

Captain Tory

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The Brighton streets were quiet at this time of night, as well as dark. Even if anyone did see us, he told me no one would pay any mind to two dirty beggars. He swung his lantern three times and slowly the schooner appeared. Grandpa hadn't told me where I was going, just that I wasn't safe here. I'd never been to the docks before. Mother always says that they're where scum and peasants go to get virus infected fish. Well, she used to say that, before they got her. They were coming after me too, apparently. Why would someone want me? I've never done anything wrong.

The man that was with me looked strange. He had a strong jaw and clear blue eyes that made him look like he should live with us in the palace, but he was missing a tooth and his hair was long and greasy. I thought I'd been seeing things when he had crawled out of Grandpa's fireplace in his study. He'd grabbed my arm, threw musty pant and shirt on me, then thrown soot on me to 'hide my smell.' Grandpa said to go with the man, and I trusted him. The man didn't talk to me, but he'd said something to Grandpa in French.

The schooner was a lot smaller than I expected it to be. Its smell made my throat scratch. A black man with two different colored eyes and a smile that covered half of his face was leaning on the shorter mast of the ship. He said nothing as the ship floated closer to where the two of us were standing. My companion jumped on, lantern swinging from momentum. He held his arms out to me. I stood at the edge of the dock and stared at the water as it churned around the slow moving vehicle. I was *not* jumping over that to go with them.

"C'mon boy," the black man said. His smile was still wide but his eyes were larger than before, staring holes into me. Now I *really* didn't want to go with them. But Grandpa told me to. I backed up a bit, and leaped to the first stranger's arms. He caught me and set me down on the cold bow. The lantern was dimming, but I could see the faint outline of burlap sacks and barrels full of fish. I thought I'd seen something scatter across one of them before he blew the lantern out.

"That's smart, Tory. Don't let 'em know we're going," the black man said from somewhere to my right. I thought only high-born men were named Tory. It's my name too. I wonder what the black man's name was. He had an accent that wasn't European. I've never heard someone speak that way. But I liked it. It was deep and thick, like honey spilling from a spoon.*

Tory picked me up by the waist and carried me below. There was no light down here, either, but the smell was worse. He set me down on a sack full of tiny pellets that dug into my skin.

"What's in this?" I asked.

"Corn," he said.

I heard him make but not a sound as he crept back into the night. I wasn't completely sure he had left. I held my shirt over my face to stop from gagging, but I kept breathing the soot in and coughing. Instead, I pulled my knees to my chest and let the swaying of the schooner

along with the odor quickly make me nauseous. The last thing I did was take one last whiff and everything went darker than it had been.

The black man stared at me, but not so scarily this time. He sat cross legged with his knees on the inside of his elbows. His left hand loosely held his middle and fore fingers to keep his legs from falling. He'd lit a candle on a shelf that ran from me to the wall opposite. My vision took a long time adjusting, while his seemed as if we were in the midday sunlight. I couldn't feel the sack of corn under me anymore. The smell wasn't as bad either. I suppose that was good.

This man made me uncomfortable. Not because of his ragged clothes, casual demeanor, or his pigment, but because of the toothy facial expression I'd only ever seen him in. On any other person, it would've been out of place, but not on him. He was a bulky man with a large head, so the smile fit him perfectly. His face was not crinkled at the eyes, as if his mouth was plastered on.

"Evenin' Tory," he said.

"You know me?" I asked, confused.

"I know of you. You're whispered about on these streets, you are."

What was whispered about me? Why would people gossip about my family? We collected their tax and employed the simple folk. We're good people. Mother always said so.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Weaver, Captain Tory's second," he said.

There's no way these scruffy mongrels were fleet commanders. In all the books on our shelves, Captains and their Seconds were honorable men of wealth who followed the law and led fleets of ships into the glory of battle. Most were sent to London to be knighted by the Queen. I'd dreamed of being a Captain ever since Grandpa read me the enthralling story of Captain Asa Dickenson. Captain Asa slew bad men, saved dames, and lived his life on the rickety open ocean. He'd gotten knighted when he was only eighteen. He was a beacon of light in the bloody battle on England's coast of Desiree, and he promptly renamed his galleon *Desiree's Desire* after the victory. How dare these men rub his good name in the dirt.

"You don't like us much, do you? Don't trust us? But we're saving you, Tory. Saving you from something you don't want to know about," Weaver said. The tiny fire glinted off his teeth as he spoke. I didn't like any of this. The strangers, Grandpa being abnormally secretive, the disgusting clothes they had made me wear, the tiny boat, the stupid corn sack, and now the thing I don't want to know about. I stared at him, frustratingly skeptical, as the water sloshed around us. The housemaids had found me in the dining room and said that Grandpa requested my presence. He was slouching at his mahogany desk and leather chair that seemed like they would be better suited to a dollhouse than the colossal study when I walked in. He'd locked the door behind the maid, closed all the windows, and wouldn't acknowledge my following eyes.

I moved my position so I was facing the hatch I'd been brought down through. I stretched my legs in front of me, crossed my arms and stared away from the light at a knick in

the wood wall maybe six feet away from my eyes. Why would I trust them? That involved knowing them, and if what they say is true, I don't want to get involved in anything they do.

"I understand your pouting, but if you want to live, you're going to have to cooperate,"

"Why didn't they send me with a carriage? Why did I have to go with you? It's dirty and I don't like it here," I said. Weaver told me that a carriage would look suspicious, especially one as nice as the palace's. Besides, they could be run down. He said there are a lot of small fishing ships in the harbor, so we would go near completely unnoticed. And if anyone *did* happen to say something to them, they'd say I was just an apprentice boy. He said they were my best bet to get out of the country alive. That they know these waters like a king knows gold. As to the mess, well, that's just how they live. I didn't *want* to be an apprentice boy, I wanted to be a Captain! I don't want to leave England, either! Weaver wouldn't listen to me when I argued with him and said I should be quiet or he'll throw me in the water and collect his pay nonetheless. Tory wouldn't mind if he did that.

I stayed quiet, sitting alone with the company of a meager candle. Weaver had left to help Tory above. I'd thrown the sack of corn after it poked me for the third time. I could feel a cavern on my bum where the kernel had been. I could barely lift it, so I picked it up with both arms and cradled it against my chest. I bent my knees like I'd seen feral children do when me, Grandpa, and Mother would take evening carriage rides. They'd been tossing around a dead tom cat one time we passed. Then I turned sideways and as I wheeled back, I let it go. It made such a big thunk that Weaver came down and took it, along with the other sacks. He did it in one trip, the look in his eyes paired with his smile gleaming intensely.

Why did he take it? I wasn't doing anything, there was nothing *to* do. I heard a little scuttle, like chess pieces clinking as they touched the board, only faster. I took a deep breath in, tired from my efforts, and stopped mid inhale when urine and death seeped into my nose. It masked the fishiness, but made me vomit all over the musty wooden floorboards. I knelt there, hunched over and puking like some disease infested commoner. I kept gagging when a rat the size of a tabby squeezed between the rotting walls to stare at me with one gruesome eye. The nub of a tail it had was gnarled to match its back. Its claws reached inches in front of its body when it ran to my spewed up dinner.

I stumbled to the sorry excuse for stairs at the far end of the tiny cabin, screeching and pounding on the door until Tory wrenched it open. He dragged me by the collar into the starry world. It felt as if weeks had passed down below, but I was disappointed by the same hectic night. He pressed me against the nearest mast and shoved a calloused hand over my mouth. He'd put on a coat that was tearing at his right shoulder, exposing the muck covered pullover underneath. The knitting on the cuff of his sleeve dug into my cheek. Weaver's smile found the distinct moonlight as if it were a moth, glimmering alone without a body until he appeared beside Tory.

It had a lot more light to catch when lanterns popped on to our left, surrounding us. It felt as if a million tiny lightning bugs were shining on me, at first making me tremble, then warming me with a loved one's embrace. They revealed the starboard side of a schooner slightly bigger

than ours. Its hull of impeccably placed wood boards were lacquered. It pulled elegantly beside the shambles of a ship we were grouped on, almost teeth grindingly close. The lanterns also revealed the distant outline of the palace I called home atop its mountain of a hill overlooking equally distant stone and wood roofs. Well, not that equally distant. My family is royalty after all. Two men formed from the mist to greet us from the ship. One leaned against the railing to the wheel with his left foot crossed over his right. The other crouched. A mountain lion on the thick guard rail. They seemed to be angels in the soft light. They lounged for a moment, taking us in.

Tory had dropped me when he'd seen the light out of the corner of his eye. He hadn't accidentally done it, from the bruise I could feel spreading up and down my thigh. I landed on a clear space of hard oak which was incredibly out of the ordinary. When I'd turned myself onto my back to get a better look at my saviours, I saw they were more crafty than my own company. The one who leaned had a slim stick lodged between his rotting teeth and profound, sunken eyes. The mountain lion had the look of an actual lion, sandy hair askew beneath his crisp tophat and a great beard growing from the garden of his face. Their attire gave the impression of a monarch's confidant, all crimson dyed velvet and black Bedford cord, but they didn't have the faces of a duke or lord. Not like Tory did. The rotting man flicked the stick into the few feet of still water separating us. He strutted forward, pushing his coattail out of the way as he stowed his browned hands in the safety of his pockets.

"Awfully late for a fishing ship to be out, ain't it?" he said, patiently smiling. Tory straightened, lifted his chin, and relaxed his face. I almost forgot he'd thrown me down.

"Just passing by," he replied.

The man halted, swaying with suspicion, and clicked his tongue as his eyelids draped over their eerily grey iris's.

"You ain't got a lantern. And what's that boy doing?"

"He's our apprentice. We're teaching him to fish in the dark so he can learn to feel for the line, not watch for it," Tory said, "he'll need food in these dark times,"

I didn't know who I wanted to be with anymore. If they believed Tory, I'd stay with him and probably drown. But if they didn't, what were these men's intentions?