyle furrowed his brows as what she had said sunk in. *Always going on about magic lanterns? From China?* He opened his fist to look at the object that had been pressed there. It was a ring. A green ring, with a circle and two bars that resembled a lantern. A lantern symbol that was nearly identical to the one on the *Emerald Dawn*’s flag. It even looked to be made of the same metal as the lantern. He started to follow the man into the shop, to ask about the lantern, but then he remembered he was supposed to be following Hal. He sighed and pocketed the ring. The next time they were in Port Royal, he’d bring Hal back here to see the old man. Kyle looked up the street and felt a pang of worry and fear. He’d been speaking to the old man for quite a while. Why hadn’t Hal noticed he was missing and come back to look for him?

He got his answer when he heard the rhythmic pounding of booted feet on the cobbles. The crowd scurried to make way for a large group of soldiers coming up the street. Kyle pressed himself back against the wall of the candle shop to wait for them to pass. Then he caught sight of the prisoner in their midst.

“Hal...” He started to push his way through the crowd toward the soldiers, not at all sure what he was going to do once he got there. But Hal caught his eye and shook his head sharply, then nodded back towards the docks. And then Kyle could only watch helplessly as his lover was taken away.

Kyle clenched his fists. He hated leaving Hal like this, but he needed help. He turned and ran towards the docks.

* * *

“He wasn’t telling you to get help,” Guy said solemnly.

Kyle closed his eyes, not wanting to believe what he was hearing. “You’re telling me we are going to leave Hal to die?”

“Those are his instructions. Those have always been his instructions.” Guy looked around the table at the other officers. They all nodded in agreement, none of them raising their eyes to look at Kyle. Except for Guy. Guy looked Kyle straight in the eye. “He knew what a liability he was to the crew — the Royal Navy doesn’t look too kindly on one of their captains turning pirate. And he didn’t want anyone to risk themselves to save him. We’re to continue without him.”

Kyle stood up and turned away from the table. He scrubbed his hands over his face, then turned back to face Guy. “I don’t believe this! I thought he was your *friend!*”

Guy slapped his hand on the table. “Do you think I *like* this decision?”

“I don’t know, *Captain* Gardner,” Kyle sneered. “Do you?”

Guy went bright red. He stood up, knocking his chair over. “What are you suggesting, Rayner? That I wanted Hal to get caught?”

“You’re certainly not putting a lot of effort into getting him back!”

“That’s enough!” John shouted, standing up between Kyle and Guy. “Fighting amongst ourselves will not solve anything.”

“Neither will leaving Hal to hang while we turn tail and run!” Kyle shouted.

“In any other situation, I would put my life on the line for him!” Guy shouted back. “He’s been more of a brother to me than my own brother ever was! But I also have a responsibility to follow his orders, and first and foremost my responsibility is to this crew. And going into that prison would be a suicide mission!”

Kyle looked around at the others. What had happened to the loyal crew that he had come to consider his family? He threw up his hands. “Fine. But before you leave, I want you to take me back to shore.”

“You can’t do anything for him, Kyle,” Guy said, calmer now, with a hint of sympathy in his voice. “He’s made a lot of enemies. He could be dead already. I’m sorry.”

“I won’t stay on this ship without him.” Kyle bowed his head. He couldn’t stand to see the pity in his shipmate’s eyes. Or for them to see the tears prickling in his.

“I think we’re through discussing this then,” Guy said.

They left and Kyle slumped back down at the table. He refused to believe that Hal was dead already. Didn’t they like to make a big show out of hanging pirates, to make an example of them? And Hal was the most notorious pirate of them all. He wouldn’t be dying in private, which meant that Kyle had a chance to save him. He didn’t know what he would do once he was back on land, but he had to do *something*.

When times are dark, when the greatest one has fallen, they will look to you.

The old man’s words suddenly echoed in his mind. He frowned. Was the ‘greatest one’ Hal? Was *this* what the old man meant?

He grabbed the key from the desk and opened the trunk that held the lantern. He pulled out the bundle and set it on the table, then started to unwrap it. He needed to go see the old man and ask him what he knew about magical lanterns, but he didn’t think his shipmates would let him take the lantern off the ship. Could he convince the crew to stay long enough to bring the old man here?

He squinted as the cloth fell away, revealing the glowing lantern. He sat back down and propped his chin on his hands while he studied it. He couldn’t see where the light was coming from—there was no flame flickering within. But it wasn’t just the center of the lantern that was glowing. He realized the whole lantern had a glow to it. Was the metal itself causing the glow?

He pulled the ring from his pocket. He hadn’t told them about it, considering it irrelevant to getting Hal back. But maybe the ring had the same powers of protection as the lantern? He slipped the ring on his finger and held it next to the lantern. Within seconds it started to glow, too. Kyle stood up and walked into the bedroom, pulling the door closed behind him. The ring was still glowing.

He sat down on the bed, not quite daring to hope that he had a way to save Hal in his grasp. Now he just needed a way to test it.

9. Brightest Day, Blackest Night

John rowed the boat close to the beach near the Port Royal docks — hopefully unnoticed by any soldiers — and Kyle got out, stepping into water up to his knees. He reached over and grasped the handle of his trunk. “Want to give me a hand?” he asked Guy.

Guy stepped out of the boat and took the other side of the trunk. “Be right back, Johnny.”

“Good-bye, Kyle,” John said, reaching out to grasp Kyle’s hand. “I hope...” The man sighed. “Good luck.”

“Thank you, John.” Kyle hoisted his end of the trunk and he and Guy walked to shore.

They set the trunk in the sand, then Guy stepped back, running his hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, kid,” he said. “I really am.”

Kyle fought a smile. Guy was setting this up perfectly. He forced himself to glare at the man. “I’m sorry, too. I’m sorry that you’re a coward who will leave his friend to die.”

Guy’s face went red. “Now you listen to me—”

“No! You listen to me!” Kyle stepped forward and gave him a shove. Guy snarled and took a swing at him.

Kyle flinched, hoping to avoid a direct blow. He didn’t even know if this would work. But a transparent green wall flared between him and Guy, stopping Guy’s fist.

Guy jumped back, clutching his hand. “What in blazes...?”

Kyle pushed his finger at the wall of green. It was solid, like touching solid light. And it had stopped Guy from hitting him. “It worked...” he whispered. He grinned at Guy. “It worked, Guy! It worked!” The green wall faded away and he ran forward to wrap Guy in an embrace. “We can save him!”

Guy shoved him back, scowling. “What are you talking about?”

“This!” He held up his hand to show Guy the glowing metal band. “It’s a ring! I think it’s made of the same metal as the lantern. I got it yesterday, from this old man, he said I was the Torchbearer and I think I’m meant to save Hal! And it can *make* things! I wished I had a pistol and it made one, right in my hand! And I

wanted to see if it would protect us like the Lantern does, but away from the ship. So I got you to take a swing at me. And it worked! Even better than I expected!" Kyle gasped for breath, dizzy with excitement.

"You *wanted* me to hit you?" Guy scratched his head. "So you don't really think I'm a coward?"

Kyle shook his head. He'd just discovered an amazing new weapon that could also protect them, and all Guy could think about was that Kyle had called him a coward!

John came up next to him and grabbed his arm. "What did you do?" he asked.

Kyle wrapped John in an embrace, too, needing to share his joy. "I've found a way to save Hal!"

* * *

Marshallsea Prison loomed before them, a massive fortress of stone. Kyle took a deep breath and looked at his companions. Guy shrugged. "We're following you, kid."

Right. 'When times are dark, they will look to you.' Hopefully Uncle Mogo's oracles weren't mistaken. "Let's find a door, then." They crept around the edge of the building until they found two guards standing at a doorway. Kyle clenched his fist and ran his thumb over the ring around his middle finger. He lifted his hand, pointing the ring towards the men, and let his imagination take over. *Rocks, flying through the air...*

Two green rocks shot out from the ring, each one smashing a man on the side of the head. Both of them fell to the ground, unconscious.

Kyle looked back at Guy and John. They were both staring in amazement at the guards. "Unbelievable..." John whispered.

"Sure wish we had more of those," Guy muttered.

"I wish we had more as well," Kyle sighed. He looked down at the ring on his hand. He could really use the help. But he needed *real* rings, not rings made of light.

"Ow!" He jerked his hand up when the ring suddenly flared and grew hot.

Two metallic objects bounced on the cobblestones. Guy crouched down and picked them up. There were two rings, identical to Kyle's, lying on his palm. "I think you got your wish." He handed a ring to John, then slipped the other on his finger. He

held the ring up. A burst of raw energy shot out, arching over the harbor and falling into the ocean. He nodded and grinned. “Nice!”

Kyle rolled his eyes. “Keep it under control! We don’t need to draw attention.” Even though it was the middle of the night, there were still people about. Hopefully anyone who saw it would think it was shooting star. Or a drunken hallucination.

They crept further along the wall, then stepped over the unconscious guards to enter the fort. They ended up in a bare hallway, with no indication to where prisoners might be kept. “Now which way?” Kyle said, despair creeping into his mind. Some ‘Torchbearer’ he was turning out to be.

“To the left,” Guy said. “We need to go down a level, then make our way to the north side of the fort. It’s going to be tough, though, because there are a lot of soldiers prowling around down here.”

Kyle frowned. “How do you know that?”

“I was in the Navy, kid. I dragged my share of pirates down here before becoming one myself.” He sighed. “I figure their ghosts are already lining the walls, just waiting with big grins on their faces for me to die here in the end.”

“This won’t be the end,” Kyle said fiercely, pushing away his despair. He took off to the left, with a new resolve that they *would* succeed, because he was the *Torchbearer* and he was going to prove to everyone that he could live up to that title. “We’re going to get Hal and get out of here.”

They met more soldiers along the way, and Guy and John got a chance to test their new weapons. John did the same as Kyle, only forming cannon balls rather than rocks, but Guy’s ring just exploded with green light. The last guard he hit wasn’t going to be getting up again, as half his face was splattered on the wall. “Suppose I should tone it back,” Guy muttered as they stepped over the body.

They found the jail cells and knocked out the guards. When the prisoners realized what was happening, they started pleading with Kyle and the others to set them free. But they didn’t have time and the shouts and sobs were going to attract more guards. Kyle held up his ring, pointing at the row of cells, and every man inside suddenly had a bright green gag over his mouth.

“Good idea,” John said.

Kyle ran down the row of prisoners. All of them now frantically clawing at the gags, fear in their eyes. But none of the cells held Hal. “All right, so where’s Hal?”

“Through there,” Guy said, pointing at a door on the end. “They’d most likely keep him in solitary.”

Kyle blasted the door open and went inside.

The room held four more doors, each with a small, barred window. He looked inside the first one, into a tiny cell. It was empty. He ran to the next, but it was empty as well. He found Hal in the third cell.

“Here.” Guy pushed him aside, a ring of keys in his hand. “Got it off the guard.” After trying a few keys, the door swung open and Kyle ran inside.

Hal was battered and unconscious, but he was still alive. He had new bruises over old ones, and blood matted his hair from a still-bleeding gash on the side of his head.

“Hal? Wake up!” Kyle patted his cheeks, but Hal only groaned slightly. “Hal?” He bent down and kissed Hal’s bruised and split lips, not caring that John and Guy were there. “We’re going to get you out of here,” he whispered.

The prisoners started shouting again — the gags must have worn off. Kyle looked up at John and Guy. “We’ll have to carry him out.”

John and Guy each slipped an arm under Hal’s, lifting him to his feet. Hal just sagged against them, his head resting on John’s shoulder. Kyle took a deep breath. *They were going to get out of here. They had to get out of here.* “All right, let’s go.”

He stepped out of the room and back into the row of cells. “Quiet! All of you!” he shouted. “You’ll alert the guards.” He tossed the ring of keys to the prisoners in the first cell. It was up to them to save themselves if they wished. Kyle was only concerned with getting Hal to safety and the escape of the other prisoners would provide a good distraction.

They went back the way they came, slowed now by Hal’s dead weight. At the end of the final corridor before reaching the outside of the fort—and freedom—Kyle heard the voices of soldiers coming towards them. There was no way they would get out of the fort and away from their pursuers when Hal was still unconscious. He made his decision.

“Go!” Kyle shouted. He shoved Guy and John out the door that led to the entrance they’d come in at. “I’ll hold them off.”

“We’re not leaving you, Kyle,” John said.

Kyle looked at Hal’s bruised face and reached out to touch his hair. According to Mogo’s legends and oracles he may be The Torchbearer, but Hal was The Greatest

One. Kyle was sure of it. He was the one who rallied them all together, who saved people from slavery and gave them hope. And maybe it had been Kyle's entire purpose in life just to be here to return the favor and save Hal.

His hand drifted down to touch Hal's bruised cheek. *I love you.* He looked up at Guy. "You have to get him back to the ship. The *Emerald Dawn* needs her captain. Get him back to the ship and get away from here."

"He'll never forgive us if we leave you behind," John said. "I'll stay."

"No, John," Guy said, shaking his head. "We can't lose our navigator. I'll stay."

Kyle took advantage of their argument to slip back into the hallway. "The ship needs *all* of you." They looked up at him just as he slammed the door and slid the bolt into place. "Tell Hal it's for the good of the crew," he yelled through the door.

"Kyle!" John shouted from the other side.

Kyle ignored him. He ran back down the corridor, towards the soldiers that were following them.

He waited for them at an intersection. When they spotted him, Kyle held up his fist. *Arrows*, he thought, and a flight of bright green arrows shot from his ring towards the soldiers. The first few men went down screaming. He turned and ran, deeper into the fort. He had no idea where he was going, but he knew it was away from Hal.

He ended up back in the jail. All of the cells were empty now. He was in a dead end and there was no escape. Hands grabbed him and he tried to twist away, but it was no use. He clenched his fist, pressing his thumb against the ring. He couldn't let them find it. He had to hide it somehow.

He doubled over, briefly pulling out of the grasp of the soldiers, and in a swift movement slipped the ring from his finger and into his mouth. He swallowed hard and the ring slid down his throat.

A hand grabbed his hair, pulling him upright. "How did you kill those men? Are you a witch?"

"Of course he is," another man said. "He helped Jordan escape. He's from that cursed ship."

"Jordan made a pact with the devil," another man said. "Maybe he's a demon?" He crossed himself.

“A demon, are ye?” the soldier holding him said in his ear. “Well, you feel flesh and blood to me.”

Something heavy cracked across the back of Kyle’s head, knocking him unconscious.

* * *

Kyle woke to excruciating pain all through his body, but his head was the worst of it. Throbbing pain pounded in his skull, radiating down into his neck. He lifted his hand to touch his head and found his hair sticky with blood. He rolled on his side and had to take a deep breath to fight down the nausea. He must have been hit in the head, but he couldn’t remember it happening. He couldn’t remember how he got here. The last thing he could recall was pushing John and Guy out the door with Hal...

He looked around the the room. There were a few chairs, some paintings of important looking people on the walls, but it was the desk that drew his attention. Bruce Wayne sat behind it, scribbling away with his quill.

Kyle tried to sit up, but he couldn’t move very far without pain stabbing through his body. His groan got the attention of the man at the desk.

Wayne stood up and walked over to him. The dull expression was gone, replaced by a cold glare from intelligent eyes as he looked down at Kyle. It was like he was a completely different man. “Where is Hal Jordan?” he asked in a deep, gravelly voice.

“Dunno,” Kyle mumbled. He let his head sink back to the floor. “Long gone, I suppose.” At least he hoped so. He squinted up at Wayne. “What do you want with me?”

“Nothing. It’s Jordan I want.”

Kyle frowned. “You made a deal! For the maps! You said you wouldn’t go after him! Or has the Crown lost all sense of honor?”

Wayne laughed. “You need to learn to pay attention, boy! I promised the *ship* and *his crew* would go unmolested. I never promised a thing about Jordan.”

Dammit! Kyle closed his eyes for a moment, his battered head trying to come up with ... something. “He’s not going to rescue me, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Kyle said, trying to make his voice bitter, as if he despised the Captain for abandoning him. “I’m not important.”

The man laughed. “I think you *are* important. You are his *lover*.”

Kyle flinched. *How did the man know that?* He wrinkled his nose. “You’re disgusting! I’m not a sodomite!”

“You really need to work on your lying as well, boy. It’s the eyes that give it away. And you look at Jordan with lust in your eyes. As he does to you.” The man sneered at him. “So you are the perfect bait to get him back.”

Kyle let his head drop back to the floor. “He’s not coming back,” he mumbled. “He won’t risk the ship for one man.” Part of him wanted to believe that, that Hal would leave him behind and get away safely. But another part of him really wanted Hal to burst in and save him in time, because more than anything in the world he wanted to see Hal again.

“Oh, he’ll come back for you,” Wayne said. “It’s his weakness, always putting his own needs first.” He turned to the guards and gestured towards Kyle. They came forward and picked Kyle up off the floor, pulling him to his feet. “And I’m going to leave him a message, about what happens to those who betray the Crown, who break the law and choose to become criminals. A message he’ll understand far better than the threat of his own hanging.”

Wayne reached inside his coat and pulled out a small silver knife. Kyle sucked in his breath and shrank back. *Oh, hell...*

“I’m part of the crew, you know,” Kyle blurted out, trying to appeal to any sense of honor the man had. “Isn’t this cheating?”

Wayne shook his head. “No, I don’t think you’re part of the crew. You’re Jordan’s whore.” He studied the knife, running his thumb along the blade. “So where should we start? Something Jordan values, I think?” The man reached towards Kyle’s face and when Kyle tried to jerk away, Wayne roughly grabbed his chin, squeezing hard enough that Kyle was sure he’d end up with more bruises. Wayne brought the knife up and pressed it to Kyle’s left cheek, just below his eye. “Your face will certainly feel my blade.”

He jerked his hand away and Kyle hissed as the knife slid across his cheek. His eyes watered and he felt a warm trickle of blood roll over his skin, but he ground his teeth together, determined not to cry out.

“But perhaps we’ll start somewhere that Jordan values even more?” Wayne stepped back and looked at the soldiers. “Remove his clothing. We’ll see if Jordan still wants him if he’s a gelding.”

“No!” Kyle twisted in the grip of the soldiers and managed to kick out, kicking the knife from Wayne’s hand.

One of the guards punched him in the gut and Kyle doubled-over, out of breath. Wayne retrieved the knife and grabbed Kyle by the collar, pulling him close. “Very well. If you prefer, we can skip the prelude and get right down to business.”

Cold pain bit into Kyle’s belly, but it didn’t feel like the punch the guard had given him. He looked down. Wayne’s knife was impaled to the hilt in his gut and a blood stain was growing on his shirt. *No...*

Wayne jerked the knife out. “It can take hours for a man to die of a belly wound. Days even, if you manage not to bleed to death first.” He wiped the knife on Kyle’s shirt. “But the one certainty is that you *will* die. Slowly and painfully.” He jerked his head towards the soldiers and they let Kyle go.

Kyle staggered back against the wall, grimacing in pain, his hands pressed over the sticky wetness. Wayne wasn’t lying. Kyle had read about belly wounds in Soranik’s books. It was probably one of the worst ways to die — pain and fever that could last for days as the wound turned septic and slowly killed you. And there was nothing any doctor could do about it. His only hope was that Wayne had hit an artery and he would bleed to death quickly. That would be far preferable to a slow, agonizing death.

His belly felt strange, a tingling spreading out from the wound to the rest of his body. He felt burning hot and freezing cold at the same time. *Is this what it felt like to die?* He slid down the wall to sit on the floor and looked up at Wayne. “Hal was right,” he said weakly. “You’re a bastard.”

Wayne laughed. “I’ll be sure to remind him of that when he’s dying on the floor next to what’s left of you.” He stepped towards Kyle. “Now, let’s see what we can do with that pretty face.”

Kyle watched him come closer, the knife in his hand. The world started going gray and he tried to fight it, tried to scramble away from the man coming towards him, but his limbs wouldn’t move...

A streak of green light smashed through the door and then Hal was there. He *flew* into the room, smashing Wayne into the wall. John and Guy followed, taking out the guards. Hal pressed his forearm into Wayne’s neck, pinning him to the wall. “Don’t you touch him!”

Bruce smirked through his bloodied mouth and held up the knife. “Too late.”

Hal grabbed the knife and whirled around. His eyes widened when he saw Kyle. “Kyle!” He ran over to Kyle and dropped to his knees next to him. “Let me see.” He pulled Kyle’s hands away from the wound and tore the shirt open. He grimaced. “Oh, Lord...”

For the first time since Kyle had met him Hal looked *frightened* and that alone confirmed what Kyle already knew. “I’m going to die, aren’t I Hal?” Kyle mumbled. Hal didn’t get here in time to save him, but at least he got his wish to see him again, even if it was for the last time. He was having trouble keeping his eyes open now, when all he wanted to do was look at Hal and try to burn his face into his memory for ... well, wherever he was going when he died.

“No.” Hal shook his head and ran his fingers through Kyle’s hair. “No, love. I’m not going to let you die. You’re *not* going to die.” He looked up. “John! Get him back to the ship!”

“Hal...” Kyle whimpered, trying to grab at Hal’s shirt but his fingers wouldn’t cooperate. He felt other hands on him, then he was looking into John’s worried face.

“I’ve got you,” John said. He stood, lifting Kyle in his strong arms.

Kyle looked back over John’s shoulder at Hal through a haze of gray. The last thing he saw before the world went black was Guy holding Wayne and Hal walking towards them, the silver knife glinting in his hand.

10. Healing

Kyle opened his eyes, the dream fading away in a flash of green. He remembered Wayne's cold voice telling him he was going to die and he remembered Hal's face, pale with fear. *Am I dead? Or was it all just a dream?*

He blinked and looked around. He was back on the ship in their bed and his whole body hurt, especially his belly. So he must still be alive. But he couldn't remember how he got back to the *Emerald Dawn*.

He turned his head. Hal was sitting next to him, elbows resting on the bed and his head bowed into his hands. He saw that Hal now wore a green lantern ring, too, and Kyle smiled. His limbs felt like lead, but he managed to move his hand far enough to touch Hal's arm.

Hal's head jerked up and he stared at Kyle. He looked exhausted. His eyes were red and ringed by dark circles. His hair was a wild mess, as if he'd been running his fingers through it too much, and dried blood was matted in it.

Hal sucked in his breath and reached out to gently touch Kyle's face. "I thought I'd lost you, love," he whispered, his voice shaking. He leaned over to kiss him softly, his lips wet against Kyle's parched mouth, then he stood. "I'll go get Soranik."

Kyle didn't want him to go, but he could only gasp out a weak protest as Hal raced from the room. He looked down at his body. His ribs were bound and every breath came with a stab of sharp pain. His belly was felt like someone had punched him. His head was throbbing and he was sure his entire body was one big bruise.

Soranik came in, a worried Hal behind her. She sat in the chair Hal had vacated. "How are you feeling?"

He did his best to lick his lips. then opened his mouth. "Hurts," he gasped.

"Get him some water, Captain," Soranik said over her shoulder.

Hal hurried away again and Soranik bent close to him, laying her hand on his shoulder. "You are a mess, my dear," she said softly. "It's a wonder you're still alive."

"Feel ... like it," Kyle whispered.

Hal came back with a copper cup full of water. Soranik moved aside so Hal could sit down. He carefully slid his arm under Kyle's shoulders to lift his head up to drink.

Kyle ignored the pain, just glad to get some water on his parched tongue. He drank down the cup, then Hal eased him back onto the pillow. “How are you?” he asked, lightly brushing his fingers through Kyle’s hair.

“Fine.” Kyle forced a smile on his face. He didn’t know if Soranik had told Hal he was lucky to be alive, and he didn’t want to worry him anymore. Hal already looked worried enough and it was disconcerting to see him like that. Captain Hal Jordan wasn’t supposed to be afraid of *anything*. He lifted his hand to touch Hal’s face ... and noticed his own ring was gone. He frowned. “Where’s my ring?”

Hal shook his head. “I don’t know. You didn’t have it when we found you.” He turned his head to kiss Kyle’s palm. “It’s no matter. We can make you a new one.”

“What if someone finds it?” Kyle wracked his brain, trying to remember what had happened to it. He’d had it when they rescued Hal, he was sure of that, but that was the last thing he really remembered. *The ring ... where was the ring...?*

Something fluttered in his stomach and worked its way up towards his throat. He swallowed hard. “I ... I’m going to be sick.”

Hal picked up the chamber pot and helped Kyle roll to his side. Kyle coughed painfully and then the little bit of water he had drank came back up, along with something hard that dropped into the pot with a metallic clink. Hal looked into the pot, then up at Kyle, a weary smile on his face. “Well, we seem to have found your ring.”

* * *

Kyle sighed and closed his eyes. He was still tired, although he had slept away most of the day, but overall he was feeling much better than he had this morning. He should be dead — or dying — but instead he was healing at an amazing rate. Already his wounds were closing and his bruises were fading. Even the belly wound was healing, with no sign of going septic. He moved his thumb to rub the ring on his finger. Hal had cleaned it up and refreshed its light from the lantern for him, so it had a slight glow again. As near as they could figure, it had protected him from the fatal injuries, just like the lantern did for the ship, and now the ring was healing him.

He wasn’t the only one who was healing. He glanced at the man gently snoring beside him. Hal’s injuries were healing as well. None of them were as serious as Kyle’s, but Soranik was still worried about him. She had told Kyle that Hal hadn’t slept at all since they’d brought him back. He’d spent every moment sitting by Kyle’s side, pushing himself to exhaustion. And even after Kyle was awake and showing improvement, Hal was still on edge, refusing to sleep. So Soranik had added a concoction of herbs to his rum to *force* him to sleep.

He heard footsteps in the cabin and looked up. Guy was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, John right behind him. He smiled at his friends. "Come in."

"We can come back later if he's sleeping," John said, nodding towards Hal.

Kyle shook his head. "You won't wake him. Soranik spiked his rum."

Guy snickered. "She's sneaky like that." He came in and sat on the chair, while John sat on the edge of the bed. "Feeling better, kid?"

Kyle smiled and nodded. "Much better." In the light from the port hole, Kyle noticed the large, faded bruise around Guy's eye. He didn't remember Guy getting hit, so it must have been on the way out. "What happened to your face? Did you have to fight your way out of the prison?"

Guy glanced at John, then shook his head. "Nah. This is from Hal."

Kyle's eyes widened. "*Hal* hit you?"

"He probably would have *killed* me if Kilowog hadn't pulled him off me." He wagged his finger at Kyle. "So think about *that* the next time you pull some trick that makes me leave you in danger."

"Oh. Sorry." Kyle frowned. Hal hadn't told him what had happened in Port Royal, always finding an excuse to put it off. "So what happened after you left me? My memory is pretty hazy."

"We got back to the ship without any difficulty," John said. "Your distraction worked. And as soon as Hal regained consciousness, he wanted to see you."

Guy sighed. "And I volunteered to be the one to tell him that you stayed behind to distract the guards. He was barely conscious and he still just about took my head off for leaving you there. Then he insisted on going to get you, no matter how much Soranik tried to tell him he needed to rest. So we made more rings and a bunch of us went back. Luckily we did, because it looked like Wayne was about to butcher you."

Kyle frowned, trying to remember. Everything from that time was a blur. He had vague memories of a silver knife. But it was in Hal's hand, not Wayne's. "Did Hal kill him?"

Guy shook his head. "No. I convinced him we didn't need the Navy on our tail over killing some jackass. We needed to get out of there and get you to safety. That convinced him not to kill Wayne ... for now anyway. Hal just smashed his nose real good. Knocked him out in one punch!" Guy grinned. "Bruce Wayne won't be going to any fancy dress parties anytime soon."

Kyle blew out a sigh of relief and reached over to grasp Hal's hand. Killing someone of Bruce Wayne's status would have put every ship in the Navy on the hunt for Hal. He smiled at Guy. "Thanks for stopping him. I don't want him getting into even more trouble just because of me."

"Kid, the only thing that stopped him is knowing he'd put you in danger if he killed Wayne. He'd do anything to protect you. I've never seen Hal afraid of anything until I saw him watching Soranik work on you. If you had died, there would have been nothing any of us could have done to stop him. Hal would have gone back to kill Wayne in the slowest and most painful way possible, I can guarantee that."

Kyle frowned. "He'd put the crew in danger because of me?"

"Yeah, kid, he would have." Guy glanced over at Hal. "I've known Hal my whole life, I love him like a brother, but I have to say that he is the most selfish and arrogant man I've ever met. And *you* are the one person he loves more than himself."

* * *

"You don't have to coddle me, you know." Kyle glared at Hal, awake from his forced nap and back to hovering over him like a mother hen. Hal had been furious when he woke up from his drug-induced sleep, but Kyle had suspected that would happen so he insisted that they blame *him* for the idea. Hal had grumbled some, but at least nobody got punched in the face again. "Don't you have a ship to run?"

"Guy can handle things." Hal paced a few more times, then sat in the chair next to the bed. "You shouldn't have come back for me, Kyle."

"Too late now." He grinned at Hal. "It looks like I'm stuck with you."

Hal didn't smile back. "I'm serious, Kyle. You had no business being in that fort. And—"

"Hal!" He reached over to take Hal's hand. "I'm fine. Truly." And he *was* feeling better. It was hard to believe he'd been on death's doorstep last night.

"You could have *died!*" Hal squeezed his hand. "The ring protected you, helped you survive your injuries, but its light was fading."

"But the ring worked," Kyle said. "I'm still alive, aren't I?"

Hal looked down and ran his thumb over the back of Kyle's hand. "You should never have put yourself in danger in the first place. Especially not for me."

Kyle opened his mouth to protest, but realized it was a losing battle. Hal was bound and determined to wallow in his guilt. “Fine. Next time I need to break you out of a prison, I’ll ask your permission first.”

He thought for sure Hal would argue back, but the captain didn’t say anything, just kept his eyes on the hand he held in his grasp.

Kyle rolled to his side and reached up to run his fingers through Hal’s hair. “I can take care of myself, Hal. You can’t dictate what I choose to do with my own life. I’ve had enough of people doing that to me.”

Hal nodded. “I know.” He lifted Kyle’s hand to his lips, kissing his palm. “I do it because I love you. Can you understand that?”

Kyle smiled and brushed his fingers over Hal’s cheek. “Of course I do, as annoying as it is. I love you, too.”

Hal kissed Kyle’s hand again, then stood up. “I need to get back up on deck. I’ll have Soranik come keep you company.”

Kyle frowned, watching Hal hurry out of the cabin. Hal seemed ... odd. Distant. Like something was weighing heavily on him. He sighed. Well in a few days they would be in Havana. Maybe some shore leave would do Hal some good.

* * *

“Kyle, we shouldn’t.”

Kyle sighed in frustration then renewed his efforts, sliding his hand down Hal’s belly to grasp his cock. It had been four days since Kyle was injured and though he had been feeling better by the second day, Hal kept avoiding him. He would find something to keep him occupied late into the night, then would do no more than wrap his arms around Kyle as he slept, claiming he didn’t want to disturb Kyle’s recovery. And now Kyle was tired of it. He was fully healed — hell, he was *alive!* — and he wanted to celebrate it in an appropriate manner. “I want to,” he mumbled into Hal’s chest, flicking his tongue over salty skin. “And I’m fine.” He thrust his own cock against Hal’s thigh. “*Very* fine,” he murmured.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Kyle.”

Kyle groaned and lifted his face to look at Hal. “You’re not going to hurt me. See?” He took Hal’s hand and pressed it to the scar on his abdomen. “It’s all healed. My bruises are gone, my bones are knit—I don’t even have so much as a headache anymore. The ring took care of everything.” He scooted up to kiss Hal’s mouth. “Though, I *do* have a few new aches that only you can help me with. Right here.” He moved Hal’s hand down to his cock and ground against it a few times. “I

want you,” he sighed, pressing his face into the crook of Hal’s neck. “I want you to fuck me.” He ran his tongue along Hal’s collarbone and smiled when his lover gasped and shivered. Kyle lifted his head again to look into Hal’s eyes. “Or I can fuck you. Whichever you prefer.”

Hal sighed and combed his fingers through Kyle’s hair. “You tell me if I hurt you.” Kyle nodded and then Hal rolled over so he was on top. He settled between Kyle’s thighs, their cocks pressed together.

Kyle ran his hands over Hal’s back. Hal was upset about nearly losing him, but he had come so close to losing Hal as well. What if he’d never met Mogo, had never gotten the ring...? Kyle wrapped his arms around Hal’s neck and pulled him down to kiss him. “How do you want to do this?” Kyle whispered against his mouth.

“Just like this,” Hal said. He ground against Kyle, sliding their cocks together, and bent his head to kiss him. Kyle opened his mouth to Hal’s kisses — gentle at first, but then growing more possessive and needy. “I was so afraid I lost you,” Hal murmured when they stopped to breathe.

“I thought I’d lost you, too.” Kyle wrapped his legs around Hal, pulling him close, grinding his cock up into Hal’s belly. “I wasn’t going to stay ... on the ship without you.” His breath quickened and he felt the ache of an orgasm building. “I *couldn’t* stay ... here ... without you. I ... uh, God! Hal! ...” He thrust harder, the orgasm close now. “I love you,” he gasped and then he climaxed, muffling his shouts in Hal’s shoulder.

Before Kyle could catch his breath, Hal came, thrusting hard against Kyle, grunting with the effort. “I love you,” he said afterward into Kyle’s ear. “Always remember that. No matter what.”

Kyle kissed Hal and turned to cuddle against him. “I will,” he said sleepily. “Always.”

II. Home

When they reached the docks of Havana, Kyle remembered Hal's original proposition a few weeks ago, which now seemed like a lifetime ago, that he could stay on the *Emerald Dawn* or be dropped off in Havana to buy passage wherever he wanted to go. And Kyle knew he had made the right choice. There was nowhere in the world he'd rather be than on the *Emerald Dawn*, with this crew and with this captain.

He stepped out of the boat onto the dock, then turned back to look at Guy. "I won't be long." He grinned. "Unless I get lost." He'd begged Hal to let him do something, tired of the days spent recovering in bed, so while Guy and Isamot traded for supplies, Kyle was given the task to go arrange for new sailcloth to be delivered.

"Sure, kid." Guy gave him a crooked smile and waved at him. "Good luck."

Kyle laughed and waved back. Everyone seemed so worried about him today, going off on this task alone. Soranik had given him a hug and told him to be careful. Kilowog had given him a string of beads and shells to wear around his neck, a protective totem he'd explained. Even Salaak hadn't been quite so grouchy when he'd handed Kyle the bag of coin, admonishing him to watch out for the coin *and* himself.

Hal and his worries must be rubbing off on them.

He looked around at the streets. He was supposed to look for a church, the Church of the Holy Angel. Hal said the sailmaker was nearby.

"Excuse me," he said, flagging down a man pushing a cart of vegetables. "Holy Angel? Um ... *Angel* ... *Santo*? Church. Uh ..." What the hell was the Spanish word for church?

"*Sí*," the man said and pointed down a road that ran through the center of the city, filled with people doing their shopping.

He spoke some more, more explicit directions Kyle could only assume, but he spoke so rapidly that Kyle had no chance of even attempting to understand it with his very limited knowledge of Spanish. But he at least had a direction to go in. Kyle nodded and smiled. "Thank you. *Merci*. I mean *gracias*."

He got caught up in the sights and smells of the new city, street vendors and hawkers of all kinds. He suppressed the urge to stop at a shop selling papaya — he

had become enamored of them while in Tortuga. Maybe he could talk Hal into taking a walk here later and buy a crate of them.

He walked farther on, weaving between people and carts. But there was no sign of the church yet. He stopped to check his bearings. He was a little confused that he was heading so far into the city rather than along the harbor — he would have thought a sailmaker would be closer to his clients. He turned around to look the way he came. He hadn't realized he'd come so far. He couldn't even see the harbor anymore. He frowned. Maybe he'd remembered the wrong name for the church?

He stepped off the street and under the awning of shop to get out of the sun. He pulled the letter from Hal to the sailmaker out of his pocket and unfolded it, hoping it gave some clue as to who this man was so Kyle could ask how to find him.

He nearly dropped the letter, shocked to find it addressed to him. Fear gripped him, because there could only be one reason for it.

Dearest Kyle,

I know you'll be angry with me, but I'd rather you were angry with me than dead. It's too risky for you to be involved with me. Too many people would hurt you to get to me, just as Wayne did, and I can't bear that. You are too good for the life of a pirate. And you are too good for the likes of me.

The money is yours, your share from the cargo we took. There's more than enough for you to buy passage wherever you would like to go.

Perhaps you could take up Mister West's offer to go to Virginia? Guy will leave your trunk with the harbor master.

I'm sorry. I love you, always.

Hal

Kyle crumpled the paper in his hand. *Damn him!*

He pushed his way through the crowd, running back towards the harbor, hoping Guy was still there. If not, he'd pay a fisherman to follow the *Emerald Dawn* if he had to.

It explained everyone's behavior — they had all known he would be abandoned in Havana today. And it explained Hal's words last night. I love you. Always remember that. No matter what.

But you don't just abandon someone you love, the selfish prick, just because you're scared they might get hurt, and you at least have the courage to tell them that you're leaving them. And Kyle wanted the chance to say it to his face before he got kicked off the ship, to tell Hal he was a selfish, arrogant prick and a *coward*.

He reached the docks and gasped in relief when he caught sight of Guy's bright red hair. He and Isamot were just settling into the boat, getting ready to go back out to the *Dawn*.

Kyle skidded to a stop on the dock above them and jumped down into the boat, knocking his shin on a crate in the process and nearly falling into the water. "You're not leaving without me!"

"Kyle! My friend! You come back!" Isamot stood and wrapped him in a joyful embrace that nearly squeezed the breath out of Kyle. "I told them it's a mistake to leave you!"

Guy sighed. "The captain said ..." He frowned. "Aw, hell!" He stood up. "Your trunk is with the harbor master. Let's go get it."

Kyle grabbed him, wrapping him in an embrace almost as enthusiastic as Isamot's. "Thank you, Guy!"

"All right, all right..." Guy shrugged out of his embrace and turned to climb back up on the dock. "It's better to get yelled at by Hal for bringing you back," he muttered as they walked across the docks. "He would be moping around the ship for weeks and making our lives miserable if you're gone."

* * *

Kyle waited up on deck while the *Dawn* got underway. He wanted to be well out at sea before he went in to see Hal, so there was no chance of being put ashore again. Not right away, anyway.

"He went into his cabin after you left, with orders not to be disturbed," John said. Then he grinned and shook Kyle's hand. "I'm glad you're back, Kyle."

"I'm glad, too," Kyle said.

The others all came up to welcome him back and by the end of it Kyle realized he was wanted on this ship, that these people were truly his friends, his family. And he wasn't going to give it up that easily. If Hal didn't want him as a lover anymore — fine. But he wasn't going to leave the *Emerald Dawn* without a fight.

Once the land had faded to a strip on the horizon, Kyle went down the steps to the Captain's cabin. He took a deep breath and opened the door.

Hal was sitting at the table, his head in his hands, a half-empty bottle of rum in front of him. "I said I didn't want to be disturbed!" he shouted. He looked up, glaring. Then his eyes widened. "Kyle?"

Kyle shut the door and walked over to the table. He threw the bag of coins in front of Hal. They spilled out, clattering across the table. "You said I could use it to go anywhere I wanted. So I'm buying passage on your ship."

"Kyle..." Hal stared at the coins on the table and shook his head. "No."

"Why?" Kyle stepped up to him and put his hand on Hal's shoulder. "Tell me why you want to be rid of me! I deserve to know! I thought you loved me!"

Hal slapped his hand on the table, making the coins jump. "I do love you!"

"Then why, Hal? Why did you try to leave me behind?"

Hal crossed his arms on the table and bowed his head. "Because for only the second time in my life, I was well and truly afraid. The first time was when I found out my father had died. And I knew I had to go conquer the sea that took him, to conquer that fear. The second time ... " He voice broke. "The second time was when I saw that wound and I *knew* you were going to die and there was nothing I could do about it. I sat by your bed all night, waiting for you to take your last breath. It was the worst night of my life, Kyle. I've watched plenty of friends die, but I've never felt *anything* like that before."

Kyle sighed in frustration. Hadn't they discussed this last night? "But I didn't die, Hal! We have the rings to protect us!"

"And what happens the next time, when one of my enemies decides to torture you and I can't get to you before your ring loses its light?" Hal asked. "I'm afraid of losing you. And I don't know how to conquer that fear except to get you away from me. You'll be safer if you never have anything more to do with me."

Kyle bent over to wrap Hal in an embrace from behind, his cheek resting on Hal's shoulder. "I fear losing you as well, Hal. But you can't conquer every fear. You'll have to learn to face it, just like the rest of us. Because I'm not going anywhere."

“Kyle ... I can't put you in danger like that.”

Kyle angrily pushed away from him. “Did you ever consider that it's worth the risk to me? Because for the first time in my life, I feel like I truly belong somewhere, that I have a purpose. The Lantern *chose* me to be here, Hal! I'm learning to be a sailor and Soranik is teaching me about healing ...” He crossed his arms defiantly. “I'll move out of your cabin and live with the rest of the crew if I have to, but this ship is my home and I'm not going to leave her willingly!”

“I ... I never thought ...”

“You didn't think about what I wanted, did you? That I have more reasons to stay here than just being your lover?” Kyle snorted. “I love you, Hal, but I love this ship, too. And I will continue to love this ship, even if you want to end this. Us.” He touched Hal's shoulder. “So what is your decision, Captain? Do I get to stay as part of your crew, or do you throw me off the ship at the next port?”

Hal gave a resigned sigh and shook his head. “No, I don't want you to leave.” He turned to Kyle, at the same time pushing his chair back from the table. He took Kyle's hands and pulled him down to straddle his lap and wrapped his arms around him. “You're far braver than me, you know. Everyone says I'm not afraid of anything. But I just managed to *avoid* being afraid. I never had anything I cared that much about. Until you came along.” Hal smiled and brushed his thumb over Kyle's lips. “This ship hasn't been the same since you joined us. I almost had a rebellion on my hands, you know. The crew argued for you. They thought I was wrong to leave you.”

Kyle poked Hal in the chest. “And they were right.”

“I know. I know that now.” He threaded his fingers into Kyle's hair and pulled him down to kiss him. “We should probably go tell them you're staying and that they can cancel their plans for a mutiny.”

“I think it can wait,” Kyle said. He leaned in to whisper in his ear. “I think you should welcome me home first, Captain Jordan.”

This is a work of fanfiction. Source material belongs to DC Comics.

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