

A VILLAINOUS PETER PAN RETELLING



BECOMING HOOK

LEGENDS OF NEVERLAND BOOK ONE

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To My Readers

Also by Mary Meham

About the Author

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MAP OF NEVERLAND



DEDICATION

For James, who inspired Hook's story. May you find as much joy in growing up as you do in your youth.

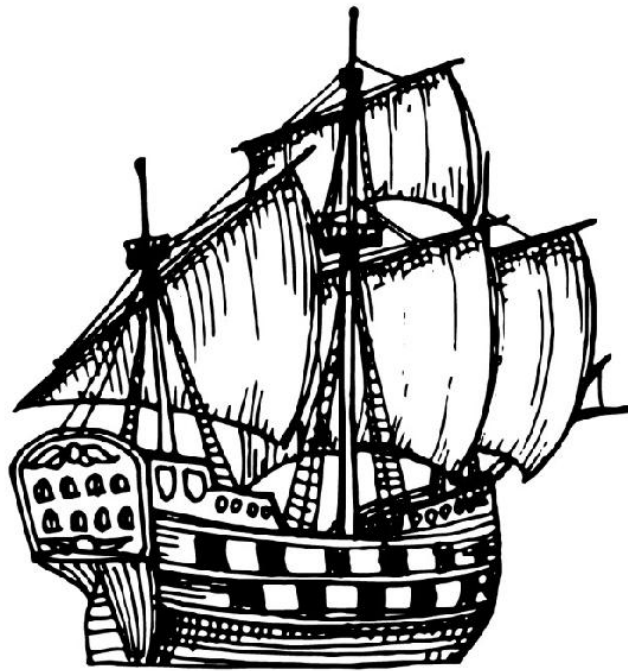


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PART I

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THE FIRST LOST BOY



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CHAPTER 1



Jimmy lay on top of his cot with his chin propped in his hands. Peter had granted him permission to release one of the pixies from her cage, and Jimmy watched, mesmerized, as she flitted around the damp underground cave he and Peter used as a hideout. Her wings hummed and the jingling of bells filled the room with the enchanting noise all pixies made from time to time. Jimmy had flown a few times using the pixie dust Peter collected, but he was still fascinated by the movement of the pixie's wings as they blurred together in flight. For the first time, underneath the jingling, Jimmy heard faint words.

"Release me!" the tiny pixie pled. "Let me out!"

Jimmy stared. This pixie was not buzzing around the room like some foolish bumblebee. She was frantically running her hands all over the cave wall, desperately yet methodically searching for an escape. Could pixies... reason? He had never before been visited by the idea that they were capable of intelligence.

"You can talk?"

The pixie performed a graceful pirouette in the air, spinning to face him. The fluttering of her wings grew less rapid, and she slowly descended to perch on Jimmy's pillow. "You understand me?"

"Yes. I only heard jingling bells before, but I can hear your voice now."

The pixie held her hands up to her tiny mouth. "You haven't been putting the dust into your drink each morning, have you." It was a statement, not a question.

Jimmy thought hard. Peter had all the Lost Boys collect eggs, milk, and pixie dust every morning. The eggs they cooked, and the dust was mixed in

with the milk to be drunk. He had never thought much about it; it was just a boring morning routine. But after he got violently sick from eating bad mushrooms some months ago, milk began to taste strange to him, and he had avoided it—along with the accompanying pixie dust—ever since. “No, not lately. Why?”

The pixie tilted her head from side to side. “You’re older.”

“No, I’m not!” Jimmy leapt to his feet, outraged at such a suggestion. Wasn’t aging the worst crime of all in Neverland? How dare this stupid pixie make such absurd accusations! He lunged forward to snatch her up. Jimmy couldn’t wait to stuff this pixie into her cage and put her back where she belonged—with all the other of the Lost Boys’ pets.

The pixie fluttered into the air, darting around to evade his grasp. “It’s true!” she screeched, her thin voice piercing Jimmy’s mind like a dagger. “Why do you think Peter Pan has you steal our dust every day? It’s to keep you young forever and never return to your families! He’s a monster who kidnapped all of you!”

“Stop it! You’re lying!” Jimmy yelled, then leapt off his cot, snatched the mischievous pixie out of the air, and thrust her back into her prison. His fingernail scraped against the tiny creature’s body as he did so, and he picked off the scrap of green fabric that snagged under his nail. The pixie clung to the bars and glared at Jimmy. Her face had changed from a gentle golden glow to a bright red.

“Do you even remember your family?”

“Shut up!” Jimmy screamed. He snatched up the cage, ran down to the animal shed, and shoved it onto one of the many pixie-laden shelves.



Jimmy ran all the way to the beach, where the white-crested waves and screaming calls of the seagulls had always managed to soothe him before. No matter how he tried, he couldn’t seem to get rid of the pixie’s cry.

“Do you even remember your family?”

What nonsense. Of course he remembered his family! Jimmy strained his memory as fuzzy and elusive recollections floated near the forefront of his mind but were difficult to clarify. He had a mother...didn't he? Yes, he did. She was a sweet, plump woman with wavy black hair, but for the life of him, Jimmy couldn't remember her face. His stomach sank. He couldn't even picture his father—the man he had been named after. He didn't even know if he had brothers or sisters.

The first real memory he had was of Peter Pan slipping into his window one night, promising a lifetime of adventure and eternal youth. Almost everything else before that point had faded over time to a hazy, grayish black.

The pixie had been right; he couldn't remember his family at all. The young man's shoulders slumped, and he dug his fingers into the gritty sand. He flung a handful at a nearby crab and watched glumly as it scuttled away over a smattering of shells and rocks that lay scattered on the shore.

Jimmy shook himself out of his gloom. Pan frequently went to visit the "other world" to look for more boys to join their club in Neverland, so all Jimmy had to do was ask to go with him to visit his family next time. He and Peter were friends—best friends! Jimmy was the first Lost Boy Peter had brought to Neverland, a fact which he had always been proud of. But now, pangs of homesickness stirred in his gut.

Jimmy couldn't bring himself to leave the comfort of the beach's crashing waves yet. He watched as the sun sank lower and lower, painting the oceanic landscape with golden, rosy hues until it finally dipped beyond the horizon. The changing tide crept closer to his bare feet, but Jimmy couldn't find the motivation to move farther up toward the tree line. The sand on which he sat grew increasingly colder as stars began to pop into existence across the vast expanse of night sky. The brightest star of all—the second to the left of the moon—was the one that housed the gateway through which Peter brought all the Lost Boys. The star winked, mocking his pain.

No, he wouldn't subject Peter to an interrogation about an offhand remark from a rogue pixie. If anyone should be cross-examined, it was that good-for-nothing pixie!

Just as the water reached his toes, Jimmy pulled himself to his feet, brushed off the seat of his pants, and hiked back to their base camp, leaving a trail of footprints in the sand as he walked. As he drew nearer to the

hideout, Jimmy grew ever more resolved. He needed to talk to the pixie again. He snorted. A pixie talking? He half hoped he had imagined it all.

Jimmy slid down the hollowed-out tree trunk and shot out onto the packed dirt floor beneath the forest. Candles illuminated the large room where more than a dozen boys all played—some were rough housing in the center, while others were throwing Rolland's cap around as Rolland ran after it, laughing. The joy they all felt couldn't penetrate Jimmy's melancholy. Everything felt surreal. As he peered into each boy's face, another phrase the pixie had yelled came back to him.

"He's a monster who kidnapped all of you!"

Was it true? Peter hovered over everyone, doused as he always was in pixie dust, egging on each Lost Boy in turn.

Jimmy numbly considered his friend, whose red hair flopped into his eyes from underneath his green cap. Peter had always said that he'd saved them all. Saved them from a life of being unwanted and growing old. He granted them a future of ease and enjoyment, free from the cares of that other, darker world. He thought back to when he and Peter first met. Peter seemed larger than life back then. But now? He studied the boyish face. Peter looked small, or at least, smaller than himself. Was what the pixie said true? Was he, Jimmy, getting older and growing taller?

Jimmy slouched out of the room and down the earthen tunnel to the hollow they used for an animal shed again. He flung open the door, startling several chickens, who flapped and clucked around the small room. Jimmy marched over to the rows of pixies in cages and identified the softly glowing female pixie with yellow hair who had goaded him earlier. She was sitting, hunched over in her cage, massaging her tiny abdomen.

Jimmy tapped sharply on her cage. "Hey, pixie."

The pixie turned and fluttered her wings angrily, dust flurrying down into the collecting pan set beneath her wire cage. "Hello, thief."

Jimmy frowned. "I'm not a thief."

"So you say, despite the fact that you steal my dust daily." The pixie's voice was weak, and she continued to press against her sides, her tiny features crumpled in pain.

"I'm not stealing your—" This conversation, surrounded by the smell of penned animals, would get them nowhere. Jimmy picked up the pixie's cage and carried her out of the shed to his room, where he firmly bolted the door

so no other boys would disturb him. “Look, I just want to know what you meant by not remembering my family. I remember my mother!”

The pixie gave a sharp laugh that was cut short when she clutched at her middle. “That’s surprising, considering how long you’ve been here. You must’ve really loved her.”

“How long I’ve...” Jimmy never thought about time anymore. The days and nights always seemed to meld together in Neverland. How long *had* he been there? The pixie gave a tiny cry of pain and collapsed to the bottom of her cage. “What’s wrong with you?”

“You!” she spat, then gasped out, “You injured me when you grabbed me earlier, but you didn’t think about that, did you? No, you Lost Boys only ever think of yourselves and having fun forever.”

“That isn’t true! Here, I’ll show you!” Jimmy unlocked the pixie’s cage. She didn’t fly away like he expected, but stayed huddled on the interlocking wires. He gently lifted her out of the cage and laid her on his pillow, careful not to bend her fragile wings.

She had a vividly green dress that covered her torso and flowed over her legs, and she was so small that Jimmy’s fingers would have been far too large and clumsy to be of any assistance. He examined the tiny body anyway, but couldn’t see any injury. “You’re so small. I don’t know how to help you.”

The pixie glared at him, red all over again. “You can’t when I’m this size.”

“Yeah, like you could be any other size.”

The pixie cried aloud again, her enormous blue eyes watering with pain, and panic clawed at Jimmy’s throat. He would be responsible if the pixie died. “Tell me what to do!”

The pixie turned her tortured face toward Jimmy, then shook her head, resigned. “Just ... don’t scream. Or call Pan,” she whispered. She furrowed her eyebrows in deep concentration, then glowed a brilliant gold and began to enlarge. Jimmy scrambled away from her as she grew rapidly until she was the same size as a young woman, and the small cage was pushed to the ground as the pixie took up all the cot’s space. Everything about her was petite, even in her enlarged form. She had thin arms, a trim waist, slender legs, and her bright yellow hair looked windswept despite the room’s air being still.

Jimmy's mouth hung open in shock, eyes large as dinner plates. "You just...Pixies can...What?!"

"I said don't scream." The pixie grimaced again, and for the first time, Jimmy noticed golden blood trickling out of the pixie, oozing from a wide rip along her dress. "Get a knife."

Jimmy withdrew the pocketknife tucked into his vest. All this time he had been sitting on the beach trying to remember his family, and this pixie had been injured and suffering! She wasn't going to ask him to put her out of her misery, was she?

She gestured weakly to the candle on Jimmy's side table. "Get the blade hot. I need you to cauterize the wound."

Jimmy's panic grew. He had only experienced having a gash cauterized once—when he was much younger back in London—but he would never forget the searing pain. Now this pixie wanted him to perform the operation he could barely remember?

He couldn't! He was only sixteen years old, or at least, he had been when he left with Peter. But...what other choice did he have? Who else would help the pixie if not him? He didn't have the knowledge or experience to perform medical treatments! Jimmy held the blade into the flame and watched as the metal began to glow red hot.

"Give me your belt." The pixie's tone was demanding as sweat broke out on her forehead. Jimmy removed the leather strap and wordlessly handed it over. The pixie clamped her jaws around the belt then ordered through clenched teeth, "Do it." She closed her eyes and turned away.

Jimmy gingerly folded back the ripped fabric to expose the injury, then took a deep breath to steady his hands. It was fortunate he had such a strong stomach. If Rob or Ozzy had been the ones to see all the blood and do this, they would be hunched over, heaving. This pixie needed Jimmy.

He gently pinched the separated skin together and pressed the long flat of a blade against the width of the wound. The pixie cried out, and glittering tears seeped from her eyes. Once the wound had sealed, Jimmy immediately withdrew the knife, revolted by what he had done.

"I'm sorry, so sorry!" Jimmy repeated. The pixie slammed her head backward, writhing in agony. Jimmy heard several quiet sobs escape from between the pixie's pressed lips, and his stomach churned horribly. He placed a hand on her delicate shoulder, trying to express the extent of his

remorse. The pixie's gasps of pain had barely begun to slow when a rapid knocking assailed the quiet room.

"Jimmy Boy!" Peter Pan's voice floated in from behind the locked door. "Everything okay in there?"

"Fine!" Jimmy was amazed at how calm and collected he sounded. "Just rehearsing for a new play is all!"

Peter's easy laughter rang out, boisterous and lively as ever. "Sounds like fun! I look forward to it!"

It surprised him how easy it was to lie to his best friend. Jimmy heard Peter's voice fade away without any accompanying footsteps. For the first time, Jimmy wondered how many pixies had to sacrifice their dust each day just to maintain his friend's constant use of it in addition to what he drank. He spun to face the pixie, who was still sweating and trembling.

"Were you telling the truth? Does drinking the dust make us stay young forever?"

The pixie turned her head toward Jimmy and weakly lifted a solitary finger. "You tell me. Did you have facial hair when you stopped taking the dust?"

Jimmy slowly raised his hand and stroked the stubble on his chin. She was right. He was getting older.

"You stink too," the pixie reported in a matter-of-fact voice. "Grown-up humans smell *terrible*."

Jimmy raised an arm and sniffed. She was right again. How had he not noticed all these changes? He supposed that it happened so gradually that it was impossible to tell from one day to another, and none of the other Lost Boys had said anything.

"Do you have a name, pixie?"

The pixie wiped sweat from her forehead and placed her hand on her abdomen over the sealed wound. "Tinkerbell, but you can call me Tink," she said through clenched teeth. "And you, Lost Boy? Do you have a name?"

"Jimmy. My name is Jimmy." He hesitated, then asked, "Tink...do you know how long I've been here?"

The pixie's brow furrowed. "In Earth time?" she counted on her fingers then flicked her eyes up to the ceiling as she thought hard. "Probably about two hundred years, but not nearly that long in Neverland time."

Jimmy staggered back and sank to his knees as his chest constricted around his heart. *Two hundred years?* “But...my family...m-my mother...”

The pixie’s eyes softened with the first showing of compassion as she shook her head. “Humans don’t live very long, Jimmy. I’m sorry.”

Jimmy couldn’t catch his breath. All his family members were dead. Had they searched for him? Wondered where he had disappeared to for decades on end? When he’d left with Peter that night, Peter had assured him he would be able to come back whenever he wanted. In Jimmy’s mind, when he decided to return, he would arrive back during the same night from which he departed.

Up to this point, his life’s entire purpose had merely been to have endless fun, day in and day out. But now...now he had nothing to go back to when he was finished with his fun. What other option did he have? His entire future had been stolen from him.

How long had the other boys been here? Less time than he had, he knew that much. Did they still have the chance to return to their families and experience what he would never be able to?

He glared at the meddlesome pixie. Everything had been fine this morning! Now, this pixie had him questioning his future, his very existence! Could she be lying? What evidence was there, really, that he should trust her over his best friend? He clung to the shred of hope as if it was his only salvation.

CHAPTER 2



Jimmy was quiet at breakfast the next day. He watched his friend like a hawk, and saw Peter Pan's normal, boisterous self bouncing with enthusiasm as he went about his morning routine. Pan sent Rolland and Chibu to collect the eggs, milk, and pixie dust. They arrived back several minutes later, staggering from the weight of the heaping egg basket held between them, Rolland carrying the milk pail in his other hand, and Chibu clutching the bag of dust with his basket-free hand.

Jimmy stared at the bag of pixie dust, which Peter Pan had eagerly snatched from Chibu. He refilled the leather pouch at his hip, then poured a generous measure into the milk pail. The remainder he carefully siphoned into the storage chest that housed all the dust Peter used for his trips to the other world to find new Lost Boys.

"You mean kidnap innocent children?" Tink's voice corrected in his head.

"Why do you do that?" Jimmy asked, carefully avoiding Peter's eye. "Put the pixie dust in our drinks, I mean."

Peter flashed his boyish, youthful grin. "Helps keep our minds sharp and bodies healthy as we never grow old here, of course."

"Don't the pixies need it for themselves?"

Peter crowed with laughter. "Just as much as the goats need their surplus milk and the chickens need extra eggs, I suppose. Waste not, want not, am I right?" He ladled milk into mugs, and the twins began to scramble the eggs at the wood-burning stove.

The Lost Boys lined up to accept a glass of the drugged milk from Peter. Jimmy fought down a sudden, violent urge to overturn the milk pail and

swat the mugs from the boys' hands. There was nothing wrong with Peter wanting to have his friends stay youthful and healthy—it was good, really, that he cared so much. But still, the sick, twisted feeling in Jimmy's gut grew.

“What would happen if we stopped taking the pixie dust?”

Peter raised a bright-red eyebrow as he shot Jimmy an inquisitive look. “What's with all the questions this morning, Jimmy Boy?”

“Just curious is all,” Jimmy mumbled. He didn't fall into line with the others, which Peter noticed, and he sought him out to hand him a mug.

“Drink up, pal. We can't have you turning into an adult on us now, can we?”

So Tink's allegations were true. Jimmy forced his lips into a pained smile and accepted the drink. He stared down into the contents. The thick milk had the faintest tinge of golden glitter swirling around in it. For the longest time after he first arrived in Neverland, Jimmy thought of it as beautiful and mysterious, but now, the beverage flashed dangerously at him. Tink's accusations rang in his mind, vibrating around his skull until he thought he would go mad from it.

“Peter?”

Peter Pan jerked his head in acknowledgement that he was listening. All the other Lost Boys, who had just been served plates of scrambled eggs by the twins, had their mouths stuffed full and were unusually quiet as they ate. Jimmy swallowed hard to try to remove the growing lump in his throat. “How long have we been here in Neverland?”

“We all came at different times, Jimmy Boy. You know that.”

“Me, then. How long have *I* been here?”

“What difference does it make?” Peter shrugged. “What does time matter as long as we are having fun here?”

“I'm having fun!” Ozzy burst out, spraying a mouthful of half-masticated egg across the wooden table.

Rob burst out laughing and used his spoon to fling eggs back at Ozzy. A brief but furious food fight immediately broke out. The boys lobbed cutlery, plates, and food at each other, all ducking and weaving to avoid being splattered with breakfast. In the ensuing hubbub, Jimmy took the opportunity to surreptitiously dump his mug of milk onto the dirt floor next to him. He watched the liquid soak into the earth, and the last glimmers of pixie dust winked back at him before fading from view.

Peter, as always, emerged victorious from the food fight. He tucked his thumbs into his armpits, rose into the air, and emitted a loud rooster's crow.

Following the thrill of the food fight, Peter didn't seem inclined to calm down enough to talk with Jimmy. Peter left the mess of the food fight—fruit and eggs strewn over the table and floor, with milk dripping down onto the bench—and grabbed his fishing pole from a corner. “Last one to the fishing hole is a rotten egg!” In a flash, Peter flew up the tunnel and was out of sight.

The other Lost Boys clambered over one another to retrieve their own fishing poles, squabbling amongst themselves as they tried to untangle their lines and hooks and follow Peter Pan. Within one minute, all of them except Jimmy had disappeared. He couldn't seem to muster up the energy to race to the fishing hole today.

The hideout was abnormally silent in the absence of his friends. Jimmy stared at the food splattered all over the kitchen area, his shoulders hunched. As he took in his surroundings, it felt like waking up after years of being asleep. Burned pans were crusted with hardening egg yolks, the blackened and moldy residue of previous food fights coated the table in a moss-like texture, and gnats were beginning to buzz all around the mess. Jimmy inhaled. The entire place reeked. Maggots would follow soon, and once the state of the hideout deteriorated to unlivable, Peter would simply move all the boys to a new location, just like always.

Jimmy's stomach turned. The fuzziest of recollections floated just out of reach in his memory. The hazy image of his mother scrubbing a kitchen table while telling him a story sharpened. A warm sensation started in his chest and began to spread. He'd had a family once; he had been loved. Jimmy sank down to the ground, slumped back against the dirt wall, and buried his face into his hands.

What had he done when he agreed to come with Peter to Neverland?



He still hadn't moved by the time the rest of the Lost Boys returned hours later. Jimmy heard their gleeful shouts and laughter long before they slid, one by one, down the hollowed-out tree trunk. Peter flew in after them with a string of fish trailing behind him.

The boys all threw their fishing poles haphazardly into a corner, causing the strings and hooks to tangle even worse than before. Peter Pan began tossing individual fish to each boy in turn.

"Where were you, Jimmy?" asked Smee. He was a plump boy who looked younger than everyone else, perhaps ten years old, and hadn't been with the Lost Boys very long. His full cheeks, constantly sunburned nose, and platinum-blond hair made his babyish face wide and innocent-looking—very different from Jimmy's long, thin face with his unusually straight nose and long dark hair.

Jimmy shrugged. "Not feeling well, I guess." He couldn't stop looking at each of his friends and wondering how long they had all been there. Did any of them remember their origins? If they did, they certainly didn't seem troubled by leaving them behind. They all began to throw the fish between themselves with blinding speed, laughing uproariously if anyone dropped his slippery load or received a fish to the face.

Smee plopped down next to Jimmy and handed him his catch from the day. "Will you help me clean it?" Smee's face remained so eager and hopeful that Jimmy couldn't say no. Smee seemed to think that Jimmy could do no wrong, and being admired so much buoyed Jimmy's spirits, but only fractionally so. Besides, he loved the salty smell of fish and needed something to occupy his hands. He carried the codfish over to the table, then recoiled. The filthy table grew dirtier and more repulsive the longer he examined it.

"Hey, everyone, how about we all come over and clean up this table?"

A shocked silence met his words as the boys turned as one and stared, utterly taken aback, at the suggestion.

Peter Pan burst out laughing. "That's why we live in Neverland, Jimmy Boy! No chores, no bedtime, no work *ever*!" The other Lost Boys raised an ear-splitting cheer. Peter traced a finger along his chin as he considered his tall, lanky friend. "You certainly are behaving strangely today, Jimmy. Lighten up! You're acting all...grown-up."

Several boys hissed at the forbidden word, and Jimmy refused to meet any of his friends' eyes. Is that what being grown-up meant? Having

responsibilities and not seeing the world as a joke anymore? His mother hadn't been a terrible person, and she was a grown-up...or had been once. The thought of his mother dying without even the chance to say goodbye tore at his heart. To avoid the pain, he struggled once again to remember his father, but came up with nothing, which only served to deepen the wound gnawing at his chest.

"C'mon, Smee, let's clean it outside," Jimmy muttered. He and Smee clambered back up to the surface, leaving the cacophony of the Lost Boys below. Jimmy found a wide, flat rock and began to scale and gut the fish.

"You really are quiet today," Smee observed. "Are you sick? I can go get Peter if you want."

"No!" Jimmy objected a little too quickly. He glanced around the clearing to ensure that they were alone. "Smee, do you remember your family at all?" As the newest arrival, if anyone was able to remember, Smee would.

Smee's eyebrows furrowed as he concentrated. "I think so, but the details are sort of slipping away. Peter came the night I had a fight with my mum. She wanted me to feed our dog, Missy, and I didn't want to. Peter said that I would never have to do chores again if I came with him."

Smee continued, "I should go back soon; my mum said she was going to plan me a birthday party. Even though I wouldn't feed the dog, she still was going to have a magician come and do tricks for me and my friends. You can come to my party if you want to."

Jimmy smiled wistfully, even as his heart sank. He couldn't even remember the concept of birthdays anymore since Peter forbade any mention of age or getting older. "That sounds nice. What's your mom like?"

"She's real pretty, my mum is! She has long hair and puts it in a braid. I would swing on it all the time and pretend to be a monkey when I was little. She would always tell me to stop, but it was so fun."

"Did she tell you stories?" Jimmy couldn't tell why he kept coming back to the idea of a mother who told stories. Maybe because it seemed so homey and pleasant.

"Yeah, she'd tell me stories about when I was a baby, and silly things I used to do. She told me the story of Rapunzel, and I thought it was a story about her for a long time because it sounded like her hair." Smee's lip quivered, then he quietly confessed, "I miss her. I think I'm ready to go back now. Do you think Peter will take me?"

Jimmy piled all the fish guts into one corner of the stone slab they used as a table but didn't respond. The truth was, he didn't know what Peter would do if Smee expressed a desire to return. Once boys arrived, Peter kept them all so busy with games and endless entertainment that no one had ever asked to go back. How much did he know about his friend, really?

"I don't know. But," he added as sudden inspiration struck, "if Peter won't take you, I will."

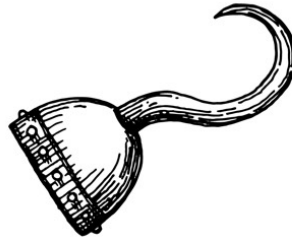
"You?" Smee's eyebrows raised incredulously. "You can't fly without Peter's dust."

"No," Jimmy admitted. "I can't."

He slowly de-boned the fish, and the image of Tinkerbell floated back to him. He had returned her to her cage to heal—along with a tiny blanket and enough food to help with her recovery—and had been checking on her every few hours. He knew he needed to free her, but with her injury, she would easily be captured again. At least until she was stronger, she needed protection, and he felt compelled to give it.

Jimmy continued pensively, "Pixie dust doesn't belong to Peter anyway and...I know someone who might be able to help us get home."

CHAPTER 3



*P*eter Pan, it transpired, was not at all eager to take Smee back to his family. He made excuse after excuse, and while he never denied Smee's request outright, he did everything in his power to keep Smee occupied and distracted. Peter began planning even more elaborate games and activities, insisted that the boys rehearse and put on a play to provide a story to Smee, and awarded Smee a rare treat—a sprinkling of pixie dust that allowed him to float around the room for several hours.

During one memorable afternoon, Peter led all the Lost Boys on a pixie hunt to try to track down new pixies from the other side of the island. These pixies looked different from those in Tinkerbell's tribe. They had a slightly darker complexion and wore animal skin clothing instead of the thin, plant-like fabric that the lighter-skinned pixies used. Jimmy refused to participate, horrified as he now was at the prospect of kidnapping free creatures, enslaving them in cages, then eventually feeding them to Peter's pet crocodile. His stomach churned just thinking about it.

The leader of the Lost Boys could hardly fail to notice that Jimmy, who had been his faithful sidekick in all such adventures for years, was continually shrinking away from more and more activities and giving Peter the cold shoulder.

"Let's go fishing," Peter finally suggested one evening. After devoting so much time to entertaining Smee, who had fallen asleep, Peter sought out his best friend. He leaned against the doorframe separating Jimmy's room from the rest of the underground hideout.

Jimmy continued to stare at the earthen ceiling, counting the roots that threaded their way through the packed dirt, and didn't answer.

“We could try for cod,” Peter coaxed.

Finally swayed by the temptation of his favorite food, Jimmy swung his legs off the cot and followed Peter to their favorite fishing spot, a stream that emptied into the ocean. Occasionally, but not often, cod would stray up into the stream from their natural saltwater habitat. One day, Jimmy vowed, he would build a boat and venture out beyond Mermaid’s Lagoon and fish for cod to his heart’s content.

Neither boy said much as they baited their hooks and sat on a log, side by side, lines from their poles extended into the stream that reflected the moon’s rippling glow in the slow-flowing water. Peter cast a quick sideways glance at his friend. “You’ve been very quiet lately, Jimmy Boy.”

Jimmy wasn’t sure what to say. How could you tell your best friend of the last several years—or had it been hundreds of years—who had shared in countless adventures and secrets, that you no longer trusted him? Jimmy had known Peter longer than anyone else. All the other Lost Boys saw them as a team—Peter and Jimmy, Jimmy and Peter. You couldn’t have one without the other...until now.

The fish weren’t biting, even though nighttime fishing was usually better than daytime. Jimmy held the pole in his hands and hunched his shoulders, as if it would protect him from the fears he had about his friend. The silence swelled between them, accentuating how far apart they had grown in the recent weeks.

Jimmy slapped at a few mosquitos and stared at the colorful birds roosting in branches of the trees lining the stream as a fat porcupine waddled out of its burrow on the opposite side of the running water.

“One day, I’m going to train porcupines to protect our pixies,” Peter said, making another stab at conversation as both boys watched the porcupine lumber away on its nightly hunt for food. He glanced at Jimmy and continued, “You don’t have to worry about anything attacking the pixies. I’ll keep them safe.”

It was Peter bringing up pixies that finally broke Jimmy’s silence. Did Peter think that was Jimmy’s concern? Keeping the pixies safe?

“Pixies shouldn’t be kept in cages. They should be free.”

Peter chuckled softly and shook his head. “They *are* free! We’re keeping them protected from the elements, saving them from needing to hunt for food or fighting with the other pixie tribes.”

“You’ve killed them, though, Peter. You fed them to your crocodile.”

Peter fixed Jimmy with a hard stare. “We,” he corrected. “We did those things together. All the capturing, caging, and killing...we *both* did all those things. But remember, it was only the old or sick pixies who were going to die anyway that we fed to the crocodile, and she has to eat too. That’s the circle of life, Jimmy Boy. Creatures are born, grow old or sick, and eventually die.”

“We don’t grow old.” Jimmy shot a look at Peter, whose expression had suddenly become closed off.

“We’re special, though. We’re the only humans in all of Neverland.”

“Humans do age. The pixie dust you put in our drinks keeps us young.”

Peter nodded. “Well, sure. It isn’t like the pixies need it; it’s just like dandruff to them. There’s no harm in collecting it so it doesn’t go to waste. It just happens to come with the additional benefit of staying youthful and helping us fly. Did you *want* to get old and die? I want to keep my friends around for a long time yet, including you.”

Jimmy didn’t respond, a sick feeling rising in his stomach. Peter’s face was alive and earnest, wanting Jimmy to understand. He didn’t know what to think anymore. Yes, he had participated in the abuse of pixies, and he could see Peter’s rationale of not wasting something that was useless to pixies, but still...it felt wrong.

“Wouldn’t it be better if they offered it to us as a gift? Keeping them caged is wrong. They’re people too.”

Peter crowed in laughter, startling several of the parrots roosting nearby. “They aren’t people; they’re bugs.”

“But they are! They can even be the same size as us—”

“Who told you that?” Peter’s face changed from casual to hostile so quickly that Jimmy dropped his fishing pole in surprise.

“Wha-what?”

“Who told you that pixies change size?” His tone became aggressive.

“Nobody.” It was true; no one told him anything. “I just saw it when I was...out one day.” He suddenly felt the fierce need to protect Tinkerbell, even though he barely knew her.

Peter’s expression remained suspicious, even angry. “If you ever see that again, you should tell me right away.”

“What, so you can cage them, too?” The words burst from Jimmy even before he had decided to say them. “Will you feed me to the crocodile if I don’t do what you want, just like you do with them?”

“You make me sound like a monster,” Peter said, a frown creasing his young face. “I told you, I keep the pixies safe and fed, just like I do with our chickens and goats. I’m *saving* them.”

The night air blew Jimmy’s unkempt black hair into his eyes, and he shook his head to free his vision. For years, he had found comfort in knowing that Peter had everything handled. Now, he wondered why he had trusted the red-haired boy so blindly and had foolishly followed in his footsteps. He thought back to Tinkerbell. Even though he hated the pain of the truth she revealed, he couldn’t deny that her story made more sense than Peter’s. It explained the mystery of aging, but more importantly, opened Jimmy’s eyes to the stark realization of what he and Peter had done in the past. They *were* monsters. Could they ever atone for their sins?

“I won’t do that anymore,” Jimmy said finally. “It isn’t right.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “You want someone else to do the dirty work while you continue to reap the benefits? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“No, nobody should be doing it. It’s wrong! You don’t even need the pixie dust.”

A dark look stole over Peter’s eyes. “That dust is the reason we’re all alive.”

“Suppose it was gone?”

“Is that a threat?” Peter stood up. “Don’t you dare do anything to the dust.”

“I’m not threatening—”

“You must be ill.” Peter forced a strained smile, and Jimmy heard the restraint in his friend’s voice. “You’ll feel better in a few days with enough rest.”

“I’m not sick.”

Peter patted Jimmy’s shoulder in a sympathetic way, but a cold bite edged his voice as he said, “I think you must be. We can talk about this later when you’re thinking straight again.” He walked back to the hideout alone.

Jimmy sat, fuming, long after Peter had disappeared. Did he think it was that simple? That some rest and quiet would make the wrongness of imprisoning innocent pixies go away? Perhaps the ignorance of youth had finally faded from Jimmy’s eyes, and he was seeing the world as it truly was for the first time. Gone was the innocence of boyhood, replaced with a man’s desire to acknowledge his transgressions and fight for what was true instead of passively accepting the easiest route.

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CHAPTER 4



Despite Jimmy's eyes being wide open, nothing was visible. The lanterns had been extinguished and the underground dugout, cut off from all moonlight, was pitch-black. After his argument with Peter, it had taken more than an hour for him to fall asleep as he mulled everything over. He wasn't sure what had awakened him, and he lay for a minute, trying to recall if a nightmare had frightened him awake, but no. He had been dreaming that he discovered some far-distant land, not at all something that would jar him out of a deep sleep. Before he could remember any specifics of his dream, a dull scraping noise met his ears, and Jimmy instantly felt much more awake. The scraping noise was accompanied by the measured breathing of a person fighting to remain unheard.

Not a single muscle twitched as Jimmy strained to pick up any other noises. Who would break into their home? All of Neverland's creatures avoided the Lost Boys whenever possible. The crocodile that generally stayed in the swampy marshes didn't sound anything like what he heard. Neither did pixies or merpeople.

Footsteps so quiet that they were nearly silent scrunched as the intruder moved about in the next room. Was it Peter, off to find another child? No, Peter made no noise when he flew. Was it another Lost Boy, perhaps, up to get a drink? Jimmy discarded this notion as well. If a Lost Boy got up, he would not take this much effort to stay quiet but walk confidently toward the rain barrel to fill a dipper with water.

Jimmy held his breath as a soft creaking of wood broke the still air, so quiet that it was only by listening with all his might that Jimmy was able to hear it. He wracked his brain. The only things that would make noises like

that were the wooden table and chairs, the trunk containing a hodge-podge of makeshift weapons that were more or less broken, and the small chest Peter used to house all the pixie dust. Was someone stealing it?

Images of who would possibly steal from his best friend flashed through his mind and came up with a list of Lost Boys; there was no one else on the island. Recently, Rob had been angry that Peter guarded his pixie dust so jealously, so perhaps it was him. Or maybe it was Rolland, the boy whose hair was just as vividly red as Peter's, and who asked to use pixie dust most often.

The longer Jimmy thought about it, the more options came to mind. Was it Chibu? The dark-skinned lad laughed easily and often expressed the desire for more responsibilities. Could he resent Peter's leadership enough to seize the most valuable asset they had? The twins hated collecting the dust from the trays beneath the pixies every day; could they be the culprits?

Mulling over all the possibilities had monopolized so much of his brain's functions that Jimmy hadn't realized that the noises had ceased. He eased his head off his pillow—the better to listen—but the night was silent. With a groan from his cot, Jimmy rolled out of bed and padded down the hall. He drew a deep breath and looked into the common room, widening his eyes to try to make out any unusual form huddled in the corner or skulking along the walls.

There was nothing. Another thought flashed into Jimmy's mind. If Tink could change size, other pixies would be able to as well. Could a pixie have flown down the tunnel and stolen the dust, angered that their fellows had been imprisoned? It was possible, even probable. A slightly vindictive relief swept through him. Maybe Peter was right, and pixies were nothing more than bugs, petty thieves who should be locked up. It was almost instantly eclipsed by shame and the thought of...

Could he blame them? The dust belonged to them anyway. Peter was the real thief. And even if they were stealing, theft was undoubtedly warranted after your friends had been held captive for years on end.

Held captive for years on end... did he fit into that category? For, despite the endless games and adventures Peter had planned to make the experience as fun as possible, Jimmy was stuck in Neverland just as the pixies were stuck in cages. They were all prisoners...prisoners of Peter Pan.

Jimmy's teeth gnashed together. When he had agreed to come with Peter all those years ago, he had never dreamed life would get so

complicated. He no longer knew what the right course of action was, but he knew without a shadow of a doubt that what Pan was doing was wrong.



The following day, Jimmy saw no sign of an intruder, and everything seemed accounted for, which led him to believe that either he had imagined the noises from the previous night, or it was one of the Lost Boys. He couldn't help shifting his gaze to each of the Lost Boys in turn, then to Peter Pan. Had it been Peter? It likely could have been that he wanted to ensure the safety of his precious pixie dust. His precious, *stolen* pixie dust.

No matter how Jimmy tried to occupy himself that day, his thoughts always returned to the pixies. He couldn't be happy sitting here with the freedom to go and do as he pleased when he knew that just down the corridor, pixies were being kept imprisoned, Tinkerbell among them. He was sure she was strong enough to be released now. Jimmy stared at the chest high on the shelf that housed all the pixie dust, which Peter jealously guarded and always questioned anyone who came near it. No matter how much dust he collected from the pixies, it was never enough.

If Pan was truly kidnapping boys and keeping them from their lives, he needed to be stopped. His supply of pixie dust had to be cut off. In a spur-of-the-moment decision, when Peter took a group to practice with some newly fashioned blow dart guns outside, Jimmy padded down the hall, the strong smell of chickens and goats becoming stronger as he reached the shed.

The Lost Boys had recently repainted the pixie cages—a thoroughly messy affair that left smears of the paint all over the cages, shelves, dust collecting pans, and on the pixies themselves, who all glared up at Jimmy with accusatory eyes. Tinkerbell's cage, painted just as vibrantly green as all the others, was nearest to him. She quirked her tiny eyebrows at him. Once again, he heard words beneath the jingling of her voice.

“Come to feed your *pets*?”

Jimmy didn't respond. Instead, he fumbled with the locks on her cage and flung the door open. Tinkerbell stepped out of her prison, awed. "You have to get out," he told her, urgency in his voice. "I'll open the doors between here and the tunnel. Head for the tunnel."

"Not without my friends."

Jimmy bit his lip. Many pixies all moving together would be easier to spot, but Tink was right; it wasn't fair for her to be free while her fellows were imprisoned. He cast his gaze around and sighed in resignation. There were at least fifty pixies.

After several minutes, all the cages were unlocked. The pixies huddled together in a frightened cluster and Tinkerbell flew in front of them—bolder and more confident than her fellows, her tiny shoulders thrown back and chin jutted out.

The other pixies didn't look nearly as brave. Many trembled in fright or crouched, as if desperate to make themselves so small they would disappear. Jimmy wasn't sure how else to help them. All they needed to do was get out through the tunnel. If worse came to worst, they should be able to enlarge themselves and make a fight of it...right? Another glance at the terrified knot of pixies troubled him.

"Can you grow bigger if you need to fight?" Jimmy looked at Tinkerbell, who shook her head glumly.

"Not right now."

Already, Jimmy worried about what Peter's reaction would be to seeing the pixies released. He inhaled deeply. That was a consequence he was willing to deal with. He didn't have time to speculate about a possible reaction or why pixies could only sometimes change size. The time to act was *now*.

"Let's go."

His way lighted by the golden glow of the pixies, Jimmy treaded carefully along the path, trying to listen over the hum of dozens of wings that buzzed behind him. Once he was near the tunnel door, he waved them to a stop. All the pixies clung to the sides and ceiling of the earthen passageway, giving the impression of tiny, glowing bats.

In a whisper, Jimmy instructed, "I'll go through and leave the door open. Count to a hundred, then fly as fast as you can. I don't know if anyone's in there, but if they are, I'll try to distract them."

He saw Tinkerbell nod her tiny head in understanding, but the majority of the other pixies still looked too terrified to respond. Jimmy's eyebrows contracted. This may be the only chance they got; they couldn't waste it now.

As casually as he could, Jimmy strutted through the door, leaving it slightly ajar. The stench of rotten food hit him as he entered, even more pungent than the animal shed. Jimmy wrinkled his nose at the smell. The appeal of having chores and working had never been more attractive, but now was not the time to get sidetracked by how fuzzy the table was or how thickly the flies congregated.

There weren't any Lost Boys present besides Arnie and Auggie. The twins were both fast asleep, sprawled over each other in the heap of furs piled in the corner. How many seconds had passed since the pixies started counting? He swallowed hard and crossed the room, about to look up the tunnel to check for anyone else arriving when Peter Pan flew headfirst down the tunnel and bowled him over.

Peter, jolly as ever, laughed out loud. "I certainly know how to make a *smashing* entrance, don't I, Jimmy Boy?"

Jimmy tried to smile, but his face had frozen in horror. One after another, all the remaining Lost Boys came sliding down the tunnel, talking animatedly to each other. Jimmy tried to retrace his steps, to warn the pixies to not come, but it was too late.

A flurry of pixies burst through the door leading to the animal shed, all flying around the room in a cloud of glitter and fluttering of wings. The Lost Boys leapt into action, shouting instructions to each other as they grabbed and snatched at the pixies. Chibu, the largest boy, blocked the exit to the outside, and Peter flew through the air, recapturing pixies with unnatural speed and skill.

Jimmy frantically searched for Tinkerbell, hoping not to see her in the pixies still trapped within the dugout. She was young and healthy; surely she could have made it out before any of the others. His heart fell as he spotted her on top of Peter's pixie dust chest, trying to tug another pixie, who had a broken wing, to her feet. He rushed across the room to her, intending to hide her, to ensure that she, at least, was saved.

Yet again, his timing was poor. Auggie, who had woken up in all the commotion, reached Tink seconds before he could and snatched her up,

along with the pixie with the broken wing. Jimmy winced as he watched Tinkerbell struggle against Auggie's fist.

"I'll take them," Jimmy said, trying to pry Tink and her friend from Auggie's hand.

"*Quiet!*" thundered Peter. The pixies still jingled, but the Lost Boys fell silent. Jimmy stared around the room in despair and saw that almost every single boy had one or more pixies clutched in his hands. Only he and Smee had refrained from capturing any, and Smee looked just as distressed as Jimmy felt. Had *any* pixies made it to freedom?

"Get these creatures back into their cages," Pan continued, thrusting his handful of pixies at Chibu.

Jimmy cursed under his breath. He should've smashed the cages while he had the chance so Peter couldn't contain the pixies any longer. He wasn't sure why the pixies were prevented from enlarging to their human size, as Tinkerbell had done in the past. If they were larger, surely they could've fought back against the Lost Boys with Jimmy's aid.

"I'll take them," Jimmy offered again, stepping up with hands outstretched.

Peter wheeled around to face Jimmy, his features sharpening as anger overtook the red-headed boy. "Over my dead body!" He handed the pixies to Chibu, then glared at Jimmy. "Why'd you do it?"

"Why did I do what?"

"Don't play dumb! I know you let them out!"

Jimmy didn't answer and instead crossed his arms over his chest, a sulky expression on his face.

Peter interpreted the taller boy's silence correctly. Spit flew from his mouth as he shouted, "I thought we were a team! Why are you working against me?"

"Pixies shouldn't be caged up!"

The pixies jingled in agreement, and Peter flicked a dismissive hand at Chibu, who was at least gentle as he carried the captured pixies back to their cages. Peter and Jimmy stared at each other, fire blazing from their eyes. All the other boys had fallen silent and were watching their two leaders with apprehensive looks.

One of Peter's fists was trembling, and Jimmy knew the smaller boy was trying with all his might to not throw a punch. Finally, Peter turned on his heel and stomped off, calling over his shoulder, "Set a watch on those

pixies! Two boys all the time are to stand guard, and Jimmy isn't allowed to go anywhere near those cages, for any reason!"

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CHAPTER 5



Jimmy leaned back against the trunk of the weeping willow he often used as a hiding spot, using the slender branches to conceal him from the other boys, who were engaged in a raucous episode of Manhunt. The game was simple: one boy would hide with a twenty-minute head start, then those remaining had two hours to locate and capture the target. This time, Peter had been elected to be the fugitive. Jimmy heard the shouts of joyful laughter mixing with the cries of startled seagulls as the Lost Boys sprinted along the rocky outcroppings that lined Sinking Shallows Beach to scour the caves for their leader.

Without truly seeing anything, Jimmy stared at the boulders and rock formations, the outlines of which were just barely visible from where he was positioned at the willow's base. A breeze whispered through the tree, setting the thin, string-like branches to sway back and forth. The salty scent of the nearby sea soothed him in a rare moment of peace as the sounds of his fellows faded in the distance.

What could possibly be done about his predicament? If he left, where would he go? Would he ever be accepted back in London, centuries after his time? But also...he couldn't just abandon the other Lost Boys; they were his friends—Peter included, even if they didn't always see eye to eye.

With each passing day, Jimmy had become ever more resolved that he would find a way to strike out on his own. One of the biggest complications to this plan was Smee. While Jimmy trusted in his own ability to find food and shelter for himself, he also was confident that the younger boy wouldn't be able to and needed to go back home.

Did the burden of responsibility always accompany aging? Was it because he was taller and older that he suddenly felt the need to protect those around him, like Smee? Jimmy dug the toe of his boot into the dirt. Smee was a good friend, but he felt that the younger boy's innocence made him gullible, naïve, and somewhat accident-prone. He needed someone to look out for him. He needed...a parent. Smee might still have parents who were alive if he could just return him without Peter's knowledge. If Smee tried to go back on his own, Jimmy could only imagine the young boy, lost and alone in the massive sprawl of London, with no one to guide him home.

A mosquito landed on Jimmy's leg and sucked eagerly, earning a smart slap that ended its life. Staring at his blood-streaked hand, Jimmy's stomach twisted. How many creatures had he thoughtlessly murdered or tortured, assuming all the while that they couldn't understand? For the longest time, he'd thought of pixies as little better than mosquitos. Who was he to determine who should live and who should die?

The soft rustling of the willow's leaves being pushed aside alerted him to someone else's presence. Jimmy rolled his head around the tree trunk and saw Smee, who was biting his lower lip and twisting the hem of his shirt so hard that it was beginning to fray. Jimmy patted the ground beside him, but Smee didn't sit down.

"I need to tell you something," Smee muttered, shuffling his feet while refusing to look Jimmy in the eye. The young lad's nose was more sunburned than ever, and bits of bright-red skin were starting to peel away.

"What is it?"

"I...I did something bad."

Possibilities flashed through Jimmy's mind, the worst of which was that Smee had reported Jimmy's growing desire to leave Neverland.

Thankfully, that wasn't what Smee had come to confess. He looked around for eavesdroppers, his round face heavy with anxiety. Jimmy saw his friend's mouth move, but no sound escaped his lips.

"I couldn't hear you."

With a terrified expression, Smee raised his voice slightly. "I stole something."

Carefully, Smee withdrew a small drawstring bag from his pocket. Jimmy pinched the sides of the leather bag and pulled it open, curious about what honest, eager-to-please Smee could have stolen and from whom.

There was no mistaking that golden glow. Smee had somehow managed to smuggle away more than two cups of pixie dust, which twinkled innocently back at him. Jimmy pulled the strings of the bag closed, sealing the dust back into safety. He handed it back to Smee. So he had been the thief in the night.

“Looks like you have your ticket back home.” He tried to inject a cheery tone into his voice but was only moderately successful.

Smee’s lip quivered. “I’m scared.”

“Why are you scared?” Jimmy smiled and placed a bracing hand on the younger boy’s shoulder. “Your mum will be thrilled that you came back!”

The pouch of pixie dust was tucked away again, and Smee shook his head. “No, I’m scared that Peter will find out. Will you come with me? You said you know a pixie, right? Do you think she would come to make sure we don’t run out of dust?”

“Her name is Tinkerbell.” It took fewer than five seconds for Jimmy to make his decision. He nodded and shifted his weight to his feet to stand. With all the other Lost Boys out playing their game, now was as good a time as any to try to make their escape. Getting Tinkerbell out of her cage would be the most difficult part by far, especially if there were guards like Peter had ordered. Who knew, maybe Smee’s mother was just as kind as his friend had described, and he could start a new life there. He felt like an adult already, hardly in need of a mother, but Smee was still so young.

When they both slid down the tunnel and onto the earthen floor of the burrow-like hideout, they found Peter, lounging about in one of the hammocks, who flashed a grin at them when they spotted him.

“I guess you win Manhunt this time.”

“You weren’t even hiding!” Smee protested.

“Sure I was. But who’d expect me to hide somewhere so routine?” Peter yawned and pulled his cap down over his face. “They always look for me up in trees, so all I have to do is circle back around and come back here.”

“Why tell us?” Jimmy raised an eyebrow. “Now we know your strategy.”

Peter let out an annoyed puff of air. “It’s not like you play any of our games with us anymore, and I have to babysit so you don’t release my pixies again.” He closed his eyes and added in an undertone, “*Traitor.*”

Jimmy remained silent, but his mind was far from trivial things like game strategy or name-calling. With Peter in the middle of the hideout,

particularly when he was so suspicious and watchful, there was no way he and Smee would be able to smuggle Tinkerbelle to freedom. Jimmy nodded meaningfully toward his room, and Smee trailed after him.

Once they had bolted the door closed, Smee turned his anguished face toward the older boy. "What are we gonna do?"

Feigning confidence, Jimmy shrugged casually. "Wait for him to leave. No big deal if we have to postpone until they all go fishing or something. It'll give you time to gather up whatever you need."

Smee smiled, seemingly reassured. "You are coming with me, right?"

"You bet I am!"

"What about the others?"

Jimmy hesitated. He wanted to help the other boys, but if they weren't ready to listen to reason, that was their problem, not his. Perhaps one day they would realize for themselves. Besides, they had all been in Neverland for much longer than Smee. Who knew what had become of their families? If he was able to return only one person to their life in London before too much time had passed, he wanted it to be Smee.

"They've made their choice, and we've made ours."

Smee's forehead wrinkled as his eyebrows puckered in concern. Jimmy pretended not to notice and busied himself with searching his room for anything he would want to take with him. Although he had told Smee he was going with him, it still felt surreal. All he could remember was living in Neverland, interspersed with a few fuzzy recollections of a family before Peter lured him away with the temptation of endless fun and a carefree life, devoid of labor.

The concept of imagining himself living anywhere else was a struggle. Would he be placed in an orphanage? The word conjured up a dismal image of bare gray walls, rows of beds lined with stiff sheets, and a stern matron with no tolerance for play. Such an idea was repugnant. But if not London, where? He knew of nowhere else to go.

"Jimmy?"

"Huh?" He had been so wrapped up in his thoughts that he hadn't heard Smee calling his name. Lifting his head, he saw Smee fiddling with his pocketknife, flipping it open then snapping it closed again.

"I said, Peter's calling everyone. The game must be over."

The cot groaned in relief as Jimmy hoisted himself to his feet and crossed the room. He took a long look around the area. Would he really be

leaving in a few short hours, never to return? Smee was watching him closely, and Jimmy grinned, projecting an air of confidence that he didn't feel.

"Let's go along with them until tonight. Then you should be back home in time for a bedtime story."

This perked Smee up, and he skipped down the hall as if he had springs in his feet. The heavy weight of responsibility settled on Jimmy's shoulders as he watched the small boy bound away. He thought back to all the times Peter had said similar things to him—reassuring the boys and giving off an air of confidence all the time. Jimmy had always assumed it was the mark of a good leader, but now...

Was he any better, really, than Peter? He'd been doing the same things and had committed the same crimes for years. The depressing thought that he and Peter were more alike than different weighed on his mind as he dragged his feet down to the main room, which was unusually quiet. As he had expected the usual shouts, the silence was what pulled Jimmy from his pensive state.

When he entered the room, he immediately sensed a thick tension in the air. Peter was hovering two feet off the ground, glaring around at the congregated group. Even Rob, the loudest of the Lost Boys, had clamped his jaws shut as everyone waited for Peter to announce the reason for the meeting.

"I'm missing dust," Peter hissed, venom edging his voice. "There should be more than what I have here." He opened the small chest he used to house his precious powder and showed the group.

While it didn't look any different to Jimmy, he knew that Peter was fiercely protective of his collection and would know down to the teaspoon how much he had. If he found out who took it...the punishment would be swift and severe. Jimmy's eyes darted once toward Smee, who had turned ghostly white and began to tremble all over. Jimmy shifted to the side, screening the younger boy's guilty face from Peter's view.

"I saw one of those pixies there yesterday when some of them got out," Auggie piped up suddenly. All the Lost Boys' attention snapped onto him, and a measure of tension left Jimmy's body. Maybe Smee wouldn't be suspected after all. Auggie, ever the chatty one, went on, "It was that blonde one with the green dress. Maybe she took it."

New fear, even more intense than a moment before, spasmed through Jimmy's chest, paralyzing him. *Not Tink.*

A cruel smile flickered across Peter's face, twisting his handsome features into something sinister and unsettling. "You know, I think dear Mrs. Crocodile hasn't been fed in a while. I think I just found her next meal. We all know how she craves the sweetness of pixies."

Smee and Jimmy exchanged horrified glances.

Peter led the other Lost Boys down the passageway to the animal shed. Once the rest had realized they were not in trouble, they immediately reverted to their boisterous nature—shouting and shoving as they thundered down the hall. Jimmy and Smee, still too stunned to move, began conversing in panicked whispers about what to do.

"I should tell him," Smee agonized. "I can give the dust back."

"No, that is your only way back home!"

"But Tinkerbell..."

"I won't let anything happen to Tink," Jimmy promised in a fierce whisper. "No matter what."

"Peter's going to kill her." Tears welled up in the younger boy's eyes. "And it will be all my fault."

"Nobody is going to die today." He glanced around and saw the line of boys had already disappeared. "Hurry!"

The two friends dashed out to the animal shed, but Peter had already come and gone, and Tink's cage was noticeably absent. The Lost Boys must have been just as eager to feed the crocodile as Pan was. Jimmy sprinted toward the jagged outcropping that overlooked the dark bayou, thanking his long legs for closing the gap between himself and Tink's attackers. The faint sounds of Smee's puffing quickly faded away as Jimmy nearly flew over the ground, outpacing the smaller boy by a great distance.

When Jimmy burst out onto the rock outcropping, he saw Pan clutching Tinkerbell's tiny cage handle, suspended over the crocodile circling below. The pixie dust trickling down from Tinkerbell's frantically fluttering wings only excited the massive reptile. Pixies were a special treat for her, Jimmy knew, but it was now time to bring that tradition to a close.

"Stop!" Jimmy ran forward in a panic and attempted to snatch the cage from Peter. Tinkerbell flitted around madly inside the tiny prison, desperate to put space between herself and the crocodile, jaws open wide in the water below.

“Jimmy, what’re you doing?”

“It was me,” Jimmy burst out, sweat breaking out onto his brow. “I stole the dust. It wasn’t her.”

Peter’s face darkened. “Come off it, Jimmy Boy! I know you’re lying.”

“Then throw me out!” Jimmy challenged. “You shouldn’t kill pixies.” He tried to grab Tink’s prison from Peter again, but Peter leapt out of reach.

Peter laughed derisively. “So much effort just to save a bug! How’d this insect get you to lie for it anyway?” He shook the cage viciously, watching Jimmy’s reaction carefully.

Jimmy lunged forward again and tackled Peter to the ground. In their ensuing scuffle, Tink’s cage crashed to the ground and splintered. Cracks appeared in the miniature cell that were large enough for Tink to squeeze out and fly into the air, evading the grasping hands of several Lost Boys who leapt in a fruitless attempt to recapture her.

“Now see what you did!” Peter roared as he drew his dagger. He began to take off after Tinkerbelle, ready to finish what he started, but Jimmy caught Peter’s ankle and dragged his friend back down toward land, teetering dangerously close to the edge of the rock outcropping.

“Leave her alone!”

“Leave *me* alone, you traitor!” Peter swiped his dagger downward.

In slow motion, Jimmy saw the dagger descend and penetrate his wrist, where the razor-sharp blade cut through his left wrist as smoothly as butter. The horror of what he was watching seemed like an illusion as his severed hand lost its grip on Peter’s ankle and fell to the water below, where it was enveloped in the sea with a sickening splash.

Jimmy stared at the grotesque sight, uncomprehending, then gazed back at his former best friend. Peter was fixated on the same point in the sea, aghast at what he had done. In a violent flurry, the crocodile descended on the spot where the hand had dropped. Jimmy looked back at the stump where his hand used to be, bile rising in his throat. Despite the copious amounts of blood pouring from his wrist, he didn’t feel any of the accompanying pain he thought would come.

It was as though pillows had been pressed over his ears. In slow motion, he saw Smee stumble out of the forest, watched the other Lost Boys jump around, screaming at the top of their lungs, all excitedly pointing over the edge at the crocodile devouring the hand, but to Jimmy, no noise was heard.

He lifted his gaze upward and saw that Tinkerbell had disappeared into the clouds above.

“Fly, Tink,” Jimmy murmured. “Be free.”

Then, he fainted.

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CHAPTER 6



The black, fuzzy squiggles around Jimmy's vision slowly cleared, and Peter Pan's face swam into view, sponging his forehead with a damp cloth. "Get away from me," Jimmy croaked, though he lacked the strength to push the smaller boy away.

"I am so sor—"

"Don't even say it," Jimmy interrupted, then gasped. The pain, which had been noticeably absent during the severing of his hand, exploded up and down the left side of his body. Jimmy's eyes grew hot. Try as he might to prevent the tears from falling, they began to trickle down his face, cutting a track through his grime-covered cheeks. Slowly, he raised his arm and stared at the bandaged stump where his hand should have been, the wrappings stained scarlet. It was almost as though he could still feel his fingers twitching there, and their absence fell oddly on his eyes. "You...you cut off my hand."

"Pixie blood will stop the bleeding—" Peter ventured cautiously.

"But it won't grow my hand back, will it?"

"If you hadn't tried to stop me—"

Jimmy glared, fighting back additional tears of anger. Never before had he ever felt rage like this. "I'll never take part in injuring or killing pixies again. If you hadn't been trying to murder one, this wouldn't have happened."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jimmy Boy. They are animals...bugs! They serve a purpose for humans; they live a short time, then die. I can get some blood to fix—"

“They feel pain, too. Emotional and physical. Even if it means I have to endure this...” Jimmy grimaced. “I won’t have the blood of any more pixies on my hands.” He gritted his teeth and smiled ruefully at his stumpy wrist. “Or hand, as it is now.”

Peter tore at his red hair in frustration. “But I can fix you! You don’t have to suffer like this.”

“Yes, I do,” Jimmy whispered, thinking back to the years during which he had imprisoned pixies, the ones he himself had fed to the crocodile, and when he had nearly killed Tinkerbell with his own carelessness. Perhaps, in some twisted, convoluted way, this was penance for his previous sins.

Peter shook his head at Jimmy. “I don’t understand you. You are so upset about a few bugs. We used to burn ant piles all the time together. How is this any different?”

Jimmy turned away from Peter and stared in the opposite direction. Blood-soaked bandages littered the ground between his cot and the hideout’s underground wall. He felt like his limited energy had already been drained away, and his eyelids began to close.

He heard Peter scoot his stool away from the cot, preparing to leave. “I really am sorry, you know. About your hand.”

“If you’re really sorry, prove it and release all the pixies.”

He heard Peter pause on his way to the door. “You know I can’t do that, even if we are friends.”

“Then you aren’t really sorry, and we aren’t friends.” Jimmy hunched his shoulders as he stared at the wall. He heard the faint click as the door behind Peter shut. In that moment, he knew that he would never, ever forgive Peter Pan.



A distant jingling reached Jimmy, sounding as though it was coming from miles away. Jimmy wanted the noise to go away so he could rest in peace, but no, it continued on and on. Jimmy scrunched his eyes closed

more tightly as he tried to roll over to muffle his hearing, but found that he lacked the strength, so he silently prayed for the jingling to stop instead.

A tugging at his eyelashes was what finally aroused him. As Jimmy's eyes were forced open, he saw the culprit. Tinkerbelle had planted her tiny feet firmly on his cheekbones, pinched his eyelashes with her fists and pried his eyelids open. Jimmy sharply blew out a puff of air, and Tinkerbelle tumbled over backward.

"You're alive!" The thin pixie looked cleaner and healthier than ever before.

"If someone's in bed and still breathing, that generally means they're alive, and that they want to sleep." Forming words proved difficult for Jimmy. Every syllable weighed heavily on his tongue and cost him dearly.

Tink wrinkled her nose. "I know that. I just wanted to say thank you for protecting me."

As the grogginess of slumber cleared, Jimmy realized the danger Tink was putting herself in by coming back to see him. He turned his head, trying to check the room for eavesdroppers, his senses heightening as any thought of more sleep faded from his mind and was replaced with a blind panic. His voice came out strangled and hoarse as he croaked, "Tink, you need to get out of here! If Peter sees you..."

"I wanted to see you and make sure you were okay. That's what friends do, after all. Besides, you saved my life. Again."

Her words shook Jimmy. Just as he realized his friendship with Peter had drawn to a close, Jimmy realized that another friendship had surfaced—Tinkerbelle's.

He did feel it was unfair for Tink to claim that he had saved her life twice. After all, the first time shouldn't count, as he had been the one who originally endangered it. He brought himself back to the present. "Saving your life before won't matter if Peter catches you now. You have to get out." His fear of Tink being found began to pound in his head. His previous blood loss still made his head woozy, and Tink's image swam in and out of focus. Jimmy shut his eyes hard, then re-opened them to try and clear his vision. Even blinking took a high percentage of his remaining energy, and each breath was a struggle, as if a heavy weight had settled on his chest.

The pixie didn't move. Instead, her eyes dropped to his bandaged left arm, where droplets of crimson blood had begun to leak out of the fabric and fall as Jimmy's panic increased. "You're going to die, aren't you?"

“You will too if you don’t get out.” Jimmy tried to inject force into his voice, but it barely came out as a whisper. “You’re finally free. Don’t waste it.”

Tink straightened. “You saved my life twice. Now it’s my turn to save yours.” She fluttered over to his side and started to tug the bandages away.

“No!” This time Jimmy did force his voice louder, and he tried to brush Tink away from his wound and prop himself up on his good arm.

Tink’s face reddened, and she grew to her full human size. Her glowing form seemed to fill the entire room, blinding the young man on the cot. “I’m not asking for your permission.” She placed one of her knees on Jimmy’s chest, forcing weight onto him to prevent him rising, then stripped the stained bandages from his left arm. *Of course she can change size now*, Jimmy thought ruefully.

“Don’t,” croaked Jimmy. “I don’t want...”

Tinkerbell ignored him. She reached over to the sheath strapped against his hip, withdrew the sharp dagger, then placed it against her palm. Jimmy, still pinned down and too weak to move, shut his eyes but couldn’t block out the involuntary gasp of pain he heard.

He felt the pixie place her bleeding hand against the stump that used to be a hand. Warmth originated at his wrist and flooded through his body. Jimmy’s mind cleared, the pain faded, and he felt the skin on his left arm knit together as the pixie blood coated his wound.

He stared down at his left arm, which still ended at the wrist, but the skin on it looked taut and unblemished, with no scar in sight. He felt renewed energy flow into him, and the second it returned, he shoved Tinkerbell off his chest, stood, and stumbled slightly, still gazing at his asymmetrical arms. “You shouldn’t have.”

“I won’t let you die.”

“It would’ve been easier. I don’t care about living anymore.”

Tink slapped him across the face with as much force as she could muster. Jimmy staggered back until his back hit the wall and held his remaining hand up to his burning cheek, astonished. The pixie’s face reddened as she advanced on him, her blonde hair wild and untamed. “Don’t you dare...Don’t you *ever* talk about dying like that, Jimmy. Your life has meaning.”

The red in Tink’s face deepened until she was nearly maroon. “If you can’t think of a reason you want to stay alive, I will give you one. *I need*

you. The other pixies Peter imprisoned need you. The Lost Boys need you. If you don't care about living for yourself, live for *us*."

Jimmy stayed pressed against the wall, his hand still raised to his cheek. The seconds trickled by as he and Tink stared at each other. In the background, Jimmy could hear the Lost Boys cheering on some game. They sounded perfectly content and either completely unaware or uncaring that one of their comrades lay wounded in a back room. Could they need him as much as Tink said?

"Now, hold still." Tinkerbell held out a gleaming hook attached to a leather cup lined with soft sheepskin. How she had smuggled it into the Lost Boy's hideout without being seen, Jimmy had no idea.

"You made that?" Jimmy eyed the sharp iron with apprehension. The inner curve of the hook had been sharpened to a lethal-looking blade.

Tink smiled in a self-satisfied way. "They don't call me *Tinkerbell* for nothing!"

She placed the hook over his left wrist and busied herself with tightening straps around the cup encompassing the end of Jimmy's arm. The pixie tilted her head as she looked at the prosthetic limb. "A hook is actually all I know how to make," she said, somewhat apologetically, then withdrew so Jimmy could examine the curved metal. It wasn't uncomfortable, but the additional weight felt strange, and he couldn't stop staring at the new appendage. Any time he blinked, the novel sight hit his eyes just as strangely as it had the first time. He wondered if he would ever get used to it.

A faint knock interrupted his musings. Tinkerbell shrank to her miniature size and flew over to the side table to hide underneath Jimmy's hat. "Who is it?" Jimmy called, struggling to walk in a straight line and not lean to one side.

"Smee," a small voice said from the opposite side of the door.

Jimmy pulled the door opened and was startled to see the younger boy's eyes brimming with tears. The grin that normally was in place had slipped from his face, and he sniffed loudly.

"Are you okay, Jimmy? I saw what...what happened." He stared at the hook at the end of Jimmy's arm, then fixed his eyes on Jimmy, as though ashamed of looking. "All of us are real mad at Peter."

The laughter from the next room contradicted Smee's claim, and Jimmy wanted to say that no, he wasn't okay, and that he preferred to be left alone.

But as he looked at Smee's trembling chin, he knew he couldn't. Tink was right; he needed to find the courage to continue on, if not for his sake, for the sake of the Lost Boys. He was the oldest now. He needed to open their eyes to what was really happening and teach them that what Peter was doing was wrong. He needed to become the leader the Lost Boys didn't know they needed.

He looked at Smee. The pain in the boy's eyes went beyond seeing his friend hurt. "Smee, what's wrong?"

"I feel bad asking because you're hurt..." Smee's lip quivered. "But I really want to go home. I miss my mum so bad."

"Tink?" Jimmy gestured Smee inside with his hook and held out his hand. The pixie emerged from under his cap, fluttered across the room, and alighted on his palm, her tiny arm wrapped around the larger boy's thumb for support.

Jimmy only had to look once at the pixie, who nodded in confirmation. "Let's go."

CHAPTER 7



Eager to avoid Pan, Jimmy left the dugout—with Tinkerbell concealed under his coat—as soon as Smee deemed the pathway clear. Even though the day was far too warm to need additional layers, the threat of the pixie being discovered after helping him was too risky. If Peter caught Tinkerbell after what had happened...Jimmy would have liked to think that his former best friend would let her go considering his guilt about Jimmy's hand, but he knew Peter's ability to hold a grudge for years at a time all too well. He had just never been on the receiving end of one of Pan's vendettas before.

After leaving the Lost Boys' hideout, Jimmy took Tinkerbell and Smee toward Mermaid's Lagoon, where they would be far less likely to be seen by Pan. Smee, who had also stopped mixing pixie dust into his daily drinks at Jimmy's recommendation, was able to hear Tinkerbell's thin voice as well. When they finally reached a clearing, Jimmy turned to Smee. "Do you have it?"

Smee's jaw hung slack. "Oh, I forgot the dust back at the hideout. I hid it after...after your hand, you know." In a rush, he added defensively, "I was scared Peter would find it if he asked me to turn out my pockets."

Instinctively, Jimmy looked at Tink, who shook her head slowly. "I don't know if I could produce fast enough to make sure both of you get there without extra stored dust. I'm pretty sure I could do one at a time, but I would need to rest in between trips. That's just me guessing, though. I've never tried, and I don't want you two to fall out of the sky while I figure it out. We need some extra dust as a backup until we know for sure."

Jimmy didn't want Smee to go alone, and he also felt responsible for Tink's safety. He had caused her enough harm already, and refused to add to it. He smiled, forcing a casual confidence that he didn't feel. "Then we will just wait until tonight when everyone else goes to sleep, and you can get your dust. Easy."

Smee's face relaxed into a beaming smile. "Tonight, then?"

"Tonight," Jimmy promised. "And now, we can go for a stroll to pass some time." *Hopefully, not too much time, though.*

The trees thinned as the trio approached Mermaid's Lagoon. After ensuring no merfolk were sunning themselves on the beach, the boys strolled along the shore while Tinkerbell flitted beside them. They admired the white-capped waves crashing in the distance while the secluded lagoon managed to remain smooth as glass, disturbed only when a mermaid's dark form drew near the surface.

Jimmy had never seen a mermaid or merman face to face and hoped never to experience such a frightening encounter, though Peter spoke of having several experiences. Jimmy had heard enough stories to know that merfolk hated humans. Jimmy kicked at the ground, watching the granules of sand scatter into the air before falling into the shallow water rolling onto the beach as he considered the creatures who lived in the lagoon. Mermaids rarely showed themselves above water. If a Lost Boy ever came upon the beach and spotted the humanoid beings above water or on some of the rocks that lined the lagoon's perimeter, the mermaid would instantly dive back into the depths.

If Peter had lied about pixies being mindless insects, then what else had he hidden? With a sudden, reckless daring, Jimmy stripped off his shoes and stepped into the water, ignoring the shocked gasps from the other two as he did so. He scanned the water for any ominous shape approaching to pull him down into the depths as Peter had claimed they would. Nothing happened. Jimmy glanced down at his hook.

Though the pain was gone, his left arm felt unevenly weighted as compared to his right, and every time he looked down at his side, he was surprised yet again by the hook. It gleamed in the afternoon light, catching the sun's gilded rays in a way that made the artificial limb look golden rather than steel. *At least if the merfolk do attack, I'll always have a weapon on me,* Jimmy thought grimly.

The rolling tide gently lapped at his ankles, the water so clear that everything on the ocean floor was visible as far as he could see. Schools of brightly colored fish darted through the smoothly waving seaweed, and his toes curled around a few of the small shells that speckled the sand. He waded in a little farther, so the tide came up to his calves. At one point, a dark shadow drifted toward him and he nearly ran for shore, but it turned out to be a large sea turtle, lazily paddling its way through the water. No fin nor face was seen of the merpeople.

“Come back, Jimmy, please!” Smee pleaded, his forehead shining with sweat. Even Tinkerbell looked apprehensive, her large eyes wide as she stared at Jimmy.

The older boy sighed and returned to shore, watching his friends’ shoulders relax as he stepped back onto dry ground. Sand clung to his wet feet and ankles, and Jimmy sat down to brush everything off before replacing his boots.

“What’s that?” Smee pointed into the distance, his high voice interrupting Jimmy’s musings.

Expecting a horde of angry merfolk to approach with spears, Jimmy whipped around. There was nothing unusual that caught his eye.

“Where?”

“There!” Tinkerbell pointed too, beyond the reef that separated the lagoon from the ocean.

Jimmy squinted to where an odd outline marred the sweeping view of the horizon. “It looks like...a boat.”

This was a boat unlike any Jimmy had ever seen before—nothing like the tiny rowboats that occasionally washed ashore from some unknown origin. Peter Pan, who had always been anxious around water, would avoid most ocean-related activities and make a bonfire to burn any rowboats that washed up. Jimmy could only assume his former friend worried that the constant spray from the ocean would dampen the effects of his precious, gravity-defying pixie dust. Because of that, the only experience with ships Jimmy could recall were the small rafts the Lost Boys would lash together with bits of string and vines, to be shoved out into the swimming hole only to fall apart minutes later.

This gargantuan vessel could easily support dozens of people. Tattered sails fluttered in the weak breeze with bits of shredded fabric still lashed to the halyards. Barnacles clung to the underside of the frigate, the white-gray

pockmarking the weathered wood on the hull, which leaned to the side where the ship was beached on a far distant sandbar. The exterior's scarred appearance was easily visible even from the distance. Netting with gaping holes in the ropes hung limply from the crow's nest, swinging sadly in the wind that was ruffling Jimmy's hair.

Smee let out a long, low whistle. "That's some boat! Want to go look?"

"No way am I swimming through *that* to get there," Jimmy answered, gesturing at the deceptively innocent-looking water. Despite his earlier show of bravado by wading into the shallows, he had no plans to become a mermaid's lunch, even if he did want to investigate the curious vessel. He tilted his head to the side as he squinted again. "Do you think there are people on it? Other humans?"

"I may not be able to get you both to London and back, but I am sure we could make it over there. Do you want to...?" Tink gestured at the beached frigate.

Excitement exploded in Jimmy's stomach, and while Smee's round face did not share the wild joy that lit up Jimmy's, both boys nodded—Jimmy with much more enthusiasm. Tink rose into the air and fluttered her wings over both boys until the glittering pixie dust settling on them lifted their bodies into the air.

Jimmy and Smee followed Tink over the lagoon, where Jimmy could see the rippled outlines of merfolk swimming just below the surface. They seemed just like the thin silhouettes of the massive stingrays that pooled in Stingray Reef off the west coast of Neverland, and Jimmy flipped over in the air to glide along on his back. He closed his eyes to bask in the sun's warm glow and, for the tiniest of moments, he understood why Peter preferred to fly everywhere. This was wonderful, a joyous freedom incomparable to anything else he could imagine. The crashing sound of the ocean waves far outweighed the obnoxious shrieking of parrots and chattering of woodland animals like what was found on the mainland.

"Jimmy, watch out!" Smee's anxious yelp jerked Jimmy out of his reverie. He flipped over and saw the enormous ship mast only a few body lengths away.

Reflexively, Jimmy threw out his arm to avoid collision with the massive beam, intending to push the mast away, but he had forgotten about the hook attached to his left arm. The curved metal caught on the mast, and

Jimmy found himself winding around the mast in a dizzying spiral as the hook carved a corkscrewing groove all the way down to the deck.

Jimmy lay, gasping and disoriented, on the wooden planks of the deck while Tink and Smee descended. Tink glowed bright gold and enlarged to her human size, then rushed over. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Jimmy clutched at his head with his hand, eyes still spinning in circles. "I...I wasn't paying attention."

"You looked pretty funny," Smee chimed in.

Jimmy let out a grunt of laughter and wrenched his hook free. A long curlicue of wood shavings showed the path of Jimmy's helical descent down the mast. "That got a little *out of hand*," he said, feebly waving his hook.

Tink rolled her eyes, and Smee chuckled. Once Jimmy's vision stopped spinning long enough for him to get a good look around, he took Tink's hand and allowed her to help him to his feet. A thin white crust had formed along the deck in patches where salt had been left over from rogue waves, the water long evaporated by the sun's beating rays.

With a measure of trepidation, Jimmy began his search of the ship. Tink wandered off to explore on her own, bending over barrels and ducking under ropes as she strutted across the deck, but Smee stuck close to Jimmy's side, anxiously turning his head from side to side as the boys roamed about the ship on their own. With each new deck and behind every overturned barrel, Jimmy half-expected to find the remains of this ship's previous owner. Smee obviously shared the same fears. Peter Pan had told them enough spooky stories at nighttime that Jimmy was sure he knew the sort of images the younger boy's mind was conjuring, and this shadowy ship screamed that spirits would love nothing more than to haunt an abandoned seacraft such as this.

Even though the absence of life felt unnatural and spooky, their fears were unwarranted; nothing leapt out to grab them or swooped down from above. Although the ship was devoid of life, there were plenty of items left over from previous occupants that certainly led Jimmy to believe that the ship had once boasted a full crew.

Boots of various sizes, kegs of ale, books with pages curled at the edges, and weapons of all sorts, all dirty and coated with cobwebs and salt, were scattered around the ship. There were several trunks full of clothing, most of which looked to be the typical sailor's attire, but Smee also

discovered a chest full of women's dresses and accessories, which Smee pretended to twirl around with, holding a red gown up to his shoulders before stuffing it back into place.

In the captain's quarters, Jimmy ran his hand along a handsome mahogany desk that had toppled during some long-forgotten storm and stared at the magnificent king-sized bed built into the cabin's wall, scarlet blankets stiff with dust. Musical instruments were crammed into a large chest in the corner, strings snapped and coiled. Where had this ship come from, and what had happened to its previous owners who had apparently lived in such luxury?

Jimmy picked up one of the cutlasses, which had the early signs of rust tinging the blade. Whoever had made these items had been talented, but why had all the treasures been abandoned? He exchanged a wondrous look with Smee, thrilled at the prospect of such glorious riches. Jimmy could barely breathe. He imagined what it would be like to be at the helm of this majestic, ghostly ship, sailing into the great beyond with the sun on his face and the wind whipping through his hair. Who knew what sort of treasures he could find, and what lands he would discover? The world was his for the taking.

Covetously, Jimmy fingered the cutlass, then buckled its sheath onto his waist. There was no previous owner to complain. Finders keepers...Did that philosophy extend to the entire ship? What if he claimed ownership?

Tinkerbelle poked her head into the captain's cabin as Jimmy thumbed through the yellowing pages in one of the books he found inside the desk. She fluttered over to stand next to Jimmy and took the book from him. "These are words?" she asked wondrously.

"Of course...can't you read?"

Tinkerbelle held the book the wrong way up, examining the symbols drawn on each page with round eyes. "Where would I have learned?"

Jimmy had no answer. He had never been much of a reader when he lived in London, though he knew how, just like every child who went to school. Now that he stopped and thought about it, he couldn't remember seeing any books or written words at all in Neverland—not even scratched into the sand or carved into trees. "I can teach you if you want."

Tink's face shone with hope. "I'd love to learn!"

Smee tugged on Jimmy's sleeve, his round face shining with sweat. "You can't teach her to read by tonight, can you? We're going back to

London, remember?”

“Oh...right.” The spirit of adventure that had so briefly kindled inside Jimmy was extinguished in one fell swoop, leaving him feeling deflated and disappointed. A sinking pit opened in the bottom of Jimmy’s stomach as he watched the glimmer of hope fade from Tinkerbell’s face.

Smee, who did not seem to share the extent of Jimmy’s letdown, plucked at the older boy’s sleeve again while they exited the captain’s quarters, taking care to avoid his friend’s lethal hook. “My mum’s a real good cook; I bet she’ll make you fried cod, if you want.”

Jimmy cast a longing look around the abandoned ship. With his own family gone, the allure of returning to London had dwindled significantly, even if Smee’s mother was willing to prepare his favorite foods. He shook his head. What a waste of time, wishing for a ship that was undoubtedly in need of extensive repairs that he lacked the knowledge and manpower to perform. It was a child’s playground, nothing more.

The journey back to Mermaid’s Lagoon beach was a quiet one. Tinkerbell occasionally posed questions about reading that Jimmy barely heard. He was too lost in his own thoughts of what it would be like to live on a ship—to be free from Peter Pan, free to make his own choices. Smee seemed not to notice either of the other two’s preoccupation and hummed to himself as he flew back to the shore. The moment his feet landed, Smee asked in a rush, “How long until we can go back?”

“We have to wait until everyone else falls asleep tonight. We can’t risk Peter seeing us,” Jimmy answered.

He turned to traipse back through the jungle, the new cutlass bumping against his thigh as he tried to purge the majestic image of the frigate from his mind. Some broken-down boat didn’t matter in the grand scheme of things. Smee needed him here and now. Tink shrank back down to pixie size and flitted along beside him, jingling as she chattered away about the legend of the Lost Cities, and wondered aloud about the ship’s origin. Jimmy remained skeptical that there was a whole land that still lay undiscovered if they were able to craft such seaworthy vessels. If such a country existed, explorers would have undoubtedly sailed to Neverland before now and made contact.

“Do you think they all died of hunger?” Smee piped up, whose thoughts seemed to be along the same lines as the other two.

Tink shook her tiny head. “No, there would’ve been bodies or skeletons if they’d died of hunger or thirst. But they were just...gone.”

“Maybe it was the merpeople! Maybe...maybe they climbed aboard and took them.”

“Nah. Merpeople wouldn’t be able to climb that high up on the sides of the ship. Besides, they have tails, not legs. Climbing anything would be too difficult for them.”

“And if they did manage to get on a ship,” Tink pondered, “they’d be at a significant disadvantage because they can’t move well on land.”

“Oh.” Smee’s face fell, then brightened once more. “Maybe pixies came and made them all float away!”

Tinkerbelle let out a high jingling laugh that lifted Jimmy’s spirits. “What would pixies want with some stinky humans? *Gross.*”

Jimmy tapped his chin in mock puzzlement. “And yet, here you are, hanging out with two stinky humans.”

Tink took an exaggerated sniff and pretended to keel over in midair, making gagging and retching noises as she clutched theatrically at her throat.

The boys laughed and spent the remainder of the hike back to camp hypothesizing with Tinkerbelle about what had happened to the previous crew.



“So...so I just go get it?” Smee asked, licking his dry lips nervously.

“Right. Just act casual and don’t draw attention to yourself. I’ll do the distracting.”

“How?” Smee’s round face shone anxiously.

Jimmy lifted his hook and gave a half-smile. “I wonder if I can think of anything that will work.”

“Oh, right.”

“And you—” Jimmy turned his attention to Tinkerbell. “You stay out of sight. I’d rather not have to rescue you again.”

“I can rescue myself, thank you very much,” she answered with a huff, but obediently shrank into the palm fronds of a coconut tree without any further argument.

Jimmy wiped his sweaty palm onto his shirt and stared at the hideout’s entryway with steely resolve. “Ready?” he asked Smee, trying to sound far more confident than he felt.

“I guess,” Smee squeaked, biting his lip.

Jimmy slid down the tunnel. Smee needn’t have worried about Jimmy not being able to cause a distraction. Immediately upon landing, the Lost Boys flocked around Jimmy.

“Where’d you get that hook?”

“Sorry about your hand.”

“We ought to cut off Peter’s hand after what he did!”

“Does it hurt?”

“Are you gonna clobber Peter?”

“He deserves it!” Rob said angrily, throwing a disgusted look over his shoulder.

Peter lurked in the far corner of the room, eyes alternating between the floor and the hook that shone by Jimmy’s left side. Was that regret or anger gleaming in his eye?

No matter, Jimmy thought spitefully.

“I’ll show everyone,” he said, working to detach the hook by unclasping the leather straps and removing his arm from the cuff.

As the boys *ooohed* and *aahed*, Jimmy spotted Smee sneaking back to his room, unobserved by all but Jimmy. Even Peter started to edge closer, the better to see what had replaced Jimmy’s hand.

Chibu frowned as Peter tried to cut into the group and shoved the red-headed boy away. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be? Go guard your precious pixies since you care more about them than you do about your best friend’s hand.”

Peter’s face twisted so that it looked like he had a mouthful of lemon. “I *said* I was sorry,” he griped.

“But that won’t get his hand back, will it?” Rob snapped.

Jimmy set his mouth into a thin line as he glared combatively back at Peter, who retreated, slinking back down the tunnel toward the animal shed.

“We care about you, Jimmy!” Auggie announced.

A chorus of agreement rose from the other boys. Out of the corner of his eye, Jimmy saw Smee, shirt pocket bulging, creep back up the tunnel.

“Thanks, lads. I appreciate that. It’s good to know that I still have true friends.”

“Is there anything we can do for you, Jimmy?” Chibu asked.

Confident that Smee had made his escape, Jimmy backed up to follow in Smee’s footsteps. “Not right now, boys. I...I’d like some time alone to process everything, you know?”

“Of course,” Rolland said gravely. “Do you want a hand up the slide? I mean—” His face turned ashen. “Do you...want help?”

Jimmy managed a small smile. “Well, I don’t know that I could get another hand, but some help would be nice.” He turned and clambered back up the tunnel, propelled by several pairs of hands pressing against his lower back.

“Got it!” Smee said breathlessly when Jimmy emerged. Tinkerbell’s glittering form fluttered down to join the two boys as Smee showed the pouch full of dust.

“Good. Tonight, we return to London.”

CHAPTER 8



Soaring through the night sky was an experience far more exhilarating than Jimmy had ever expected. Peter letting him drift weightless around their underground hideout for short stints of time was nothing compared to flying far above the trees, up toward the thousands of sparkling stars. There was no noise at such an elevated height, and Jimmy started to shiver as they flew closer to the stars and the temperature dropped. During the nail-biting ordeal of sneaking into the hideout, Jimmy had been so focused on Smee retrieving his bag of pixie dust that he hadn't considered collecting other supplies.

Tink shouted instructions to Jimmy and Smee, "Stay out of the clouds!" and darted out of the way of a particularly dense patch of clouds. Jimmy swerved to avoid them as instructed, but was curious about what they felt like, and reached out an arm to touch them.

Almost instantly, Jimmy felt the pixie dust vanish from his arm as his hand drifted through the mist, and holding his arm outstretched became much more cumbersome. "Don't touch the clouds!" Jimmy yelled to Smee, worried that Smee hadn't heard Tinkerbell's tiny voice, and was relieved to see Smee give the clouds a much wider berth than he had.

Jimmy struggled to maintain his balance as he followed Tink into the blinding second star, which grew larger by the moment. In a flash, they were through. Passing through the star felt like being bathed in the sun's rays on a summer's eve. The numbness in his fingers from the frigid air of Neverland's skies melted away, and when they burst out on the other side of the star, Jimmy looked down on the most wondrous sight he had ever beheld.

Huge buildings stretched up to the sky, higher and in greater quantity than when Jimmy had left for Neverland. An immense clock rose like a mountain above the city, and as they approached, Tink led them into a dizzying dive then swept under a vast bridge.

“It’s just like I remember!” Smee whooped gleefully. “I know where I am now!” He flew ahead of the other two, weaving through the streets of London, dodging lampposts, and finally slowed. Smee’s face wrinkled in confusion. “It looks a little different, actually. But I know my street is called Bloomsbury, and we live on the corner.”

After checking many streets, Tink let out a triumphant jingle. She found Bloomsbury Street, and a grand old house sat on the corner. “That’s it!” Smee bugled.

Jimmy floated low enough to read the wooden sign nailed over the front door on the corner house. It read, *The Darling House*.

“The Darling House?”

“Yeah. My name’s Smee Darling; my family has lived here for generations.”

Smee peered into one of the third-story windows. His shoulders sagged. “It looks real different in there.” He eased open the window and poked his head inside.

“Smee, don’t,” Jimmy began, unease creeping into his voice.

He didn’t know how long it had been since Smee left his family and hadn’t wanted to tell Smee about the possibility of many years having elapsed for fear of being right. It wouldn’t do to go bursting into a home where Smee’s family no longer lived, and who knew what year it was? It could be that whoever lived here now never got around to taking down the weather-beaten sign from the front door. Jimmy was already overwhelmed by the sheer mass of buildings and the sound of automobiles honking on the roads. Peter had told stories about these horseless carriages, but until this moment, Jimmy hadn’t truly believed the tales. Now, the noise of the hustle and bustle, even at night, pressed on his ears. Already, he wanted to go back to the peace and tranquility of Neverland, his real home. Could he ever be happy in a noisy, crowded city like this, imposing on a family that wasn’t his?

No call Jimmy made could have prevented Smee from checking for his family. He had already tugged the window open and squeezed his way inside.

“Mum?” Smee called softly. “It’s me.”

“Smee, this may not be a good idea...”

Tinkerbelle flew in after Smee, leaving Jimmy to fold his lanky form through the small window. The items strewn about the home were nothing like what Jimmy was used to. He couldn’t help himself from running a finger over everything, inspecting the fascinating machines that whirred and clicked and had been crafted with incredible workmanship.

“Mum!” Smee called a little more insistently. “I’m home!”

Tink flitted around his head and popped in and out of drawers. Smee had hopped down from the table beside the window and was hunting through the house, looking for his mother.

“Smee?” a hoarse voice called. “Is that you, Son?”

“Mum!” Smee ran across the sitting room and burst into the adjoining bedroom. He pulled up short, shocked at what he saw.

A frail old woman lay in the bed, small half-moon glasses perched atop her bony nose. She lit a lamp and squinted at Smee, who was framed in the doorway. Her eyes filled with tears. “I knew you’d come home one day.”

“Mum?” Smee’s voice cracked and went up an octave. He couldn’t pull his eyes from her wrinkled face. “You look...older.”

The woman’s mouth turned up in a tired, wan smile as she held her arms open for a hug. “I *am* older, son. My question is why you still look like my sweet ten-year-old boy who disappeared forty years ago.”

Smee, instead of moving to embrace his mother, reeled back and leaned against the doorframe for support. “*Forty years?*”

Jimmy held on to his friend to keep him upright as Smee’s knees buckled. “Time works different in Neverland than it does here.” He made sure Smee’s legs would support him, then gave the younger boy a little push forward. “Don’t waste another moment.”

Smee’s mother hadn’t taken her eyes off her son. “I missed you, my darling boy. Every day.”

Smee slowly approached his mother, and he gently folded her into an embrace. Jimmy, well aware that he and Tink were outsiders, quietly slipped out to give Smee and his mother the private reunion they deserved.

Jimmy lit an oil lamp, sank into a worn armchair in the sitting room, and watched Tink flutter down to his knee, then ran a hand over his face and sighed. “What are we going to do, Tink? Smee was the one who came

to Neverland most recently, and his mother is so old. There is no hope for the other boys and their families, is there?"

Tink flew up to perch on Jimmy's shoulder and patted his cheek. He closed his eyes at her touch. It all seemed so hopeless. What was in his future but a desolate expanse of loneliness and isolation? Perhaps there was some wisdom to what Peter did—was living in ignorant bliss worth it, if it spared them the pain of losing their family members?

"I agree. They won't see their families again; it's been too long."

"What are we going to do?" Jimmy repeated, slowly reclining to lean against the chair's back so he wouldn't jostle Tink and make her lose balance.

Tink leapt into the air and spun about to face Jimmy, hands on her hips. Her wings buzzed as she hovered in front of Jimmy's face. "The question you should be asking yourself is '*What can I do?*' You know the problem; now figure out how you can fix it."

Jimmy stared at her, baffled. "I can't do anything, Tink! All the other families will be dead by now. None of us have anything to go back to. Smee's mother can't support a dozen boys."

Tink lifted her chin stubbornly. "Then don't go back. Go *on*. Do you really think Peter will stop with just the boys he already has? You think he'll never kidnap another child or imprison another pixie?"

The weight of her words sank in. She was right. Peter would never stop. Every so often, he would fly off and return with yet another young boy, who was frustrated about some argument with his parents, to join the ranks of the Lost Boys—Smee was evidence of that. Someone had to stop Peter Pan, but who? As Tink glared meaningfully at him, Jimmy realized who she meant.

"Not me!" Jimmy protested and heard his voice crack. He lowered it to prevent disturbing Smee and his mother. "I can't stop Peter by myself; there are too many other boys on his side! Besides, he can fly and knows the island like the back of his hand. I would have nowhere to go. What could I do?"

"Jimmy, you know Peter better than anyone else. You were the only one smart enough to stop taking the pixie dust. If you can't stop him, who else could?"

Jimmy wanted to squirm. Her praise, lavish as it was, was unfounded. He was loath to admit that it wasn't intelligence or suspicion that had made

him stop taking the dust, but a simple dislike of milk. He was no hero.

“Tink,” Jimmy began, determined for her to listen to reason, “even if I was able to convince the other boys to join me, there isn’t enough room on the island for two warring clans of Lost Boys. Peter will have me cast out.”

“Then take the ocean.”

“Right. I’ll just grow fins and swim with the mermaids. They drown blokes like me, you know.”

Tink rolled her eyes. “Boys are so stupid. We just found a ship today, remember?”

Jimmy paused. The beach already served as a peaceful, solitary retreat for him, and once he thought about it, he very much liked the idea of living on that grandiose ship they had found—assuming he figured out how to get it functional. For the second time that day, he allowed his imagination to run free and pictured himself at the helm of the majestic ship, sailing around Neverland with sunshine on his face and the wind in his sails.

The best part of all? Peter always avoided water. Jimmy thought back to when he’d trailed his arm through the cloud, recalling how the mist had negated the effects of the pixie dust. No wonder Peter wouldn’t go near the ocean. He wouldn’t be able to fly long with all the sea spray flying up.

“What? You want me to become a pirate?”

Tinkerbell grinned mischievously. “Better an honest pirate than a thieving Lost Boy.”

A shadow of a smile flickered across Jimmy’s face. “I don’t think you understand the concept of a pirate, Tink.”

She snickered.

Smee poked his head out of his mother’s bedroom. “Jimmy?”

The older boy jumped to his feet, his face twisting in concern as he glanced at Smee, who looked ready to cry. “Hey, pal. What is it?”

Smee’s eyes brimmed with tears. “My mum’s real sick,” he whispered. “I want to stay with her for as long as she has left. Do...do you want to stay with us? Mum says you can if you want.”

Jimmy felt a lump rise in his throat. As tempting as the offer was, it only took one glance at Tinkerbell to know that his path forward would be different from Smee’s. He shook his head. “No. I need to go back and see what I can do to stop Peter Pan.”

Smee pulled out the drawstring bag, still bulging with the glittering, unused pixie dust, and offered it to Jimmy. “Here, to help you get there.”

A jingle from Tinkerbell confirmed what Jimmy already suspected, and he curled Smee's fingers back around the bag. "Nah, I don't need that; Tink says she can get me back home. You keep it to remember me and Tink."

Smee threw his arms around Jimmy and squeezed him tightly. "I could never forget you, Jimmy."

"I'm glad you found your family again, Smee," Jimmy continued, patting Smee's back and struggling to keep his emotions in check. "Don't ever take them for granted. Just think, you can tell your children and grandchildren all about your adventures with me and Peter Pan and the Lost Boys."

Tink jingled by Jimmy's ear.

"What'd she say?"

"She says she's going to make me into a pirate." Jimmy rolled his eyes at Tinkerbell.

Smee smiled. "That would be a good story. Jimmy the pirate fighting Peter Pan."

Jimmy raised his left arm, a bemused smile creeping across his face as he contemplated his altered limb. "Nah, Jimmy the pirate doesn't sound very ferocious. Call me Captain Hook."

CHAPTER 9



Though Tink and Jimmy spent nearly the entire night in London, only an hour had passed in Neverland. Jimmy landed on the beach, the final bits of pixie dust fading from his body. Tink continued to flit around his head for a minute until she settled herself into his hair. Jimmy could feel her making herself comfortable, and he slowly lowered himself to the sand so he wouldn't jostle her position. He stared at the moon's magnificent reflection on the ocean's surface and listened to the low rushing sound of the waves. There was something truly enchanting about the beach at night, with the thousands of stars scattered throughout the heavens. The massive silver orb hanging in the sky made Jimmy and his problems seem insignificant, even though they still seemed insurmountable.

The huge frigate was still stranded on the sandbar, but outlined by the full moon, it looked as though it was floating in the bay. In his mind's eye, Jimmy could just imagine a pirate crew dashing about the deck, raising the anchor and sailing off into the endless horizon, ready for a lifetime of adventures that didn't include Peter Pan.

Being a pirate...The notion was an attractive one. It was easy to picture himself, hook agleam and Tinkerbelle at his side as he led a crew of pirates on a quest to thwart Peter Pan from taking over Neverland. The island should belong to the pixies, not to Peter and his superiority complex. He sighed and fingered the cutlass's hilt that he took from the frigate. Right now, he only had a crew of one. Two, if he could convince Tink to join him.

He heard the tiniest of snores from the top of his head and knew Tinkerbelle had drifted off to sleep. Jimmy gently leaned his back against a palm tree and stared at the star second to the left of the moon. For a long

time, he thought about Smee and his mother's reunion. How much time had elapsed in London since he left? A few hours in Neverland could be days or weeks there. Maybe Smee got his birthday party after all. He smiled, picturing Smee with a party hat and blowing out candles. Would he put on ten candles or fifty?

His thoughts turned, and Jimmy bit his lip as the image of Smee's mother lying thin and frail in her bed came back to him. Smee wouldn't have much time left with her. Jimmy's heart tore. If only he'd had more time with his family.

When the morning came, he knew he would have to confront Peter. The other pixies needed to be rescued, and his fellow Lost Boys needed a wakeup call to what Peter had done. Jimmy didn't sleep at all that night, too engrossed in formulating a plan for the morning.

As soon as the sky began to lighten, Jimmy softly called out to Tink to rouse her, then got to his feet, body stiff and numb from a cold night reclined against a tree. He still wasn't used to his hook, and he nearly gashed his forehead open when he went to brush his hair out of his eyes before he saw the glint of steel and stopped the hook just in time.

"Ready for a little revenge?" he asked Tink, his voice barely more than a whisper.

She fluttered down from his head and stretched, her wings humming as she hovered at eye level. "Always. Let's do this."

Early morning is the best time for an attack, reasoned Jimmy. The Lost Boys tended to stay up late into the night then sleep in until nearly noon. Best to catch Peter sleeping and unaware.

Jimmy slid noiselessly down the hideout's entry chute and landed catlike on the dirt floor. He went to pinch his nose the instant his feet hit the ground, but instead of sealing off his nostrils, his hook crashed into the bridge of his nose. He ignored Tink's sympathetic hand patting his cheek. The stench from the kitchen was becoming unbearable. The Lost Boys would get seriously ill from eating on that disgusting table.

But filthy living conditions were the least of his concerns; he had pixies to rescue. He barely even paused to look around to see if anyone was awake before he made his way down the passageway to the animal shed. Tink fluttered ahead of him, lighting the dim hallway with her golden glow. The two boys who were supposed to be standing guard had fallen asleep, and

Jimmy deftly stepped over their immobile forms. Yet another error on Peter's part of using children to do an adult's job.

When Jimmy slid the bolt back on the animal shed, his heart sank. Several pixies lay unmoving on the floor of their cages, their lights barely flickering. Was he too late and Peter had starved yet more pixies to death? Tinkerbell darted around the shed, speaking to each pixie and encouraging them to get up. Jimmy moved from cell to cell, using the cutlass to slice the cages apart, never to be used again. He gritted his teeth as he saw reddish brown rust stains on the blade and remembered the ease with which Peter's dagger had cut off his hand. How fitting that Peter had cut off Jimmy's hand and now Jimmy would cut off Peter's precious supply of pixie dust in return.

Tinkerbell rushed into each cage to help the pixies who were unable to leave on their own. The jingling of all their voices grew to a fevered pitch as they clamored about finally being free.

Jimmy shushed them all. "You aren't out of the woods yet. We have to do this right this time." Several pixies were being borne up by fellows and would be easily caught if Peter or any of the Lost Boys woke up. Jimmy held out the wide, flat basket used for gathering eggs, and the pixies lowered themselves and their fellows in. They didn't make a peep as Jimmy laid the milk-straining cloth over the top, each pixie as eager as the next to avoid detection.

Jimmy anxiously poked his head around each corner, then tiptoed across the floor as he cautiously made his way toward the exit. Just as he reached the main living area, Jimmy heard, "What're you doing?"

Peter's tousled red hair flopped over his forehead, giving the impression that he had just rolled out of bed. But any drowsiness drained from his eyes as he took in the sheathed pirate blade and the basket nestled in the crook of Jimmy's amputated arm, ending in the curved hook. "What's in there?"

"Just eggs," Jimmy lied, failing to hide his guilty expression quickly enough.

Peter glanced at Jimmy's hook again, then back into his former friend's stony face before he advanced a few paces. "You let the pixies out again, didn't you?"

Jimmy matched Peter's speed, but moved backward, closer to the opening to the outside world. "Why do you ask?" If he could just play for some time...

“It’s glowing.” Peter glowered. “Hand it over, Jimmy. No need for anyone to get hurt this time.”

Jimmy continued to retreat. “They’re already hurt. They need to be free.” He watched Peter closely. Any moment now, Peter would try to make a grab for the basket, but Jimmy wouldn’t let it happen. Peter was just one boy. If it was to be a fight, better sooner rather than later.

In one fluid movement, Jimmy whipped the cover off the basket, flung it into Peter’s face, and shoved the basket into the entrance to the escape tunnel. “Go!”

He turned and pounced on Peter Pan, wrestling the smaller boy to the ground. Even if it cost him his other hand, he would hold Peter Pan back and allow the pixies—*all* the pixies—time to get away. Within seconds, his left arm was clenched around Peter’s neck, the hook just above his right ear. Jimmy lifted his arm to grip the hook and cinch his elbow’s position to cut off Peter’s air supply.

“No!” Peter’s voice came out strangled as he struggled against Jimmy’s iron hold around his neck, straining to follow the pixies, who were disappearing in droves up the slide, some held up by friends. Peter slammed his elbow backward into Jimmy’s stomach. A gust of air was forced from Jimmy’s lungs, but he held on, clenching his teeth as he fought to keep Peter restrained.

“Help!” Peter screamed, gasping for breath. Within seconds, other Lost Boys appeared, all with pillow imprints on their faces or wiping drool from their mouths, looking on in horror as the two leaders of their group tussled with each other. During the struggle, Peter slammed his head backward and broke Jimmy’s nose. Blood gushed from both nostrils, and as Jimmy recoiled and finally released his hold, his hook scraped across Peter’s cheek and jaw.

“Traitor!” Peter screamed, blood pouring from the smaller boy’s face. “You chose pixies over us! We’re your family!”

Finally satisfied that the pixies had all made it to freedom, Jimmy shoved Peter away from him and stood. “No,” he countered, towering over all the boys. “My family is dead.” He lifted his gaze to stare at each of the Lost Boys. “All of your families are dead, and it’s all *his* fault!”

He pivoted and scrabbled his way up the exit. As he neared the top, he heard Peter cry out from below, “He took all the pixies! Stop him!”

Jimmy scrambled up the tunnel and emerged into the small meadow clearing. A flurry of glitter ahead showed which way the pixies had gone, and he stumbled in the same direction, thick blood trailing down his face and flowing freely onto his shirt. He spat a mouthful into the clutching weeds as he plowed after them.

The noise of the pursuing Lost Boys thundered in his ears, and Jimmy increased his pace, barely noticing the blood that poured into his mouth. When he burst out of the tree line onto the beach, his heart stopped. Many pixies were clustered around the base of a palm tree, all exhausted and huddled around their injured comrades, too ill to escape.

Jimmy, still panting for breath, stepped in front of the group and wheeled around, waiting for the other boys to catch up. They appeared, one by one, with weapons drawn and prepared to battle. Jimmy swallowed hard. If ever the pixies needed him, it was now. He slowly withdrew the cutlass he'd taken from the ship. "Don't come any closer!"

Peter flew out of the forest with several pixies clutched in his hand. They jingled in terror, and a clamor went up from their fellows behind Jimmy, all outraged to see their friends recaptured after such a short amount of time.

"Pan!" Jimmy roared. Anger boiled in his gut, driving his feet forward toward the group of younger boys. "Hand them over."

"Fat chance," sneered Peter. "It's only lucky that I caught these ones before they got away."

Jimmy stepped toward Peter and pointed the cutlass's blade at his former best friend. "Hand them over now, or I'll return the favor you paid me and cut your hand off as you did mine."

Peter crowed with laughter. "You think you can take on all of us by yourself with only a few bugs in tow?" He looked around at the other Lost Boys for support, but the ripple of laughter he anticipated never came. "Please, do try."

"What can I trade you for their freedom?" Jimmy asked in desperation. He hated sounding like he was begging, but he saw no other option. He had no backup, except for a few injured pixies, which was no help at all. His only hope was that as many as possible would make it out alive.

Peter grinned lazily and pulled a dagger out of a sheath on his belt and flipped it casually in the air. Jimmy's stomach convulsed at the sight. It was the same one that had cut off his hand. "How about we fight for them? I

rather like the idea of a little duel with my *best friend*.” He handed the pixies he’d captured off to a very hesitant-looking Chibu and stretched his arms, bouncing from side to side to loosen up.

Jimmy’s heart sank even further. Was that all this was to him—yet another game? A spectacle to entertain? Did anything hold meaning? He looked at the pixies clutched in Chibu’s dark hands. He didn’t have a choice. Already, the Lost Boys had formed a half-circle behind their leaders, egging them on.

Slowly, Jimmy drew a long line in the sand with the tip of the pirate cutlass, spanning the length of the row of Lost Boys, separating Pan’s lot from himself and the pixies. “Step over this line, Peter,” he challenged, “and I will do my best to kill you. Let’s end this.”

The pixies behind Jimmy all cheered. The jingling din of the pixies’ cries rang in Jimmy’s ears, and he wished they would have simply remained quiet. The cacophony compounded the noise from his wildly thumping heart.

“Jimmy, why are you doing this?” Chibu, the strapping young lad who was the oldest of the remaining Lost Boys spoke up. “Why are you turning on us? What did we ever do to you?”

Jimmy shook his head. “It isn’t what you did, Chibu.” He fixed Peter with a hard glare. “It’s what *he* did.”

All the Lost Boys pivoted to stare at their leader, who looked remarkably calm with all the accusing eyes on him. “Enlighten us then, Jimmy Boy. Tell us why you’ve gone mad.” He glanced around at his fellows, as if inviting them to share in a glorious joke.

The pixies let out several shouts, accusing Peter of his crimes, but they were unintelligible to all except Jimmy, who knew he needed to choose his next words carefully. “Did anyone notice that Smee’s gone?” Several boys looked around in surprise, as if only just noticing that the youngest of their group had disappeared. A few whispers broke out, and Jimmy continued, “Want to know why he left?”

More whispers, a little louder this time, accompanied by sideways glances, but still no one spoke up to answer.

“Smee went back home to his mum last night. I took him myself. We flew to London.”

“There was no reason—” Peter began, but Jimmy cut him off.

“Did you know his mother was *dying*? It’s been forty years of London time since you kidnapped him, and he wanted to spend the last little bit of time she has left with her. *You* deprived him of his family! Of his whole life! A few more weeks of our time, and she would’ve been gone. Can any of you remember your mothers? Your families?”

The other Lost Boys began to murmur mutinously. Jimmy called out to them, beseeching them to understand. “Peter kidnapped all of you! All our family members are dead. Peter did that!”

“All of you came willingly!” Peter contradicted. “If your families grew old and died, that isn’t my fault! If anything, you should all be thanking me for sparing you from old age!”

“And the pixies?” Jimmy challenged. “Did you know they can talk and reason? They aren’t brainless insects, like Peter says. They’re every bit as intelligent as we are and are living creatures that deserve our respect. You have enslaved them, tortured them, even killed them!”

“So have you!” Peter shot back. “Even if what you said was true, you’ve killed plenty of pixies in your time. You think you’re so innocent?”

“No, I don’t.” Jimmy’s cold fury clutched at his chest. When he thought about all the lives he had destroyed...it gave him a sick, sinking feeling in his gut. “But I will spend the rest of my life trying to make up for it.”

Peter rolled his eyes and grinned around at the crowd of boys. “Hear that, lads? Jimmy fancies himself the savior of all insects. Shall we fall down and worship you, Oh Mighty Hero? What’s next? Going to stop eating your favorite food too? Is it too intelligent to be eaten? All hail the great King Codfish!” Peter flourished his hands as he executed a low, mocking bow. He straightened when he saw that no one was laughing, a slight frown creasing his young face.

“This isn’t a laughing matter, Peter,” Jimmy said solemnly. “Pixies should be free, and I will *never* hurt another one as long as I live in Neverland.” He spun the blade around in his hand, testing its weight. “I’m prepared to fight for their freedom.”

Peter sneered. “Won’t hurt a bug, you say, and yet you’re willing to kill your best friend. Very clear logic, Jimmy Boy. If you care so much,” Peter continued, carelessly flicking away a fly that landed on his shoulder, “then leave. Go back and be with your *precious* Smee. I’ll even give you dust for your trip. I’m not forcing you to stay. You don’t have to pick every battle, you know.”

“No,” conceded Jimmy, “but there *are* battles worth fighting. There are hills worth dying on, and this is one of them.”

“Fine, then!” burst out Peter. “But you’ll lose. Look around, Jimmy Boy! You’re outnumbered, and you have no chance of success. Any last words, traitor?”

Jimmy inhaled slowly, then lifted his hook and sword, prepared to defend himself. He crossed the blade and hook in front of his chest. “At least I’ll draw my last breath knowing that I fought for what was right, even if it was twelve to one.”

“Make that eleven to two,” Chibu said suddenly, and moved across the line to Jimmy’s side, bringing the pixies clutched in his hands. He lowered them down to sit with their fellows, then drew his dagger and pointed it at his former leader. “If my family is gone, I only have you to blame for it, Peter. I swear on my life that I will make you pay.”

“Me too!” agreed Ozzy, and he joined the other two. One by one, all the remaining Lost Boys left their former leader and crossed the line in the sand to Jimmy, prepared to fight against Peter Pan.

Peter’s face flushed. “All of you are dead to me!” he screamed. “I took care of you all, rescued you from a lifetime of misery, gave you eternal youth, and *this* is how you repay me?” He glared at each determined face, then launched himself into the air. He arced across the sky, flying to the other end of the island. Jimmy had no doubt he planned to capture more pixies and start over. There would be more kidnapped boys, and Jimmy would be there to stop him as often as he could.

“What now?” Arnie asked.

Jimmy straightened his shoulders and exchanged a glance with Tinkerbelle. “I know of a ship we can use. We’re going to take to the sea. Let the pixies have their freedom in Neverland, the way it was meant to be. It’s time for us to grow up.”

Several of the boys lit up with excitement. “What’s the ship’s name?”

After a moment’s deliberation, Jimmy answered, “*Hope of London*.”

The boys nodded their acceptance and began chattering amongst each other, showing just as much enthusiasm for becoming pirates as they ever had for Peter Pan’s games.

Tink fluttered down to Jimmy’s shoulder. “Well done. I knew you’d make a great captain, Jimmy.”

“Jimmy is gone, Tink.” He squared his shoulders and rose to his full height, prepared to accept the heavy mantle of leadership. “Call me James...” He stared for a long moment at where his left hand used to be and where the curved metal now gleamed in its place. “Captain James Hook.”

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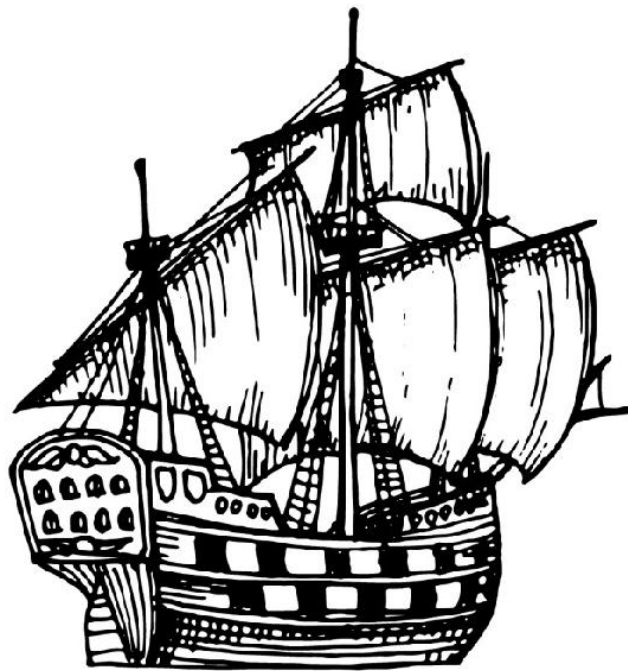
PART II

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THE PIRATE CAPTAIN



~Five Years Later~



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CHAPTER 10



A young boy came dashing into the clearing, red-faced from running and sweating heavily, with several of the Lost Boys in hot pursuit. Peter Pan flew overhead, shouting, “Don’t let him get away, lads! Nab him, quick!”

“Hook!” screamed the boy. “Captain Hook, save me!” His eyes darted around with the frenzied look of a hunted animal.

James rose from his hiding spot and waved his arms, his hook reflecting the sun’s rays. “Over here!” He drew the saber from his scabbard and held it out as the oncoming horde of Pan’s new Lost Boys advanced. Other pirates emerged from the shrubbery, adding their menacing presence to their captain’s. The advancing gang of boys slowed to a halt as they calculated their chances against the throng of grown men.

In the years after James left Peter’s band, the two leaders had developed a back-and-forth routine of cat and mouse, each fighting to gain and maintain control of as many people as possible. Some years, it seemed that Peter multiplied his following, and other years, it dwindled to almost nothing as Hook’s crew captured and returned as many boys as possible—yet Pan always managed to elude capture. To James, it felt very much like the ebbing and flowing of the tides, with occasional storms of fighting. It was difficult for the pirate to find the balance between knowing when to hold back and avoid hurting the children, and when to act without mercy with the knowledge that a traumatic kidnapping would be worth it if that boy had more time with his family back in London.

The boy being chased collapsed beside James, panting and pulling air into his lungs with great, choking gasps. James heard Chibu drop down to

tend to the lad, but James's eyes never strayed from Peter Pan. He raised his weapon a few inches higher, challenging the boy to accept the duel. Pan's gaze darted from the escaped Lost Boy on the ground to the brandished sword.

"Come on, boys, this one isn't even worth the trouble," he grumbled. The Lost Boys slowly retreated, refusing to turn their backs on the pirates until the foliage hid them well, then the sound of stampeding feet thundered around the clearing as the younger group fled.

"Babies," sniffed one of his crew.

James knelt beside the runaway youth. The boy's breath gradually slowed, and his eyes looked up at the pirate with a wide, terrified expression, interspersed with stolen glances at the hook.

"It's all right, lad, I won't hurt you." James tried to keep his voice as gentle as possible, but the deep timbre often frightened children anyway.

"P-Peter said that you...that you...take boys back to London, to their families."

James smiled in what he hoped was a fatherly fashion. "I'm surprised he told you. Yes, if you want to go home, I'll take you."

"But, don't you need fairy dust?"

"Pixie dust," he corrected, "and I have my sources." The boy's eyes gleamed with curiosity, and James chuckled. It was all too easy for him to remember what it was like to be that young, to have the energy to marvel at the mysteries of a pirate right after running for your life only moments before.

The underbrush rustled, bringing James's thoughts firmly back to the present and reminding him of how close they were to Crocodile Bayou. He cast an anxious glance around for Tinkerbell or any other pixies the crocodile might be hunting. All traces of glitter had disappeared, flashed up into the trees overhead.

"We can talk back on the ship." James said, cautiously watching the underbrush for any movement. "Let's get a move on."

He cast a bemused glance at the boy, who had eagerly hopped to his feet and was rattling off endless questions as he trotted alongside James. "A real pirate ship? Do you make people walk the plank? Do you have cannons? Can I see them? Do you have a talking parrot?"

James answered questions all the way back to the *Hope of London*. He missed the vivacity of youth. The boy kept up a constant, one-way dialogue

as they hiked back through the forests and across the beach, never pausing for breath or answers to his endless flow of questions.

“I read a book one time about a pirate with a peg leg, and you look just like him, except that you have a hook and not a peg leg. He was a mean pirate, but he had a treasure map where he buried all the booty he stole from ships off the Spanish Main. Do you have treasure? Do you bury chests of gold? Or do you bury pixie dust like Peter Pan says you do?”

“I can see why Pan said this one wasn’t worth the trouble,” Chibu mumbled in an undertone, but from his light-hearted expression, it was obvious he didn’t mean it. All the pirates had a spring in their step that only came with a rescue. Each one was imagining how this boy would be returned to his family, safe from Peter Pan’s twisted games and free to live the life they never could.

They rowed back to the *Hope of London*. James wanted to debrief the boy and get him back to England as quickly as possible, but this boy seemed in no rush to return to London. He was delighted with every aspect of the pirate ship, wanted to explore every nook and cranny, even volunteered to climb the rigging to the crow’s nest. The pirates enjoyed watching the young boy scamper all over the deck; it reminded them of what it was like a few years ago when they were still as young and enthusiastic just as this boy was. He questioned everyone about everything, insisted on seeing the captain’s quarters, and asked James how to read the topographical map laid out on his desk.

James did his best to explain, but it seemed that with every explanation, multiple questions burst from the boy in a never-ending flow of queries.

“Did you ask Peter all these things too?” he asked the boy, whose name was George.

George wrinkled his nose. “Yeah, but he laughed and told me to find out for myself.”

For the rest of the day, James indulged the young boy’s curiosity about anything and everything that piqued his interest. The rest of the crew seemed similarly affected—though surprised at the amount and speed of questions, they were merely glad they had succeeded in rescuing another one of those whom Pan had been holding captive.

Several pirates told stories of previous rescues and praised George’s proactive escape until the boy glowed with pride. James tried multiple times throughout the day to debrief him, but the boy was too excited about being

on a real pirate ship to care about answering Hook's questions. Anytime James would gently pump him for information about Peter Pan, the boy would look scared and say that Peter would be mad if he said anything. No matter how often James reassured the boy that he was safe, his efforts came to naught, and his hopes of finding out anything about Peter Pan's new hideout dwindled.

"Do you have pixie dust to take me home?" George asked. "My next-door neighbor wanted to have a tea party with me tomorrow, so I don't want to go back before that." He scrunched up his face. "She makes me dress up."

James laughed. If he had ever had a sister or neighbor friend like that, he was certain he wouldn't have wanted to play tea party either. "Time works differently here in Neverland," he explained. "I'm sure the tea party is over. We can take you back now if you want."

George shook his head violently. "No! What if you're wrong, and I have to sit and drink rose tea with Mary? Take me back tomorrow, please."

James sighed. He was the adult, and he knew better than George, but he also wanted to respect the boy's wishes. Perhaps a few more hours wouldn't hurt if it made him feel better, and they still needed to collect the necessary pixie dust anyway. He smiled. He was sure that, even if George did avoid one tea party with his neighbor, there would be many more in the future.

In that case, he reasoned, he might as well try to make the remainder of the boy's time as pleasant as possible. He set sail for Skull Rock, where he kept his hidden stock of pixie dust, donated over the years by Tinkerbell.

George watched in amazement as the crew climbed up the cargo nets and masts like monkeys, all swinging about the ship with the ease brought on by their years of training coupled with the strength that accompanies young men in their early twenties.

James stayed at the helm, gently guiding the *Hope of London* past the rocky shoals that bordered Mermaid's Lagoon, keeping a wary eye out for any of the sea-dwelling creatures. "Up there," James said, indicating Skull Rock looming on the horizon, "is your ticket home."

The young boy stared earnestly at the upcoming land. The small peninsula jutted out from the island at a sharp angle, and at the very end rose a massive rock—larger than three ships—that formed the ragged outline of a skull. Jagged teeth formed where the waves had beaten against the mouth of the rock for years, the saltwater eating away at the stone for

eons. Bits of seaweed frequently washed in and out of the jagged teeth, giving the impression that the massive skull structure was slowly eating anything that ventured near it. The top of the skull was smooth as glass, and the sunken eyes were a natural shape of the rock, coming together to form an eerie outline that turned James's stomach every time he saw it.

During his time as a Lost Boy, Peter Pan had warned the boys that it was haunted, and James steered clear of it as a lad. But as an adult, he had needed a safe place to store his collection of pixie dust, and on the ship wasn't an option—one bad storm would dissolve the dust, rendering it useless. Deserted, remote, dry, and feared by the Lost Boys, Skull Rock served as the perfect hideout for James's precious lot of glittering freedom, a valuable symbol of the hope it would bring to boys if only he could get to them.

George stared at Skull Rock, his mouth agape and eyes wide. "Isn't it haunted?" he asked with a tremor in his voice.

James laughed, trying to inject confidence into his voice for the boy's benefit. Even his crew still had reservations about the place. "It's just a rock, George. Just a big rock that's hollow inside."

"It's hollow?"

James nodded. "It stays dry year-round, so it's a great place for hiding things you want to keep safe. There's only one entrance, so you know when people are coming."

When they anchored in the bay by Skull Rock, James had Chibu lower a lifeboat. It didn't take long to retrieve the dust, and it was a one-person job. The tunnel leading into the skull itself was a narrow chute—similar to the one he had used as a lad with the Lost Boys—but it was difficult to get to on foot.

When James was halfway down to the ocean, George's head popped over the side of the ship, his eyes pleading. "Can I come too?" he asked. "Please?"

"It's a tough climb," James warned, but George looked so eager and excited at the prospect of another adventure that James relented, and his young companion eagerly slid over the side and dropped into the rowboat.

"I won't be any trouble, I promise! I just want to see what it looks like on the inside. My dad's a watchmaker, and I always want to see the gears. I like learning new things."

James steadied the boat as George found a place to sit and plunked himself down, eagerly looking over the side at the fish swimming in the ocean below. “Are there mermaids here too?”

James shook his head. “Nah, they need the freshwater that feeds into their lagoon. They can handle some saltwater, but if they stay in pure saltwater for too long, they shrivel up, just like a slug.”

George’s eyes grew wide as dinner plates. “How do you know?”

“Pet— Someone told me a long time ago.” James didn’t elaborate. He didn’t want to admit how much of his knowledge of Neverland came from the years spent with his enemy. For all of Peter’s faults, he had discovered more of Neverland’s secrets than anyone else. He had no idea how Peter had discovered what would happen to a mermaid in saltwater, and now that he gave pause to think about it, he wasn’t sure he wanted to find out.

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CHAPTER 11



The rowboat bumped gently against the shore, and James leapt out to fasten the lead rope to a nearby palm tree, its thin trunk swaying gently in the warm breeze. James squinted at the ship, where his crewmates were waving and raising mugs in the distance. “This way.” He indicated the path, only barely visible, to George.

The two wound their way around the back of the skull. Foliage flowed like hair from the nape of the skull’s neck, and ivy crawled up the back of the skull, twisting in sinister patterns. They trudged along, mud squelching under their boots as they traipsed along the path.

“Why don’t you just fly like Peter does? It would be easier to get up here,” George puffed some time later, his breathing labored as he climbed.

James, who had slowed considerably from his normal pace to accommodate his companion’s shorter legs, answered, “The dust is very valuable. I only use it to get boys like you back home. And I never enslave pixies to produce it for me, so I have to be very careful about how much I use. I don’t want to waste any to float around for fun like Peter does.”

“I thought you had a pixie friend. Can’t she help?”

“She is visiting one of her cousins who’s getting married.”

“I didn’t know pixies could get married. Just like people, huh?”

“Just like that.”

“Are you married?”

“No. If you haven’t noticed, women are in short supply in Neverland.”

“I don’t think you should ever get married. Girls are yucky.” George became preoccupied with detangling his trouser pants from a thorny bush.

James smiled. He didn't think Tinkerbell was *yucky*, to use George's phrase, and she was the only girl he knew.

"Not far now," he encouraged. "Just up here."

George raised his eyes to where James had indicated. James had to fight to keep his facial expression neutral as the younger boy's face fell comically.

"I told you it would be a hard climb," James reminded him. "And don't lose your lantern. We'll need it once we get inside."

Rocky outcroppings formed a makeshift staircase that led up to the entrance of the hideout. James, with his long arms and legs, found the climb easy, but knew that George would struggle. He gave a small sigh and then crouched down. "If you hold the lantern really tight and don't let it fall, I'll carry you on my back."

George's face, so recently dismayed at the long climb ahead, split into an instant grin. "Yes!" He scrambled to clench his arms around James's neck and hooked his legs around the pirate's middle. "My dad carries me like this all the time. Can you hold on to the rocks with your hook?"

James grinned as he started the ascent. "Sure can. My hook is actually very *handy*. I don't have to worry about touching any scorpions or snakes, and in the summer, the rocks never burn me no matter how hot they are."

"That was a bad joke," George said with a deadpan face. "*Handy*? You tell jokes like my mom."

James rolled his eyes. "Just hold on, kid, okay?"

The climb became much more difficult than usual with a ten-year-old boy on his back. George gripped around James's neck so tightly that James felt as though he couldn't breathe at times. George also had the hot lantern clenched in his fist, which constantly bumped against James's chest. When they finally reached the narrow landing that housed the entrance to the cavern, it was with relief that the lanky pirate lowered his load to the ground. "Don't slip" was all he cautioned before gesturing toward the small opening.

The tunnel slanted upward slightly, then dropped with a steepness that always sent James's stomach swooping upward in a thrilling rush. It was convenient that any rain was kept at bay by the angled entryway—a dry environment was crucial to preserving the pixie dust's integrity.

James slid down the chute first, holding the lantern, followed by George, who shouted as the steepness of the drop caught him by surprise.

When the small boy thudded onto the floor, James lifted the lantern to see if he was injured. George looked more excited than scared, and he sprang to his feet with the energy associated with youth.

“That was fun! How do you get back up?”

A small smile lit up James’s face. “That’s one time where I will use a little pixie dust. What do you think?” He illuminated the expansive hollow inside the rock by lifting the lantern high. The rough interior was bone dry, so no moss coated the walls, and the only things to see were a few skeletons of mice who had mistakenly slid down the chute only to find themselves in a death trap.

“Do you have a treasure chest?”

“I wouldn’t be much of a pirate if I didn’t have one, would I?”

From behind a boulder, James tugged open a chest. Inside were two large leather bags. Neither were heavy, but they took up a lot of space in the small box. James withdrew one. “Have you seen Peter use pixie dust?” He didn’t know how long George had been with Peter Pan before he had escaped.

George nodded reverently. “Can I put some on us to get back up?” he asked, wonder in his voice.

James smiled and offered the bag to the young boy, who took it and opened the drawstring pouch. The golden glow of pixie dust lit up his face, illuminating a wild happiness on his features as he dipped his hand inside and withdrew a pinch of the glittering powder. Surprisingly careful for someone so young, George sprinkled the dust over himself and began to rise into the air. “Look, I’m flying!” he crowed gleefully, and for the briefest of moments, James flashed back to the times he watched Peter Pan fly, always with a look of great smugness on his face. George gently floated toward the back of the cavernous room. “What’s back here?”

James followed on foot, dangling the lantern from his hook as he carefully stepped over the old rodent skeletons, his boots scrunching the thin layer of sand and dust that had settled on the stone floor. “Just empty space, really,” he answered casually, watching George explore every nook and cranny.

Before James knew what had happened, George flashed past him with blinding speed, alit on the open chest, withdrew the second bag of pixie dust, and darted toward the chute’s entrance to the outside world.

“George, stop!” James cried, running across the floor.

He was too late. George, elated with his sabotage, cackled with delight. “You really are as naïve and trusting as Peter said you would be! You thought you could save anyone who came your way? Thought that everyone would want to be rescued from a life free of chores and parents?” He blew out a puff of air. “Fool.”

In seconds, George had disappeared up the smooth chute.

“No!” James tried to scramble up after him, but the grittiness of the sand on his boots continued to make him slide back down again. He knew his crew would eventually come for him, but his anger fueled his motivation to get up on his own. He stripped off his boots, strung them through his belt, then began the agonizing climb back to the top.

In order to make it, James braced his hand, hook, and feet on opposite sides of the tunnel’s walls, where the roughness provided more purchase than the smooth, slanted floor. His progress was brutally slow, impeded by the intentionality with which he had to place each arm and leg, all while exerting all his strength to straddle the width of the tunnel and continue his spiderlike crawl.

George was long gone by the time James finally managed to climb out of the tunnel. He collapsed, panting, onto the narrow ledge outside the tunnel’s entrance to Skull Rock’s interior. His arms and legs trembled from the laborious climb, and he stared at the sky, which had rolling black clouds sweeping in from the east.

The rainclouds only hastened nightfall. He couldn’t see his ship, as the majority of the ocean view was blocked by Skull Rock. James groaned as he thought about the arduous task of descending. It would take at least another half-hour for his stamina to build back up. If only Tinkerbell was there. Not only would she be able to fly him down, but far beyond that, James wanted to be with a friend he could trust.

James’s face darkened every time he thought about George. How stupid he had been! He should have cross-examined anyone who came to him for help, but no. Instead, he had idiotically accepted George’s story without question, assuming he would want the pirate’s help. James blew out a puff of air, infuriated with himself.

No good deed goes unpunished, Peter Pan used to say. This time, James had to agree. Peter had counted on James’s trusting nature and good heart, and now, they had not only lost the opportunity to return a boy to his home, but had lost their entire stock of pixie dust in the process. James wanted to

scream in fury. His pride had blinded him to a saboteur he had invited into his ship, shown him everything...

His insides clenched. He had shown George *everything* on his ship—his maps, his quarters, and now Peter Pan would also know about the one safe place James thought he had. He was only glad that Tinkerbell wasn't around to see his failure. Wearily, James replaced his boots and began the descent.

Halfway down the mountain, a jeering voice floated up behind him. "Well, well, well, fancy meeting you here, Captain."

James, his limbs preoccupied with gripping the mountainside, couldn't swing at the red-headed boy hovering in midair, just out of reach. Peter lazily picked at his teeth with a short dagger.

"What do you want, Pan?" James refused to betray any sort of grunt of exhaustion as he descended. He would not let Peter know how utterly drained he was.

Peter idly pulled out his reed pipe and blew into it. The tinny whistling grated against James's ears, reminding him all too forcefully of the times in his youth when that tune had been a symbol of endless fun and freedom from all responsibility. Now, all he heard was the counterfeit joy that it embodied, a grand delusion that had captivated so many boys over the years.

The pipe music paused as Peter pulled the instrument away from his mouth, examining his former best friend. "How ironic, Jimmy."

James didn't answer. He kept waiting for an attack from the young boy, but none came. The lack of response didn't dissuade Pan. On the contrary, his obnoxious smirk broadened. "How ironic," he repeated, "that you claimed I was so morally in the wrong for kidnapping boys and pixies, when, as I see it, you are doing the exact same thing. You kept pixie dust hidden away, just as I did. You snatch up any boy you find on Neverland... How alike we are."

"I'm nothing like you," James spat.

"You're right," conceded Peter. "I actually succeed in my endeavors. On the one hand, you always fail, but on the other...Wait, you have no second hand anymore."

A growl sounded deep in James's throat. He knew that Peter would only gain pleasure from his irritation. Peter performed a slow-motion backflip in the air, watching in amusement as James finally found solid footing and

jumped the last few feet down to the ground, wincing as his legs absorbed the shuddering jolt of landing on the uneven, rocky surface.

Even though all James wanted to do was sleep, he tugged his cutlass from its sheath, trying to mask how heavy his breathing was. He still wasn't sure why Peter hadn't attacked him while he was climbing down Skull Rock. It was the most vulnerable James had been in a long time, and Peter wasn't one to squander an advantage like that.

"No fight today, Jimmy Boy." Pan flipped the right way up again and flashed a grin. "I think I'd much rather watch you run off like a dog with its tail between its legs, actually."

"Why would I run from a coward like you?"

Peter reclined in the branches of a nearby tree, pulled a string from his pocket, and began looping it in a pattern through his fingers, looking remarkably unconcerned. "Because I just set fire to your ship while George had you trapped in your little hidey-hole back there. That is why."

Cold terror gripped James's heart. Was the boy telling the truth? He couldn't be. How would Pan have any success destroying his vessel manned by a crew of fully grown adult men? Could he risk calling Peter's bluff?

"Better run." An impish grin flashed toward James. "If you wait too long, I may set Mrs. Crocodile after you. I seem to recall she enjoyed the taste of your hand. Now, do you want to try to kidnap more of my friends—none of whom want to return to London—or will you save your ship?"

Hating how easily Peter had manipulated him, James turned tail and ran off toward the beach, spurred on by the crowing laugh of his most hated rival—Peter Pan.

CHAPTER 12



Peter had been telling the truth. James looked on in horror from where he stood on the beach, transfixed by the catastrophe that had struck the *Hope of London*. The afternoon had dimmed to a dull gray evening as dense rainclouds blocked out the sun. Smoke billowed up to add to the heavy mists overhead. The mainsails lashed to the mast were ablaze, flames dropping to the deck. The bright, crackling fire contrasted sharply with the swirling darkness of the incoming rainstorm. Below, pirates dashed about, frantically drawing up water and using buckets to douse the flames while dodging the falling embers. Descending sparks flared up when they hit the wooden planks below, often landing on or perilously close to the ropes and barrels that littered the deck.

James hastily untied his rowboat but couldn't tear his eyes away from the horrific sight of his ship. As he watched, Ozzy cut one of the burning sails free and with Arnie, hefted the entire sheet into the ocean, where the flames fizzled and died. James rowed with all his might back toward his ship, keeping a close eye on the weather conditions. Would the sky rain down ashy remnants of his ship before the day was out? Just as he was pulling away from shore, Tinkerbelle darted out of the jungle.

"I saw the column of smoke," she explained briefly before she flew ahead to help. James heaved at the oars with a renewed vigor. If the rain started before Tinkerbelle reached the ship, a single raindrop falling on her wings could force her down into the churning waves below. She didn't know how to swim, and if he couldn't get to her in time...

James resisted the urge to turn around and look at the chaos aboard his ship as he made his way back. The sandy beach became smaller as he

heaved on the oars, one of which was specially designed to attach to his hook.

The loss of his ship would be a devastating blow that James wasn't sure he would be able to recover from if it were destroyed. He had discovered its existence at the very moment he had needed it most, and all these years, it had served as a refuge and sanctuary for those Lost Boys who chose to leave behind their childhoods and embrace growing up. If it was gone... James didn't want to think about that problem until it was unavoidable.

In the distance, James saw the outlines of a mass of Lost Boys tearing out of the jungle, all of whom brandished makeshift clubs and shot pebbles into the air from their slingshots, whooping and cheering gleefully as they watched James bob his way slowly back toward his ship.

James puffed out his cheeks and let out a huff of frustration as he spotted George amongst their number, floating beside Peter Pan as they cupped their hands to their mouths and heckled the pirate from the shore.

Ashes sizzled as they fell into the foamy sea all around James and, as he drew closer to the ship, sometimes landed painfully on his exposed skin. On one such occasion, James flinched and sucked in a breath as one particularly large ember scalded against the back of his neck. His hook jerked as he reflexively tried to brush the offending cinder away, and the handle of the oar his hook was attached to snapped.

"No, no, no!" James scrambled to try and retrieve the paddle, but too late. The choppy sea spray blew into his face as the current whisked the paddle farther out to sea. Several oaths slipped out as James pivoted around, turning his back to the beach as he tried to use the remaining oar to awkwardly paddle closer to the ship, dipping the oar in on one side, then struggling to switch. It would be so much easier if he still had two hands. James fumed as he cursed Peter Pan for all the trouble he caused, ready to feel as much smoke coming from his ears as there was billowing up into the blackening sky. At least the impending rain would help put out the fire aboard and make it impossible for Peter to fly.

"Hey, Jimmy Boy!" a taunting voice rang out across the ocean. "If you love cod so much, maybe you can swim with them before the day is out!"

"Or," George's voice replaced Peter's as it trailed off in high peals of laughter, "you may become flame-roasted cod instead!"

"Hook is a codfish, a codfish, a codfish," the Lost Boys chanted in unison. James ignored them, not even bothering to throw an obscene

gesture their way, too engrossed in painstakingly working his rowboat closer to the *Hope of London*. Whatever else the boys said was lost as waves grew rougher, the ceaseless wind howled, and the shouts of the pirates tending the crackling flames grew louder.

His heart lifted slightly as he looked at his ship. The crew had managed to put out the fire, as far as he could tell. The vessel was still afloat, and there were no cries about water pouring into the lower decks. But the mast would need to be completely replaced, as well as the sails. The blackened pole stuck up, looking naked without the usual sails that flapped in the wind. Ropes hit the water as he drew alongside the *Hope of London's* starboard side, and James knotted them to the rowboat, struggling to tie knots with only his right hand and occasionally his teeth for help.

“Hoist!”

The rowboat jolted as two crewmen heaved on the fall ropes. James held the sides tightly. Whichever man was on the stern side of the craft was pulling slightly faster than the aft, and the rowboat began tilting slightly. James braced himself, weaving his hook arm around the stern side and positioning his weight closer to help compensate for the uneven pulling. A seagull screamed as it swooped overhead, and a thick white substance appeared on James's coat sleeve. *Brilliant*.

As soon as James felt it safe to do so, he stood and gripped the ship's railing, vaulting over to assess the damage aboard. Burn marks were scattered about the deck, some large, some small, but none that looked like they would threaten the vessel's structural integrity. Besides, several decks were beneath this, and if worse came to worst, they could always replace the topmost deck. It would be a week's worth of repairs already, and James cringed as he thought about the labor-intensive tasks ahead. If George hadn't just stolen all of it, it would have been tempting to use the pixie dust Tinkerbell saved for returning boys and instead use it to fly to London and steal the necessary supplies, rather than starting from scratch yet again. How many crimes could he commit in the name of stopping Peter Pan before his conscience bothered him too much?

“Do you think we can save the mast?” Ozzy asked, a tiny note of hope edging his voice.

As if in answer, the charred mast gave a final groan of defeat and teetered, breaking off a third of the way up and falling with a shuddering crash that shook the entire ship. The railing on the port side splintered under

the collapsing weight of the heavy beam, which continued its descent, punching a hole into the deck's edge as it slid into the ocean.

"No, Ozzy...I don't think we can."

A ripple of chuckling spread through the crew. James tried to force a smile onto his face, but with limited success. After the fiasco of the day he'd had, he was courting the precarious border between outrage, despair, and insanity, and it seemed that it was only a matter of time before he released his wrath on the crew who had done their best to salvage his ship.

Above the sound of the rolling thunder in the distance, splashes of oars announced the arrival of the three crewmen who had been out collecting dragon fruit that grew wild on the island, on the cactus-like plants that so resembled palm trees. James could just hear the faint voices of all the Lost Boys, still jeering from shore. *Brats*. He wanted to give up on the idea of risking his life and ship for boys who clearly didn't deserve it. It was hard to believe that James was once one of those numbers who would cause another's misfortune and then laugh about it.

James assisted the rest of his crew with disposing of any burned remnants of wood and preparing for the impending storm. About the time Chibu and his two companions reached the ship, the Lost Boys got bored with watching the pirates, now that the fire had been extinguished, and trickled away back into the jungle beyond the sandy banks. *Good riddance*, James thought.

Rolland, Chibu, and Rob came to stand in front of their captain with only a basket of fruit between them, looking around curiously for George. The rest of the crew grew quiet, waiting to hear the explanation that James knew he owed them.

As James relayed the story of George's subterfuge, he saw Tink's face begin to tinge pink with anger. James intentionally stood tall—shoulders back and feet apart—as he told the tale, accepting his failure like a man, but he wanted to shrivel up and hide. More and more lately, he felt the need to impress Tinkerbell, and admitting that he had been handily outwitted by a ten-year-old boy was in no way impressive.

With another glance at the swirling storm clouds, James exhaled sharply through his nose. There wasn't time for lollygagging. "And while I got out, Peter flew ahead and..." He gestured at the charred mast floating away.

For a full minute, no one in the crew said anything. The fire had sprung up so quickly that none of them had realized what had happened until it was

too late. James ground his teeth together so hard that they were in danger of chipping. His shoulders and neck tensed with frustration—frustration at himself for not seeing George for what he truly was, frustration at his crew for not stopping the fire earlier, frustration that they didn't even have time to rest before the storm hit them, but above all, anger that Peter Pan was the root cause of all his frustration.

He knew that his crew, who were hanging their heads, were not to blame. This was yet another failure due to Peter Pan's relentless vendetta against them, but that still didn't ebb the rage boiling inside James. His ship was in shambles, they had wasted an enormous amount of time with no reward for their efforts, and he had bird excrement on his favorite coat.

He had half a mind to shout and rage, but such behavior was for a boy, not a man. So instead of administering a vicious tongue lashing, he simply said, "Prepare for the storm," then turned on his heel. He heard the relieved sighs of the men behind him as he marched away. Chibu began barking orders at the men, who scurried about to prepare the unburned sails and secure the rigging, and Tinkerbell flew into the captain's quarters after James.

Peter's voice echoed back in his mind. *"You're right. I actually succeed in my endeavors."*

Yet another failure on his record. To vent his frustration, James slammed the door to the captain's quarters, causing the paintings on the walls to shiver from the force of it. He wanted to kick the solid wood desk he had bolted to the floor, but doing so would only earn him a reproving stare from Tinkerbell and a throbbing toe. Instead, he flopped into his winged armchair and dug his hand through his long hair, avoiding Tinkerbell's eye.

"James, it wasn't your fault." Tink's thin voice was quieter than usual. As happened more and more often, the mere sound of her voice soothed the pirate. He blew out a steady stream of air as he tried to cool his temper and stop his hand from shaking, a byproduct of his constant stress. Tink had done nothing but help him, and here she was, assisting him instead of celebrating her cousin's wedding. If he was going to rage at anyone, it wouldn't be her.

"I appreciate you saying so, Tink, but it was." He was pleased that he sounded calm and collected, a complete contrast to the fury that was still

bubbling inside, some directed at Peter Pan, but more at himself for such a botched rescue attempt.

“Think of all the boys you have helped over the years. You took Lenny back, and Guido, and that set of triplets who imitated Chibu all the time. Do you remember?”

A ghost of a smile flicked across James’s mouth. “I remember.”

“We knew there would be setbacks. And we can’t just force them to leave Neverland; we have to persuade them,” Tink said. “They need to *want* to leave Peter. It worked with your crew, and it will with those newer boys too.”

“I don’t think so. Before, I knew my crew, and they knew me. They knew how much it cost me to leave.” James raised the hook attached to his stump of a forearm, as if Tinkerbell needed any reminder of that horrific day. “Besides, forcing them to leave has worked in the past,” James protested.

It was true. In the last few years, there had been several successful rescues, even if it was less than half of the attempts made. But each rescue was only successful through blatant kidnapping and forcing a child to unwillingly return. Each time, he dropped them at police stations, knowing they would be returned to their families. Once, he had hidden himself to watch the family’s reunion, delighted that he had been so quick about capturing the boy before too much time had passed.

“It *will* work, James! If you show the boys kindness, they’ll see you as you really are.”

James raised his head and grinned at the slim pixie sitting on his desk. Tink had so much faith in him, more than he had in himself. She had come to be so much more than an accomplice lately. She was his most trusted confidante, his closest friend. Together, they stared out at the frothy sea. The ship rocked from side to side with increasing force, a telltale sign of a storm brewing. The swirling clouds above were preparing to burst. Any storm at sea was a serious matter, but without a mast and mainsails... Perhaps he wouldn’t have to grapple with his morality over any further actions after all. James closed his eyes momentarily as he mentally processed all the regular tasks that needed to be done to prepare for a storm, which would all be exponentially more difficult now that their mast and mainsails were destroyed. Replacing them would be the top priority after the storm passed, if they all survived.

But first, they needed to survive.

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CHAPTER 13



James kept his men working to prepare for the oncoming storm without stopping for food or drink. During the fire, they had lost more than a week's worth of food, two kegs of ale, and one of the lifeboats. He still couldn't believe that Peter Pan had managed to slip aboard unseen and set fire to the ropes and sails, the aftermath of which had caused such devastation.

In his earlier years, James might have worried that he was being unfair to his men, but with adulthood came responsibility and *work*—a lesson that his crew had learned all too well as they left their childhoods behind them. He knew that his crew deserved a break after salvaging the *Hope of London*, which was still intact albeit a little worse for the wear. But breaks, just like his successful rescues lately, were in short supply. Mother Nature rested for no one.

He glowered up at the darkening sky, which swelled with black clouds that matched his equally dark mood. Tink fluttered down to James's shoulder, and he sighed. She had flown aboard to help put out the fire rather than stay in the safety of Pixie Glen, and he didn't want to shout at anyone too badly in her presence—still drawn by some unknown force to put his best foot forward with her, even though she had seen him at his worst.

The threatening clouds that darkened the sky extended across the horizon, and soon, the heavens opened up to pour on Neverland. James shouted at his men to secure the anchor and batten down the hatches. They hastened to do so, and as the last yardarm was stripped of its fabric, the winds began. These were no ordinary gusts, either. These gale forces

threatened to smash the ship to splinters as they raged against the hull, shrieking like devils had come for their souls.

More than one crewman, seasoned pirates though they were, heaved their innards into the merciless sea below. Many others retreated below deck, where they remained only slightly drier than their companions. Tink shrank to her smallest form and hovered near the ceiling of the arched entryway to the captain's quarters, the better to evade the bulleting rain. She watched James dart to and fro across the deck, tending to his ship and crew the best he could in the typhoon-level winds.

"Tink, get in my cabin out of the rain!" James roared over the pelting rain and spraying foam.

A sudden pitching of the ship, coupled with the constant downpour, threw Tink out of the safety of the archway into the hammering rain. With her ability to fly compromised, she fell to the wet planks of the ship's deck and struggled to stand. Before she could do so much as look up at James, her tiny form was washed overboard by the strength of an oncoming wave, and her light winked out of sight as she fell into the unforgiving sea below.

James didn't hear Tink cry out, but he watched in horror as she got swept out to sea. Without hesitation, James threw off his coat as he ran across the deck and fluidly dove over the railing after Tink. There were any number of creatures lurking in the depths below that would be more than happy to eat a drowning pixie. Tink was too vulnerable in the raging water. Not only was she unable to fly once she was wet, but she didn't know how to swim, and her wings weighed her down.

It was a long plunge from the frigate's deck to the icy water below. The cold shocked his body as he dove headfirst into the rolling, white-capped waves. He saw Tink's faint glimmer of gold bobbing ahead and struck out, swimming hard against the press of the ocean and trying to shake the pouring rain from his eyes. Waves buffeted him about, and James received several mouthfuls of water as the current attempted to pull him under. Even hindered as he was by the vengeful sea and by having a metal hook instead of a left hand, James was an excellent swimmer.

As he raised his head for a gulp of air, he heard his crew shout and the first mate, Chibu's, panicked cry of, "Man overboard! Help the captain!" before another wave slammed against his open mouth and he gagged on the foamy saltwater.

Lightning split the sky in a jagged flash of blinding light, immediately followed by a crack of thunder so loud that it reverberated in James's head. A rope splashed down to his left, but he ignored it, still struggling to reach Tinkerbelle. She was floundering in the water, and for the wildest of moments, she looked just like one of the lures he and the Lost Boys had used for fishing so long ago. He couldn't, *wouldn't*, let Tink be bait for Pan's crocodile or any other creature skulking in the dark depths below.

With an immense effort, James reached out his hand, scooped Tink up, and placed her on top of his head. "Hold on!" he spluttered, a bitter-tasting wave crashing against him as he struggled to keep his head up. The current had propelled him away from the ship, and James inhaled deeply, preparing to strike out for safety, when yet another wave filled his mouth and lungs. Saltwater shot up his nose and stung painfully. Spots began to pop into existence in his vision as his lungs screamed for relief.

James retched and gasped for air, desperately trying to rid his body of water and regain his bearings. His eyes were hit again and again with sea spray as he coughed with increasing intensity. James felt Tink's tiny hands wind into his hair, and even with his lungs desperate for air and eyes brimming with tears from coughing and the constant splashing, he turned back and began his laborious swim toward the rope Chibu had thrown to him. It had drifted back toward the *Hope of London*, and the rolling waves were pushing him farther out to sea. He could not fail Tink; she needed him. She would never be able to fly until she was properly dried off, and there was no chance of her swimming to safety. He was her only chance at survival.

James drew in a deep breath and continued to paddle toward his ship, taking immense care as he went to keep his head as far out of the water as possible to keep Tink safe. *If she dies...* He shuddered at the thought and pushed it from his mind. He had come close to losing Tink before and wouldn't let it happen again, not if he could help it. The possibility of losing his ship had been on his mind that day. It would be a devastating blow, yes, but one he could come back from. He would never recover if Tink died.

He saw Chibu haul up the rope and prepare to throw it out again. James swam furiously against the pull of the current until he was nearly close enough to touch the barnacles clinging to the ship's hull.

Despite the crashing, roaring waves pushing and pulling him in every direction and the rain pelting him, James caught a glimpse of a crocodile's

beady eyes cutting through the water, followed by the swishing of its powerful tail. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as the dark shape drew nearer, and he fought against the flashbacks to when he lost his left hand to the creature.

“Throw me the rope!” James screamed, striking the ship with his hook and attempting to pull Tink higher up out of the ocean by treading water furiously, though his legs were already screaming in protest. Chibu flung the rope again, and James nearly flew out of the water to grab the end, entwining both his hook and hand around the cord’s fibers. “Pull, you dogs! Pull!”

The crew heaved on the rope. Water poured off James’s clothing and boots as he rose from the ocean’s grasping depths, raising his legs to prevent another limb being lost to the reptile. Circling below, James could see the crocodile gazing up, snapping its long jaws in disappointment, only a few seconds too late for another meal.

Hands reached over the side of the ship and dragged James onboard. He collapsed to his knees, chest heaving, but his first thought wasn’t of himself. He gently reached up to ensure that Tink was still safe atop his head.

“Get the captain some warm clothes!” Chibu ordered the crew. “And get Miss Bell a handkerchief to dry off!”

Several pirates produced grubby, stained handkerchiefs, all sopping wet from the storm, and held them out. The ship was still being buffeted about by the waves and wind that bit at every inch of exposed skin and managed to stab its way through any clothing in the way that chilled everyone down to their very bones. James waved them all off and tenderly lifted Tink off his head, cradling her body in his palm and bending over her to protect her from the rain still pelting the pirates. Though raindrops hammered his back, he didn’t feel anything other than an intense relief that Tinkerbelle was safe. Her wings sagged limply as she convulsed, gagging from the lingering saltwater still in her stomach. Several pirates made to scoop Tinkerbelle out of James’s hand, but he drew her closer toward his chest as though protecting his most valuable treasure.

“I’ll take care of her,” snapped James. “Keep the ship afloat.” He staggered back to his quarters, one of the only dry places left onboard. He emptied a cigar box and lined it with clean, soft cloths for Tink. She drew up the makeshift blankets, huddled down, and closed her eyes as she

shivered beneath the layers. Only after she was settled did James strip off his sodden clothing. The smell of salty seawater—always present on the frigate—was even stronger than normal and assailed his nose as he pulled his white sailor’s tunic over his head.

Never before had James felt so depleted, in every way possible. From thinking he was rescuing George only to be betrayed, to his strenuous climb up and down Skull Rock, to seeing his ship catch fire, then saving Tinkerbelle from drowning...It was a day he wished never to repeat.

James pulled on fresh clothes then lay in his hammock, his body so desperate for sleep that he ignored how crusty his skin felt from the salt. The rolling waves rocked the netting, but it became a soothing motion now that the floor wasn’t pitching back and forth underneath his boots. Tink peeked out from her makeshift bed. The mere sight of her living, breathing body granted James a relief so acute that he felt lightheaded.

“I threw up in your hair, James,” she confessed, gingerly wiping the back of her hand across her mouth. Small as she was, James could still see her shaking violently.

“Is pixie vomit as glittery as your dust?”

Tink let out a tremulous laugh. “No, I’m afraid I’m just as disgusting on the inside as humans are.”

James closed his eyes. “I’ll survive. I’m sure most of it was already washed out when we were overboard, anyway.”

Tink smiled. “Pirates are known for being disgusting. I always knew you would fit in.”

“A pirate’s life for me.”



The storm blew itself out by morning. Tink, exhausted from her brush with death, slept soundly all night. Even though James’s body felt like lead, and he’d had more than enough adventure to last him weeks, sleep continued to elude James. He couldn’t rid himself of the all-consuming fear

that had gripped his heart the moment Tink had been in danger. Anytime he got close to dozing off, horrific images flashed through his mind, composing scenes in which Tinkerbell hadn't been able to avoid the crocodile a second time, and Peter Pan showed up, laughing at James as he mourned Tink's death.

James raised his head slightly to peer over at Tinkerbell. From the lantern's dim light flickering on the walls, James could see Tink's chest slowly rise and fall a minuscule amount with each breath.

"Stop being stupid," he berated himself. "Tink is fine. You are fine. Just go to sleep."

But no matter what he tried, sleep was impossible. How was it that he cared so much about this pixie when he had spent the majority of his childhood imprisoning her kind? She had been his friend, his confidante, for so long that it was only natural to fear losing her. She was closer to him than his first mate, Chibu, and closer than he had ever been with Peter Pan or Smee.

He stared at the tarnished brass chandelier swaying over his desk, tracking its arc. His life felt very much as pendulum-like as that chandelier, swinging from success and triumph to failure and despair, over and over again. Today was a day in which the pendulum of his life had swung toward defeat and dejection. As so often happened in such instances, James wondered if he would ever find happiness again.

His gaze fell back to Tinkerbell's tiny, sleeping form. Perhaps he would find joy again. As long as Tinkerbell stayed by his side, he could face anything. As long as he kept Tink alive, he would find the internal strength to keep up the good fight against Peter Pan. With her, he could find the will to go on. But if he was to keep her alive, he had to teach her to swim.

Finally, James consoled himself with the reassurance that, at the next opportunity, he would teach Tink how to swim while the crew worked on repairs. He blew out a long stream of air toward the ceiling and closed his eyes. There was only one good freshwater place with water tranquil enough to teach her—Mermaid's Lagoon.

CHAPTER 14



“*P*ixies fly; we don’t swim,” Tink stated flatly from where she sat on James’s shoulder. The storm had blown itself out, and somehow, they had all pulled through. Other than the palm fronds, seaweed, and starfish that littered the beach from the violent wind and rain, there was no sign of the monsoon-like storm that had threatened to reduce the *Hope of London* to a pile of splinters.

A few days passed before James managed to rationalize having a few hours off from working on repairing the ship to teach Tink to swim. The sparkling water of Mermaid’s Lagoon was crystal clear, but Tinkerbelle refused to go near the water. James had invited Chibu to accompany them, but he had declined, choosing to oversee the ship repairs instead. Besides, he was more superstitious than most and eager to avoid incurring the wrath of the mermaids who lived beneath the surface.

“They drown humans any chance they get, you know,” Chibu had said before lowering James and Tink’s lifeboat. “Be careful out there.”

It seemed that Tinkerbelle shared the first mate’s skepticism, and she eyed the innocently twinkling water with deep mistrust. “My wings will get wet.”

“We’ll stay where it’s shallow, and you can dry out your wings after.”

“Mermaids can still kill you in shallow water.”

“I’ve never known anyone who was killed by a mermaid.”

Tink wrinkled her nose. “I don’t want to be the first.”

“If any come close, we’ll get out. Besides, it looks like they’re all busy.” James waved his hand at Marooner’s Island in the distance, where the sun’s light reflected off the shining tails of several mermaids as they stretched out

on the rocks, sunbathing in the warm afternoon. “We’d see them coming and be out before they arrive.”

Tink fluttered off James’s shoulder and flew over the water, scanning for any signs of their enemy. Upon reaching the bank, she grew to her larger size and landed beside James. “I still don’t want to.”

“Would you rather drown like you nearly did before?”

“No, but I’m still tired from it.”

“You slept.”

“A few nights aren’t enough to recover from a near-fatal incident, *captain*.”

“*I’m fine.*”

“So you say. But you never sleep anyway.”

James shrugged. It was true—he was often so involved in planning the next rescue that he rarely slept more than three or four hours a night.

Tink’s eyebrows contracted into one severe line. “This is what I get for throwing in my lot with a pirate,” she grumbled and dipped a single toe into the water.

“Your choice, remember?” James unbuckled his sword and unscrewed his hook from the cup around his wrist. “Rust,” he explained as Tink raised an eyebrow.

“Maybe *I* will rust.” Her voice was heavy with cynicism.

James laughed and waded into the water up to his ankles. “You and your withering wit. Come on, it’ll be fine.” When she refused to move, James snatched her wrist, tossed her over his shoulder, and splashed out into the water until he was waist-deep. Tink shrieked and pounded against his back with her fists, legs kicking in the air.

James took a firmer grip on the back of her thighs and leaned his head away from the pixie’s waving feet. “You’re lucky I don’t have my hook on right now, or your leg would have a polka-dot shadow.” He set Tink down with a splash. “Ready?”

Tink wrinkled her nose. “As ready as I will ever be, now that I can’t fly.” She swatted at the water’s surface, showering James with droplets.

After showing her how to do a basic stroke, James had her practice floating on her back. The pirate was careful to keep her afloat by holding her up as the surf rolled in. Tink kept panicking and jerking upright anytime a swell would bob her body in the water, no matter how gently. James continued to reassure her that she was safe, and slowly, she relaxed and

allowed her body to drift on top of small waves. James closed his eyes and let his body rise in the water to drift beside hers. The sun warmed their faces and the cool lagoon lapped at their sides.

Tink's wild hair fanned out in the water, framing her face in golden locks. "You win, Captain Hook. This is nicer than I thought it would be. You aren't so bad, for a pirate."

James grinned. "If you move your arms like this and paddle your feet, you can swim on your back."

Once she got over her fear of the water and saw that she could keep herself up, Tink was a fast learner. She and James continued to swim on their backs, practicing staying afloat and breathing regularly.

When Tink flipped over to swim on her front, she balked when she saw just how far they were from land. "I can't touch the bottom!" she gasped, then her head disappeared under the water.

James calmly tugged her back up to the surface. "We'll be fine, Tink. Sometimes people drift a little when the waves push them. We'll swim back."

"I can't shift without my dust!" Tink tried to scramble a little higher, shoving James's shoulder down in her attempt to get her face fully into the air.

James expelled a spout of water. "You don't need to shrink. You need to swim, and preferably not drown me in the process."

Tink gave a tiny nod, then screamed as James was suddenly jerked under the water. His head popped back up a second later, and he looked angry. "Tink!" he spat. "I said *don't* try to drown me! What'd you do that for?"

"I didn't do anything!"

The two stared at each other, then comprehension dawned on them at the same time. All around them, the water was starting to churn and bubble as creatures from the deep began to swirl about them, trapping them in the center of a revolving whirlpool. James clutched Tink closely into his chest, desperately trying to shield her from what he knew lurked beneath. In his rush to keep her safe, had he endangered her once more?

A mermaid's wild head broke the surface of the water. Her powerful tail beat underwater, keeping her entire upper body out of the water. She pointed a lethal-looking spear at James. "Why are you here, *human*?"

James flapped his mouth open and closed uselessly. This mermaid was nothing like the stories of sirens he heard from Peter Pan in his youth. Peter had described them as beautiful women with long, elegant fish tails, but he had also warned all the Lost Boys that they were deadly, could hypnotize any man by simply talking, and never showed any mercy. Perhaps mermaids and sirens were not at all the same, or else Peter had fabricated the entire tale.

This mermaid was far from beautiful. She had mottled green skin, and her hair was matted into thick dreadlocks that looked scaly. It undulated even without a breeze, almost like snakes protruding from her scalp. Her slanted eyes were significantly larger than any human or pixie's and had a transparent eye covering beneath the green eyelid. The transparent eyelid continually covered and retracted, coating the creature's eyeball with a thin slime that, when exposed to air, evaporated quickly.

"Why are you here, human?" the mermaid repeated, jabbing the pointed spear closer to James. Her voice was hoarse and gravelly, not at all the musical, siren-like song he had expected.

It only took one glance at Tink's terrified face for James to find his voice. "I was trying to teach my friend to swim. I didn't realize we had drifted so far. I'm sorry."

The mermaid tossed her head and directed her attention to Tink. On his next time spinning around the circulating water, James spotted several purple veins throbbing on the mermaid's neck underneath some scars where the green skin had faded to a pale yellow. He tried to control his breathing. If he could just find a way to get out of this alive...

"You're a pixie," the mermaid observed, eyeing Tink's wings, which were plastered, sodden and limp, to her back. The mermaid had no eyebrows, so her facial expression was difficult to read.

"I am," Tink confirmed.

The mermaid tilted her head. "Why are you with this *human*?" She spat the last word like a foul oath.

"He saved me from drowning during that storm and was trying to teach me to swim, just like he said." Tink lifted her chin higher, daring the mermaid to challenge her story.

The mermaid cast a look around at her fellows, still silently circling around the perimeter of the whirlpool and listening to their conversation. Several hissed and shook their heads, but others beat their tails against the

surface of the water, signaling their approval. James hoped that whatever verdict was going to be passed, it would happen soon. The constant spinning in the whirlpool while trying to track the mermaid speaking was making him ill.

The verdict did not come quickly, and the circulating water continued to keep James and Tinkerbelle trapped at the center while the head mermaid conversed with her fellows in low, raspy voices. James couldn't pick out any of what they were saying; he was too focused on treading water while keeping Tinkerbelle aloft. Her brief swimming lesson was fine for still, shallow water, but churning water in the deep was still beyond her ability. She clutched at James, whose legs, still sore from the day of the fire, screamed in protest while he continued to pump them furiously to keep their heads above water.

James looked below and saw a school of merfolk swimming in a tight circle to keep the whirlpool spinning. He clenched his eyes shut, focusing instead on the feel of Tinkerbelle in his arms. She felt so tiny and fragile.

"You align yourself with Peter Pan, human?" the head mermaid spat.

"No! He cut off my hand." To prove his point, James shifted Tinkerbelle's weight into his right arm and held up his left.

The mermaid's protuberant eyes scanned the stump James held aloft, absentmindedly stroking the crisscrossing scars on her neck as she did so.

The head mermaid contemplated for a long time before ducking below the surface. Eerie noises bubbled up, but while his head was above water, James couldn't understand a word she said. His legs were on fire as he continued to tread water, desperately keeping Tink's face above the swells in the lagoon. Her arms were wrapped around his neck, and he held her close, determined to keep her safe.

As soon as the mermaid broke the surface again, the spinning whirlpool stopped. "We have suffered at the hand of Pan as well...more than you could ever know. He stole from the pixies and has stolen from us too. It has been happening more and more often."

James's heart lurched as his sense of foreboding increased. Just as he thought it was impossible for Peter's crimes to be greater...What had Peter stolen from the mermaids? What was the leader of the Lost Boys doing with increasing frequency? Again, his eyes were drawn to the scars on the mermaid's neck and flicked to other mermaids, who bore similar disfigurements. *Peter, what have you done?*

“We let you pass this once, human, because you’re with a pixie who vouched for you. *Never* come here again. You have been warned.”

James bobbed his head in agreement. It must be a record, to have met a mermaid or siren or whatever this creature was and not be drowned. He placed his hand and forearm on Tink’s waist and gave her a small launch back toward shore to help her start swimming again. He followed, beyond exhausted, and the circle of mermaids parted to let them pass.



“Let’s never do that again.” Tink pulled herself onto the beach, trembling all over.

“Agreed.” James collapsed next to her, his chest heaving from the residual terror of the experience coupled with the physical drain his body had endured over the last few days. Why had he thought teaching Tink to swim would be a good idea? She had never needed to before now, and had he imagined that when they left the safety of their ship, they would somehow bring any lingering protection with them? *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

His only saving grace had been the protection afforded by Tinkerbelle’s heritage. James didn’t know why mermaids were so willing to make allowances for pixies, but he was too grateful to care. He turned his head sideways to examine Tink for any injuries.

She was flat on her stomach to expose her delicate wings to the sun’s warming rays, her face tilted to avoid full contact with the sand as she gasped for air. Little puffs of sand flew up every time she exhaled, blowing grains into James’s soaked hair, but he didn’t mind.

The blonde strands that framed Tink’s face were sopping wet and stuck to her forehead. Her eyes were closed as she fought for breath, and James’s eyes roved down to examine Tink’s face more closely. As had happened with increasing frequency lately, he found it difficult to stop staring at her.

The pixie, so unlike her timid fellows, was fiery and spunky and never afraid to speak her mind. Her form-fitting clothing didn’t help things, either,

and if he didn't control his eyes every second he was around her, he could get distracted by strange things like the curviness of her figure or how blue her eyes were. He hadn't noticed such features when he first met her, but aging brought on a funny effect in relation to his opinion about women, and this woman in particular—though, granted, she was the only one he knew well.

But losing his one contact who was able to spy on the Lost Boys' camp was something he couldn't afford. He could never let Tink know that he found her attractive. She would be repulsed by him, he knew it. Besides, what ridiculousness was he thinking? Their near drowning and interaction with the merfolk had undoubtedly addled his brains. It would be impossible for a human and a pixie to ever be together, and he was not going to do anything to make Tink feel uncomfortable.

"I'm flying everywhere from now on," Tink declared, and James's thoughts were pulled back to the present with a harsh bump. "You can swim if you want to, you pirate."

"I've had enough swimming to last me a while, actually." James dragged himself to his feet and held out his hand to Tinkerbelle, trying to ignore the way his skin tingled when she held on to him to stand.

With her fingers still on his, Tinkerbelle tried to flutter her wings, which sagged limply down her back. James found his eyes drawn again and again to her bare back, where her wings attached. More than anything, he wanted to stretch out his hand and stroke her back. The thought of touching her in such a way sent thrilling waves rushing through his body and, before he realized it, his fingers acted of their own accord and ran the length of her spine.

Eager to cover up his momentary lapse in judgment, James contorted his face into an expression of deep concern. "How...how long will your wings take to dry?"

A curious light danced in Tinkerbelle's eyes, and James quickly withdrew his hand. "About an hour," she predicted. "We can walk back to the boat, and I should be dry enough to fly over."

James nodded. As they hiked back through Woodland Pixie Hollow, Tinkerbelle's fingers brushed against James's. He monitored his breathing carefully, determined not to betray any sense of nervousness. Tinkerbelle... beautiful, energetic, driven Tinkerbelle would never be interested in him, would she?

His steps slowed as he walked beside her, furiously trying to think of something clever to say and wondering if he dared to nudge her hand back. The idea of even holding her hand caused his vision to blur.

“Tink?” The thin, chittering voice of another pixie broke through James’s musings. A pixie, who was a head shorter than Tinkerbell, swung out of a tree and landed cat-like on the ground.

“Hello, Tiger Lily,” Tink said.

The woodland pixie had darker skin than Tinkerbell and a wilder look about her. She threw James a dirty look, then cupped her hand to her mouth and stage-whispered, “What are you doing with this *human*?”

James sighed wearily. First the merfolk and now this. But as Tinkerbell protectively linked her elbow around his arm that ended in a curved hook, all thought of exasperation faded from his mind.

“This is Captain James Hook. James, this is Tiger Lily.”

“It’s a pleasure,” James said and extended his hand.

Tiger Lily examined James as though he were something disgusting on her shoe and didn’t take his hand. Not even bothering to hold up her own hand, she sneered, “Tink, you cannot seriously be spending time with one of the monsters who held you prisoner. He doesn’t even know how to greet a pixie properly.”

James’s stomach churned and he relaxed his arm, prepared to let Tinkerbell distance herself from him, but she didn’t. She clenched his arm even tighter and lifted her chin. “I can spend time with whomever I choose.”

The woodland pixie snorted and rose into the air, her green wings fluttering. “Whatever you say. By the way, Terrance wanted to ask you to come to his next tournament, but you flew off from the wedding before we even started the ceremony. I promised I would invite you, but you’ve been spending so much time with *others*”—she threw James another dirty look—“that you’ve been hard to find.”

An unpleasant lurch jolted in James’s stomach. Of course there would be other men who were interested in Tinkerbell. Any man in his right mind would be. The thought of holding her hand faded faster than pixie dust washed away by water, and he tugged his arm away from Tinkerbell. She didn’t belong with some human pirate obsessed with revenge and kidnapping children. She deserved more in life, and he couldn’t give that to her.

Tinkerbell frowned at Tiger Lily. “You go back, James. I’ll catch up with you later.”

James obeyed, trudging off to let Tinkerbell continue her private conversation. How preposterous that he could ever dream of something as forbidden as a pixie and a human falling for each other. The most he could ever hope for would be to protect her from Peter and watch as she eventually grew tired of his obsessive plans and traps and left him to start a family of her own. The thought pierced his soul like a knife.

Rowing back to the *Hope of London* felt like much more of a chore without Tinkerbell beside him. Just before he reached his ship, he saw her fly overhead to land before he did. He watched her graceful arc across the sky and wished he were a pixie too.

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CHAPTER 15



Every time James climbed aboard the *Hope of London*, he was reminded of the mysterious way in which it came into his possession. A ship in almost perfect working order floating completely abandoned in the ocean with no sign of a struggle...He still wondered about where it had originated. The few books aboard that hadn't been ruined were instructional books on sailing, along with several fiction titles that held legends of sirens and krakens, yet no historical texts about where the ship came from.

True to his word, James had taught Tinkerbelle to read, after which she had laid claim to one book that told the sad tale of a siren who gave up her voice in order to save the human she loved. As James had no interest in reading romance novels, he had been more than happy to bequeath it to her, and often saw her re-reading it during the quiet days between their attacks on the Lost Boys, a sappy smile across her face.

When James climbed aboard after the disastrous swimming lesson, night had fallen, and he found Tinkerbelle, still human-sized, waiting for him in his cabin, hip jutted to the side and foot tapping impatiently. He pushed his curiosity from his mind. He would worry about solving the mystery of his ship another day.

"You taught me to swim, and I want to teach you to fly."

"I've flown before," James pointed out.

"Shut up and follow me."

She rose into the air and fluttered her wings rapidly so sprinkles of dust showered over him. James felt the pressure of his body's weight lift from his feet and spine as he rose into the air and accepted Tink's hand as they

flew across the island, marveling at how much faster he could travel while in the air.

Within minutes, the pirate ship had faded from sight, Skull Rock and Mermaid's Lagoon were hidden behind the enormous palm trees that now looked like tiny blades of grass, and they had flown so high that it felt like if only James stretched forth his hand, his fingers could brush the moon. After multiple trips to London to return the Lost Boys he had succeeded in capturing, flying came easily to James, though he still felt guilty for using Tink's precious pixie dust for anything other than returning kidnapped children to their families as quickly as possible.

Tink halted, hovering in the air and framed by the full moon's silver glow that cast a ghostly light on all of Neverland. She didn't speak, and James took the time to examine his surroundings. Twilight had truly fallen, and though the moon's brilliant light hid a great number of the stars James knew would be visible on a moonless night, there were still thousands scattered across the heavens. One in particular stood out, shining like a beacon in the darkness as it twinkled, the second over from the moon's cratered orb.

It winked, reminding James of what he had lost because of that deceptive twinkling light. He couldn't tear his eyes away. During his infrequent trips to London, he often thought of Smee and wondered what had become of him. James supposed it was yet another question—just like his ship—that he would never have an answer to. Sometimes he was tempted to go back and see what had become of his friend, but he always held himself back, afraid that if he ventured down that path, he would only learn that Smee, just like James's family, had passed on.

"Thinking about Smee?" Tink asked, exemplifying her uncanny knack for guessing what was going on in James's head. He nodded, the memory stinging painfully as he thought back to his friend from so many years ago. There was no way to tell how much time had passed in London. Sometimes, on his trips there, it seemed that time had leapt forward in great bounds, while other times not at all. He shut his eyes and rubbed his face.

"Are you all right?" Tink's voice was surprisingly gentle, far more gentle than he deserved after putting her in danger that day.

James waved his hook as though brushing aside her concern. "Fine. I just...I miss him." He released his grip on the bridge of his nose and opened his eyes. "I am sure he is happier now."

“Are you?” Tink drew nearer to James, her golden wings aglow as they beat, sending a gentle gust over James that smelled intoxicating, like fresh lilacs in full bloom. Glittering dust danced in the surrounding breeze, shed from Tinkerbell’s wings as she hovered on level with the pirate captain.

“Am I...happy?” James tried to ignore the thumping of his heart and how intensely he was aware of the pixie’s proximity as he valiantly tried to avoid looking at her for too long. If his eyes lingered for any reason other than holding her gaze for the briefest of seconds, she might get the wrong idea.

She nodded.

A heavy sigh escaped from between James’s lips as he rolled his head around to examine the moon again, so large that it dominated the sky. “I’ll be happy when we save all those boys. And...did you hear what the mermaids said today? They said that Peter stole from them too, but what—”

“We can worry about that another day.” Tink closed the distance between them as she slipped her thin arms around James’s torso, snaking their way between his coat and tunic so she could hug him properly.

The pirate hesitated. He couldn’t hug a pixie the same way he could with a human—her wings were at the same spot on her back where he would typically place his arms. With some trepidation, James returned the gesture, angling his dangerously sharp hook down so it couldn’t possibly hurt the pixie and placing his hand on the small of her back, well below the joint where her wings sprouted. As he did so, he felt his stomach lurch. His fingers had brushed against the bare skin that Tink’s backless dress didn’t cover. Instinctively, he wrenched his hand away as though he had been burned.

“You shouldn’t be so tense when you hug someone,” Tinkerbell teased. “You’re making me anxious. It’s just a hug.”

Just a hug between friends, James reminded himself. He had known Tinkerbell for five years. There was absolutely no reason to suddenly be shy about touching her, and yet...his hand tingled where his fingers had brushed against her skin.

Tinkerbell seemed not to share his reservations. She took his hand and put it back in its original position on the small of her back. “Just be careful of my wings with your little fishhook there,” she mumbled into his chest, muffled by his coat.

James held her as they rotated slowly, their silhouettes encircled by the full moon, with Tink's head tucked under his chin. The air was colder so high up, but James didn't feel the chill of the night with Tinkerbell in his arms. He did feel slightly light-headed, but he told himself that it was only due to the air being thinner here, as opposed to the nearness of the pixie.

"I must confess, I thought you brought me here to scold me in private." James pulled back from their embrace and dropped his arms. "Putting you in harm's way today is worthy of a lecture, at least. You can start whenever you choose."

Tinkerbell lifted her chin and pirouetted, arms held high, as the sheen of the glittering pixie dust surrounding her shone golden in the moonlight. "When I scold you, I would prefer to do so publicly. I'm sure your crew enjoys it just as much as I do."

"Minx." She had such a playful confidence, and being around her made James feel just as eternally young as he did when he had drunk pixie dust. Perhaps it was so with all pixies, but Tinkerbell was...different. Special. It was becoming increasingly difficult to convince himself that he saw her only as a friend or comrade. None of his fellow pirates would ever make his heart skip a beat the way Tink did, and certainly none looked anything like her.

There were no human women in Neverland, and the other female pixies he rescued would dart back to Pixie Glen just as soon as James freed them. He couldn't imagine that any other woman could compare to Tink—her wit, her bravery, her beauty...

James pushed the spiraling thoughts away. Entertaining such notions would only lead to disappointment. Tink had nothing to gain from a relationship with a cranky pirate, and a human and a pixie falling for each other was preposterous.

"So why did you bring me here if you aren't going to give me a proper tongue-lashing? I already know how to fly, so I don't need a lesson."

Tink tilted her head to the side, considering the pirate. "What? I have to have a reason to sneak off with my best friend?"

Best friend. James's heart gave another skip.

Tink hadn't noticed James's rapidly palpitating heart and went on. "Maybe you should stop thinking of everything as work and let yourself relax. The future will take care of itself."

“But everything *does* require work, and we don’t know what the future will look like unless we mold it ourselves.”

Tinkerbell slipped her arms back around James, traced around his ear, and fingered the small golden hoop in his earlobe. “Many things in life are unsure and demanding, but I’m sure of one thing...that I want to face the future with you.”

The corner of James’s mouth twitched as he fought not to laugh at the pixie. “Tink, isn’t that a quote from your siren book?”

She wrinkled her nose. “So what if it is? It’s a good line.”

“I’m not some character in a romance novel.”

“We’re all the writers of our own stories.”

“Well, I’d rather my story not be a romance novel.”

Tink paused, a dreamy expression on her face. James could see the moon reflected twice in her eyes. “I wouldn’t mind some romance in *my* life story,” she admitted quietly.

Shoals, there came that infernal pounding of his heart again. Tinkerbell was going to hear the drumming and know his thoughts. A pirate had no business thinking about love. He had boys to kidnap, a ship to repair, merfolk to avoid, more pixies to rescue...Tink’s expression turned hopeful as she looked at him, and James swallowed hard.

How exactly was she expecting him to respond? Was he supposed to reassure her that she would indeed find love? Was she hinting that she wanted *him* to fulfill that role? If he misread the signals she was giving off and made a move that she hadn’t asked for, it would be the end of their friendship.

“I-I hope you can find it, then. I am sure there are plenty of...of male pixies who’d be happy to oblige.”

The corners of Tink’s mouth turned down. “I’m sure there are. Maybe I need to go find one who isn’t a numbskull.”

James’s mind struggled to process. He had no experience whatsoever with romance other than the few times Tinkerbell read him mushy passages from the siren book that she liked so much. Did she want romance...with him? Those certainly were the vibes he was getting, but the logic didn’t compute. No pixie as beautiful and vivacious as Tinkerbell would want to entangle herself with a pirate who bordered on obsessed with his vendetta against Peter Pan.

No, he corrected himself, *not bordered on obsessed*. He was *fully* obsessed with saving boys from his same fate. He didn't have time to woo anyone like the characters in Tink's book did—giving bouquets of flowers and composing sonnets of love. He had no spare time to spend getting a full night's sleep, let alone whisking a girl away to express his affection. He supposed that he did sometimes lift boxes of chocolates from shops when he visited London and later gave to Tinkerbell...but did it count as romantic if the gift had been stolen?

Even if he had wanted to explore the possibility of a relationship with Tinkerbell, the moment had passed. Tension was tight between them as Tink began shooing him back down to the *Hope of London*, and he meekly obeyed.

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CHAPTER 16



After recovering from the frightening experience with the mermaids and the awkwardness of their late-night conversation, James and Tink returned to what they knew best—spending hours closeted in James’s quarters, poring over terrain maps and drawing out battle schematics. This time, James had proposed the idea of listing all the pirates’ strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of the Lost Boys. It was both a blessing and a curse that he and Pan knew each other so well. He knew all of Peter’s best hiding spots and battle strategies, but that was a two-way road—his former best friend had the same information about him.

“Have you heard anything about the merpeople when you’ve spied on the Lost Boys?” James asked, still poring over his lists.

Tinkerbelle wrinkled her nose. “They talked a few times about wanting to catch another mermaid, but they didn’t say why. I didn’t pay as much attention because it wasn’t about pixies or kidnapping new boys.”

“Everyone in Neverland needs to be protected,” James murmured. “*Everyone.*” What use did Peter have for mermaids? They couldn’t be toted from one location to the next like the pixies could, and he still hadn’t solved the mystery of why the pixies could sometimes shift forms and other times not. For years, Tinkerbelle hadn’t struggled with changing her size the way she had when she was imprisoned, and she usually stayed human-sized while with James. He couldn’t determine why the other pixies wouldn’t simply enlarge to form an army and charge Peter Pan.

“We need to change our approach,” Tink informed him. “If we can’t rescue the Lost Boys, then we should focus on freeing the pixies. We know they’ve captured more, because we’ve seen Peter return with new boys, so

they must have an ample supply of dust. I just don't know where they're keeping the pixies within their hideout."

Consistent with his past, Peter still moved his band of boys every few months when their living situation deteriorated. According to Tink's reports, none of the boys did any chores, and once the hideout became an unlivable hovel, they would simply move to the next spot. After all these years, several of the old hideouts had been cleaned out by the sheer number of worms and insects that fed on the repulsive remnants of the boys' disgusting habits. Once all the rotten food had been consumed by the insects, the bugs would retreat, and after a time of being deserted, it was ready for the Lost Boys to move in again, despite them having no parents to guide them on cleanliness.

I could do with some lessons on cleanliness, James thought ruefully. He swam often enough—usually to try to scrape barnacles off the underside of his ship—which was the closest he got to a leisure activity lately. But that was a poor substitute for a proper bath with soap, as Tink constantly reminded him.

James dug through the stacks of notes from failed attempts to rescue the boys and pixies in the past, looking for any sort of a pattern or any clue as to what Peter may have done to anger the merpeople. For the first time, something jumped out at him.

"Maybe we can save the boys and pixies at the same time," he murmured quietly. "And capture Pan once and for all."

"What?"

"Take a look at this." He held the paper steady with his hook and underlined the weather conditions on several sheafs of parchment, then shoved them toward Tinkerbell.

The pixie scanned over the pages. "So?"

"We only attack when there are clear skies. Day or night, it doesn't matter. Only clear skies."

"So?"

"Pixie dust is useless in the rain." James tapped the parchment with the back of his hook to emphasize his point.

Tinkerbell frowned. "Exactly. I wouldn't be able to fly."

"And neither would Peter."

Understanding dawned in Tink's eyes, then they widened as the plan's implications sunk in. Peter usually came out victorious in most battles since

he had pixie dust on his side. But matching brute strength against brute strength, the fully grown and armed pirates ganging up against a motley gang of young boys would be no competition. With a gleeful shout, Tink leapt into the air, her wings beating so rapidly that papers began fluttering around the room in a small tornado of parchment. “We could capture all the boys at once and free the pixies!”

“Exactly!”

“Why did it take us so long to see it?”

James grinned and shook his head. “I guess I cared too much about your comfort when I brought you to battle before.”

“But not anymore? You flatter me with your chivalry, you wicked pirate.”

James, elated with the realization of the advantage he had overlooked for so long, caught Tink around the waist and spun her around several times. She squealed, clutched his shoulders, and wrapped her legs around his torso as the force of the spin whipped her blonde hair around in a wild tangle. Pixie dust flowed in a dazzling golden ring around them as Tink’s wings shimmered and blew about. Some of the glittering powder settled on James, and though it wasn’t enough to lift him entirely off the ground, he felt lighter than he had in months, perhaps even years.

When James stopped spinning, he found Tink at eye level with him, mere inches away, and she stared at him in a way that no one had ever done before. His Adam’s apple bobbed as his throat constricted, and he reminded himself that whatever he did, he must *not* look down at the lower half of Tink’s face. He couldn’t let her get the wrong impression of his intentions. But nonetheless, his heart betrayed him, beating more violently as heat rose to warm his neck and ears and his pulse quickened. Staring into her intense blue eyes proved to be equally as dangerous as letting his gaze examine the rest of her face.

Tinkerbelle tightened her grip around him, and James instinctively returned the pressure by securing her position, locking his hand around the wrist that housed his hook’s cuff and angling the curved metal away from Tink’s delicate wings. She raised one of her hands to run her fingers through James’s unkempt hair.

“You’re handsome, James.” Tink’s hand moved from his hair to cup his jaw, where he could feel her thumb caress his cheek streaked with three days’ worth of unshaved facial hair. James monitored his breathing

carefully, determined not to allow the slightest hitch as he inhaled and exhaled—and mentally noted how uncommonly hot his quarters suddenly felt. He was sure Tinkerbell was teasing him, waiting for him to succumb to her flirtations so she could mock him mercilessly later. But even if that was the case, she had called him handsome...

He could feel as every muscle in his neck tensed at her touch and allowed himself to yield to temptation for the merest of seconds, dropping his gaze to her rose-colored lips that were so close he could feel her breath mingling with his own. Tink's elbow tightened at the back of his neck, coaxing him nearer. She must know how beautiful she was. She must know how agonizing it had become for him to keep his feelings for her in check.

Whether she was teasing him or not, James couldn't prevent the tiny flame of hope that lit inside him. He did his best to quash it immediately. As he had told himself countless times, a human and a pixie falling for each other was ludicrous. Falling for Tink...James found it impossible to tear his eyes away from her mouth, and the feel of her wrapped so tightly around his chest and waist made him fervently wish to never move. No, he took that back. He wanted to move, but only enough to incline his head toward hers and close that tantalizing distance between their mouths, to explore what it was like to kiss Tink...

"Captain, it's the crocodile!" Without knocking, Rolland burst through the door. He instantly turned bright red as he saw Tinkerbell entwined around James and backed out, muttering, "Oh, sorry, sorry! Beg pardon."

In a rush, James remembered all the logical reasons he had not to pursue any sort of romantic relationship with his greatest source of knowledge about Peter Pan's movements and released Tink, who floated gracefully to the ground.

"It isn't what it looked like!" he bellowed after the retreating crewman. If Rolland had heard, he ignored it and spared no time in shouting what he had seen to the others. Within seconds, several whoops and whistles rose from the other side of the door.

"All these years later, they're still children," James muttered angrily. The room no longer felt as warm as it had a few moments ago, and he found it hard to meet Tinkerbell's eye. It didn't matter much, because she seemed to be avoiding looking at him as well.

"I...I need to go tend to the crocodile before it goes too far," he said awkwardly.

“Yes,” Tink agreed swiftly. “I’ll stay here and...and make a plan. About the next attack! Planning for that, and nothing else.”

“Right.” James swung his arms at his sides, trying to think of something clever to say, but nothing came to mind, so he simply turned and exited without another word. Before the door clicked shut behind him, he heard Tink heave a sigh laced with emotion.

By the time James had left his quarters and stopped his crew from guffawing about their captain’s scandalous behavior, the crocodile had disappeared again. Glad for a reason to shout a bit at the pirate horde, James berated them for focusing on imaginary romances and shirking their duties. Though he wasn’t sure how much good it did. Most of the pirates were not at all embarrassed about losing the crocodile’s trail and exchanged gleeful expressions any time they thought their captain wasn’t looking.

Fresh gossip was always in short supply, and rumors about Tinkerbell and James flew around the crew like wildfire. The pirates never tired of discussing it, much to Tink’s amusement and James’s displeasure. No matter how many times James told them that if he did have a relationship, which he *didn’t*, he would keep it private, his crew would chuckle as if it were an enormous joke.

“You *tried* to keep it private; you just didn’t succeed,” Chibu said slyly.

Tinkerbell let out a high, thin giggle, and the crew guffawed. Tink didn’t seem bothered at all by the jokes sent her way, only solidifying in James’s mind that her actions had only been to taunt him. As much as he wanted to be angry at her that he was now being the butt of all the jokes onboard, it was impossible. Secretly, James was quite glad that the crew teased him about it because each time they did, he was able to relive those moments when he had held Tink close and smelled her lilac scent that was so incredibly intoxicating.

CHAPTER 17



James had never wished for poor weather before, but now that he did, it seemed that there was nothing but sunny days and clear skies. More than a week passed before dark clouds threatened the horizon again, this time rolling in from the north, bringing a howling, bitter wind with it. The early signs of winter had arrived. The seasons were all mild in Neverland, which made the days that stung from the cold seem all the worse.

Remembering their families was the factor that had motivated Smee and James to leave in their youth, and Tinkerbell remained convinced that it was the best way to motivate the new Lost Boys to abandon Pan—just as Hook had done all those years ago. She emphasized several times that, win or lose, every interaction James had with the Lost Boys, planting the seed of doubt in their minds about their leader was crucial.

“If they lose faith in Peter Pan, they’ll turn to you,” Tink repeated so many times that James nearly believed it himself. Besides, as long as they managed to free the pixies and consequently stop Pan’s ability to procure dust, the Lost Boys would realize that drinking the drugged milk was stopping them from aging...at least James hoped they would realize it.

James marveled that he was so eager for a storm, especially since they typically meant at least a full day of repairs afterward. But this time would be different. He moored his ship near Skull Rock and hiked with his men through the overgrown jungle with Tink, now pixie-sized again, riding on his shoulder.

The benefit of battling their way through the gale was that, as pirates, they were used to the sea spray being flung into their faces. Though it was

penetratingly cold, the weather was no worse than what they usually endured on the *Hope of London*. And the pirates, buoyed up by the prospect that their plan could work, didn't complain.

They were used to the routine after all these years and followed their captain's footsteps as they made their way to Pan's most recent hideout. When they arrived, there was no flurry of movement, no low chatter of conversation. No smoke furled up from a chimney and no sentry called out a warning. All signs pointed to this being yet another abandoned hideout.

After they approached cautiously and there still was no sign of life, James grew anxious. What was wrong? He exchanged a quick glance with Tinkerbelle, who was the one who had given the information about the Lost Boys' location. She had been so accurate for so long that James had come to think of her information as infallible.

His shoulders slumped in disappointment. It would take Tink at least two days to find Peter's new hideout and sneak in. More time lost for the boys whose families may have given up hope of ever finding their sons. James glanced down at his hand, which had begun to shake—not from the cold, but the constant stress and lack of sleep.

He knew he should take care of himself and get the rest his body so desperately craved, but he could never manage to work up the justification. How could he kick back and relax when, somewhere in London, mothers were crying, frantic to find their sons who had vanished without a trace? Sacrificing sleep—even if it came at the cost of occasionally twitching eyelids or shaking extremities—was worth the price of reuniting families.

"We could still check," Ozzy said, the eternal optimist of the crew. "Maybe they left some clues behind."

"Okay, Detective Ozzy, you and Arnie go in and investigate."

The dugout was burrowed beside a swamp that hung with dense Spanish moss. James idly watched the two pirates slide into the burrow, wondering if perhaps the Lost Boys had realized that one solid rainstorm would cause the hideout to flood and vacated before such an instance occurred.

Shouts of terror echoed out of the tunnel, and Ozzy and Arnie burst out, scrambling in a great clawing of dirt and brambles. Right on their heels was the enormous crocodile, who snapped her jaws with enough force to sever a leg. All the pirates leapt forward to protect their friends. Chibu managed to land a ferocious blow on the beast's snout with a heavy club, and Auggie prodded it back into the burrow at sword point.

James felt Tinkerbell flit off his shoulder. Once ensuring she was still safe, James turned his attention back to the crocodile. “Will that thing never die?” he shouted as the crocodile slid back into the underground room.

How long did crocodiles live, anyway? The beast had been around ever since he could remember, the equivalent of hundreds of human years. Then realization hit him. Consuming as many pixies as it did must have resulted in a prolonged life, just like what happened when the Lost Boys drank pixie-dust-laced milk.

The Lost Boys...Fear settled around James’s chest, constricting like a python about to consume its prey. The crocodile wasn’t gone for good. He could hear the beast hissing from within the depths of the hideout it had claimed. Could the crocodile have possibly consumed any of the boys? Or had they escaped in time?

As if responding to his thoughts, a whooping noise grew louder as Peter Pan swung through the trees, transferring from vine to vine as fluidly as a monkey. He perched high on a tree branch, seemingly unfazed by the torrential downpour that was turning the ground to a thick, glutinous mud. Soon, other Lost Boys followed.

The temptation to scream in frustration nearly overpowered James’s self-control. Rain or shine, day or night, Peter always seemed to have the upper hand.

James counted the boys as they swung into view and sighed with relief when he reached fifteen—the number of total boys Tink had reported. There was still hope after all. They congregated like vultures in trees, eagerly watching the pirates as the angry hissing from the crocodile’s lair grew louder. James could feel his blood pressure steadily rise higher as they gathered. How could Peter steal years and futures away from these boys and not want to curl up with disgust at himself?

“I wonder if Mrs. Crocodile is hungry for the rest of her favorite kind of codfish,” Peter mused to the Lost Boys.

“Is everything a game to you?” James bellowed, rain clinging to his eyelashes and the stubble on his jaw. “How can you live with yourself, knowing that these boys have families wondering what happened to their sons and never knowing, for years on end?”

Several of the newer Lost Boys exchanged uneasy glances.

“He’s lying,” Peter told them casually. “He’s trying to trick you so he can make you do what he wants. So typical of grown-ups.”

James appealed to the boys, whose faces were all dripping with rainwater. “Do you remember your mothers? Do you remember having a family? Singing or reading together? Playing with your brothers and sisters? Or else wrestling with your father?”

More confused looks met his words, but Peter let out a derisive snort so forcefully that James wouldn’t have been surprised to find snot splattering beside him. “With all this mushy talk, Captain, you’ll have us all in tears soon.” He pretended to wipe his eye.

James ignored him and called out to the boys, “Peter probably has you taking pixie dust every morning, doesn’t he? Didn’t you ever wonder why you don’t age, but we do? All this time while you’re staying young, your families in London are growing old and still want to see you again.”

“Lies. All lies!” Peter exclaimed.

“All of us”—James gestured at the pirates—“were once like you boys. We were friends with Peter too, but we left once our families all *died* waiting for us to come back. You’re all just replacements for our lost friendships.”

“Enough!” Peter screamed. “Freckles, now!”

Freckles was a blond boy who looked to be about twelve years old and, true to his name, had a face so freckled that he looked tanned. He pulled out a blow dart gun, took a deep breath, then released it in a *whoof*.

The golden dart zinged away, but the pirates dodged out of the way. Either Freckles was a terrible shot or else he hadn’t been aiming for the pirates at all. The dart hit near the entrance to the crocodile’s burrow and exploded, revealing a cloud of pixie dust. The dust soon sank back down to the earth, caught in the falling raindrops.

“Missed!” Ozzy called out tauntingly.

“Did he?” Peter asked slyly. The white scar down his face stood out in a flash of lightning, reminding James of their fight just before he and the original Lost Boys had mutinied.

Attracted by its repulsive taste for pixies, the crocodile lumbered back out of its hiding place, snuffling around where the pixie dust dart had landed. The pirate crew backed away nervously. Now that none of their crewmates were endangered, everyone seemed much more apprehensive about charging the sharp-toothed animal. After the crocodile realized that no pixies were available, it growled deep in its throat, swinging its long head to glare at each pirate.

“I hope none of you have been touching pixies lately, or it will smell their scent and target you.” Peter’s eyes flashed dangerously, as if he knew how frequently James was around one pixie in particular.

The boy’s suspicions were confirmed when the pirates threw anxious glances at James, whom the crocodile was slowly approaching. Only one comforting thought came to James’s mind, and it was that at least Tinkerbell was nowhere in sight. As long as he kept her safe, he could handle anything that came his way.

The pirates rallied around James, clashing their swords together and shouting. Arnie and Auggie beat the muddy jungle floor with their wooden clubs, daring the crocodile to come closer. The reptile kept its mouth wide, exposing her sharp teeth to the crew, and the Lost Boys watched eagerly. James remembered his own gruesome fascination with battles and gore as a lad. Back then, everything had seemed like a grand game in his head, simple to be reset if something went wrong.

But with age came wisdom, and James was certain that if one of the pirates were to die or be gravely injured, it would traumatize the boys more than they could ever anticipate. After all, that was precisely why several of his crewmates had become disenchanted with Peter Pan in their youth—once it became obvious that death and suffering were no joke, they had been forced to accept the reality of Pan’s atrocities.

Intimidated by the large, raucous pirates, the crocodile slowly slunk back into its burrow, where no one dared to tempt it back out again. The Lost Boys in the surrounding trees all groaned in disappointment, and James gazed upward. His crew was skilled at shinnying up nets and the mast and walking along the yardarms. Could they possibly get up the trees and take the boys without causing too much injury to either party?

In all the hullabaloo, Peter had disappeared, but he soon returned with reinforcements of his own. Porcupines waddled out of the trees while dark-skinned pixies on leashes used chirruping noises to communicate with the animals, riding atop the sharp-quilled creatures in miniature saddles. The end of each tiny pixie tether was clenched in Peter’s hand.

Well, look at that, James thought ruefully. *Peter trained porcupines after all, just as he said he would.* He hated that the red-headed boy never seemed to fail at anything. He knew Peter hadn’t really trained the porcupines. He merely capitalized on the talent that the woodland pixies

had to communicate with animals and forced them to do so at his will, which was even worse than if he had trained animals to do his bidding.

The Lost Boys jeered as the porcupines advanced on the pirates, who all looked to Hook for instructions. James gnashed his teeth in fury. Loath as he was to injure animals or pixies, some sacrifices would have to be made if they were to rescue the boys. That was their mission, wasn't it? But if their goal forced them to take the very path that Peter Pan had, then it wouldn't be worth it.

"Flank them," James ordered. After all, men were faster than porcupines or soaked pixies. His crew split and circled the porcupines, but a few clicks from the pixies caused the porcupines to flip around and waddle to keep Peter Pan secure at the center.

"To the trees, get the boys," James muttered out of the side of his mouth.

No sooner had he spoken than his right side burned in sudden agony. As he clutched at his hip, his fingers met sharpened porcupine quills. He looked around wildly. Since when could porcupines shoot their quills long distance?

Then he saw it. The boys in the arena of trees were all armed with dart guns and handfuls of porcupine quills. Any time any of the pirates moved, the Lost Boys would attack as one, pelting the offending crew member with a dozen well-placed darts.

If James Hook thought of blood as cheap, he likely would have ordered his men to attack right then and there. A few quills would be a small price to pay for returning boys to their families, but James couldn't bring himself to issue the command.

With the prospect of facing armed Lost Boys with porcupines at their tails and a crocodile still lurking around, it was too much to ask his men to climb slippery trees in the pouring rain while they were attacked from all sides—and the boys would doubtless suffer many injuries if they resisted capture and fell from the trees. As much as he hated the idea of chalking up yet another failure on his record, he hated the idea of anyone dying or being injured needlessly even more.

"Retreat," he ordered crisply, rain pouring down his face.

Peter Pan laughed derisively. "What's wrong, captain? Too frightened of what you can't control? Too afraid to make a sacrifice?"

James clenched his fist as he walked backward, refusing to turn his back on Peter Pan. Peter advanced, still clutching the pixie leashes in his hand. “That’s your problem, isn’t it, Jimmy Boy? You’re so afraid to make a move. You play it safe with everything you do, and that’s why you always lose.”

The shouts of his former best friend rang in James’s ears as his crew retreated, and James was left to wonder...would he always lose? Was he destined to fight against Peter Pan forever with little success to show for his efforts?

“What do you think, Tink?” he asked glumly, then looked around and felt his heart plummet. Tinkerbell was gone.

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CHAPTER 18



Tinkerbell watched as the battle's favor began to turn from the pirates to the Lost Boys. James and the pirates were held back by their reluctance to strike a deadly blow, none of them wanting to injure the boys. Peter's followers had no such reservations as they rained darts down on the pirates with as much force as they could muster. As much as she hated to admit it, James was going to lose. Retreat was inevitable.

Well, if James's men were going to fail, Tinkerbell was determined that this trip would be of value somehow. While everyone was distracted with fighting in the pouring rain, Tinkerbell slipped away. She couldn't fly with fat raindrops as large as her head splattering all around her, but she still possessed an advantage the pirates did not. Her tiny form went unnoticed as she slipped into the bushes. The only benefit to the rain was that the boys would be forced back to their hideout on foot. It was too good of an opportunity to miss.

It was only a matter of time before the Lost Boys would fall back to their new hideout, and if she followed them, it would save her days of flying around hunting for them. From between the leaves, she watched James shout at the boys, imploring them to remember their families just as she had done to him all those years ago. The same uncertainty showed on the faces of Peter Pan's followers as they frowned, trying to recall their pasts. Hope surged within Tink's tiny chest at the sight. *They remembered!*

Anger bubbled in her gut when she saw the porcupines and pixies emerge from the forest. Those were woodland pixies, from a different tribe than her own, with the ability to communicate with animals; yet here they were, also forced into slavery by Peter Pan, just as she had been for so long.

Did Peter have no morality at all? Was endless fun the only motivator for him? Or was it the sadistic pleasure of torturing others that drove his heinous actions?

Tink slathered her body in the thick mud that threatened to sink anyone who stepped into it, disguising her golden glow as effectively as possible. She waited in the underbrush until the pirates had fully retreated. A part of her rippled with annoyance. Hadn't James realized she'd stayed back?

After the pirates were well out of sight, Peter ordered a search of the nearby foliage to ensure no pirates had lingered behind. It was no haphazard search, either. Peter, curse him, was meticulous and insightful about every possibility that might result in a pirate discovering their new hideout. Tink grudgingly realized that between James and Peter, Peter was perhaps a shade better as a tactician. As the boys scoured the area for any straggling pirates and found none, Tink slowly moved toward the porcupines. The youngest of the Lost Boys had been tasked with holding the pixie leashes, but he was not highly attentive to the pixies' actions and kept wiping rain out his eyes and asking when it would be time to leave.

The woodland pixie atop the nearest porcupine noticed Tinkerbell's approach and stared at the mud-covered member of the glen tribe. Tink held a finger dripping with mud up to her equally dirty lips.

At first, the woodland pixie gestured for Tinkerbell to retreat, but after a few quiet words of explanation, the woodland pixie nodded and spoke in rapid clicks and trills to the porcupine, which responded with grunts.

"Hop on," the woodland pixie finally said. "Hide between his quills." Tink eyed the creature suspiciously. The quills were extended straight out except for the part where the pixie sat, which had somehow been stripped of quills. Tink didn't want to imagine what horrific procedure Peter had done to the animals to make it so, then remembered the handfuls of quills that each of the Lost Boys had and shuddered. She stared at the quills, many of which were taller than herself, and felt a tremor of apprehension. Was it safe? Even if the dull brown quills matched her mud-covered self, one wrong move could easily punch a hole in one of her wings, or worse.

"Let's move out!" Peter called, and the Lost Boys finally began their trek back, the youngest still clutching the leashes tight in his fist.

The time for making a decision had come. Tink wrinkled her nose and gingerly held on to the porcupine's quills, then burrowed between them.

The ride, though not comfortable, was not as bad as she had anticipated. Only the ends of these quills were barbed. The shafts of the quills she was hidden within were smooth, rather like thick stalks of straw. Tink had to clutch two of the quills as her host waddled through the forest. The creature's back rocked uncomfortably, and Tink gritted her teeth as her body swayed from side to side, still concealed within the creature's long quills. This was not a fun way to travel. Flying was much better.

All in all, Tink was grateful for any cover that could be provided. The rain had lessened, but the light drizzle still falling from the skies began to wash off the mud, and Tink worried she would be spotted. The boys were much quieter than they normally were on walks like these. Peter made frequent jokes or asked questions but was rarely answered.

Just as she began to wonder when they would arrive, she heard several of the boys quicken their pace and knew they must be close. The porcupines waddling in formation were at the rear of the company. If there was a time to drop off before the animals and pixies were penned up again, now was the moment.

After a hasty warning to the woodland pixie, Tinkerbelle dove from the porcupine's back. She twisted her ankle upon landing, and for the briefest of seconds, she wished she didn't have her wings. If she were human, she would have been able to tuck and roll with no thought of harming her delicate wings.

Of course, she rationalized, if she were actually human, trying to hide on a porcupine would have been disastrous. As she clutched her ankle and watched the group ahead approach a large, blackened tree trunk, she allowed her mind to forget the pain in her leg and conjured up an image of James sitting on a porcupine. She sniggered quietly as the imaginary James hopped about, clutching the seat of his pants.

Her escape seemed to have gone unnoticed. Tink hobbled to her feet, trying to ignore the shooting pain pulsing from her ankle and cursing the rain that made it impossible to fly. She took back her previous thought—she never wanted to be a blasted human. James would owe her big time for this. Pixies, which Tink felt were the superior species, should not be subjected to grunt work like this.

Limping after a group comprised of humans—all with legs multiple times longer than hers—was no easy feat. Tink kept up the best she could but fell farther and farther behind. Just as she felt ready to give up, she

heard a low murmur of voices from below. *Finally!* Tinkerbell edged nearer and found a hollow tree trunk that housed the entrance to the hideout.

This was one of the roomier hideouts that Peter had used years ago. The insects and worms must have cleaned out all of the mess that the Lost Boys had created before, because no stench reached Tink's sensitive nose. The only smells in the air were of fresh rain and damp earth. Feeling like a large fly, Tink crept down the hollow tree, where a soft gold-and-green glow came from the hidden chamber. Tink peeked out and located the source of the light. Suspended in cages all along the ceiling were pixies. Small pans hung beneath each wire cage to catch the pixie dust that fell from her fellows' wings, looking a little like the hot air balloons she had once seen on a trip to London with James.

Tink edged along the tiny ledge near the ceiling, concealed by the tree roots that covered the small burrow in which Tink had hidden herself. Enough mud covered her body that her glow was dulled, but Tink took no chances. She lay flat on her stomach and slithered like a snake between tree roots.

Tink had been observing these boys for nearly three months of Neverland time and knew all of them on sight. Peter, no doubt fearing that their given names would remind them of their homes, had christened each boy upon his arrival with a nickname. Tink found all of their names preposterous—things like Stinky and Nibs and Slightly. Apparently, Peter used all his brains for outwitting James and had no thought left over for good names for his “friends.”

The Lost Boys had already trooped into the dugout and were sitting morosely on piles of fur or on the dirt floor, shoulders slumped and heads in their hands. Tink held one eye up to a sliver of an opening in the roots, watching as Tootles, Curly, and Nibs sat together, having a whispered conversation with their faces downcast. The set of identical twins were acting similarly demure, fidgeting with their frayed clothing so even more threads unraveled.

“Why all the long faces?” Peter Pan, still wet from the rainstorm, entered the room, presumably from locking his porcupines back up. “We won! And good riddance of that old codfish, am I right, boys? Did you see how the coward ran off?”

A few boys let out half-hearted cheers, but the ensuing applause fell far short of the usual standard. Curly in particular looked miserable. Tink

watched with interest as Pan stuck his nose right in the young boy's face. "Spit it out, kid! What's your problem?"

Curly's lip trembled, then he opened his mouth wide and began to wail. "I don't remember my mother!"

"Neither do I!" Nibs added, and additional cries of "I can't remember!" and "Me too!" began to rise from the crowd. Even the boys who had cheered about Hook's defeat furrowed their brows.

"Stop it!" Pan ordered. "Stop it right now, all of you!" He placed his fists on his hips and pivoted in a circle, glaring at each Lost Boy in turn. "Honestly, what a bunch of babies you all are! I bring you to Neverland and play games with you all day, and now you whine about wanting your mommies? Do you miss someone bossing you around and telling you to go to bed? Or to do chores?"

Slightly, the tallest of all the Lost Boys, wiped his nose on his shirt. A long string of shining snot gleamed up the arm of his sleeve all the way to his elbow. The twins began to cry and flung their arms around each other, each sobbing into the other's shoulder. Even George, the filthy little liar, looked down.

More cries of protest chorused up to Tink's hiding spot near the ceiling. She smiled, satisfied with the discord. James had cleverly managed to infiltrate the Lost Boys without even being physically present. Perhaps Peter wasn't the better tactician after all. She wasn't surprised as she watched Pan's shoulders tense and his fists clench until his knuckles were white as his control over the boys slipped.

"Cheer up, lads! Don't let Captain Hook get you down! He's just a grown-up, remember?" Peter waited for the typical *boos* to follow, but none came. All the boys were gulping down tears and trying hard not to show how homesick they truly were.

Tink saw the panic in Peter's eyes, try as he might to suppress it. A smirk of satisfaction flitted across her face. After all the suffering he had caused her and her people, let him squirm and worry about being abandoned by another set of friends.

"You know...mothers would never allow what I'm going to let you do." A note of desperation edged Peter's voice, and he cleared his throat. "Want me to let you in on a secret?"

The boys began to quiet down, and Peter beckoned them closer as he lowered his voice. "Sure, a mother may clean up your scraped knee or cook

your food, but I have something much better.”

Nibs and Tootles scooted closer to Peter, their tears fading fast as they lost themselves in the magic of Peter’s storytelling. Tink felt her ears perk up. Any plan Peter had would result in suffering.

“We have a few pixies here and there, right?” Peter gestured at the strung-up cages, hanging from the ceiling so the glowing pixies inside looked like some twisted version of a lamp. The Lost Boys nodded.

“Imagine having so many pixies that we never had to ration our supply again. Unlimited pixie dust, and we all could fly anytime we wanted. Any guesses where we would get that many pixies?”

The twins shook their heads, and Slightly guessed, “From the trees? That is where they usually hide.”

Fear clutched at Tink’s chest, shriveling her heart so her entire body quivered in fear. She knew exactly what Peter was talking about. A malevolent smirk lit up Pan’s face as he whispered, “There’s a place where hundreds of pixies live together...up at the top of Erosion Mountain, in a little glen.”

Tinkerbelle tried to quell her breathing as she began to hyperventilate. Her family, her friends...everyone in Pixie Glen was in danger. Somehow, she had hoped that Peter would forget his upbringing over the years.

“But before we can take them, we need a little more of an...ingredient, you might call it. It will be dangerous, though. A mother would never allow it. Maybe you are all too babyish to help—”

“No, no, I will help!” Cries chorused up from the boys, who had all seemingly forgotten their desire to have a mother. “We can do it!”

“Are you sure?” goaded Peter. “I don’t want anyone as cowardly as that Captain Hook in on my plan. Did you see the way he ran away at the first sign of a fight?”

“But—” One of the twins spoke up hesitantly then quailed under the venomous look Peter shot at him.

Connected by the inexplicable link between twins, his brother finished the sentence, “But what about how he’s older?”

A clamor broke out again. “Yes, Peter, you said that no one ages in Neverland!”

“What if we start getting old like him?”

“Was he right?”

“Is it the pixie dust?”

“Are we going to die from getting old?”

The flustered darting of Pan’s eyes grew more frantic, much to Tink’s pleasure. She watched as he wildly invented a story to placate the crowd of boys. “You mustn’t listen to anything that old codfish says. He...he’s from another island in Neverland, where they do age. I’ve seen it. Once we have all the pixies we want, I can take you all there. Want to hear the story?”

The boys clustered into a huddle, ready for the promised tale. Peter began, “There’s a land across the sea, plagued by sirens who call sailors to their watery deaths.”

“What’s a siren?” piped up one of the smaller boys.

A wicked grin flashed across Peter’s face, and a shadow of his former jovial self reappeared. “A siren is like the mermaids around here in that they both are half humanoid, half fish. But a siren is much, much worse. Sirens are beautiful, grown-up women—”

This time, his use of the word “grown-up” earned him a few *boos*, and he looked encouraged as he continued, “Grown-up women who will sing songs that cause men to lose their minds and plunge into the ocean, where they drown them. When a siren starts to call to you, you can’t control yourself anymore. You find yourself falling, falling, then...*they’ve got you!*” He pounced on Nibs, who shrieked and laughed.

Tink’s brow furrowed. She thought Peter had been inventing this tale to placate the boys, but it had an echo of familiarity to it. When she was young, other pixies had also told of such a place and warned that if they tried to fly there, a pixie would drop from exhaustion. But if Peter had all the pixie dust he could possibly harvest...if Tink and James didn’t stop him soon, Peter may journey to another land, where he may do even more damage.

“See? Another reason to never trust a grown-up,” warned Peter as he released Nibs. “We are lucky that our mermaids don’t do that. They’re just ugly.”

“Not as ugly as Captain Hook!” quipped Slightly.

Several boys laughed, and a knot formed in Tink’s stomach. She wished to give Slightly a swift kick to the backside for criticizing James. They didn’t see how handsome he was.

Peter finished his tale of the other land where humans lived and aged, just like in London, but Tink was working too hard at masking the red glow taking over her body to notice. Eventually, talking broke out in babbles as

the boys broke up the storytelling ring and drifted off toward their beds. They had been talking through the night for so long that it was nearly daybreak. Tink stifled a yawn of her own but knew the consequences that would follow if she gave in to the fatigue pressing her eyes closed. She needed to get back to the ship to report on Peter's new location before she was discovered.

Peter traipsed out of the common room toward his private quarters, and Tink followed, crawling along the tiny tunnel between the roots like a large beetle, taking care not to let a single flake of pixie dust fall from her wings.

"Curse that Jimmy," Peter growled under his breath once he thought himself alone, as he let the bearskin he used for a door fall back into place. "Curse Jimmy down to Davy Jones's deepest locker."

Tink wedged herself into a crevice on the wall close to the ceiling, hiding herself from Peter's view. "I'll have my revenge, Jimmy," Peter huffed to himself, "if it's the last thing I do."

Alarm bells clanged in Tink's head as haunted memories surfaced. She knew what Peter was capable of, even more so than James. She had shielded James from a portion of the truth all this time, but if Peter had more sinister plans in mind...

Tinkerbelle knew Peter Pan didn't make empty threats. She had to warn James, had to keep him and all those in Pixie Glen safe. If anyone else had to go through what the first pixies and mermaids had...she just couldn't allow it.

Though she waited another hour, Peter didn't say another word. He dropped off to sleep, sprawled out on his cot, while Tink stayed still and silent. Once the boy's breathing evened out and slowed down, Tink decided it was safe enough to emerge. She cast a covetous glance at the chest in the corner, which she knew contained the hidden stock of her stolen pixie dust, then sighed noiselessly.

She would never be able to remove the chest without waking Peter Pan. Even if it was sprinkled with her own pixie dust to make it feather-light, there was no hole large enough to shove it out except the tunnel in the common room, and she knew it would be impossible to escape with that in tow without being caught.

The idea of dousing the trunk with water to make the dust useless also crossed Tink's mind. Better to have it wasted than in the hands of someone like Pan. But that plan, too, had its flaws. Where would she get enough

water to soak through the locked and sturdy trunk while avoiding waking Peter and still have time to escape?

Tink wrinkled her nose in annoyance. It looked like, for the time being, she would have to abscond with only the information she had gathered, rather than tangible proof that she had thwarted any of her nemesis's plans. But then, her gaze flitted over to where the green-and-gold glow softly illuminated the hall beyond the bearskin door—a reminder of the enslaved pixies still suspended in cages.

Tink slowly made her way back toward the main room, listening with all her might to the slow, steady breathing of Peter Pan, whose occasional snores sawed at the still night air. The pixies inside were the dark-skinned pixies Peter had kept on leashes during the pirates' assault on the Lost Boys, and they were all huddled into balls to stay warm, their light-green wings drooping with depression, their emerald glow dimmed. She couldn't leave them, not when they were this close.

Besides, she reasoned, if she succeeded in freeing them, it wouldn't just liberate the pixies but would also halt Peter's acquisition of dust and, consequently, limit his ability to take more boys as well as start them all aging again.

She stared around at the Lost Boys littering the floor. James wouldn't want her to risk blowing her cover and wouldn't want her to be in danger—at least, she thought he didn't. Her eyebrows contracted as she thought about the tall, lanky pirate she had become so fond of. She had given plenty of hints, so why had he not picked up on any of them? Or was it that he didn't return her affections, so he kept his distance to avoid addressing it? If he didn't care for her the way she did for him, there really was nothing to be lost by risking her safety.

Tink emerged from her hiding place, wishing her skin was less luminescent in the dark. She was painfully conspicuous. Careful to avoid jingling or fluttering her wings, which would shower pixie dust on the sleeping boys below, Tink crawled along the wall and across the ceiling. Finally, she slid down the thin string that held up the tiny prison closest to where she had been hiding.

Her golden glow woke up the pixie inside—the same woodland pixie that had been on the porcupine earlier. He cast a fearful look at the Lost Boys and again, Tink held a finger to her lips. The woodland pixie had enough sense to remain quiet, and Tink held fast to the green-painted slats

while she worked on the sliding lock, which because of the solid wooden slab that formed the door, was easy to open from the outside but impossible from the inside.

Tink tugged on the sliding lock, working slowly to prevent any creaking that might wake up the Lost Boys. Once she released the first pixie, he crawled up the rope that held his cage aloft and moved to help free his fellows. Tiger Lily, Tinkerbell's friend, was among their number. After the last of the thirty-eight pixies were released, Tinkerbell fluttered her wings experimentally. At least now they were dry. She gazed around at all the others, who watched her with wide, eager eyes and held up three fingers. She put down one, then another, then in a rush of wings and jingling, the pixies were off, darting up through the makeshift chimney and out into the open sky, toward the *Hope of London*.

The few startled cries of protest from the boys were left far behind as the pixies escaped. They cheered as their group flew like a glowing comet across the sky, and Tink buried herself into their midst. When they stopped for a brief rest, after affirming that Peter wasn't on their tail, Tiger Lily stepped in front of her fellows to address Tinkerbell.

"We thank you for your timely assistance." Tiger Lily spoke much more formally than Tink was used to.

"You're welcome. We're friends, after all."

"Is there anything we can do to repay you?"

Finally, an offer of help! "Yes, actually. You know Peter Pan—"

Hisses and choked noises rose from the cluster of pixies.

"We do not speak the name of the wretched human cursing our land," Tiger Lily snarled.

"Well," Tink plowed on, "I know Captain Hook, and he wants to stop Pet—I mean, the person who captured you. You heard him tonight; he's planning something big. If we help James..."

Already, the woodland pixies shook their heads. "We do not interfere in human battles."

"But this affects you too! You've all been held prisoner for weeks or months! If you fight back..." Tinkerbell wanted to slap all the pixies as they continued to doggedly shake their heads.

"We will not risk our lives and the lives of our children for a chance at freedom. That also comes with the chance of dying. We appreciate your

help, truly, but you ask for something we cannot give.” Tiger Lily crossed her arms over her chest.

Tinkerbell’s face burned red. How were they so apathetic? Did they not care that their families, their entire world was in danger? She was offering them a way out! James had already sacrificed his entire future as he fought against Peter Pan. Was he the only one, besides her, who cared enough to do something about it? She knew Tiger Lily thought poorly of humans, but to outright refuse to defend her people because it meant aligning with James against a common enemy...

The pixies, most of whom looked too embarrassed to meet Tink’s fierce gaze, dispersed in twos and threes as they returned to their long-lost families. Still infuriated with her fellow pixies, Tinkerbell launched herself into the air and streaked across the starry heavens toward the pirate ship that now, more than ever, felt like home.

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CHAPTER 19



James paced his quarters in a frenzy, looking out the window every few seconds. How could he have been so stupid as to lose track of Tinkerbelle when he knew the rain made her unable to fly? What if she had been stepped on by one of the Lost Boys or, heaven forbid, his own clumsy foot? Had Peter found her and held her hostage? What if the crocodile ate her? His head pounded as increasing stress sent a throbbing pressure through his brain. With each pump of his heart, the message *Your fault, your fault*, pulsed to the forefront of his mind.

When Tinkerbelle, human-sized once more, flew through the bay window, James rushed to her and crushed her in a hug that stole her breath. “I was so worried,” James repeated over and over.

“I’m here now, and I’m fine. Let me go.”

James didn’t let go. He continued to grip Tink tightly until she gasped, “Stop squeezing me. I have to tell you—”

James finally released her. He couldn’t express the terror he had felt, wondering if she had been captured. If his blunder cost Tinkerbelle her life, he would never forgive himself. Nothing was worth sacrificing Tink.

“Tell me what?”

“Do you want the good news or the bad news first?”

“Always give me the good news first; at least then I have something to keep my spirits up.”

“I released all the pixies Peter had imprisoned.”

James looked at her, stunned for a moment, then let out a victorious whoop of delight. For a moment, he felt like the teenage boy he had been

for so long. After pumping the air with his hook, James remembered that there was a second part to Tink's message. "What about the bad part?"

"Well..." Tink deliberated. "There are two bad things, actually."

"Tell me."

"I tried to convince the pixies I freed to help us, but they refused. They said this is a human battle."

James shrugged, unconcerned. "That's no surprise. The Glen pixies have refused before too, but their hesitation makes sense. They've been hunted and imprisoned for years, and after all this time, they're all too timid and scared to fight back." Then he added with a grin, "Though the exception stands before me. Now, what was the other thing?"

"He said he wants revenge...and that he wants to capture more pixies. And he talked about sirens in some distant land. Do you think he'll try to take over another island?"

"He has wanted revenge ever since I left and took the first group of Lost Boys." James wasn't concerned about that either as he lit the wicks inside the lanterns that hung around his cabin. After closing the tiny glass doors to protect the flame, he sighed with relief as he lowered himself into his hammock and placed a weary hand over his face. "Maybe we should just let him be. All the better if he leaves Neverland, right?"

"What?!"

"Think about it, Tink. You cut off his supply of pixie dust—"

"For now. He always finds more, and he still has a chest full."

"Those boys with him clearly don't want to leave. I've tried for ages. Maybe it's time to give up and live our own lives."

Hot, angry tears filled Tinkerbell's eyes. If James surrendered like the other pixies had...she couldn't fight this battle alone. James's stubborn determination and refusal to quit had been the one constant in Tink's life, one she relied on. "You can't just give up like that!"

James lifted his legs, boots and all, to rest in the gently swinging hammock. "I won't be able to keep up with Peter's antics forever." His admission sounded defeatist. "I know Peter. He's too selfish to give up the dust he uses for flying. He won't kidnap anyone else for a while, so we should take a rest. It would be good for you too, Tink. You could've gotten injured. This is becoming too dangerous."

"No!"

"Why?" James sounded resigned.

“You don’t understand!” Tears spilled down her face. “He has to leave Neverland, forever. He hasn’t just kidnapped human boys.”

“I know, pixies, too. You don’t have to remind me. I participated in that, remember?”

Tink shot a glare his way. “Vividly. But I wasn’t referring to that. I meant...did you ever stop to think about what Neverland was like before Peter Pan?”

James paused. He hadn’t ever heard Tinkerbell speak about her life before he met her. Anytime it came up, she would suddenly feign deafness until the topic has passed.

“Many years before you came here...even before Peter was here,” began Tink, who stared at the flickering candle inside one of the lanterns, “Neverland was a beautiful place. There was an abundance of food, the tribes of pixies got along...it was perfect.”

James listened quietly. He had never thought much about Neverland before the Lost Boys lived there. They had seemed like an integral, eternal part of Neverland’s history, but of course the land would have existed long before their arrival. Tink drew a deep breath and continued, “But one day, my tribe found a baby. A toddler, really.”

“Where—”

“A boat washed up on shore. It only had one person inside.”

“Peter,” breathed James.

Tink nodded miserably and sat beside James in the hammock. “My aunt said that when they found the boat, the little boy inside was sunburned, dehydrated, and hungry, with empty ration crates and water skins all around him. There were cuts on his hands where he had been trying to get the food out of the crates. They had no idea how long he had been drifting, and he couldn’t tell them. They felt bad for him and took him in. We had heard stories of a faraway land and sent pixies to discover where he came from. We knew about London already, but any pixies who went to explore beyond the sea never returned. Aunt Meriol decided to raise Peter as her own.

“At first, he grew up like any normal child. I used to go visit him all the time. I’m a little younger than Peter, and my mother said that I was fascinated by the ‘*giant, wingless pixie*.’ But after some time, Peter began to ask why he was different—he couldn’t fly or produce pixie dust or change size like the rest of us. Eventually, he became fiercely jealous and ran away.”

Gloomily, Tink waved her hand at the island. “There aren’t many places to run here. Meriol thought it would be best to let him be for a little bit. She didn’t know what normal development looked like for a human and thought maybe some rebellion was a typical part of growing up for his species, or that he needed to build a nest or something.”

Tink smiled wistfully. “My aunt wanted so badly to find out about his parents so she could tell him. It’s only natural to wonder where you came from, after all. But soon, pixies started to disappear when they left our glen. They would fly out and never come back, just like those who tried to cross the ocean. The other pixies became afraid and stopped leaving the safety of our glen. Food became scarce, and we were in danger of starving.”

James listened in horrified silence. How was it that he had never asked Peter what his childhood was like? He had naively assumed that Peter Pan was somehow immortal, with no beginning and no end, just as much a part of Neverland as the ocean and island.

“Meriol began to suspect that Peter had something to do with it, and she went looking for him. I went with her, and...and...we found the missing pixies—what was left of them anyway. Peter had been experimenting on them the whole time.” Tink’s eyes brimmed with tears, and she shuddered violently. “I’ll never forget that sight.”

James laid his hand over Tink’s trembling hands, clenched in her lap. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

Tink shook her head stubbornly. “No, you need to know.” She drew another deep breath and repeated, “He had experimented on them. He was trying to find out what different parts of pixies could be used for. Some he had strapped down, collecting their blood in vials. He ripped apart wings, used the dust for all sorts of tests—”

She began to sob. James held her, taking particular care to avoid his hook scraping against her delicate skin or wings. Of course Peter would have tested his theories about pixies in order to discover all the magical remedies he knew about, but James had never thought about it before. Collecting surplus dust hadn’t exactly been a heinous crime other than the pixies being locked up. A recollection floated into James’s mind of Peter saying, “*Pixie blood will heal that...*” How else would he have known about that remedy if he hadn’t conducted experiments to discover the uses of pixie blood?

The idea of Peter torturing pixies for years in Neverland...bile threatened to rise in James's throat. Tink paused with her eyes clenched shut, and James gently patted her back, noticing as he did so that Tink's wings had wilted in despair.

"But..." he ventured, then hesitated. He didn't want to be insensitive in any way as Tink recounted the trauma from her past, but the story didn't add up. "Surely, if pixies can change size, you could've teamed up to fight back?"

The deadened expression on Tink's face as she turned to James would haunt him for the rest of his life. "You underestimate the extent of Peter's knowledge of Neverland. We weren't the first creatures he'd experimented on. He found something that traps us in our smaller sizes, I'm sure of it. He used it to paint our cages. I think that's why we couldn't shift in there."

The vivid memory of the pixie cages painted bright green burst into James's mind. He had always assumed they were painted that way for decoration, but now, it was all coming together. The horror of what he had participated in for years hit him with another crushing blow. James felt as though a heavy weight had settled on his chest. He quietly listened without interrupting as Tink continued her tale. "When Meriol got there and saw what he had done, she lost control. She tried to free the pixies, but he... he..."

A fresh wave of sobbing washed over Tinkerbelle before she choked out, "*He killed her.* Then he looked at the rest of us and said that we were just bugs to him, and that we could fight and be killed like her, or we could come quietly. So many of us had already died, and we were scared. None of us believed that the sweet, chubby toddler that came to Neverland was capable of such treachery."

Her breathing caught in her throat, her voice becoming more ragged as she whispered, "I wish I'd been brave back then. I wish I had helped Meriol. I wish...I wish..."

"You stayed alive. There's no shame in living," James told her quietly.

"There's shame in living with this guilt. I never want my actions to be guided by fear again. I need to be braver. My aunt died because I was a coward." She wept anew, and James held Tink against his chest as her frail shoulders shook in grief.

"No, she died because of Peter Pan. You were just a child trying to stay alive. No one would ever mistake you for a coward." James stared over

Tink's head, out the open bay window that boasted a view of the distant shore. Palm trees bowed gracefully in the salty breeze, and the crescent moon cast a silvery glow over the shadowed outline of Skull Rock. So much beauty that hid Neverland's dark history.

A cold fury gnawed in the pit of James's stomach as he imagined the terror plaguing the merfolk and the pixies for the past decades. Naturally, they would hate humans. How dare Peter stain Neverland with his presence. How dare that self-centered, sadistic excuse for a boy appoint himself to play God and treat the native creatures as mere playthings, objects to be cast aside at his will. The desire to punish Peter Pan for harming any of Neverland's creatures burned within James, but the most all-consuming rage came from his knowledge that Pan had caused Tinkerbell pain.

Once Tink's sobs slowed down, she choked out, "Once he had captured or killed all the pixies he could find, he began to collect our dust and saved it. When he had enough, he flew back to London and came back with...with you. You know the story after that. Peter shifted his focus to being with his *own kind* and left us in the shed with the other animals, often forgetting to feed us or to care for the sick and injured. He was too busy having fun with all of you Lost Boys. Compared to what it was like before that, we were grateful. But having to choose between torture and neglect wasn't enjoyable. Many pixies died."

James cringed. He had been one of that number of neglectful keepers of the pixies. He had never given them too much thought. Just as Peter had always treated them like animals or pets, so had he. "I'm sorry, Tink."

The front of James's shirt was soaked in the pixie's tears, but it didn't bother him. On the contrary, it felt as though a fire had been rekindled inside his chest, flaring up more intensely than ever before as he renewed his hatred of Peter Pan. No one should ever have had to see or experience what Tinkerbell had, and James Hook knew from that point on, he would fight until his last breath to bring Peter Pan down. Taking a break would never be an option—no matter what it cost him personally, no matter if it required James to become the greatest villain in all of Neverland's history.

Peter Pan had to be stopped.

CHAPTER 20



The strong scent of seaweed hung in the air as James crouched outside one of the dank caves near the base of Skull Rock, the night air whipping his hair across his face. After Tink succeeded in rescuing all the pixies, Peter had moved the Lost Boys into the hollow cavity of Skull Rock, claiming that if Captain Hook trusted it enough to protect his pixie dust, it would be safe enough for them, too. It was just the opportunity James had been waiting for. He knew of Skull Rock's fatal flaw—there was no escape route. It wasn't a haven; it was a death trap.

Tink's story had lit a fire within James, one that could never be dampened or stifled. Peter Pan had escaped punishment for his crimes for far too long, and he, Captain Hook, had failed to use the force necessary to stop him.

No longer.

Whatever it took, whatever sacrifice had to be made, was worth it if it put a stop to Pan's atrocities. The hints at a bigger plan that Tinkerbell had told him about only confirmed that if he didn't stop Pan now, it would prove impossible in the future. The kidnappings, the torture of innocent creatures, drugging children and stealing their lives...it would all end tonight, no matter the cost.

He signaled to Tinkerbell, who nodded and launched herself into the sky, a trickle of powder trailing behind her as she flew off. By the light of the moon, James could see the outline of a boy patrolling near the base of Skull Rock, smartly turning on his heel at the end of each pass and returning to the starting location again. Tink's pinprick of light became nearly indistinguishable from the explosion of stars in the night sky. James

had to squint in order to differentiate Tink's glow from that of the heavenly bodies.

It became easier; soon, the guard's shadow leapt in an attempt to capture the pixie. James could only imagine how much Peter was prioritizing capturing pixies now that their own stock was depleted. Tink began to dart here and there, nimbly evading the lad's grasp while luring him away from his post.

"Now," James whispered to Chibu, who nodded and gestured for two men to begin the crawl up the path. Once the lookout on patrol wandered nearer, still lost in his attempts to capture Tinkerbell, Auggie and Arnie leapt out of the bushes, clapped hands over the lad's mouth, and bound him tightly with rope, then tossed him over Chibu's massive shoulder.

When they deposited their load at their captain's feet, he smiled, the manic gleam still dancing in his eyes. "One down, fourteen to go," he said with satisfaction. "Check him for a knife and gag him well. We can't let him warn the others."

They captured two more boys who were patrolling the forest and beach around Skull Rock in a similar way. Tinkerbell, who was posing as a lookout near the entryway to the hideout, reported that she could only hear snores from inside.

James left three of his crew to keep an eye on those who had already been captured and crept up to the mouth of the entryway, the climb much easier without anyone clinging to his back. He grinned around at his crew—some crammed onto the narrow ledge, a few floating nearby, courtesy of Tinkerbell's donated dust. Many carried rope, while others clutched torches, and two held buckets of water filled to the brim, sloshing slightly as they tried to balance on the ledge and hold the buckets steady at the same time.

All the men looked eager with anticipation. Never before had they been so close to their prize. James smirked in grim satisfaction. Peter said he was too timid to make a move...well, now he was prepared to play just as aggressively. After one final nod, James threw the clay pot containing lantern oil straight down the entryway's slide. He heard the pot shatter at the bottom and turned to his men. "Brace yourselves, gents," he said, then flung a torch down after it.

There was no explosion, but a dim glow appeared at the very end of the tunnel, followed by panicked shouts of, "Fire! Fire!"

In an instant, Peter Pan came shooting out of the tunnel, flying so quickly that he looked more like a shooting star than a boy. Without hesitation, Chibu threw his bucket of water at the leader of the Lost Boys. He missed.

James bellowed, “No!” and leapt after Peter, straight off the top of Skull Rock. His hook scraped down Pan’s leg, and James’s hand scrabbled to grab to the boy’s ankle to slow him down, forcibly reminding him of the day he lost his hand to the crocodile. The combined weight was too much for the small amount of pixie dust Peter had used, and they began to sink, slower than if they had fallen.

“I’ll get him this time, captain!” James heard one of his crew shout from above. With that, a shower of water splashed down. The benefit of this was that the water hit its mark and doused both the pirate and Lost Boy. The downside was that James was still clinging to Pan’s feet, and when the pixie dust was washed away, both were still twenty feet off the ground.

They plummeted with terrifying speed, crashing through many layers of palm fronds until they landed with an almighty *crash* in the sand below. Wind knocked out of them, James and Peter both gasped for air, mouths flapping noiselessly like a fish out of water.

Peter, with eternal youth on his side, recovered first and rolled away from the pirate. “You...fool!” he gasped, still clutching his side with eyes streaming from the pain. “What...did you...do? The boys...”

Still gasping for air, both James and Peter Pan flicked their gazes to the top of Skull Rock, where they had been only moments before. A rosy glow from the flames lit up the sky, outlining the silhouettes of pirates as they nabbed every boy trying to escape the flames. For one heart-stopping moment, James feared the fire would kill some boys, rather than frighten them out as intended.

As they watched, another boy darted out of the mouth of the tunnel, only to be snatched up and tied to his peers.

“No!” Peter tried to launch himself into the air, but the water that had engulfed him and James had washed away all the remnants of pixie dust. He was grounded. He flung one disgusted look at James as he turned to run.

James’s hook snagged around Peter’s ankle. “Not so fast,” James hissed, and wrenched his left arm back, causing Peter’s leg to be pulled out from under him. Peter crashed back down to the forest floor, and James’s eyes flashed. The boy wasn’t used to getting around without pixie dust anymore,

and that made it all the simpler. The pirate pounced, pinning the unarmed boy down to the ground with his knees.

Finally, *finally*, James had the advantage. Peter Pan was at his mercy. James directed his cutlass at the boy's throat. Now, all of Neverland could be avenged. Now, the boy would pay for his crimes, pay for all the lives he had stolen, with his own. "It's over, Pan," James said. "You've lost."

Peter's eyes, so full of malice and hatred only moments before, drained and were replaced with childlike fear. As James stared into the face he knew so well, images from all the time they had spent together flashed through James's mind—fishing for cod, playing pranks on Rolland, the day they had tried to make a snare and Peter ended up dangling from a tree by one foot, roaring with laughter. Though distance made it easy to assume the boy was an emotionless killer, he really was still just a boy. Did Peter, his former best friend whose mind was still as young as any of the Lost Boys, truly deserve to die like this?

The grip on his cutlass shook as his teeth gnashed together. Could James knowingly and intentionally deprive anyone of their life, of their chance at a future, when this was the very crime he hated Peter for? *Just do it!* a voice in the back of his head screamed. *He deserves it. Just think of all the pixies he has murdered and the families he has torn apart. He's no child, not anymore. Do it now while you have the chance!*

Only an hour ago, he had been so sure that this decision would be easy, that he would stop Peter at all costs. But now that the moment was here, he faltered. Could he kill as easily as Peter Pan could? Peter's voice echoed as a memory surfaced. "*How alike we are...*" Was he the same hardened murderer as the boy he held at sword point?

The scar James had given Peter all that time ago stood out brightly in the moonlight, shining where James's hook had carved an ugly groove in Peter's face the day they parted ways forever. A drop of regret swelled inside James. He had done that, and now he was holding a boy at sword point. What was he becoming? The tip of his cutlass dropped a fraction of an inch.

James's hesitation was his downfall. Peter had slowly worked his hand over to a patch of sand near his head, and he flung a fistful of sand into James's eyes. James roared with pain and raised his right hand to rub them vigorously.

Peter's voice floated into his ear. "You'll regret this, pirate." The last word was spat with hatred in his voice. James lunged blindly toward Peter's voice and grabbed a hold of some fabric, but the younger boy peeled away, ripped the cloth, and sprinted off. His footsteps pounded away as James continued to try to remove all the remaining grains of sand from his eyes.

"Coward!" James bellowed after Peter Pan.

By the time James had recovered, his crew had descended from Skull Rock, all the captured boys in tow, and he smiled in satisfaction. They had succeeded. His crew had managed to recover all the boys, who were all tied together and gagged, glaring daggers at the pirates. It was their largest capture yet.

Tinkerbell, looking smug as any of the crewmates, sat on top of one of the bags of pixie dust with her feet propped up on the other. She had flown back down into Skull Rock to ensure everyone was out, human or pixie, and retrieved the bags of dust that George had stolen from James. The fire had been extinguished, and Auggie released the two caged pixies that Peter had managed to recapture since Tink's rescue. They jingled their gratitude and fluttered up into the heavens.

"Everyone out?"

Chibu nodded in confirmation.

"Good. Smash all the cages. Pan won't be capturing any pixies anytime soon."

"Where is he?"

James shook his head, still unsure what he felt about the boy's latest escape. "Got away again. But think, lads!" he said loudly. "We have all the boys *and* the pixie dust. No need to waste any more time. Let's get these Lost Boys out of Neverland tonight!"

His crew roared in appreciation. Tinkerbell flew up into the air and circled James. Her dust floated down and settled on his clothing. As James began to rise into the air, he called out, "Never forget today, men! For today is the day we thwarted Peter Pan!"

He gathered up the bags of dust and sprinkled each crew member in turn, followed by the knot of Lost Boys. They all followed Tinkerbell's golden glow to the *Hope of London*, where James, in a rare show of frivolity, sprinkled an entire bag of dust onto the ship itself. The crew whooped in glee as the ship rose from the water with an eerie sucking,

splashing sound. Even the Lost Boys, all of whom were chained to the mast of the ship, looked fascinated.

James took immense pleasure in seeing George amongst the group, squished between two particularly large boys and not looking at all happy to be back on the ship. James couldn't resist gloating a little. He meandered over to the cluster of boys, fixed George with a sinister smile, and gently removed the gag from his prisoner's mouth. "Well, well, well...fancy seeing you back here, young George."

George stared resolutely at James's highly polished boots and didn't say anything.

"I must thank you," James continued. "Without you, I never would've been able to concoct the plan to return you all safely home. You have my undying gratitude." He swept into a lavish bow, whipping his hat from his head. James's dark hair fell into his eyes, and as he straightened, he flipped his hair back and replaced his hat. He caught Tinkerbell watching him, who grinned mischievously and beckoned to him, nodding her head toward the captain's quarters.

"I must take my leave now," James said. "Ho, Rolland, come keep an eye on our esteemed guests."

Rolland bounded over. The dust coating him lifted his steps much higher than normal. He looked alight with happiness as he sprang forward in huge arcs. "Glad to, captain!" A crafty grin lit his face. "Are you off to spend *alone* time with Miss Bell?"

Several guffaws rose up from crew, and James frowned. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Rolland tapped his finger knowingly on the side of his nose. "Playing coy? Good plan. Women love that."

James's frown deepened. "Like any of you know anything about women."

Tinkerbell was waiting for him inside his quarters. She had enlarged to her human size, but her wings still fluttered in excitement. She skipped around the cabin in a kind of dance, chanting celebratory cheers in her jingly voice. She stopped when she saw James and rushed over to seize his shoulders, pulling him into a tight hug. "You did it, James!"

James returned the embrace, then remembered the door to his quarters was still open when he heard hoots behind him. He pulled away from the pixie and slammed the wooden door shut. "Cavemen," he growled.

“What was that all about?” Tink asked.

James rolled his eyes. “They all seem to think there’s something romantic going on between us.”

Tink’s eyebrows rose, but she said nothing.

For some reason, James felt heat creeping up his neck and warming his face. “Isn’t that ridiculous?” he babbled. “Anyone thinking that we would... that we might...you know?”

Tink remained composed and shrugged modestly. “I can think of crazier things.”

The flush in James’s face deepened until he was sure that he would burst into flames. He wished he hadn’t said anything. *A future with Tinkerbell was impossible*, James reminded himself again. No villainous pirate captain who’d just burned boys out of their home had any business being with a beautiful, youthful pixie like Tinkerbell.

*And yet...*a tiny flame of hope still burned in his chest, just as impossible to extinguish. Tink hadn’t ever rejected him outright, had even flirted occasionally, but surely as a joke. His eyes darted once over to her, and he fought down the alluring ideas that were popping into his head. The last thing he needed was to make a move on Tinkerbell and then have one of the crew burst in on them again. Blast it all, he had forgotten to get a lock for his door.

He cast around the room for a change of topic. The clear night sky floating gently past the window showed a bird’s-eye view of Neverland as the ship drifted higher toward the second star. It felt surreal to be soaring above the island in his ship. “Good thing the night isn’t cloudy. It would be much more difficult to navigate around the moisture if it were.”

The absurdity of talking about the weather with Tink made James’s stomach curdle. He could have picked any topic—any at all—and it would have been better than *that*. He took a deep breath and ignored how Tink was looking at him. “I should use this opportunity to remove the barnacles from the bottom of the ship. It needs it.”

“Don’t you dare, James Hook. This is a moment to celebrate, and we are going to celebrate! Not everything has to be work, you know.”

James stayed quiet. Everything had been work for years. He had done enough playing for ten lifetimes during his sojourn as a Lost Boy, and now was the time to pay it back. Tink seemed to understand his line of thought.

“If we stay in here alone together, your crew will think we are up to something.” She raised her eyebrows meaningfully. “Let’s join them and celebrate our victory. Besides, don’t you want to see George’s face when we drop him off at home?”

The appeal of that suggestion brought James back to life. He grinned and crossed to the door leading to the deck and bowed low. “Miss Bell, after you.”

She ran a light hand across his chest as she passed him, and James’s heart hammered against the inside of his ribcage. She must have known that would happen. Why did this woman have such a detrimental effect on his ability to focus? They walked up the few steps to the deck, and the rest of the crew cheered and whistled as they emerged. The men were busy throwing knives at a wooden target painted on the wall opposite, and the frequent *thud* of the knife hitting home proved just how often the pirates engaged in the diversion.

Several of the captured Lost Boys watched apprehensively, as if concerned they would be asked to be the next target. James debated talking to the boys, to convince them of his good intentions, but decided against it. Who would believe that their kidnapper had their best interests at heart? No, best let them vilify him forevermore. After all, once they were back with their families, it wouldn’t matter what they thought of him.

He smiled nostalgically as he thought of young Smee, who had vowed to spread the story far and wide of Captain Hook’s eternal quest to thwart Peter Pan. Let the legend grow with the stories these boys told. He could only imagine the tales they would tell. The evil Captain Hook, burning them out of their safe hideout, tying them up and chaining them to the mast while taking them away from their safe haven of Neverland.

“Captain!” Chibu veritably leapt across the entire deck. “Will you join us?”

Tink gave him an encouraging prod in the back, and James stepped up to the starting place for the knife throwing. He waited until all the pirates fell silent, then drew his dagger from his boot. The crowd whistled and stamped, and James held up his hook. “This is a fine game,” he began. “However...” He paused dramatically. “It would be more fun with rum!”

He pivoted quickly and threw his dagger. The point didn’t sink into the barrel of rum as intended; instead, the knife handle smacked against the wood and clattered to the floor. But it made no difference as a thunderous

cheer rose from the crew. They swarmed over to the barrel and poured mug after mug.

“One of the benefits of growing old, ya know,” Chibu said to the Lost Boys chained to the mast as he took an enormous gulp.

“For you, Cap’n and Miss!” Rob held two mugs out to James and Tinkerbelle.

“Pixies don’t drink that foul stuff.” Tink wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “That pigswill is for humans.”

James copied her and declined. “No thank you, Rob. I appreciate the offer.”

“More for me!” Rob crowed and downed one mug after another.

Just as the ship was to cross into the Second Star, Tink sidled up to James. “Don’t feel like you can’t have a drink. I know you’re a human.”

“Peter drugged me with pixie dust for years. I won’t put anything into my body that alters my state of mind again, but the crew enjoys it.”

The cool night wind whipped through James’s long hair, fanning it back as he watched the star grow larger, arms splayed on the railing of the *Hope of London*. Tink slipped her arm through his and stared at the bright spot.

In a flash, the ship was through and burst out into London’s night sky. It was equally clear on this side, but thousands of lights sparkled below, both lamps outside and flickering candles that gently illuminated the insides of homes.

“You know what bringing these boys back means, don’t you?” Tink’s voice trembled with delight.

James sighed heavily. Any time they returned a boy, Tink forced him to bathe thoroughly and trim his hair. She had pointed out that any adult man dressed as a pirate—dripping with weapons, and smelling the way he often did—would much more likely be arrested than thanked for returning lost children. It wasn’t that he never bathed, but...he *was* a pirate, after all.

“I could drop them on the street instead of escorting them to the police station,” he suggested dully. “They’ll find their own way homes.”

Tink’s eyebrow raised, disbelief etched all over her face. “You would just drop them off like that?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” James agreed grudgingly. “Peter Pan isn’t the only kidnapper in the world.”

“There’s my honorable, responsible pirate.”

“I still don’t think you understand what a pirate is, Tink.”

She laughed gaily. "I don't need to! All I need to know is that you're having a bath tonight!"

"You should come with me," James suggested, then his ears flamed scarlet and he proceeded to stumble over his words. "To London, I mean! Not to have a bath...you should take the boys with me, since...since there are more boys than usual this time." He kept his voice as neutral as possible and avoided looking at her. *So much for being suave and charming.* As long as Tink was agreeable to his plan, there was no harm in them spending a little extra time together, and if they were alone...James's heart leapt at the thought.

"Are you asking me on a date?"

James's blush deepened. Had he been that transparent? "More like a work meeting," he responded hastily, eager to cover up how much he craved time alone with Tinkerbell.

"It's a date." Tink grinned and vanished into the washroom to get ready.

"*Work meeting!*" James called after her.

CHAPTER 21



James dragged his hand across his face for what felt like the hundredth time, rubbing his palm over the scratchy stubble on his jaws. His head felt lighter, now that his hair was almost all gone, trimmed short and close to his head. Everything sounded louder since matted locks no longer covered his ears.

The bath had washed away all the dirt and grime that seemed to always coat his skin. Even after swimming, there had always been residual salt. James thought that Tink's insistence on him bathing in the ship's drinking water would be met with resistance from the crew, but they all found the situation wondrously hilarious and seemed elated that they hadn't been the ones asked to chop off their hair and whiskers. James replaced the hook on his left arm, tightening the strap around his wrist and forearm.

The sensation of being completely clean was surprisingly refreshing. His boots had been polished until they could reflect the moon's glow, and even his fingernails were immaculate. He had trimmed them down and dug all the dirt out from under them, knowing how pleased Tink would be by it. He still couldn't articulate why he felt the compelling need to impress Tinkerbell—and the urge was growing stronger by the day. Today, with him saving several boys and trying to look his best, she was sure to be impressed.

He stood in front of his wardrobe, struggling to decide on which of his few outfits would blend in most when he and Tink took the boys down. After all, he hadn't lived in London for hundreds of years, and who knew what the fashion was nowadays? His only hunch was based on what the

Lost Boys wore, and he hoped that the differences between what boys and men wore wasn't too extreme.

He selected the most boring black trousers and tunic, with a simple black belt to complete the ensemble. When he looked in the mirror, he could hardly recognize himself. Gone was the pirate, replaced with a man fine enough to pass as an English gentleman. A very poor English gentleman, perhaps, but a respectable citizen nonetheless. Despite the hook gleaming where his left hand would have been, no one would ever guess he was the leader of a crew of hardened pirates. James pulled open the door.

Several crewmates whistled. "Captain, you look downright pretty!"

"Need me to curtsy, Your Majesty?"

"Don't tease him; he's too good to associate with the likes of you now!"

James grinned good-naturedly. "Where is the lovely Miss Bell for this adventure?"

When he saw her emerge from the cabin at the far end of the deck, the entire world seemed to freeze. Tinkerbell's wild, blonde hair had been combed and smoothed into shimmering curls that cascaded to her midback. The flowing green dress she typically wore in classic pixie fashion was gone, replaced by a red gown that laced up in the front and accentuated her tiny waist. Never before had James been so devoutly grateful that whoever the ship's previous owners had been left a few dresses among the sailor's clothing in trunks. Her enormous blue eyes matched the heavy cloak that kept her wings hidden. She was beautiful—truly and radiantly beautiful—simple as that.

For several long moments, James couldn't speak. Nor, it seemed, could any of the other men. They all had their mouths agape, staring fixedly at the pixie masquerading as a human. Ozzy let out a tiny squeak that was a far higher pitch than his usual voice.

"Don't everyone compliment me at once," Tinkerbell said slyly, looking at their dumbstruck faces with amusement.

With that, everyone began to gibber.

"You look beautiful, Miss Bell!"

"Yeah, gorgeous!"

"Makes me wish I'd volunteered to go!"

"I need to get me some new duds so I can get me a girl like that!"

"You dolt! There's no girl as good as Tinkerbell!"

Tinkerbell laughed in delight, thrilled with all the attention. She glided across the deck and linked arms with James, who was the only crewmate who hadn't said anything. "Shall we go?" Tinkerbell threw a handful of dust into the air that settled over James and gave an additional sprinkle to the boys still tied together. They rose into the air as one, then vanished over the side of the ship.

Flying through the streets of London with a pack of Lost Boys in tow and a pixie at his side felt like something out of a dream for James. Of course, he had successfully returned boys home in the years past, but never this many all at once. He was actually doing it—rescuing all the Lost Boys in one swoop, rather than one or two at a time. His eyes were continually drawn to Tinkerbell at his side, try as he might to resist. Suddenly, he could imagine why his crew had made remarks about him being alone with her so much. Anyone would want to be; she was stunning.

It took longer than he expected to locate the police station. It seemed as though many years of Earth time had passed since his last visit, and James felt all turned around. The small sprinkling of pixie dust had worn off, and his feet ached from all the walking. His sentiment was shared by the boys, who were apt to whine and walk as slowly as possible, their bound hands concealed by the cloaks tied around their shoulders. James felt like a bumbling fool, as everything appeared strange and new to him. London's explosive growth never seemed to slow, and nothing ever looked the same. The pack of boys in tow were no help at all. They frequently grumbled their dissatisfaction and accused him of kidnapping them—which, James reasoned, was true.

The police station they found was small and dingy, with a sleepy-looking night guard at the front desk. Tink entered first while James stayed outside with the boys, watching from behind the glass. She approached the front desk and smiled winningly at the guard, who suddenly looked much more awake. Thank goodness adults could understand her jingling speech. The policeman looked mesmerized by Tink, who walked over to a bulletin board full of pictures of missing persons. She pulled off a poster and pointed to the picture displayed, then gestured toward the door.

James hurriedly ushered the boys inside, though they did not go willingly. A few sat down and refused to move, others shuffled their feet or tried to kick James in the shins, and James veritably dragged them all in.

“What ’ave we ’ere?” the guard asked the boys. “This nice chap an’ ’is wife come to fetch you ’ome, and this is the gra’itude ye give ’em?”

“They were the ones who kidnapped us in the first place!” spat George. It seemed that he had been elected as the spokesperson for their group, and he glared at James with a vengeance.

The night guard’s eyes snapped over to James and Tinkerbelle. “Askin’ for the reward money, are ye?”

“No, sir, we just want these boys to be returned home to their families.”

“I’ll need statements and identification,” the guard said, stooping to gather paperwork from behind the desk.

James caught Tink’s eye and she nodded. In a flash, they were out through the glass door. Tink threw off her cloak, grabbed James’s hand, and flew up into the night sky. Dust showered onto James, who felt his body lighten immensely with every passing second.

They had done it! The boys were in the hands of the police, who would return them to their homes. It didn’t matter now what stories they told—there was no chance they would be believed. James and Tink soared up to the floating pirate ship and found most of the crewmates had fallen asleep, as it was nearly dawn.

James’s boots hit the deck and he scrambled to turn the ship around, to head for the second star before it disappeared in the morning light. Within minutes, they vanished through the entrance to Neverland, their hearts lighter than they had been in years.

CHAPTER 22



Tink stretched out on the window seat and watched Neverland's lonely island come closer through the open window. The cool breeze blew into the captain's quarters where they were closeted together, wafting her wild, long blonde hair back over her wings like something out of a dream.

James sat opposite Tink but found himself watching the pixie rather than the oncoming land. He couldn't tear his eyes away and barely registered anything she was saying. They had already gone over the events of the day about a dozen times, and though he felt elated with their success, he couldn't stop staring at Tinkerbell, as if seeing her for the first time all over again. She had once again donned her emerald-green pixie dress laced with feathers down the front that James longed to touch.

Tink turned her face toward James. "You have a good heart, James Hook."

The very mention of his heart set it to racing again. James tried to think of something clever or funny to say, but his mind was filled with a useless buzzing noise. Incapable of speech, he nodded mutely. Tink either didn't notice or didn't mind James's distraction. If anything, she seemed pleased by it. She coiled a lock of hair around her finger and released it to fall over her shoulder. James felt hypnotized by the sight of it, and his vision was drawn to her face, rapidly skating over her features so he could memorize each and every one.

"I'm glad you don't stink anymore, James." She scooted closer to him so their legs touched.

Her touch jolted James into speech. Eager to act as though he hadn't been fixated on her appearance, the pirate grinned. "It seems like you told me in the past that it smelled like I hadn't bathed in a year. It would be a pity to subject your delicate pixie nose to such an atrocity."

"And I appreciate the consideration."

James became even more acutely aware of what it felt like to be sitting next to a beautiful woman, a sensation that both captivated and terrified him, but a seed of doubt crept into his mind. If he confessed his feelings and she rebuffed him...he wasn't sure he would be able to look her in the eyes ever again. What if she left? No matter what he told himself to the contrary, he knew that the loss of Tink would devastate him more than the loss of his hand ever had.

"You're amazing, James," Tink said, resting her head against his shoulder. "Those boys are back home now, all thanks to you."

"No, all thanks to *you*," James answered, then grudgingly admitted, "And it wasn't all the boys; Peter escaped again."

"But he now has no dust, no friends, nothing."

"He still has his life." James ground his teeth, keeping his eyes downcast in shame. "I could've ended it tonight. I had the opportunity."

He heard Tinkerbell's breathing stop. He scrunched his eyes shut and forced himself to continue, "I was about to kill him. I...I wanted to. I wanted him to suffer the way he made you suffer, but...when the time came, I couldn't do it. He got away."

Tinkerbell's soft hand cupped his chin. "He escaped because you, Captain James Hook, are an honorable man. You have a morality that evades Pan. It sets you apart from him, and I love...that about you."

Tink loved something about him. The drumroll in his chest would be heard throughout all of Neverland. His eyes skated up her arm and fixed on her face. James was doing his utmost to keep his thoughts away from what Tinkerbell looked like, truly he was. They had been friends for years. *Friends*, he reminded himself firmly. It was only natural to feel close to her, only natural to want to spend time with her, only natural to imagine holding and kissing her...

No! No, he needed to control that particular impulse, at least until he was sure, without a shadow of a doubt, that Tink returned his feelings. He still hadn't installed a lock on his cabin door, and inwardly cursed his lack of foresight. Just when he could have used some privacy... Even if most of

the crew had fallen asleep, it would be just his luck for the one remaining crewman who was awake to spot him and Tink sitting this close to each other and use the opportunity to spread even more rumors.

Tink remained silent for several long moments before she pulled her leg away from James and said with unusual formality, "I've clearly made unwanted advances toward you in the past, and I feel like I need to apologize."

"It was never unwanted." James didn't hesitate for a moment in his response. The tiny flame of hope he had suppressed for so long suddenly surged into a bonfire that he had no hope of controlling. If Tinkerbelle was truly offering what he had wanted for so long, and he was certain of it, he would be the biggest fool in Neverland's history to squander the opportunity. "Never."

"But..."

"Tink...this is new for me, and I worry that I won't be enough for you. I'm not the hero you deserve. I'm a human pirate, not a pixie—"

"You're perfect."

James's mouth went dry. The elation that his deepest, most secret desires were coming true was more than he had ever hoped for. Pirates didn't deserve the attention and affection of beautiful women, but if Tink was being honest...With a quick glance at the unlocked door, he commented, "I finally replaced those loose boards up in the crow's nest; do you want to see?"

The look Tink gave him made James think that she knew exactly what his intentions were. His insides squirmed until Tink simply replied, "Yes, I do," at which point his stomach began leaping about. The possibility of what his friendship with Tink could evolve into took shape in his mind again, but with a modicum more of hope than before.

The crow's nest was small, hardly more than an oversized barrel, but neither Tinkerbelle nor James minded the cramped space when they reached the top. The floor swayed from side to side more than at any other point on the ship, and James looped one of his arms around the pole in the center of the crow's nest to stabilize himself out of habit.

"I replaced those boards there," he said, waving his hook behind him carelessly.

"Very good." Tink's eyes, shining with adoration, didn't leave James's face. No one had ever looked at him that way before. Tinkerbelle was

looking at James, not how a person sees a friend, or in the curious way that a pixie examines a human. No, her eyes burned with the intense, compelling stare that only a woman could give a man.

Her facial expression alone caused James's heart to pound frantically in his chest. A creeping heat snuck up his torso and burned his neck. James firmly instructed his rebellious eyes and hand to stay away from Tink, but they disobeyed. One lurch of the ship cresting over a swell in the ocean sent Tinkerbell tumbling against James, who was devoutly thankful for the wave's timing. His hand crept around the pixie's trim waist, cinching her close to him, and he was emboldened by Tink not pulling away.

His gaze moved down from Tink's eyes to her mouth, so enticingly close. It was as if his hook had a mind of its own as the curve raised to tilt Tink's chin upward. He was certainly courting that precarious line between restraint and wild abandon. James caressed Tink's side and his thumb traced the fabric hiding the scar he'd given her the day they met—it felt like forever ago. He feverishly tried to think up any way to prevent himself from doing anything as foolhardy as the forbidden thoughts popping into his head.

Tink was no help whatsoever in stopping him. Her slender fingers ran up his arms and latched onto his shoulders. She was pulling him closer, inviting James to do exactly what he had been thinking about. This was a dangerous combination, being alone together and having feelings of this intensity.

James couldn't resist any longer. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against Tink's.

The elation of their recent success was nothing compared to this. Why had he fought this desire for so long? Tink felt so delicate in James's arms, and he wanted to savor every second of their moment together. She was softer than James ever could have imagined, and touching her was like finding an oasis in the barren desert he had been living in. The longer they stayed locked together, the more intensely James held on to Tink, and the more passionately she returned his affection.

He couldn't prevent himself from kissing her in a desperate frenzy, frantic to soak in every second of her presence. This felt too good to be true. His body was shouting at him to hold on to Tink, shouting to suppress his reservations and ignore his self-discipline, and his brain's weak protests were becoming feebler by the second.

The pirate ran his hand up Tink's back, taking great care to avoid her fragile wings, and felt his heart swoop as Tink wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing against him and returning his affection with equal passion. This was certainly a benefit to growing up that he had never thought about in his youth. How glad he was that he'd chosen aging over eternal youth.

James kissed Tink for a long time, exhilarated not only by the sensation of the physical affection, but also from the validation of knowing that Tink wanted *him*. For whatever unknown reason, she was attracted to him, and that knowledge was enough to make James feel that he could do *anything*.

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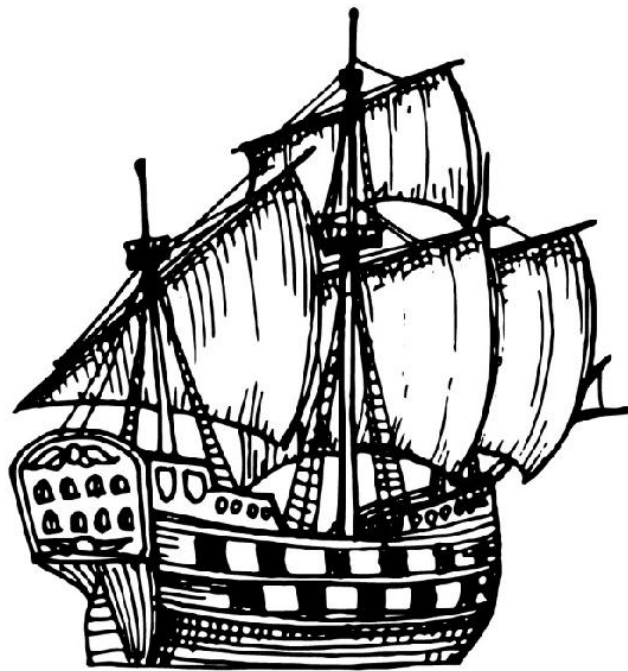
PART III

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THE HERO OF NEVERLAND



~One Year Later~



CHAPTER 23



“Say it again.” James tried to stop his hand from shaking by gripping his desk. He couldn’t have heard correctly. His ears must be playing the same sort of malfunctioning tricks his eyes had lately—another blasted side effect of his lack of sleep.

“At last count, he has twenty-two Lost Boys and more than sixty pixies,” Tink repeated. She was seated in James’s hammock, slowly swinging and staring at him with that same concerned expression she always wore whenever she sensed James starting into one of his downward spirals.

In the months immediately after he and Tinkerbell had finally confessed their feelings for each other, James had become careless, so enveloped in the joy of being with Tinkerbell that he turned a blind eye to Peter, deluding himself into believing that a lone boy stripped of pixies and friends was hardly a threat.

He had been a fool. Love had made him a fool.

James knew better than anyone of the hazard of having Peter running loose in Neverland. By the time James realized how long Peter had gone unchecked, he had already amassed more than a dozen boys and had set up pixie traps that secured him pixies at a terrifying rate. The new information sent James into a deteriorating health spiral that left him refusing to sleep as he frantically tried to correct his months of laxity while trying to hide the emerging side effects from Tinkerbell.

Now, he and Tink had less time together than ever before as Tinkerbell spent greater amounts of time spying on the Lost Boys, trying to determine their future plans.

Peter had gotten wiser and must have known that a pixie had infiltrated their hideouts and passed information to James. Now, the Lost Boys plugged up even the tiniest of holes in and out of their hideouts, and Tinkerbell was often exposed to the elements as she stubbornly kept watch from outside. Consequently, the amount and quality of her inside information had dwindled significantly.

James swore and aimed a ferocious kick at the winged armchair, earning him a throbbing toe and a disapproving frown from Tinkerbell. No matter how hard he fought, Peter always seemed to be one step ahead.

“How does he do it?” James shouted, pounding his hook onto the desk. The metal tip embedded into the mahogany surface, and James wrenched it free. Splinters tore out as a chunk of the desk clung to James’s hook. “How can he sway these children away from their homes so easily?”

“That isn’t all.”

There was *more*? James’s eyebrows nearly met as his brow knitted, and his entire body vibrated from the compounding stress. “What else?”

“He...he has...I can tell he has something planned; I just don’t know what.”

Curse Peter and his infernal ability to achieve all his twisted, convoluted goals, as well as his ability to evade capture. No matter what James tried, the last year had been nothing but a rapid succession of failures, meaning that the boys Peter had captured in the last year of Neverland time could easily have lost ten to twenty years of their lives.

Several more oaths spilled from James’s mouth as he tore at his hair. “I should’ve killed him when I had the chance.”

Tinkerbell’s frown deepened. “Don’t say that. You aren’t a murderer like he is.”

How fervently James wished that to be true. But the longer this battle raged on, the more James regretted his hesitation to kill Peter when the opportunity had presented itself. Then, Neverland would be free of Peter Pan, even if he had to carry the burden of killing a child with him for the rest of his life. At what point was murder justified—when it saved fifty lives? Three hundred? One? How could he ever quantify the value of a soul?

His delay in answering angered Tink. “You *aren’t* a murderer, James Hook.” Her wings beat the air as she was lifted out of the hammock, hovering in front of James.

“You know I am.” The words were whispered so quietly that James wasn’t sure Tink had heard them. “I’m just like Peter Pan.”

Pleading crept into Tink’s tone. “But you’ve changed, James.”

James slowly shook his head. Tink had far more faith in him than he deserved, and certainly more than he had in himself. Slowly, he tried to pull oxygen into his fatigued body. No matter how many breaths he took, it never seemed to adequately fill his lungs or reach his brain. Determined to keep this information from Tinkerbell, who would just worry about his health again, he asked, “Do you have any idea what sort of plan he might be working on?”

“No. He’s been collecting a lot of bottles; that’s all I know. He’s been bringing them back every time he returns with a new boy.”

Bottles...what would Peter want with bottles? “What sort are they? He wouldn’t put pixies in the bottles, would he? They would suffocate.”

Tinkerbell scrunched up her face, trying to remember. “They usually aren’t big enough bottles for a pixie, anyway. When I’ve seen him, sometimes the bottles are empty and sometimes they’re filled with a green liquid. Maybe bottle isn’t the right words. They are more like small vials, the sort he used when—” Tinkerbell’s face went ashen.

James and Tink stared at each other as the weight of her observation sank in. If Jimmy used a green liquid to paint the cages that trapped the pixies, and was amassing a huge collection, possibly large enough to imprison hundreds of pixies at once...

“You can’t go back there again, Tink.” The horror of what Tinkerbell had confided in him still haunted his dreams. No inside information they may lose out on was worth putting Tinkerbell’s safety in jeopardy.

“If I don’t go back, we won’t have any way of knowing what Peter is planning.”

“I don’t care about that. I only care about you!”

Tink’s face turned red. “I know you wouldn’t give up on everyone Peter is holding hostage, James!”

“If it comes at the cost of your safety, yes, I would. If you go back, you might never return.” To emphasize his point, James shut the bay window that Tinkerbell used as a door.

Her shade of red deepened. Even though her human size was far shorter than James, she seemed to fill the whole cabin with her anger. “You can’t lock me up! Are you *trying* to be like Peter?” Tinkerbell shouted.

Her words stabbed through James's heart like a knife. For several long moments, they stared at each other. Tinkerbell's red flush faded as she turned pale and held her hands up to her mouth. "I...I'm sorry, James. I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did. And you're right." James collapsed into his armchair and tried to mask his shaking hand from Tinkerbell. How long would Tinkerbell stay around if she felt like he was becoming the monster they were fighting against? How long before his health broke under the burdens of boys who didn't want to be saved, a crew who were hungry for success, and a woman he loved, who may decide she didn't return his feelings?

James pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to focus on inhaling slowly. In a vain attempt to hide his shaking hand and ragged breathing from Tink, he tapped his hook against the desk in front of him, beating out a tuneless rhythm that matched the rocking of the ship's deck beneath his boots.

The harder he fought against Peter Pan, the less he slept, the less time he spent with Tinkerbell, and the quicker his health declined. Anytime he relaxed his efforts, as he had for the first months after returning all the Lost Boys to London last time, Pan's kidnapping increased sixfold. Tinkerbell deserved more than a pirate who couldn't give her the attention she warranted. She was in love with the *idea* of a man stopping Peter Pan, James was sure. But with his recent track record of failures...how could any woman love that? How could a beautiful, driven woman like Tinkerbell ever be happy settling down with a failure who barely ate or slept anymore? She wanted someone who could save her fellow pixies, and he just happened to fit the bill.

And yet...selfishly, James didn't care about her reasons for staying with him. Her presence had always been a source of strength and comfort for him. If he lost that, either by Tink leaving him or being gravely injured as she gathered information for him...he knew he would never recover. With each passing day, he fell more in love with her—with her fiery spunk and the way that the intensity of her convictions rivaled his own. He couldn't imagine life without her, and yet...the possibility of a future with her seemed so far out of reach. His obsessive behavior was the only thing that kept Peter from amassing a veritable army of boys, but it was also the thing that prevented him from spending the time with Tinkerbell that she needed and deserved. But if she had fallen in love with his convictions and

purpose...Everything swirled around in James's head like a hurricane. Nothing was simple anymore.

"I'm sorry," Tinkerbell repeated softly. "I really didn't mean that. I know you aren't like him."

Her soft hands began massaging the knots in James's neck and shoulders, and he closed his eyes to fully appreciate the sensation of Tink touching him. He needed her more than he could ever say.

Finally, he turned and buried his face into her side, wrapping his arms around her waist and breathing in her sweet scent. "I can't lose you, Tink. I can bear anything but that. It would break me."

Tinkerbell ran her slender fingers through James's hair. "I don't know why you keep thinking I'm going to vanish one day. I've always been here for you, and I always will be. But like it or not, if we have any chance of finding out what Peter has planned, we need someone to keep an eye on him."

"I'll go instead," James offered.

Tinkerbell let out a soft exhale through her nose, fingers still ruffling his hair. "James, don't take this the wrong way, but you are much more conspicuous than I am. I've never been caught before."

"I don't want that option to even be a possibility. Please, Tink."

She huffed, "What am I supposed to do, wait here like some damsel in distress?"

"Stay here on the ship and go with the crew. Sail the perimeter of the island to make the Lost Boys think that we are moving positions. I'll take a rowboat to shore and scout around."

"A lot of things could go wrong with that plan," Tink said hesitantly.

"But you would stay safe."

"I am plenty capable myself."

"I know, but...please, Tink. For me."

Tinkerbell stayed silent for a long time before she finally said, "I worry that you are pushing yourself too hard, James. Don't kill yourself trying to prove anything to me."

"I won't."

"You have to sleep a full night before you try, too. I saw your hand shaking."

"I don't need—"

“Peter Pan already stole your hand and your childhood, James. Don’t let him steal your health and future too.” She slipped her arms around his shoulders and pressed her lips against the side of his neck. “If this is what you really want, we can try it your way. Be safe out there, and good luck.”



James had none of the luck wished upon him.

Almost as soon as the *Hope of London* faded from sight as it turned around Skull Rock, a commotion appeared from out of the trees. Peter Pan had not been tricked in the slightest by the ship’s departure. The slim hope that James’s tiny lifeboat bobbing on the waves would not be spotted from so great a distance was dashed as Pan and a gang of his followers—all sprinkled with pixie dust and floating well above the crashing of the waves—made a beeline for James. How much dust did Peter have if he was willing to squander it so easily?

“Your ship seems to have shrunk, captain,” Pan mocked. “Did you really think I would fall for that blatantly obvious ploy you just tried to pull?”

James used his oar to splash water droplets up as high as he could, but Pan and the Lost Boys swerved around them, laughing at his fruitless efforts.

“So pathetic,” Peter continued. “Now, you’re all alone in the middle of the ocean, far away from land and with none of your little pirate crew to protect you. No pixie either, it looks like.” He let out a soft snicker. “What shall we do with such an opportunity?”

The red-headed boy glanced around at his comrades, a malicious smile curling his lip. “Now, boys, let this be a lesson in warfare for you. Never pass up an opportunity to strike.”

James’s heart plummeted as Peter’s face split into an evil grin. “Collect some ammunition, lads. We have some target practice to do!”

Within minutes, the Lost Boys had flown back to the beach and collected rocks of all shapes and sizes, then returned to drop them on James and his boat. James threw his arms over his head to protect himself, but the raining stones bruised his body badly. He watched in horror as his boat began to splinter all around him, then cast a frantic eye at the distant shore, which suddenly seemed much too far away. His cutlass was no use at this distance. Why had he ever thought that his crew dropping him off alone in the middle of the ocean was a good idea? He was a fool.

Another rock collided painfully with his shoulder. Anytime he could, James would use the oars to splash more water at the boys, hoping that if the pixie dust washed off, they would fall. He hit several of the boys, and once hit, they would drop a little, then retreat to the safety of the land until only Peter Pan remained. Twice, when a palm-sized stone landed in the boat next to him, James snatched it up and threw it as hard as he could at Peter.

The younger boy laughed each time, dodged the stone on its flight up, caught it on its return to the ocean, and directed it back at James. Rocks continued to pile up on the floor of the boat, causing it to sink lower in the water, slowly at first, but as more wood splintered and cracked, water began to pour in. Finally, the pirate captain had no choice but to abandon his vessel, and Peter, crowing in triumph, flew back to land, shouting taunts as he did so.

Cold seawater constricted James's chest as he plunged into the water, pulling the heat from his body faster than he would have expected for a warm summer afternoon. James struggled to the surface and inhaled deeply as he broke into the fresh air. The shore suddenly looked much farther away, and the distant jeering calls of his former best friend rained like additional physical blows to his body. He struck out for land, kicking rapidly as he propelled himself toward the faraway waving palm trees.

Each swell of the ocean felt like it was pushing him back out to sea, and the weight of his clothes and weapons was pulling him under as if determined to drown him. James kept pushing through, wishing he at least had his left hand where the iron hook dragged his arm down, forcing him to dig deeper than ever before.

At least it isn't storming like it was when Tink washed overboard, he thought ruefully. There was no crocodile this time, either. Every time James looked up for a deep breath of air, the shore never seemed closer. *A pox upon tide changes.* James rolled over to float as he caught his breath, but

waves constantly crashed over him and filled his mouth and nose with stinging saltwater.

The only measures of time James had to go by were his number of strokes and the sun's position in the sky. *One thousand strokes.* James glanced up at the sky, mentally calculating the time of day as he tried to ignore the pain shooting through his limbs.

Two thousand strokes. Every fiber of his body was screaming in agony from the physical exertion coupled with the blue and purple bruises blossoming all over his skin. As much as he wanted to keep them, he kicked off his boots and unbuckled his sword, letting them spiral to the ocean floor far below him. They would be of no use to him if he drowned. With fresh resolve, he continued to swim, hand over hook.

Three thousand, four thousand, five thousand strokes. James couldn't feel his body anymore. The cold ocean water, coupled with the numbness of his muscles, formed a deadened sensation that spread through his entire body. As the afternoon faded, the land finally looked closer. He could make it. *Just a little longer.*

When he finally neared the banks, it became more a question of his ability to fight through the seaweed and avoid stepping on the sharp coral than swimming, but at last, as dusk fell, he felt solid ground beneath his feet.

James dragged his body across the sand. He never wanted to swim again. He collapsed onto all fours in the sand and rolled onto his back. Within moments, James surrendered to his fatigue as tendrils of sleep curled around his mind, pulling him under until he had submerged entirely.

CHAPTER 24



The faint sound of laughter coupled with an unearthly shriek woke James. He cracked his sunburned eyes open and squinted at his surroundings, his brain slowly processing that he must have slept all night and well past noon the following day. He groaned as the pain in his body wailed its presence. At least Tink got her wish of him sleeping more. James lifted his left arm to block the sunshine stabbing at his eyes, and the curved leather cuff that housed his hook thudded against his forehead.

At first, he only saw the waving palm fronds of trees above his head, with the sun's rays streaming through, but a flurry of movement down the beach quickly caught his eye. Where the water lapped against the sand, a knot of boys were dragging a creature from the surf. Though every inch of his body ached, his clothes were stiff with salt, and his skin was chafed from sand, he found the inner motivation to struggle to his feet. The Lost Boys were attacking a mermaid.

The hot sand burned his bare feet as he staggered towards the small group, all too engrossed in their activity to pay any attention to the lone pirate approaching. Every step cost James dearly. He could feel the sharp, broken seashells cutting into his burned feet, but when he saw a familiar-looking boy pull out a knife, he sped up, desperate to reach them before they did any harm to the creature.

"Stop!" he roared, his voice catching in his throat.

Miraculously, the boys heard him and paused. The whole group looked up. Two boys held each of the mermaid's arms while three others held tight to its tail, still beating ferociously. The leader of the bunch was none other than Peter Pan himself, who held the knife. He crowed in delight when he

saw James and lowered the knife. James saw a glass bottle in Peter's other hand, filled with the green fluid Tinkerbell had mentioned, then dropped his eyes to the mermaid's wrists, which were dripping that same jade color. He was collecting mermaid blood.

"Captain Hook! What a surprise seeing you again so soon. We thought you'd be swimming with the codfish."

The mermaid, with panic written all over her face, struggled against the boys' grasp and looked up at James with pleading eyes. James ignored the scalding sand on his cut and blistered feet and advanced several more paces. "Let her go," he called, slowly stepping toward the group and refusing to wince at the pain flaring through his feet and over every inch of his tight, sunburned skin.

Peter Pan held up a hand to his followers and approached his former best friend. "Or what?" he challenged. "Going to take me on all by yourself? No chance of these fellows turning on me, Jimmy Boy."

"Let her go," James repeated. "Now."

A few of the boys clutching the mermaid looked frightened. James watched the boys carefully. The second that their grip slackened, the mermaid made another bid for freedom, and James attacked. Using his hook, he slashed out at the boys holding the mermaid's tail, who all yelped and jumped away. The mermaid crashed to the beach, pulling one of the boys who held her arm with her. He fell over a large piece of driftwood and toppled backward, out of sight.

With two beats of her powerful tail, the mermaid flipped herself into the waves and disappeared with a splash. The horde of angry boys turned on the pirate. "You lost us our mermaid!" shrieked the boy who had tumbled down with the mermaid, who was barely nine years old. He brushed sand off his trousers and glared at James.

"Just like I told you all," Peter said, a slight smile touching his boyish face. "Captain Hook hates us having fun. Although..." He took in James's bedraggled appearance. "It looks as though he may not be a captain anymore. Where's your ship and crew, Jimmy Boy? Did they make you walk the plank? Or were you stupid enough to imagine that I would fall for that stupid decoy trick?"

James held his hook in front of him and didn't answer. The gang of boys didn't look very old at all. Peter was probably banking on the hypothesis that kidnapping a younger child would be easier to keep on his side, as

opposed to an older one. The youngest child looked to be about six years old, hardly a danger in a fight. But if they all swarmed him at the same time...

Out of the corner of his eye, James saw merfolk pop their heads out of the waves, bobbing up and down in time to the eerie screeching they all emitted. Peter turned to look, and when he did, mermen raised pointed spears and tridents as the mermaids gnashed their teeth at him, howling with grated voices that clawed at James's ears.

The mermaid James helped pointed at him, and the merman next to her beckoned to the pirate with an unusually long, grayish green finger. James's stomach knotted with apprehension. Last time he had been to Mermaid's Lagoon, he was told never to return.

James backed away from the Lost Boys and entered the water, staying in the shallows as much as possible. Even with his fear of what awaited him, he couldn't help the sigh of relief at the cool water against his injured feet. With a harsh, guttural sound, the head mermaid rasped a command, and spears flew toward the bank. With a panicked yell, James leapt into the air, trying to swat the spears away from the boys they were directed at. All the Lost Boys scrambled for cover.

"Leave!" the merfolk snarled.

The Lost Boys didn't need a second warning. They scattered, Peter rushing to the tree line with all the other boys hot on his heels. James made to follow them, but a cold, slimy hand on his ankle held him back.

"Stay, human." The icy voice of the mermaid chilled him to the bone.

James turned back and fought down his desire to shout in alarm. The multitude of merfolk stared at him with those wide, unblinking eyes, their snake-like hair coiling and undulating despite it being an unusually windless day. He waited for them to speak first, unsure if his voice would fail him or not.

"You helped one of us," the head mermaid, whom he recognized, said. Once again, James was struck with how difficult it was to read their facial expressions. He nodded silently. "Why?"

What kind of question was that? "They were trying to hurt her," he answered simply, nodding at the mermaid he had rescued.

"A human *help* a mermaid?" No facial expression was needed to hear the skepticism in the mermaid's voice.

“I help anyone who needs it in Neverland,” James said, his voice coming in stronger. “Pixie, mermaid, or Lost Boy.”

The mermaids all hissed at the last group’s name. The spokesperson for the merfolk thrashed her tail violently in the water, spraying foam six feet in all directions. The mermaids drifted closer, and James took an involuntary step backward. He ached to run from the water to land but knew he would never make it. “You aid the treacherous Peter Pan?” she asked, her forehead contracting in anger.

“No. I’m here to stop him from taking more boys. They...don’t belong here in Neverland. Neverland should belong to you—to the pixies and mermaids. We humans...we don’t belong here.”

The hissing stopped, and the merfolk continued to beat their tails, but with a lessened ferocity, so the churning foam quieted. “You fight for revenge?” the mermaid asked, her voice still harsh.

“Not...not revenge, exactly,” James stammered. “I just don’t want him to take any more boys or hurt anyone else. He needs to be stopped, not for my own sense of revenge, but for the safety of others.”

The chieftainess drew nearer to James and peered into his wide eyes. “You speak the truth, human,” she said softly, then gestured to the pronounced scars that ran in ragged streaks across her neck and back. “I, too, have encountered Peter Pan in my past. He is a plague on this land that must be eradicated. We will aid you in your quest.”

She held a webbed hand out behind her, and a merman swam forward, holding James’s waterlogged boots and cutlass he had cast off during his swim to shore. James couldn’t believe his luck as he buckled his weapon back onto his hip and draped his soggy boots over his arm. “Thank you,” he said graciously to the merfolk. “Thank you very much.”

The chieftainess inclined her head, though her grave expression never wavered. “May the tides of Fate be with you, human.”

The merfolk vanished, dipping below the surface with hardly a ripple to be seen.

CHAPTER 25



The notion that the merfolk were willing to assist the pirates in stopping Peter sustained James until Tinkerbell and his crew returned for him the next day. He had even managed to find Pan's latest hideout, though it had been far easier than he had previously imagined.

Whether it was because there were now so many Lost Boys, or simply Peter's desire to never stay in one place for too long, James didn't know. But whereas the previous hideouts had usually been in caves or underground dugouts, Pan had positioned his new fortress high in an oak tree, with great rope ladders and plank bridges spanning from branch to branch, even reaching other trees so it looked like a vast, treetop community.

It was amusing to James that Peter had selected a treehouse for a hideout. It would be more difficult to surround as it sprawled across several trees, hammocks strung up like little waving flags, and boys could easily escape by swinging away or simply climbing high into the branches, where the heavier, full-grown pirates couldn't follow.

In regard to defense, it was a smart move on the young boy's part, as it was an area that could only be reached by pixie dust, and they would have the advantage in visibility from so high up. However, it had also created a fatal flaw, which James looked forward to exploiting.

He knew how jealously Peter guarded his pixie dust collection, and he also knew that many of the Lost Boys frequently found themselves grounded until Peter could assist them. It presented the perfect opportunity to attack.

James knew that Peter would seek revenge after being thwarted by the mermaids and felt highly motivated to attack before Peter cooked up something troubling, so he lost no time in organizing a raid.



The jungle felt dark and ominous as James and Tink scouted slightly ahead of the raiding party. They easily found the Lost Boys' base, where two boys looked to be halfway through constructing some form of elevating platform, supported by ropes and pulleys. James supposed that the contraption served to reach the treehouse without pixie dust.

Peter Pan was noticeably absent, and Hook saw the frightened looks on the faces of the boys in the treetops. Without the threat of an older boy to fight back, the pirates should be able to seize most or all the boys in one fell swoop. The two boys on the ground proved easy prey as they were captured, and the crew looked eager to extend their success as they lashed the boys' hands behind their backs.

James eyed the treehouse and the surrounding brush. This was all too easy. "Tink," he called. "Take a look around for our red-headed friend."

Tinkerbell winked, saluted, and flitted away, quickly shrinking to pixie size as she began her perimeter sweep.

The Lost Boys aloft cowered behind whatever shelter they could find, occasionally peeking out to check on the adults clustered around the base of the mighty oak. James called up to them, smooth cajoling in his voice, "Hi there, fellows."

Unsurprisingly, there was no answer. Some of the boys squeaked in terror and buried their faces into the leaves, or widened their eyes. "Where's Peter?" he asked, still shifting his gaze about to spot the redhead.

Once again, no response came.

James leaned nonchalantly against a tree trunk. "I had a good friend once by the name of Smee Darling," he began in an offhand voice. "He

didn't stay with Peter nearly as long as I did, but the time he spent here cost him the majority of his mother's life. Do you remember your families?"

"Can it, Captain Hook!" one of the boys shouted. "You're just trying to trick us!"

"Am I?" he asked mildly. "What do you remember about your family?"

The boy's face reddened. "I'm not playing your games, Hook!"

"I'm not playing any games. This is called polite conversation. Do you remember having any brothers or sisters? Or perhaps a father who played ball with you, or a mother that tucked you in at night? Seems like a sorry trade to frolic your days away in trees while you know they are aging roughly a week or two for each day you stay. It doesn't seem like much now, but it adds up fast. Even now, your parents could be dying and you would never know. Peter certainly won't tell you."

"He's lying," a mutinous voice mumbled. James arranged his face to pretend he hadn't heard as he scraped dirt out from under his nails, but kept his ears perked for what he knew would come.

"But...what if he is right?"

"And what if he's wrong?" The familiar, jeering voice joined in as Peter Pan floated midway between the treehouse and the forest floor.

James's heart plummeted. Clutched in Peter Pan's fist was...Tinkerbell.

CHAPTER 26



Tinkerbelle struggled to extricate herself and panted for breath as the leader of the Lost Boys held her fast, clenched around the middle. She could feel each of his fingers bruise her ribcage, and his hand was coated in that same viscous green liquid she had seen him collecting. It smelled of seaweed and something even wilder than the Forest Pixie Clan.

Peter's face had twisted into an ugly sneer. His eyes flicked over to James, who was standing, paralyzed with fear, then to his two followers, who were bound and kneeling in the dirt. Tink closed her eyes, trying to swell to her real size and escape, but the heat that always accompanied her transformation never came. The green liquid that oozed from Peter's hand onto her body flashed brilliantly. Tink coughed, the constriction around her chest becoming more painful as the hand capturing her tensed and shook her slightly.

Peter laughed. The boyish quality in his voice was gone, replaced by an evil chuckle that made the hairs on Tink's neck stand on end. "Thought you could trick Peter Pan, did you? I've been on this island far longer than you have, *pixie*." He spat the word out like a dirty curse. "Think you know the secrets of Neverland? Think again. Your dust may keep you young forever, but mermaid blood traps you in this size. As long as it's touching you, you can't transform." He laughed again, a truly mirthless sound that vibrated Tink's body.

Tink cast a terrified glance down at James, who looked just as horrified as she felt. She could see the fear in his eyes grow as he watched Peter drift higher in the air, safely out of reach from any of the adults, his sneer firmly

in place as he waved the pixie, taunting the pirate. “Now, what shall I do with a little bug that is aligned with a traitorous pirate?”

Tink saw all the color drain from James’s face. “Don’t, Peter!” he called. “Give her back; we can work something out.”

“Make an offer, Hook.”

“An even trade, one of your boys for her.” Tink could hear the panic underneath James’s deceptively calm voice.

“Both boys.”

“Done.” James instantly signaled to Rolland and Chibu, who reluctantly slit through the bonds and released the boys. Both dashed for the treehouse and began climbing the ropes that formed the pulley system on the half-made platform. “Now let her go.”

Peter chuckled again, low and sinister. “Funny, I don’t remember you giving me what I wanted when you kidnapped my friends and burned me out of my home. I think a taste of your own medicine would be good for you, Jimmy Boy. Let’s see how you like it, having everything you care about taken away. If I come back and find any of these”—he gestured at the Lost Boys in the treehouse, all of whom looked positively terrified—“gone, you can rest assured I will kill this pixie slowly and in front of you.”

Peter launched himself into the air, still holding Tink prisoner. James’s voice was barely audible over the rushing of the wind, cursing Peter Pan as he spirited Tinkerbell away from the only person she had ever felt would keep her safe.

Peter flew straight toward the Second Star. Tink continued to struggle against the pressure around her middle, desperate for a deep breath. She had no idea what Peter had in mind for revenge on James, and she didn’t want to find out. The mermaid blood, unlike water, had no effect on her dust supply, and glittering particles fluttered in the air behind her as she and Peter flew to London. Tink set her jaw stubbornly. Whatever the leader of the Lost Boys had in mind, she knew she would do her utmost to thwart his plans.



The street's layout was all too familiar as Peter swooped down from the sky and landed noiselessly on the rooftop. Tink stared around and spotted the memorable wooden sign creaking gently in the wind. It was Smee Darling's house.

Peter held his fist containing the trapped pixie up to his nose. "Want me to let you in on a little secret, pixie?"

Tinkerbell leaned as far away as she could from the boy's putrid breath. Peter chuckled and lowered his voice as he waved his free hand at the house. "Maybe you remember this place. Jimmy said you helped take dear old Smee back home all those years ago. Do you remember?"

Glaring back at Peter with all the defiance she could muster, Tinkerbell remained silent. Peter's ominous grin broadened. "Smee was an ungrateful traitor, and when I went back to punish him, I found...his son. You remember my dear friend George, don't you? He was the one who so cleverly infiltrated your beloved pirate's ship and gave me all the information I wanted. He was a good lad, that George. What made the deal even sweeter was that I knew it would destroy Smee to know his son joined me."

Tink's eyes widened. How sick and twisted was this monster?

"Now, you two got the better of me that time and rushed little Georgie back to his mummy and daddy. But not this time...George has a younger brother, did you know? He was too young to take at the time, but I think we ought to pay him a visit. He must be old enough to want to join the Lost Boys now. Let's see who will crumple first: Smee, when he finds out another of his sons was taken...or your boyfriend back on his ship, when he sees me rip off your wings, bit by bit."

A tightness that had nothing to do with Peter's fist around her chest clenched at Tinkerbell's heart, and she bit her lip. She believed him. She was sure Peter planned to kill her eventually, but she also knew that he would want to do so in front of James, merely for the pleasure of tormenting him further and exacting revenge on his nemesis.

"Now, rules for our little game here. You get to watch and observe, and if all goes well, you can zip right back to your precious Captain Hook and tell him all about your little adventure. You get to watch the pain in his eyes when he hears your story, and you can remember how I felt when you and Jimmy took all my friends away from me."

Peter crept along the narrow ledge separating the second and third stories, headed toward the same window through which Tink had entered with James and Smee not all that long ago. He quietly slid the window open, the thin curtains fluttering in the breeze. Peter slipped inside, quiet as a shadow.

“Now, let’s see...” Peter murmured, his voice low and threatening. “Let’s put you where you can’t interfere, but where you’ll still be able to give a full report to your treasured pirate master. Let him know all about what shall become of his beloved Smee.” His eyes alit on a heavy nightstand. An evil grin flashed across his face as he wrenched open a drawer, shoved Tinkerbelle inside, and slammed it shut. Tink collapsed over a thimble, and her head snapped back from the force of the drawer closing. She shook her head, then frantically crawled over to the keyhole that provided a narrow view of the room, which had changed significantly since her last foray into the home.

Tink desperately scrubbed at the mermaid blood coating her body. For every dried drop she scuffed off, she seemed to find an additional two spots. She would never be able to change size until she had a full bath, which would then negate her pixie dust. *A pox upon Peter Pan and his infernal knowledge of Neverland!*

Tink’s heart pounded frantically against her ribcage as she pressed her eye against the keyhole, feeling light-headed with worry. She analyzed every nook and cranny of the room. Three unfamiliar beds stood against the walls of the nursery. How many children did Smee have?

Maybe Smee’s family had moved, Tink thought wildly, gone far away where Peter would never find them again. She watched Peter scrutinize the faces of each dozing child, clearly trying to decide which to wake. Clearly disappointed, he moved past the sleeping forms of two of the room’s occupants to the third bed, larger and more ornate than the others. Just by looking at it, Tink knew that the elegant curtains tied onto each of the four posters labeled this as a girl’s bed.

Confusion twisted Peter’s mouth downward. The flickering candles behind him threw his shadow over her quilt, and the girl’s eyes blinked open. She couldn’t have been older than eleven or twelve years old, with curly light-brown hair tied back from her face with a simple blue ribbon. She yawned and rubbed her eyes. Halfway through removing the sleep from her eyes, she caught sight of the boy standing, dumbstruck, over her.

The girl squinted. "Peter? Peter Pan?"

Tink's stomach gave an unpleasant lurch. How did this girl know his name?

Peter didn't hesitate to flash a conceited grin, pleased that his fame preceded him. *The arrogant peacock*, thought Tink ruefully.

"That is me," Peter replied. "Who are you? Smee's daughter or something?"

Now it was the girl's turn to look puzzled. "Smee's daughter?" The words seemed foreign on the girl's tongue. "Smee Darling, you mean? My name is Wendy, and I'm his granddaughter."

"So you are...George's daughter?" Peter's eyes bulged slightly. Tink was pleased to see that something had ruffled Peter's feathers.

Wendy, now fully awake, clambered out of bed, curiosity written on every one of her features. Peter rose a few inches off the ground and began to gently float backwards from the girl, but Wendy followed him, talking very quickly and in a breathy voice.

"Yes, of course I am, you silly. I know all about you, naturally. Grandfather told me all about you and how Captain Hook rescued all the Lost Boys. He is ever such a good storyteller, you know."

Peter let out a hearty guffaw. "Captain Hook *rescued* Lost Boys? Oh, now that is rich!"

Wendy's eyebrows furrowed. She studied Peter, then scanned the room. "Is he here, too? Or Tinkerbell?" Tinkerbell's ears perked up at the sound of her name.

Now it was Peter's turn to frown. "You know about the pixie?"

"Naturally! She and Captain Hook were a team, were they not? And you cut off the captain's hand, which is why he has a hook. Father doesn't believe it anymore...about Neverland and the mermaids and all. I suppose that is only natural when people grow up."

Peter remained quiet for a full minute. From her hidden vantage point, Tinkerbell could almost see the gears whirring in Peter's mind as he formulated a new plan. Then a sly smile slid into place. "I see what happened. Your grandfather changed the story. You see, Captain Hook is the real villain." Peter held out his hand. "Come with me to Neverland, and I will show you everything. Pixies, mermaids, the Lost Boys—it's all real. It was never some made-up story. Join me."

Alarm bells clanged inside Tink's head. She had to stop Wendy from going with Peter! The young girl wasn't old enough to understand her jingling speech yet, but she couldn't stand idly by. She cast her eyes around the drawer, illuminated by her glimmering wings, and spotted a pair of scissors. She wedged one blade of the scissors into the crack and heaved with all her might. The drawer opened a fraction of an inch. Tinkerbell steeled herself again, then used all of her tiny frame's weight to force apart the loops of the scissors, creating a lever to crack the drawer open just enough for her to squeeze through.

She flew into the air directly toward Wendy and grabbed a handful of Wendy's hair, pulling viciously.

"Ouch! Stop it!" Wendy waved her arms in the air, trying to shoo Tinkerbell away. Tink tugged with all her strength, trying without words to warn Wendy of the danger she would be in if she left London.

Peter's green cap enclosed Tink, obliterating the dim lights from the nursery. Peter shook the cap containing the pixie. Tink tried to hold her hands against the ceiling of her prison to protect her head from all the jostling, but with little success.

"Sorry about her," Peter said smoothly to Wendy. "She gets very jealous of any beautiful girl hanging around with me."

Wendy giggled, both hands clasped over her mouth. "So, that's Tinkerbell?"

"The one and only!" Peter crowed. "She is quite a nuisance sometimes, to be honest. She needs a good example, but as the Lost Boys have no girls..." He sighed dramatically.

"I suppose a quick trip would be all right, as long as we were all back in time for school tomorrow. I don't think Mummy and Daddy will mind. They are off at a party, you know. They won't miss the three of us children."

"Three children?" Peter repeated.

Wendy nodded vigorously. "Of course! John and Michael would never forgive me if I went without them. John absolutely idolizes Captain Hook, of course, and Michael has always wanted to meet a pixie." Before Peter could stop her, Wendy hurried to the side of another bed and shook her brother awake. "John! John, wake up! Peter Pan's here."

"That villainous cad, I'll run him through," John mumbled sleepily, waving an imaginary sword. As the sleepiness faded from his eyes, he

spotted Peter and leapt out of bed. “Great Scott, it *is* Peter Pan! Come for another hand, have you? Well, you shan’t have mine!”

Peter laughed, a boisterous noise that bubbled right up from his toes. “I cut off Hook’s hand in self-defense. He was attacking *me* at the time. My word, you three certainly have a negative opinion of me, don’t you?”

John looked positively absurd in his oversized nightshirt as he shoved a top hat on his head and picked up a spear-like umbrella, flourishing it at the intruder as if he were a butler shooing away a stray cat from the front step. Michael clutched his teddy bear and stared at Peter Pan with wide eyes.

“Grandpa...Grandpa says you steal children,” he said in a tiny, tremulous voice.

“I never steal anything,” Peter contradicted. “Am I kidnapping you right now?”

“No.”

“Am I throwing you into sacks or tying you up?”

“No.”

“That’s what Captain Hook does all the time. Now search me.” He spread his arms wide. “Does it look like I’ve stolen anything from you?”

Michael’s thin eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “No.”

“No, indeed! I am no thief; I’m the defender of the freedom of children everywhere. Tell me, Michael,” he said, throwing a companionable arm around the small boy’s shoulders, “do your parents make you work? Give you chores and send you to bed before you’re even tired?”

“Yes!”

“And John,” Peter added, switching targets, “I can tell you are a man of action.”

John puffed his chest out proudly in response. Wendy, hands to her mouth, watched Peter with large eyes—the expression that Tinkerbell often wore whenever James was nearby.

“That I am, good sir,” John responded pompously. “I plan to join the Queen’s army one day.”

“And yet you are never allowed the freedom to prove your worth? Come with me, and you can join my army *today*, lead it, even. You can fight the merfolk—”

“Oh no!” Wendy cried out. “Not the mermaids, Peter. I can’t bear the thought!”

Peter shook his head sadly. "Only because you haven't met them yet. They're bloodthirsty monsters who will drown anyone who ventures near their lagoon. I can show you." He raised the hand that still had Tinkerbell trapped inside his cap.

Wendy hesitated. "Mummy will worry. She and Daddy don't want us to leave the nursery."

Peter sighed dramatically. "See? More rules. In Neverland, there are no rules. No limitations. You are free to do whatever you want, be whomever you want."

"I could be the leader of your army?" John asked, tapping the point of his umbrella against his chin.

"You would lead the Lost Boys into every battle and defeat all our enemies!"

"I would so like to see mermaids," Wendy admitted. "I suppose it would be all right...as long as we come back soon."

Peter swooped down and kissed her hand, causing a fiery blush to light up her cheeks. "I shall escort you there and back myself, milady."

Tinkerbell, who had been listening to the muffled conversation through the heavy material, began to feel frantic. How had Peter managed to convince all three children to abandon their home in such a short amount of time? How would she be able to tell James what had become of Smee's grandchildren?

Tinkerbell tried to scrape off the remaining mermaid blood that was caked on her skin, clothes, and hair, but it had the consistency of paste. Before she could formulate a plan, Peter had snatched her and shook her violently over the three children. Pixie dust showered over the Darling children, and their feet lifted off the floor.

Peter brought Tinkerbell close to his face and whispered, "Go on; fly back to Hook. I know he will want to hear all about this." He released her.

Tinkerbell was out of the window in a flash. As she darted out into the night sky, the last thing she heard was Peter Pan telling the children, "Now here we go...off to Neverland!"

CHAPTER 27



When Tink returned, she found the ship was nearly abandoned, floating offshore and anchored near Stingray Reef. Only a few sentries patrolled the deck, watching for any suspicious activity. In the distance, Tinkerbell saw several rowboats, laden down with pirates, being shoved off the beach and heading back to the ship.

Of course. Time passed much faster in London than it did in Neverland. James and his crew wouldn't have had time to return to the *Hope of London* yet, even though she and Peter had been gone for hours. Unwilling to venture close to the sea spray that misted the air around the rowboats, Tinkerbell uttered a hasty greeting to Rolland and Ozzy, then paced across the deck in the interior of James's cabin, trying to formulate a plan that wouldn't result in James stressing so much about Peter that he'd have a nervous breakdown.

The Lost Boys' leader kidnapping children was normal—horrible and gut-wrenching, but also expected. Now to abduct an innocent girl...it was a new development and one Tinkerbell knew would make James explode. If she told him they were Smee Darling's grandchildren...well, she had no idea what sort of reaction he would have. He was already struggling with the ill effects of being overburdened, even if he did try to hide it from her.

Tink bit her lip and threw an impatient glance out the window. Humans and their slow methods of transportation. As she gazed out, a burst of glittering light came from the star that housed the entryway to London. Tink ground her teeth in frustration. *Pan.* The three figures flying across the sky with him could only be Wendy, John, and Michael Darling.

Pirates in the rowboats shouted and pointed upward, as if anyone needed reminders that Peter Pan was still a criminal at large. The creaking of oars could be heard as they splashed their way over to the *Hope of London* and were hoisted up.

As she completed another lap around the writing surface of James's desk, his door banged open with so much force that it bounced off the wall and rebounded back. James, sweating and streaked with dirt, looked around frantically and spotted Tinkerbell, who had tumbled over backward in the air from the force of the incoming gusts of wind.

"Tink!" James leapt clean over his desk and held out his hand to the tiny pixie.

Still covered in the hardened green slime, Tinkerbell came to rest on his palm. James brought her up close to his eyes to inspect her. "Are you hurt? What happened? I was so worried!"

Tink didn't answer. She could feel the blood pumping through James's vein where her soft-soled slippers met his skin at the center of his palm. She opened her mouth to tell James what Peter had done, but words failed her. It was rare to see James look completely relaxed, and now that he had realized that Tink was safe, all the stress seemed to have drained out of his body.

James gently touched the green paste coating Tink's elbow. "Mermaid blood?"

She nodded mutely.

"What happened?" James repeated his question in a quieter voice, his gaze scanning Tink's body for any additional injuries.

"I'm fine now. Nothing a long bath won't fix. Pan let me go."

"Why?"

Tink knew how much he would hate the news she had to share and she swallowed hard. "Sit down before I tell you." She wondered where to begin. Deciding it was best to leave the children's lineage out of it, Tink drew a deep breath and reported, "Pan took a girl this time."

James's head shot up. "What?!"

Tink nodded solemnly. "A girl named Wendy and her two brothers."

James swore loudly and swiped his hook across the desk, sending everything flying. The uncorked inkpot hit a painting nailed to the cabin's wall, splattering it with black liquid, then fell with a clatter on top of a wooden treasure chest. James slammed his fist down onto the desk, and

Tink jumped as the writing surface cracked with a sound like a gunshot. James swore again and ran his hand through his dark hair. “You’re sure?”

Tink nodded. “I was there. I tried to stop her, but”—she vaguely waved her hand—“Wendy didn’t understand. She likes Peter.”

“Everyone does at first,” growled James. He pounded the desk with his hook once more, and the wooden surface tilted dangerously in upon itself, threatening to collapse. His eyes had a crazed, maniacal look to them that Tink had seen before, but then the outburst faded as James looked back at Tinkerbelle. “But you’re safe, and that’s all that matters. We can get you cleaned up and better before we decide what to do next.”

Looking at the pain in James’s face, Tink could almost hear Peter Pan’s voice floating back to her. “*You get to watch the pain in his eyes when he hears your story, and you can remember how I felt when you and Jimmy took all my friends away from me.*”

How he felt? Who cared how that monster felt? What he was doing was beyond wrong, and people were suffering because of it.

James heaved a massive sigh and squeezed his eyes shut. “A *girl*, Tink! He kidnapped a girl. What’s he expecting from her? Surely not...”

Tink shook her head quickly. “I don’t think so...but I don’t know.”

James looked so forlorn and hopeless that Tink’s heart ached for him. If she wasn’t covered in mermaid blood, she would give him the hug he so desperately needed. But it wouldn’t have the same effect while she was in her shrunken state. “We’ll think of something,” she said, trying to inject a note of confidence into her voice.

He shook his head slowly, shoulders slumped and eyes downcast. “This has been going on for too long. We can’t play this cyclical game anymore. This time, Peter has gone too far.” Then he raised his eyes to the tiny pixie. “But you’re more important than any of this. I won’t risk your safety again.”

Tink’s thin eyebrows furrowed as she observed James. The pirate held on to the edge of his desk—which looked more dilapidated than ever—to steady himself while he used his hook to pull a ripped map of Neverland over to examine. It had torn badly while he had raged. James held down one corner with his hook while he tried to smooth out the paper with his hand. Ink smudged across the paper. James uttered a low growl and whipped open a drawer full of fresh sheets of parchment. He carefully laid one out and painstakingly began to copy the ruined map afresh.

Tink frowned as she watched James draw up the new map. His hand was noticeably shaking again, and he was breathing deeply, as if he couldn't pull enough air into his lungs to fill them adequately, and she knew it wasn't just from the weight of the message she'd brought. Tink's wings fluttered just enough to allow her to descend to the broken-down desk. James didn't look up as Tink studied his features. The shadows under his bloodshot eyes were nearly as dark as the black stubble covering his jaw, unshaved and untended. His dark hair was growing longer and beginning to mat—he probably hadn't combed it for days. Tink sniffed. The musky, salty smell of an adult pirate permeated her sensitive nostrils, and she wrinkled her nose.

"James, you stink."

"Thanks, Tink. You always know how to make me feel good about myself," James said dryly, still not looking at her as he continued to sketch the landscape surrounding Dead Man's Canyon. His eyelid twitched constantly as a vein pulsed rhythmically in his temple.

"Sit down," Tinkerbell ordered, but James ignored her.

"I said, sit down!" She pressed her tiny hands against his chest. It was nowhere near enough force to move him, but he sat anyway. She fluttered up to press her miniscule ear against his chest. His heart thumped irregularly, with a fluttering pattern indicative of extreme stress. "When is the last time you slept?"

A faint smile tugged at his lips. "In Earth time, or Neverland time? It may have been a few years."

Tink stamped her foot impatiently and frowned. "This isn't the time for jokes, James Hook. *When is the last time you slept?*"

"It's been a while, okay?" James scrubbed a hand down his face. "I can't justify sleep. I need to find a way to save the boys, and now a girl! I can't just abandon them to think about myself, not with Pan out there."

"You *will* be abandoning them if you work yourself to death. Yes, they need you, but they need you alive and well. You're killing yourself, James."

James briefly tried to sense his body's desperate plea for rest, but all he felt was a crushing anxiety and pressure to accomplish everything he could *now*. His brain would never be able to slow down enough to sleep. How could Tink even think he could relax when nightly kidnappings were happening? Time waited for no man, not even in Neverland. *Especially not in Neverland*, James thought wryly.

“As least I will die knowing I did everything I could to save the children I was able to, then.”

Tink bopped her tiny fist against James’s forehead. “Not an option! I’m not going to let you die!”

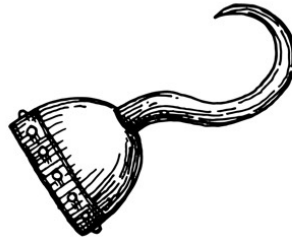
James leapt to his feet and brandished his hook, temper flaring again. Tink hovered defiantly before him, hands on her hips, with no trace of fear in her eyes. For a long time, they glared at each other, neither willing to back down.

Slowly, Tink flew up to where she could place her hand on James’s hook and lowered it, then slipped in to nestle against James’s neck, doing her best to hug him despite their size difference. A ragged breath choked James as the lanky pirate let out a sob. “What have I become, Tink?”

Tink pulled back to stare into his face. “You, James Hook, are the hero of Neverland. You don’t have to carry the weight of our world on your shoulders all by yourself. No one can do this alone.”

Tink guided James over to his hammock, where James leaned back and placed his fingertips over his eyelids. “But who else is there?”

CHAPTER 28



“*P*an ahoy!” the crewman on duty in the crow’s nest bugled.

Peter Pan? What would he be doing out and about this soon after kidnapping the three children? Peter usually spent several days after each kidnapping giving the new arrivals tours of Neverland, showing them the sights and indoctrinating them to hate Captain Hook.

James snatched up his telescope, leapt the steps to the deck, and trained the eyepiece on the sky. Sure enough, golden pixie dust trailed from the brightest star, but the bulky dark shape floating toward the island was nothing like Peter Pan’s lean, limber outline that James was used to seeing emerge from the star. James squinted. The rotund shape looked vaguely familiar, but James couldn’t place it. He focused the telescope on the silhouette again. The sun’s weak light was beginning to lighten the sky, and it illuminated the man just enough that James could see his face.

“Smee?” he whispered. Surely not; his mind must be playing tricks on him! Smee couldn’t have returned. James shut his eyes tightly and shook his head. No, it was the lack of sleep and the relentless campaign to bring down Peter Pan that was causing hallucinations. Smee, an old man, returning to Neverland? How? He lifted the telescope once more.

It *was* him! Smee had aged decades in the few years since he left Neverland, but nevertheless, James could still recognize his friend. “Smee!” he bellowed and waved madly, all signs of fatigue momentarily forgotten. “Smee!”

James watched as the airborne Smee looked around for the source of who was calling him and turned his face toward the pirate ship. Every fiber of James’s body felt electrified with excitement as he watched his friend

drift nearer, adjusting a pair of half-moon spectacles and squinting at the pirate gesturing for him to come closer.

James pulled Smee into a hug the second the old man set foot on deck. “Smee! I can’t believe it! You’re here!”

Smee took a step back and examined James then shook his head. “You aren’t a boy anymore, Jimmy. And you became a pirate after all. Doesn’t that beat all?”

James raised his arm with a missing hand. “They call me Captain James Hook now, just like I told you. Still fighting Peter Pan every day. How did you get here, man?”

In response, Smee held up the small drawstring bag that James had pressed back on him the night he returned the young boy to London. “I remembered.”

James broke out into the widest smile Tink had seen on him in months. “I’m glad you did! If only Peter Pan could see this reunion!”

Smee’s face darkened. “That’s why I’m here. He took my three grandchildren. I heard them leaving last night and knew I had to come.”

James took a step backward as the weight of those words hit him. “Your grand—” He shook his head. “Come in and have a drink, friend. It sounds like we have a lot of catching up to do.”



The second James entered his quarters, he called out, “Tink, come out and greet our guest!”

Tink, now human-sized, freshly bathed, and free of mermaid blood, rolled her head over from where she had taken James’s spot in the hammock, then smiled and stood. “Good to see you again, Smee.”

“Likewise, Miss Bell. You look just as lovely as I remember.” He inclined his head to kiss her hand.

Tink smiled widely. “You could take lessons on manners from this gentleman, James. He knows how to compliment a lady!”

James rolled his eyes, his stress melting away at the sight of Smee, who patted the doorframe of the cabin's quarters as he passed. "The ship's looking good. What do you call her?"

"Hope of London."

Smee inclined his head. "A fitting name for what you're doing. Did you ever find out where it came from?"

"Unfortunately, no," James said as he poured coffee and extended it toward the older man. "I've never even left Neverland. That Peter Pan keeps me on my toes every day."

Naturally, he had wondered over the years where it had originated, but the desire to defeat Pan and rescue the Lost Boys had quickly eclipsed his curiosity, and all questions of the vessel's origin had faded over time. One day, James vowed, he would find out. And who knew what else was out there?

Smee hadn't accepted the coffee.

"Sit down, man, and have a drink." James tapped his hook on the rim of the proffered cup, and a light tinging, almost like the jingling of Tinkerbelle's voice, reverberated around the room.

Smee shook his head. "James, it's good to see you, but I didn't come for a reunion. I need your help."

James threw the rejected coffee into his own mouth. "Ah, yes," he said after swallowing. "Your grandchildren." It still astounded him that Smee had children, let alone grandchildren. It was as though the old man sitting in front of him was still the young boy with the eternally sunburned nose.

"I didn't know what else to do or who to go to. Scotland Yard would never have believed me. I thought my son surely would believe it, since he's been here too, but George is—"

"George?" The young boy who had betrayed him all that time ago burst into his memory. Now that he thought about it, George did resemble Smee a great deal, and he wondered how he had never seen it before. James collapsed into his armchair. Surely it was not the same George who had betrayed him and stolen his pixie dust. "The George who..." He broke off, unsure of what to say, so ended with, "He's your son?"

Smee nodded. "He told me what happened that night I picked him up from the police station. You were quite the villain in his story, by the way." Smee shook his head. "I'm so sorry for what he did. I didn't know where he had gone, or I would have come then. Anyway, after all these years, he

simply wants to believe it was all a dream. When he found out I was telling stories about you and Peter Pan and Neverland to his daughter, he was furious and forbade me to talk about it again. Wendy carried on telling the stories then.” His mouth twitched into a wistful smile.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Save them!” Smee begged. “You saved me, and you saved George. Surely, if anyone can save Wendy and John and Michael, it will be you.”

James dragged his hand down his face. The weight of the world seemed to press down on his shoulders once more.

Smee, oblivious, rambled on, “They’re so young, especially Michael. Too long here, and he may forget his home like I almost did. I’m too old to be of any use in a fight, but please, Jimmy. I need you to save them. I’ll do anything.”

The use of his childhood name stirred up the fresh resolve that had led him to become a pirate, but now...James felt his heart pound harder, eager to rush to save the children but also weary at the prospect of yet another battle. Tink’s light hand brushed over Hook’s back.

“Of course I’ll do my best to help them, Smee,” James heard himself say. But how? What methods had he not yet employed? How could he give false hope to a panicked grandfather when he already felt hopeless and burned out? He rubbed his temples, his hook winding around his hair and snarling it worse than ever.

“James has already been fighting a lot,” Tink piped up. “He needs rest.”

“But...my grandchildren!” spluttered Smee. “I can’t just wait around for them! If we wait...the time!”

Tink began to glow pink. “And James can’t sacrifice his health indefinitely.”

“I already said I would help, Tink,” James said morosely. “I always do, and I always will.”

Tink’s wings fluttered rapidly, her face pulling down into a scowl. “You need to end this once and for all, James. You can’t keep up this pace. This has to be the last time.”

“You used to tell me I could never give up.”

“Some prices are too high to pay.”

James drew a deep breath in and released it. He couldn’t ever say no to a child in trouble. Even if he longed for respite, he still felt like he was personally responsible to save each and every one of them. No one else in

London knew about Peter Pan's crimes, and no one else in Neverland matched his passion for the cause.

He thought back to his previous regret that he hadn't killed Peter when he had the chance. Would he be able to make a different call if the time came again? If he did put an end to Peter's life, would Tink ever forgive him? James clutched at his heart, which was fluttering again. If Peter couldn't be stopped any other way, perhaps killing him was warranted. If it took murdering a teenager to put an end to Pan's heinous crimes, would James be able to shoulder the lifelong burden no one else wanted to carry, along with the feeble rationalization that in doing so, other lives may be spared?

Or even worse, if James failed again and Tinkerbell was put into harm's way once more...The fear crashed around his ears just as loudly as the waves outside. Right now, Tinkerbell wasn't at risk, but those three children, and nearly two dozen other boys, were.

Smee withdrew a photograph from an inner vest pocket and slid it into Hook's empty hand. This picture showed him holding his three grandchildren in front of a river. James gazed at the beaming faces of the innocent children, each smiling at the camera. "Please, help them," Smee whispered. "All of Neverland needs you."

All of Neverland... An idea stirred in the back of James's brain. "I think maybe, just maybe, I have an idea. The merfolk already agreed to help us if the time came. If we can get the pixies to rally with us, then Peter won't stand a chance."

"I've tried to talk to them before, James," Tinkerbell protested. "They won't fight."

"The pixies can't stay out of this forever. They have to pick a side. Besides, if Peter has been filling all those bottles...You have seen what mermaid blood does, Tink." The blood drained from James's face as he realized what Peter had been planning all along. "He's going to take—"

"All of Pixie Glen," Tink finished, her voice catching in her throat. "With that many Lost Boys on his side, he can take all the pixies at once."

Smee's eyes bounced back and forth between the pirate and the pixie.

James stood, his hook gleaming as the morning sun reflected off the shining surface. "We have to warn them."

CHAPTER 29



The pirates anchored the *Hope of London* a little east of Stingray Reef, close to where the Lost Boys' new treehouse hideout was. Smee had elected to stay behind and catch up with the other boys who remembered him so well, claiming he was far too old for a hike through the jungle anyway. James rowed Tinkerbelle to shore. The pixie, still damp and unable to fly after her bath, clutched her stomach as the boat rose and fell with each swell. Seagulls screamed in the distance, calling to each other as James scanned the sky for any sign of Peter Pan headed his way, but all remained still.

Once the bottom of the rowboat scraped against the sand, James leapt out, his boot splashing in the shallow water as he dragged the boat farther up the shore and anchored it. After securing the rope, he scooped Tinkerbelle out of the boat, holding her close to his chest as he carried her past the last rolling waves. It wasn't often that he had time alone with Tinkerbelle anymore, and the warm sensation of her skin against his only reinforced his desperate desire to keep her protected. He wanted to be the one who kept her safe, who showered her with all the time and attention she should have, who loved her and received her love in return.

"How gallant of you to carry me," Tink observed, entwining her arms around his neck.

"We pirates are known for our chivalry as much as you pixies are known for your affinity for water." James gently set her down in the dry sand and took her hand, relishing the feel of her fingers entwined with his.

The quickest route to Pixie Glen required a hike up Crocodile Bayou—a path that was easy so long as the crocodile didn't turn up at an inopportune

time. *It would be just my luck*, James thought.

Cautiously, he stepped through the underbrush, setting each foot down heel to toe as he wended his way through the jungle, trying to make as little noise as possible. Tinkerbell kept scraping at the cuticles on her fingernails and fidgeting with her dress the closer they got, and continually fluttered her wings to help them dry faster.

Pixies lived at the very top of Erosion Mountain, the highest point in all of Neverland. It boasted the only vantage point inaccessible by any way other than pixie dust, as the majority of the mountain had been eaten away over the centuries to form one enormous peak that sloped downward in a smooth formation of rock that proved impossible to climb. The arduous hike to the base of the mountain would take several hours.

As James approached the midway point from the mouth of Crocodile Bayou to Erosion Mountain, he heard a rousing chant and the ground vibrated slightly. He dropped to the ground as Tinkerbell shrank to the size of his hand and hid herself in the folds of his jacket, still peeking out at the top. James held his hand up to shield her from view as a procession of boys trooped past, led by a boy in an absurd top hat.

“That’s John, one of Smee’s grandsons,” Tinkerbell hissed in his ear.

James needn’t have worried that the boys would overhear the pixie, for at that moment, John bugled, “Take heed, my comrades in arms, for peril lurks at every juncture! Whether pirate, pixie, or a wild beast, shall we be afeared?”

“I don’t know what that means,” one of the boys admitted after a lengthy pause, and several others clamored agreement.

John sighed and scratched his head, jostling the top hat as he did so. “It means are you scared?”

“Ooh. Then, no!”

“Make haste, chaps, for the worst is yet to come! Onward!” John plowed through the undergrowth with purpose, scattering insects and small rodents with his stomping footsteps.

As they thundered past James crouched beneath a fern with wide, vibrant green leaves, James overheard one of the Lost Boys mutter to his friend, “I don’t know what he’s saying, but I like the way he talks.”

James smiled as he watched the troop of boys tramp past, hoping their loud footsteps would keep the crocodile at bay rather than calling it forward. He had no doubt that this valiant-hearted young man would love

nothing more than to lead a charge against a wild beast, but even though James's goal was to wage a war against Peter Pan, he had no desire for any of the children to get caught up in the messy affair.

"That one's Michael," Tinkerbelle whispered, her breath tickling James's ear.

The little boy in footie pajamas dragged his teddy bear through the dirt at the end of the column, hustling to keep up with the other boys. James's heart sank at the sight of the small boy, who couldn't be older than five years old. He was far too young to be away from a mother's tender care. Peter Pan would never attend to him the way he needed.

"Do you think he knows that his grandfather is here?" James breathed to Tinkerbelle once the boys were out of sight.

"I doubt it," she whispered, then glanced up at the mountain in the distance. The mountain's rocky gray exterior appeared silver with the sun's bright rays illuminating it, but an oasis of green foliage flowed at the peak. It would be impossible to ascend without the aid of pixie dust. She fluttered her drying wings again, and a small amount of pixie dust blew off. "Almost ready. We're nearly there, anyway."

James nodded, and they resumed their trek. Once they neared the base, the terrified jingling of hundreds of bell-like voices met their ears, coupled with the sound of Peter Pan's crowing laughter, sounded just overhead. Both Tink and James looked upward, and between the dense foliage's canopy, they saw Peter Pan and four other Lost Boys darting across the sky, holding an enormous crate painted green between them.

"No!" Tink's voice came out strangled and hoarse as her tormented face twisted in fear and she broke into a run.

When they finally burst out of the jungle at the base of Erosion Mountain, they couldn't see anyone in the sky or on the ground.

"Can you fly?" James asked, fretfully scanning the sky for any sign that Peter was returning. "We have to see if any of the others—"

"It may be bumpy, but it's the best we can do." Tinkerbelle's wings had barely dried enough to produce small amounts of pixie dust, and her flight pattern was erratic. James held his breath as she worked her way into the air and flurried her wings above his head.

The weightless sensation wasn't complete, and parts of James's body still dragged heavily, but he held tight to Tinkerbelle's hand as she rose into the sky. It wasn't a pleasant journey. With each gust of wind, James's

stomach swooped with sickening speed, and the fear of falling hundreds of feet rose just as quickly as his body did. He threw a nervous glance at Tinkerbell's wings. They would produce more pixie dust the drier they got, he knew, but it would only take a few seconds to fall to his death.

Echoes of the crowing laughter and the terrified jingling of pixies in trouble held James's reservations at bay. He and Tink *had* to find out, *had* to be sure...

Their worst fears were confirmed as Tink brought James to the one place in Neverland he had never visited before—Pixie Glen. The vast plateau at the top of the mountain must have once been beautiful. Acres of grass and flowers spread all over the glen, a sight that was at odds with the sheer, rocky face of the gray mountain. Small burrows in the hollows of trees, holes in the ground, and treehouse structures swinging gracefully in the breeze made James realize where Peter had gotten the ideas of his hideouts from. They were nothing but imitations of the life he'd had when he was raised here.

The idea that Peter had stolen their building designs and used them on the lower level of the island to imprison the very beings who'd raised him made James's stomach churn in a way that had never occurred during his choppy flight up to Pixie Glen.

Gazing around the glen, James didn't have to have grown up here to deduce what had happened. There were no pixies dancing about as Tinkerbell had often described. Flowers were crushed, tree limbs hung broken, and everywhere James looked, splatters of mermaid blood glowed green in the bright sunshine.

"We're a peaceful people," Tink said, her voice catching in her throat. "They were defenseless."

"Is anyone here?" James called, keeping his voice as steady as possible.

"If anyone's here, they'll be scared and hiding," Tink said bitterly. She hovered in the air, clearly worried about touching any of the mermaid blood that lay dotted about everywhere in sight.

"Shrink down," James suggested. "See if anyone is still here to tell us —"

Tinkerbell was off in a flash, weaving around trees and calling out in her thin voice to any stragglers who may have evaded capture.

There weren't many. After several long minutes, a handful of pixies emerged, almost all of whom were either soaked or bore the stains of the

green substance that trapped their forms. Anxiety swelled in James's chest as a new worry surfaced. Would any of these pixies remember him from his tenure as a Lost Boy? Did they, perhaps, suffer at his hand and rightly loathe him for what he had done?

The sun's summer rays beat down against James's neck and face as he waited for the pixies to gather. They all looked so small and fragile at his feet. James wiped the sweat from his brow and counted the congregated pixies—fewer than fifty—as he waited for Tinkerbell to return from her sweep of Pixie Glen.

Finally, Tink returned, along with three other pixies with no mermaid blood to trap them in their smaller form, who had all imitated Tinkerbell and grown to human size. They flew toward James, who felt a tiny ray of hope ebb away a fraction of the horror he had seen in the faces of the other pixies.

"This is James Hook," Tinkerbell introduced the pirate to the pixies flying beside her. "James, this is Queen Narida and two of her guard, Ridley and Tenley."

All three of the pixies were fair-skinned and blonde, just as Tinkerbell was, but James spotted several differences as well—in body shape, wing size and color, and the amount of dust each pixie gave off. The two in front held long spears that looked like enlarged porcupine quills across their chests, flanking the pixie with the largest wings and who gave off the most dust, undoubtedly the queen.

The queen's expression remained one of calm passivity. James, having previously been instructed by Tinkerbell, crossed his left arm and hook across his chest and pressed his right fist against his forehead in the standard greeting. Tinkerbell had warned James that, unless a pixie other than her spoke on his behalf, his time to plead his case would be limited to the few minutes the queen would allow. If he wanted to make a plea, every second mattered.

"I am Queen Narida," the leader flanked by bodyguards said. "Speak your piece, human." Her voice carried the calm tranquility of a still ocean on a summer day, and James had no idea how she managed to stay so calm when the majority of her clan had just been captured, and the rest covered in a substance that limited their ability to fight back. Peter Pan would easily be able to take the rest of them.

A male pixie with a bulbous nose near James's right shoe hissed, loudly and rudely enough to be well heard, "That *scart* does not belong here." The queen raised a warning eyebrow at him, and Tinkerbell's entire body turned scarlet. Other pixies, primarily those covered in blood, snorted their approval at his words.

"Those other *scarts* did this to us!" another chimed in.

James hadn't the faintest idea what a *scart* was, but judging by the reactions of the pixies, he didn't have to think very hard to figure it out and hastened to use the comment as an introduction.

"You are right," he said in a carrying voice. "Humans don't belong in Neverland. Your people have been mistreated, abused, and enslaved by Peter Pan for years. I participated in those atrocious acts myself for a time."

So many hisses followed his words that James nearly cast his eyes around to ensure that serpents weren't converging on them. He hastened on, "I cannot express the level of shame and guilt I feel because of my actions. Know that I have worked tirelessly since abandoning Peter to save as many pixies and Lost Boys as I could."

"The Lost Boys." The words sounded like an oath as they slid out from between the lips of one of the bodyguards. "They do not deserve—"

"Every living creature deserves to be treated with respect," James interrupted. "That means pixies, mermaids, and yes, even humans."

More hisses. "But," he continued, projecting his voice a little louder to carry over the mutinous muttering, "that does not give Peter Pan or the Lost Boys the license to encroach on your territory. I ask for your aid to rescue your comrades and help rid Neverland of humans forever, including me." Tink's head whipped around at his last statement, but she said nothing.

A fluttering of wings rippled around the clearing, bathing the glen in a gentle jingling noise. Encouraged, James went on in a booming voice, pacing the clearing in confident strides while still taking great care to avoid treading on the tiny creatures around his ankles.

"I know you're scared and worried. You have endured unimaginable pain and have lost your kin to the boy who you raised. But imagine with me! Imagine a land with no Peter Pan and no Lost Boys. You and your children would never need to fear capture. Mermaids and pixies could co-exist without interference, the way Neverland was intended to be. No pirate ship will sully the beaches. All I need is your help this one time, and I promise to never ask again."

The pixie queen held up her hand to silence him and turned to the group at large. “Your time is up. Does anyone present wish to allow the human to proceed?”

A yawning silence met her request. James felt as though his chest was being constricted by barrel hoops as he scanned the faces of all those present. Tink’s face shone brightly from the middle of the crowd, and James sent a silent message through his gaze. Would any of those present be willing and ready to fight back so soon after a traumatizing attack?

“Let the human speak.” One of the bodyguards, with shocking green eyes and spikey honey-colored hair, stepped forward. Her tightly muscled legs were covered in skin-tight leggings, and she clutched one of the porcupine quill-like spears in her right hand. Her left fist crossed diagonally over her chest as she met his gaze. “My name is Tenley. I will hear you out.”

“As will I.” The second guard stepped forward, the one with hair the color of sun-ripened wheat who had a round face that closely resembled Tinkerbell’s. She held no spear and bore the heaviest strains of golden pixie blood, but carried an aura of unmistakable confidence about her. “My name is Ridley, and I will hear him, too.”

Queen Narida appraised the two pixies who had spoken up on James’s behalf. “What did you have in mind?” she finally asked, turning back to the pirate.

“Pan has captured your kin.”

The crowd nodded silently.

“We have to fight back *now*,” James said. “Now, while he thinks you are too scared to retaliate, and before he has time to put up a defense. I’ll get my crew to fight, and the mermaids can aid us—”

His heart fell as the queen shook her head. “Your passion is admirable, human. But I cannot ask that of my people when they have just witnessed one of the greatest tragedies in our history.”

Looking around, James had to admit that she had a point. Most of the pixies looked terrified, with tears streaking down their faces. One father clutched his two small children to his chest, as if to protect them from James’s plan. He knew they were in no position to fight. What madness had possessed him to ask?

“Your cause is noble, and we sincerely appreciate your efforts in fighting to protect us, but we are a peaceful people.”

“Then help us keep the peace!” Tink burst out. Her face was still red from the outrage of Peter’s actions and the shame at her people’s continued refusal to fight, even to defend themselves. “Neverland has gone too long without true harmony.”

“Keep the peace by bringing about death and destruction? Such a plan seems hypocritical to me.”

“It’s keeping the peace by preventing kidnapping and death! It will preserve families and protect everyone from Peter Pan. He’s the plague that needs to be blotted out. He—”

“As I said, it is a noble cause. But I will not ask that of my people.” Queen Narida inclined her head apologetically. “We need time to heal, not more war.”

A murmur of agreement rippled through the crowd at the queen’s words. Tenley and Ridley exchanged expressions that James could not fathom.

“You fools!” Tink’s voice quivered as she stood in front of James. “This man isn’t here asking you to help humans. He is here to help *you*, to free all of Neverland, and you *scarts* are too arrogant to see it!”

The queen did not seem fazed by Tinkerbell’s outburst. “Be that as it may, there is too much danger for those involved.”

James bowed his head. “I understand.”

Narida’s expression softened. “We are pixies, not warriors.”

“You don’t have to be!” Tinkerbell shouted, glowing red again. “But you are too self-absorbed to see that we have to fight! Some things are worth risking your life for! Sometimes—”

“Tink,” James murmured, “their free agency has been taken away before. I won’t take advantage of them; I’m not like Peter.”

Tink trembled with fury. “I will fight with you, James.” She threw a disgusted look at her fellow pixies. “I will not be a coward who idly stands by and allows Peter Pan to dictate the course of my life. I don’t care if I need to align myself with pirates and mermaids, because at least I’ll live out the remainder of my life knowing that I stood for freedom.”

She rose into the air and flurried her fully dried wings over James. Pixie dust showered over him, coating him much more effectively than on the flight to Pixie Glen. James floated up, and Tinkerbell took his hand.

Tink remained quiet on the flight back. Before, Tink had described her people as risk-averse and shy, but James had never imagined that they

would almost unanimously refuse to participate in the plan that would rid their lands of the intruders forever. Based on Tink's stout defiance and impulsivity, James assumed that her fellows would follow in her footsteps, particularly after witnessing the cruelty that Peter was capable of firsthand.

When he voiced his observation, Tink sighed. "I've spent so much time with you, so my thoughts are probably more human than pixie now." She ground her teeth. "I grew up with them! I should never have expected them to—" She broke off and sniffed angrily, then cast a backward glance at where Erosion Mountain was fading from view and changed topics. "James, you didn't really mean that you would leave too, did you? Neverland is your home now, too."

"But it isn't. I've never belonged here, and I've committed too many crimes to be welcomed, even if they had agreed to help me. They would forever be afraid of me, and I can't blame them. They have suffered too much. A life lived in fear is no life at all."

"You can't leave!" Tink's face colored to a gentle pink as her voice rose. Then in a quieter voice, she whimpered, "You can't leave me."

"Come with me," James offered just as softly. "I don't want to leave you either."

Tears filled Tinkerbell's eyes. "I can't go to London." Her large wings fluttered, sending showers of dust onto the ground below, and she threw a glance at them. "I'd never be accepted."

A smile tugged at James's mouth. "Who said anything about going to London?"

Tink blinked in surprise. "But...you said you'd leave."

"Rumor has it that while there is no room on the island for humans, there may still be room in this world." With a quick and meaningful glance at Tinkerbell, he added, "And for any pixies who are willing to come along, I'm sure. We could explore and discover my ship's origins together."

"I'll always stay by your side, James, even if everyone else in the world abandons you." Tink kissed James. He clung to her, clung to the only shred of happiness and hope that he still possessed, and they revolved slowly in the air, hovering over Neverland's great canopy of trees.

The jarring sound of raised voices shouting back and forth finally broke them apart. James saw that his crew had navigated the *Hope of London* around the southwestern tip of Neverland and come to rest inside of Mermaid's Lagoon. The black flag at the top of the mast waved just above

the trees. At the same time, the same jangling of hundreds of pixie voices rose directly from where Pan's treehouse hideout was.

Tink gave James a hard, blazing stare full of determination and fire. "Let's end this once and for all."

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CHAPTER 30



There was no time for preparations. It seemed as though Peter must have gone to fetch another mermaid to collect more blood to continue their war against the pixies, for a deep track in the sand along the beach showed where the Lost Boys had dragged another mermaid from the sea. They mustn't have gotten far, for no mermaid was on the sand, and soaked spears from the merfolk stuck out of the sand at angles. The *Hope of London's* crew were all ashore, clashing sword against sword with the Lost Boys, who all shrieked with glee at the "game."

Smee rushed ashore, much to the utter shock of his grandchildren, and gathered them into his arms. "Grandfather?" Wendy's thin voice cut through the sounds of rolling waves and shouting boys. "What are you doing here in Neverland?"

Smee smothered her into a hug. "Wendy, my darling girl, I came for you. We need to go home."

"But why?" Michael's tiny voice joined in. "We're having fun."

"Some things are more important than having fun," Smee answered wisely. His eyes twinkled through his half-moon spectacles. "Or even more important than leading an army." He nodded at John, who dropped his umbrella point to the ground.

"So...was it all really true? The story you told us about you and your mother?" Wendy asked. "And...how she died?" The old man nodded solemnly.

The rest of their conversation went unheard as chaos swirled up and down the beach. Peter flew around like a tornado, showering the Lost Boys in pixie dust so they rose into the air, out of reach of the pirates. Mermen

hurled spears anytime one of the Lost Boys floated too near the shore, and the pirates shouted in alarm, trying to catch the ankles of the boys and tug them away from the dangerous projectiles, floating along like some weird balloon.

The boys in turn kicked out at the pirates or fired more porcupine quills through their dart guns. Ozzy roared in pain as a sharp quill tore through his ear. Chibu clung to the shins of two boys who repeatedly kicked his head as he tried to drag them down to the sand. Peter laughed gleefully at the havoc and egged each of the boys on in turn, maintaining his distance from the fierce, armed merfolk. Rolland aimed a bucket of water up at Peter Pan and caught James instead as he flew in to help. James plummeted the final few feet to the ground, crashing in a spectacular explosion of sand.

“Sorry, captain!” Rolland shouted as he dashed back to the water’s edge for more water.

Each pirate had paired off and was trying to take down a Lost Boy, and once again, James was struck by the disadvantage that their compassion brought on. His crewmates were afraid to strike any blow that would injure the young boys, a sentiment that Peter and his band did not share. The boys laughed and kicked at the pirates, showering them with rocks and porcupine quills.

Sand covered his arms and neck, and he could feel a knot on his head swelling where it had struck a rock when he fell. Lights danced in front of his eyes, and he blinked hard. Bumps and bruises would heal over time. But time...time was a precious gift these boys would never get back. The sight of Smee shielding his grandchildren from any further harm galvanized James into action. They needed to get home. They needed to be free of Peter Pan...all the Lost Boys did. Regardless of his former feelings toward George, he couldn’t bear the thought of Smee returning to find his son aged and close to dying, just as Smee’s mother had been. Every second was vital.

James struggled to his feet and threw a hasty look at one of the spears, clutched in the hand of a particularly fierce-looking mermaid. While the weapon wasn’t much more than a sharpened stick, with the force from her thickly muscled arm behind it, the effect would be devastating. When he enlisted the help of the mermaids, this wasn’t what he had had in mind. The pirates couldn’t allow the Lost Boys to get too close to the water, nor could they fight them in the air.

Peter Pan darted in and out of the fray, causing mayhem where he could and dodging anytime a pirate swiped at him. “C’mon, you old codfish, what’s wrong?” Peter taunted, pelting James with empty vials. “Afraid of a little boy?”

James’s vision turned red as he saw the empty vials rain down around him, some with a few remaining drops of the green blood that had served to kidnap an entire clan of pixies. He drove his heel into them, grimacing with satisfaction as he felt them crunch into a powder beneath his boot. How dare Peter Pan treat living creatures as mere playthings, toys to be discarded and abused at his pleasure?

“Come and get me, Jimmy!” Peter called as he flung the last vial at James. It broke across James’s forehead and left a cut across his cheek.

James slashed at the air with his cutlass, but Peter laughed and dodged. “Can’t fight me in the air, can you, Hook?”

“Maybe he can’t, but I can!” Tinkerbell had retrieved a narrow rapier from the *Hope of London*, which she brandished at Peter, placing herself squarely between James Hook and Peter Pan. She grinned at the look of incredulity that crossed the boy’s face. “What? Afraid that without your stash of green potion, a *pixie* may best you in a duel?”

“Tink, no!” James shouted, his panic reaching a crescendo.

Peter tossed his red hair out of his eyes. “If Captain Hook is so cowardly that he lets a *girl* fight his battles for him, then so be it.”

“Don’t!” James pled with Tinkerbell. The idea of her risking her life cut through him like physical pain.

“I want to do this, James,” Tink shouted back, though her eyes never left Peter. “I *need* to do this, and there are still pixies that need you.”

Of course—the pixies at the treehouse. If Peter had left them there and been drawn out into battle with all the Lost Boys, that could only mean that the freshly captured colony of pixies were currently unguarded.

Frantically, James looked around for anyone, *anything* to help. All his crewmates, sustaining injuries right and left, were fighting to capture the Lost Boys while still trying to refrain from hurting the children. Smee had drawn his grandchildren up near the forest line and was protecting them from harm, with little Michael in his arms. Tinkerbell and Peter circled each other, and Peter pulled a long dagger from his belt and leered at Tinkerbell in a way that made James want to punch him right in his smug little face.

The merfolk couldn't come on land, and no other help was coming. If James was going to free the pixies, he would be on his own.

"Go, James!" Tinkerbell shouted, then charged at Peter Pan. The pirates on the ground grappled with Lost Boys, simultaneously trying to keep them away from the water and prevent them from joining in the fight against Tinkerbell as Peter and Tink swirled up in an uncontrolled spiral of pixie dust, each trying to gain the advantage.

Though every muscle in his body screamed at James to protect the woman he loved, James knew what Tink wanted him to do. He turned and ran toward the jungle.

James sprinted along the soft ground between Mermaid's Lagoon and Pan's treehouse, stumbling as his foot caught in hidden holes or on protruding vines, but each time, he wrenched it free and dashed off again, clutching at the stitch in his side. With each pounding footstep, the thought pumped through his mind, *Stay safe, Tink. Stay safe.*

He rushed to the treehouse, ignoring the sharp pain throbbing in his lungs. He could save the pixies, now. He had to.

James crashed through the underbrush as he neared the treehouse hideout and could just see the enormous green-painted crate, dangling from the fort Peter had constructed. Around the large crate hung smaller cages, each containing a single woodland or glen pixie, no doubt ones who had been previously captured. James was so intent on reaching it that he nearly fell into a deadly trap.

Barring the path to the pixies was the mighty crocodile, its beady eyes fixed on James's approach as it thrashed its tail viciously. Drawn, no doubt, by its foul attraction to the copious amounts of pixie dust trickling down from the cage, the creature that had consumed his left hand waddled forward, enormous jaws opening wide. The pixies in their green-painted cage clutched at the narrow wires and chattered in high, jangling voices to warn the pirate of danger. James, with his grip becoming sweaty, unsheathed his sword.

James leapt forward to slash at the crocodile. He had expected the reptile to retreat, but it didn't. It lunged forward and snapped its razor-sharp teeth, catching the blade between its jaws. James wrenched on his sword and at the same time bashed the crocodile in the eye with his hook. The crocodile released the sword and withdrew a short distance, writhing in agony as blood poured from its left eye.

Glancing down at his hook, James felt avenged. It wasn't an eye for an eye, but an eye for a hand almost seemed like an equitable trade. The tiny pixies in the cage cheered wildly as James hacked at the crate to create a hole large enough for the pixies to escape from. Once freed, they flitted up into the trees and out of sight.

Their departure reminded James of Tink's escape from Pan all those years ago. "Be free," he murmured. Panic gnawed at his stomach as his thoughts traveled back to where Tink and Pan were battling on the beach of Mermaid's Lagoon. Would Tinkerbell be able to escape again?

There was still work to be done. The large crate hung in disrepair, and James pried open each of the smaller cages. As he unfastened the lock on the final cage, the tiny pixie inside jabbered in a high-pitched voice and gesticulated wildly, pointing her finger behind the pirate's back. Whipping his head around, James spotted the crocodile advancing once more, low to the ground as it stalked its prey.

"Brace yourself," he warned the pixie, not taking his eyes off the beast prowling his way. Without looking, James used his metal hook to splinter the cage, freeing the final pixie. As she squeezed herself out and took flight, the crocodile attacked once more.

It raised its heavy body off the ground and ran at James with surprising speed. He swiped his cutlass down at the beast's snout, opening a deep cut across its nostrils. The reptile let out a hissing growl that made the hair on the back of James's neck stand up. Again and again, he slashed at the monster, and each time, the crocodile evaded the blade. One person alone was not enough for this battle.

In one fluid motion, the crocodile spun and used its tail to knock James's feet out from under him. He lost hold of his sword, then fell onto it, the sharp blade slicing open his hand as he tried to brace his fall. Dread filled Hook's chest as he scrambled backward over the jungle floor, away from the reptile's advancing jaw, which was wide open and ready to consume more of the flesh it fed on before. A flurry of movement caught James's eye. The final pixie he had rescued was back, and she darted between James and the crocodile.

Though the crocodile was missing an eye, it couldn't miss the golden trail of the pixie. It snapped its wide mouth at the passing pixie, which circled and then shot past again, effectively drawing the crocodile's attention away from the pirate. With a swarming akin to bees, all the pixies

James had freed swooped down from the trees, pelting the crocodile with pebbles and porcupine quills. The tiny projectiles did nothing more than irritate the creature, and it snapped at the huddle of pixies, all clustered together so brightly that they appeared to be a shooting star.

The pixies drew the crocodile away from James and it crashed through the jungle, continuing to snap its jaws in the air. James groaned as he pushed himself upright and examined the cut on his hand. It was deep and would likely need stitches. Blood poured from his hand, making it impossible to grip his sword in an effective manner. He sheathed the cutlass and tried to staunch the flow of blood, but it was useless. He needed to rest and have it patched back up by Chibu—something that wouldn't happen until the battle was over.

The battle. James grumbled an oath. If only the pixies who drew off the crocodile had showered him in enough dust to fly. Not that it would have mattered anyway, as he was still wet from the poorly thrown bucket of water.

James froze as a faint sound pierced the air. He had heard many noises in his lifetime, but this was a sound he hated and feared above all others. It was the sound of Tinkerbell in pain.

He sprinted back to the beach, blood pouring from his hand, desperate to reach Tinkerbell before it was too late.

CHAPTER 31



James's heart sank as he surveyed the landscape when he burst out onto the beach, chest heaving and sweat streaking through the grime covering his face. His crew was losing the battle, badly. Several cowered with their hands over their heads while the Lost Boys rained anything they could collect on them.

The merfolk hovered in the shallows where the water touched the sand, just lying in wait for some unsuspecting Lost Boy to venture close enough to throw their lethal spears. Smee crouched, trying to protect little Michael from the scene while John leapt about and Wendy clutched her face, nails digging grooves into her cheeks as she watched the fighting.

But none of those scenes paralyzed James with more fright than when he lifted his gaze to find Tinkerbell. Peter Pan had the pixie's thin arms behind her back as he held a dagger to her throat, the same blade that had cut off James's hand.

"Stop!" James roared. "Let her go, Pan."

Time seemed to freeze. The Lost Boys halted their assault on the pirates, who all raised their heads. Every eye was on Peter Pan.

"Ah, Captain, finally worked up the courage to fight your own battles instead of running and hiding? I wondered if you would."

"Let her go," James repeated, never once taking his eyes off Tinkerbell's face. Her features were crumpled in pain.

Peter *tsked* loudly, and the sound was easily heard throughout the suddenly still beach. Even the birds refused to sing and waves forgot to roll. James even forgot to breathe. Nothing mattered to him more than Tinkerbell's safe return.

“Captain, Captain, Captain Hook,” Peter crowed. “You will never learn, will you? I play to win. I’m willing to take risks, and you will always fail because you don’t.” He smirked at James. “It’s too bad, really. We used to have fun, you and I.”

James couldn’t focus on anything except Tinkerbell. She was in danger, and he was powerless to stop the greatest villain Neverland had ever known. Smee’s grandchildren had peeked out at the scene, curiosity making them unable to hide their faces any longer, and Wendy held her hands up to her mouth as she gazed up at the slowly revolving pair of Tinkerbell and Peter Pan, far out of James Hook’s reach.

“Please.” James’s voice came out as a groan.

Peter grinned wickedly, his face twisting into an unpleasant leer, and looked at the spellbound crowd. He reveled in having every person’s attention solely on him. “I take it that you already took my pixies I worked so hard to gather?”

“If you mean *freed* the pixies you *enslaved*, then yes,” James responded. He only had eyes for Tinkerbell, who was grimacing in pain as Peter dug his nails into her arms and tightened the dagger against her throat. “Release Tink!”

Peter crowed in laughter. “I don’t think so. If you deprived me of my pixies, then I think it is only fair to take the one you care about away from you.” His hand twitched, and Tinkerbell let out a gasp as the blade dug into her skin.

“No! I’ll do anything,” James offered in a rush.

“Anything, you say?” Peter pounced on his offer faster than the crocodile had devoured James’s hand.

James nodded mutely.

“Well, then, let’s find out how much you actually care about this pixie. You claim that you want to defend them, and I vote we put that to the test. We’ll play one final game, shall we?”

Sick dread knotted in James’s stomach. What sadistic amusement did Peter have in mind?

“Let’s play...” Peter sneered, “*Who You Want to Keep Alive.*”

Faces all up and down the beach fell. Mermaids dotted the shallows, drifting closer so slowly that they barely looked to be moving at all. Many of the pixies James had freed had congregated in the trees, woodland and glen pixies alike, their eyes wide as they stared at their captured fellow.

Even the Lost Boys looked thoroughly disenchanted with their leader's unmasked cruelty.

"Hypothetically, who would you pick to keep alive?" Peter asked. "One of your crew, or this...girl?" He shook Tink's arms slightly, and the knife dug into her throat until a thin trickle of golden blood spilled from her neck.

"Tinkerbelle!" the entire crew roared as one.

Peter smirked. "So easy when it's hypothetical. Shall we make this more interesting? Who would you choose to keep alive...*yourself* or her?"

"Her," James answered without hesitation. Tink's eyes were closed, and James doubted she had heard a word that had been said. He doubted she could think about anything other than the knife at her throat.

The smirk on Peter's young face broadened. "Then prove it."

A collective gasp echoed up and down the beach. The pirates stared at their captain, waiting for orders.

"Bring her down, and we'll trade." In an undertone to the rest of the crew, James added, "The moment he comes down, rush him."

Peter chuckled softly. "I know what you're planning, and no. If Jimmy Boy really wants to prove that he loves pixies more than himself, as he has claimed, then he will lay down his weapons and come empty-handed. Now we'll see where his loyalties lie."

Instantly, James threw his cutlass down to the ground, where the impact caused a small shower of sand granules to cascade out from under the blade. The pirate then pulled his dagger out of his boot and cast it aside, ignoring the throbbing from his still-bleeding hand.

"Your hook?" prompted Peter.

James unscrewed the metal hook from the cuff around his wrist and placed it on top of the sword. He held his arms wide, showing that he was unarmed.

"Captain, no," Ozzy objected.

"I won't leave her." James's voice choked slightly. This time, he knew Tinkerbelle heard him as two silent tears trickled down her face.

Peter tutted softly. "As tender and adorable as this is, your time is running out, Captain Hook. Do you want to save this pixie or not?"

"Take care of the crew," James said quietly to Chibu, "and Tink." Then he turned and walked forward with his head held high and shoulders thrown back.

“Now release her!” he bellowed when he was directly beneath Pan. Blood from the gash to his hand dripped beside him, staining the white sand a deep shade of scarlet, but James didn’t care. What did a cut matter if his life was on the line, anyway? All that mattered was that he kept Tink safe.

“Rascal, come over here,” Peter barked. He pulled Tinkerbelle back, away from James’s approach, and back toward the ocean to prevent any attempt by the pirate to free Tinkerbelle.

One of the Lost Boys approached slowly. Though he held a short sword in his hand, he looked no more ready to use it than a mother would on her own child. “What...what do you want, Peter?” he asked, his voice shaking.

“Let’s see how you can handle the infamous Captain Hook. You can even have Buzz and Rocky help you finish him off, if you want.”

“No!” Tink cried out, strangled and garbled as Peter’s dagger pressed against her throat.

Peter shook her roughly. “Quiet, pixie!”

“I...I thought you said this was a game, Peter.” The boy whose sword was directed at James shook, his brow contracting as his lip began to quiver. He couldn’t seem to look James in the eye. Now that the time had come for him to take a life, he faltered, just as James had when faced with the prospect of actually killing Peter Pan.

“Don’t hurt her, Peter!” one of the Lost Boys called out. “I don’t want to play anymore.”

James didn’t even try to defend himself. He knelt in the sand, arms hung limply at his side, staring up at the woman he adored. If there was to be one final image in his mind, he wanted it to be of her face.

Peter dropped a few feet in the air but remained high enough that none of the pirates would be able to rush him. He looked at James with a curious expression on his face, a combination of confusion and pity.

“I don’t understand you,” he eventually confessed. “We killed pixies together for years. What makes this one different? Why are you willing to die for her?”

“I love her!” The words erupted from James, echoing louder than the rush of the waves, louder than the cry of the seagulls, and managed to quiet all of Neverland in an instant. Peter floated backward in surprise, dragging Tinkerbelle with him, as if blown back by the force of James’s declaration. No one—not a pirate, Lost Boy, mermaid, or pixie—spoke as James repeated in a softer voice, “I love her.”

Tink mouthed wordlessly at James, but no sound came out. Peter looked between James and Tink, his knife still pressed against the pixie's throat. He seemed to be struggling internally. He rose his eyes to the audience, taking in everyone—the pixies staring wide-eyed and terrified from the trees, the merfolk motionless in the water, and the humans, pirate and Lost Boy alike, watching him closely to see what he would do next. Could he be feeling... remorse?

The dagger at Tinkerbelle's throat dropped slightly as Peter's face puckered and his shoulders slumped. One movement from the water finally drew James's attention away from Tinkerbelle and to the merfolk who had stayed out of the battle all this time. Unbeknownst to Peter Pan, he and Tinkerbelle had drifted close enough to be within firing range. A sharpened spear hurled toward Pan, propelled by the immensely strong chieftainess.

A long, loud shriek echoed along the beach as Wendy screamed. As Peter leapt into action and pivoted away, James watched in slow motion as the spear flew through the air, no longer directed at Pan, but at Tinkerbelle.

"No!" The word tore James's throat and was ripped from his body with a force far greater than the one directed at Tink. The blood drained from his face as he watched the sharpened spear penetrate Tinkerbelle instead of Peter Pan, mere inches above her heart.

The silence that followed was the sort that only lasts a moment or two but feels like it lasts hundreds of hours, if not years. It was the moment when James realized that nothing would ever be the same again.

Peter, whose face had suddenly gone ashen, dropped Tinkerbelle as if stung. She flapped her wings, but so feebly that she plummeted to the earth, too injured to fly. With a frenzied yell, James rushed to catch her. They collapsed together, with Tinkerbelle cradled in James's arms.

Pandemonium broke loose.

The glen pixies, enraged that Pan had used one of their fellows to block a deadly projectile, flurried around Peter Pan. Though still coated in mermaid blood, they snatched at his hair, sank their teeth into his skin, and pummeled him with their tiny fists. The woodland pixies, led by Tiger Lily, grew to their full size and charged Pan in a tornado of pixie dust. Lost Boys shouted in alarm and dropped to the ground to avoid the oncoming rush of pixies. The pirates shielded the boys from harm, snatching them up and running away from the vengeful merpeople and pixies toward the tree line, where Smee and his grandchildren gestured them closer.

The enormous crocodile burst out of the jungle, hissing furiously as it thrashed its head from side to side, using its one remaining eye to glare at the humans in its path. The pirates skidded to a halt, sand flying in every direction as they looked frantically between the crocodile in front of them and the merpeople on the beach behind them, and to the pixies swarming Peter Pan in the air.

“Gentlemen, the hour of valor is upon us!” John flung aside his top hat and drew his pointed umbrella. “Attack!”

As one, all the Lost Boys and pirates rushed the crocodile, while Wendy shouted warnings and admonitions from behind them, keeping a wary eye on the merfolk. “Do be careful, John! Grandfather, stop Michael; fighting crocodiles isn’t safe!”

The pirates hacked at every bit of the crocodile they could reach while still avoiding its lethal teeth, punishing it for all the pixies it had eaten over the years. John led the Lost Boys in the continued assault of the beast, felling a blow on its other eye with the point of his black umbrella. The crocodile snapped, hissing its anger and weaving its head blindly this way and that.

The battle below was nothing compared to the one above. Pan, having already exhausted his stock of mermaid blood when he captured those at Pixie Glen, swatted his hands wildly at the pixies, both human- and pixie-sized. Anytime he managed to push one away, it was replaced by at least two more as every pixie from every tribe in Neverland congregated, finally fueled into action and ready to rally together. Overwhelmed by the sheer mass of pixies swarming him, Pan crumbled and was forced into submission.

Ignoring the bedlam swirling around him, James continued to cradle the dying Tinkerbell in his arms and stroked her face. Her entire body shook from the pain, and her eyelids fluttered as she weakly reached up to touch the shaft that had penetrated her chest, then raised her fingertips to trace along James’s jaw.

“Did we win?” Her whisper was barely audible and her eyes drifted in and out of focus.

“Yes, of course,” James replied without glancing up to confirm the validity of such a claim.

A watery smile crossed Tinkerbell’s face. “Then it was worth it.”

James blinked back tears, determined to not cry during Tink's final moments. His throat closed as he stared at the pixie's pale face. This wasn't how he'd imagined things would turn out. If anyone was supposed to die, it should have been him, not Tinkerbell. Nothing was worth losing her, not even Neverland's freedom.

Tinkerbell's eyes began to cloud and a violent shivering shook her thin body. "It's cold," she whispered. James rocked her back and forth, tight in an embrace that he wished would never end.

She mouthed words again, and James bent close enough to hear her faint murmur. "I love you, Captain Hook. I always will." Her breathing slowed and became shallow as her hand dropped from James's face, eyes flickering shut. The golden glimmer that lit up her beautiful wings slowly began to fade, and her wings drooped, shriveling as life slowly trickled out of Tink's body.

"No," James whispered in a strangled voice. It felt as though his heart had been cut in two. He couldn't go on without Tink. He couldn't. He glared at the spear meant to end Peter Pan's life. It protruded from Tink's chest at an odd angle, causing the wound to expand as the weight of the long shaft drove the butt of the spear down. James couldn't bear seeing it mutilate Tink so.

He shifted Tinkerbell so his handless arm supported her head, then used his bleeding hand to wrench the spear free. She gave a tiny moan of pain, and James watched her golden blood seep from the wound. He placed his hand over the injury, pressing firmly so he didn't have to see her lifeblood draining from her body. "Stay with me, Tink," he begged. "Stay with me, please. I can't lose you."

Tinkerbell didn't answer. Inhales came in short, ragged bursts, with increasing lengths to the pauses between her breathing. Tears dripped down James's long nose, falling to splatter against the back of his hand where he had it pressed on the wound near Tink's heart. He gathered Tinkerbell close to him, her thin body wilting in his arms. She looked the way he felt—torn to shreds.

All of Neverland's pixies gathered around, bringing Peter Pan with them, who was bound and trussed with a gag in his mouth. He stared, wide-eyed, at Tinkerbell's limp form in James's arms as the first Lost Boy of Neverland sobbed over Tink. The Lost Boys, Smee, and the pirates—who had finally succeeded in killing the crocodile—joined the throng of pixies,

staring in horror at the dying pixie. Even the merpeople had ceased their assault as James bent over Tink to press a tender kiss on her lips as a final goodbye.

The expansive hollow inside James's chest shriveled. He knew that no matter what he did, he would never feel whole again. No matter how many meals he consumed, the empty void inside him would never be filled.

James didn't spare a thought for anything or anyone else. All he cared about was that Tink was dying...

Or was she? The golden sheen to her wings began to return, a faint shade of pink tinged Tink's cheeks once more, and she stirred feebly before her eyes cracked open. "James?"

"I'm here." James searched her face hungrily, desperate to share any time left with her.

"What...what did you do?"

There was no doubt about it; Tink was miraculously reviving. Her wings expanded to their former size and fluttered, showering pixie dust into the sand with renewed vigor. James lifted his hand to peer at the place where the spear had punctured her.

They both stared open-mouthed at the wound, which had knitted, repairing itself just as effectively as James's wrist had been healed after he lost his hand. In wonderment, James raised his bleeding hand, which had likewise mended. He and Tink gazed at it as they realized the last of Neverland's secrets that Peter Pan, with all his experiments and testing, had been too selfish to uncover.

Just as pixie blood had the ability to heal human wounds, human blood did the same for pixies. A collective gasp went up from the crowd as Tinkerbell sat up, examining the spot where her wound had been only moments before.

"How did we never know about this?" she asked in amazement.

James had no answer, but Tenley, the pixie who had first spoken up on behalf of Tinkerbell, did. "What human before you would have ever made such a sacrifice for a pixie?" She threw a dirty look at Peter Pan, who hung his head in shame.

Tinkerbell had eyes for no one except James, who was still holding her and looked as though he never wanted to let go. Ignoring the vast crowd clustered about them, James stared back at Tinkerbell, feeling a bond with her that transcended all else. Knowing what he had nearly lost, he wasn't

willing to repeat the experience. He never wanted to be parted from her again.

He no longer cared that he was a human and she was a pixie; it didn't seem important whether he was a pirate and she was a spy. He didn't know what either of their futures looked like other than he wanted her with him. All that mattered was that he loved Tinkerbell with every breath in his body and always would.

Without moving from where he was crouched on the hot beach, gritty sand digging into every part of his tired body, James tucked a strand of Tinkerbell's blonde hair behind her ear and asked, "Tink, will you marry me?"

She beamed. "Of course I'll marry you, you old pirate."

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CHAPTER 32



The wedding between Tinkerbell and Captain Hook was the grandest event Neverland had ever seen. The Lost Boys, who humbly admitted their wrongdoings after seeing their leader's true colors, seemed eager to prove their value. They cleared the beach near Mermaid's Lagoon of all dried seaweed, driftwood, and fallen palm fronds, then arranged stalks of fire lilies to line a trail along the shore.

The only person not invited was Peter Pan. The pixies all agreed that they never wanted to see his face again, so the pirates locked him in the *Hope of London's* brig, where two pirates guarded him. Peter sat hunched in a corner of his cell, whether ashamed of his previous behavior or because he had finally been captured, no one knew or cared to find out.

James's heart swelled with joy as he stood beside Smee, who was serving as best man.

He had done it. Neverland was saved, and he, James Hook, was about to be wed to the most incredible woman in the world. Just thinking about Tinkerbell made James feel so light, it was as though he had been doused with pixie dust.

Mermaids and mermen floated in the water closest to the sand, their heads and shoulders visible above the rolling waves, while others sat on the sun-bathed rocks to have a better vantage point. Lost Boys played on Peter Pan's collection of reed pipes while a choir of pixies sang along with them. The crowd of human-sized pixies mingled with the pirates in a vast, shapeless mass. James had no idea what a traditional wedding for a human was supposed to look like, but he was certain that the officiator was not usually surrounded by hundreds of glittering pixies. He had thought,

somehow, that there would be more order, not a huddled mass of people pressing in on him.

Queen Narida hovered a few feet off the ground at the center of the circle and spread her arms wide, looking into the distance. The crowd quieted and turned to watch Tinkerbell glide toward the congregation. James caught his breath as he saw her step through the archway constructed of flowers and vines. This was how he wanted to remember her for as long as he lived. She was radiantly, breathtakingly beautiful. A shimmering golden gown flowed behind her that matched her wings, which were glowing as James had never seen them glow before, and Tink's cascade of blonde hair waved gently in the breeze. There were *oohs* and *aahs* from the crowd as she glided down the sandy aisle toward James, her wings humming behind her.

All the pixies overhead, some glowing green and others gold, fluttered above the knot of wedding attendees, bathing them all in a heavy sprinkling of sparkling pixie dust that only increased in quantity as Tinkerbell drew nearer. Several children, Lost Boys and pixies alike, reached their hands out to catch the sparkling golden glitter that shined brighter than the blazing sun overhead. Each fragment of dust seemed to catch the sun's light and reflect it tenfold as it descended on the crowd.

The crowd parted to allow Tinkerbell to enter the heart of the cluster of people. When Tinkerbell reached James, she beamed and wrapped her fingers around James's and gave a gentle squeeze. His mouth hung agape as he stared at her, unable to believe that this radiant goddess was about to become his wife. After a lifetime of things never turning out how he planned, James couldn't believe his good luck. He wanted to freeze time and live in this moment, with this pure happiness, forever.

The pixie dust continued to flurry down and soon, everyone was lifted into the air. Pixies, pirates, and Lost Boys joined hands to form three circles of various sizes around James and Tinkerbell. Queen Narida nodded to the circles, and they slowly revolved around the couple, each circle moving at a different angle so that James felt caught at the center of a giant floating ball.

"Pixies, pirates, and merfolk," Queen Narida began, "we are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Captain James Hook and Tinkerbell." She paused while several of the pirates let out whoops and whistles, cheering for their captain.

“This marriage symbolizes much more than the unification of two lives into one. This marriage ushers in a new era—one in which pixies and humans can coexist in harmony and peace. When two souls bind themselves to each other, they are promising to fly and fall with that pixie... or human,” Queen Narida amended, then directed her attention to Tinkerbell and gestured at one of the slowly revolving circles that spun around them. “Tinkerbell, just as these circles have no end, do you pledge your love to this man, understanding that such a pledge has no end, and you vow to bind your life to him and only him for as long as you both shall live?”

“Yes.” Tinkerbell extended her right hand. The queen wrapped a length of shimmering golden fabric around her wrist then turned to James, lifting the other end of the fabric as she did so.

“Captain James Hook?”

James extended his right arm. The queen didn’t wrap his hand right away as she had done with Tinkerbell. Instead, she appraised him silently for a moment as the three circles spun around the ceremony.

“I never thought I would see the day in which a pixie would marry a human,” the queen said calmly. “I doubt any of us”—she gestured at the pixies—“ever dreamed that such a union could take place. But Tinkerbell never doubted.” She smiled at the blushing bride, then fixed James with a piercing look.

“James Hook, just as these circles have no end, do you pledge your love to this woman, understanding that such a pledge has no end, and you vow to bind your life to her and only her as long as you both shall live?”

“Yes.” James looked deep into Tinkerbell’s enormous blue eyes, which were shining in adoration. As Tinkerbell smiled back at James, all of Neverland seemed to fade away around them, leaving them on a private, secluded oasis of happiness. He barely felt his wrist being wrapped, so that his fingers joined Tinkerbell’s as the queen tied the knot binding their lives together.

The three circles around them began to spin increasingly faster until they became a whirlwind of swirling gold. “I now pronounce you husband and wife!”

James lowered his head and kissed Tinkerbell as all the pirates spinning hand-in-hand with the pixies whooped and cheered with such gusto that colorful birds in the nearby trees took flight in alarm, swirling up to the sky.

Pixies joined in the celebratory shouts, all trailing glitter that flurried in every direction. Mermaids in the lagoon below slapped their tails on the water's surface, sending showers of water droplets into the sky. The sunshine pouring down from above caught the droplets and painted a rainbow that arced across the sky as all of Neverland celebrated the newlywed couple.



The festivities lasted all day, nearly until sundown. The pirates were preparing the *Hope of London* for their upcoming expedition, leaving Tinkerbell and James on shore to say their final farewells to the pixies and mermaids.

Tiger Lily crossed her fist across her chest as she appraised James. “You’re all right for a human.”

James inclined his head. “I suppose you’re all right for a pixie.”

The ghost of a smile flickered across Tiger Lily’s face before she turned to hug Tinkerbell and wish her luck.

Queen Narida, who stood nearly as tall as James, held out the leather sack of pixie dust that she had reclaimed from Pan’s hidden stock. “Human, I thank you for your assistance. You have given us back our homeland and restored our hope for the future. You will always be welcome in Neverland, James Hook.”

James held his hook and hand up level with his shoulders. “I accept your gratitude, but I cannot take anything else from you. I’ve had enough of taking dust from pixies to last several lifetimes. And as grateful as I am for your invitation, Neverland belongs to you—to the pixies and merpeople. Humans don’t belong here, but I shall cherish the memories forever.”

Tinkerbell chimed in, “We heard of a country across the sea where humans live. We sail for that land.”

Queen Narida nodded. “Use caution. I have heard tales of a creature that haunts those lands, and it is not to be trifled with.” She lowered the bag and

looked at it with a slightly puzzled expression, as if she didn't know what to do with it.

Smee stepped forward, little Michael still clutching his hand, and cleared his throat. "If I may, could I have use of the pixie dust?"

He glanced back down at Michael and gave his grandson's hand a small squeeze. "I think it's time I took all these boys home." Then, after a moment's pause, he added, "Boys and girl." Wendy rocked back and forth in her light-blue slippers, smiling shyly beside John.

The pixie queen nodded and held the bag out to Smee. John held his hand out solemnly to James while his grandfather accepted the pixie dust. "Captain Hook, pirate or not, it has been an honor and a privilege to make your acquaintance."

James's face twitched to conceal a grin as he extended his hand to shake. "Likewise, John Darling. You take good care of your family."

"I shall strive to be worthy of my post."

Wendy rolled her eyes at her brother's pomp and ran forward to hug Tinkerbell and James, squeezing them into a tight group hug. "I'm ever so glad we were able to meet. This has been such a lovely adventure, and I'll never forget you. I do hope that Peter Pan learned his lesson. He ought to be grateful that you allowed him to stay alive. I would be horrified if I behaved as atrociously as he did!"

Smee patted her shoulder. "That's enough, Wendy dear."

Finally, Smee clasped James's hand in farewell, tears shining in his eyes. James gripped Smee's hand, then pulled him in for a tight hug, hook snagging on the back of the older man's shirt. After detangling his hook, James leaned back to look at his friend once more. "All those wrinkles, and I still think of you as that small boy I helped not all that long ago."

"Not long ago for you, perhaps, but many, many years ago for me. I still remember it like yesterday, just as all these children will treasure their memories. Don't ever fear age, my friend. For with it comes wisdom and the knowledge of a full life."

Smee turned back to the children and clapped his hands. "But now, it's time for us all to make new memories! Everyone say goodbye."

"Goodbye, goodbye!" chorused the children. They linked hands and turned their eyes skyward as Smee sprinkled each of his grandchildren, himself, then the Lost Boys with pixie dust. "This will be a memory we will never forget, but now, we must move on with our lives."

As one, they all rose into the air. With Smee at the head of the group, they floated farther and farther away until the second star to the left of the moon winked, and they were gone.

“Hoist the anchor and let’s set sail!”

The mermaids in the distance waved and called goodbyes with their screechy voices while the pixies flew in formation, trailing pixie dust in spectacular swirls across the sky in farewell. Their jingling speech was added to the mermaids’ voices.

James’s heart swelled. Though parting from the land he had spent the majority of his life in was difficult, he was glad it would finally be able to flourish and return to its natural state, unhampered by the tampering of Peter Pan, Lost Boys, and pirates who stripped it of its resources.

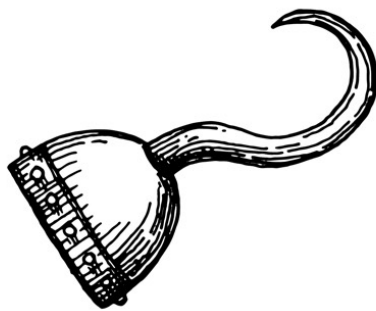
Securely locked in the brig until he could face a trial for his crimes, Peter Pan would never return to Neverland, James would make sure of it. Never again would he allow Peter to conduct his twisted experiments on the magical creatures of Neverland. Pixies would be able to fly free and without fear in their homeland. Soon, the tales of Captain Hook would fade into legend.

Tinkerbell leaned against James’s chest, her long blonde hair blowing behind her in the wind rushing over the ship’s bow. James draped his arm around her, and she raised her pinkie finger to link it with his hook. She leaned her head back onto his shoulder, and James grazed her lips with his own.

“Are you ready for our next adventure, Mrs. Hook?”

“Always, Captain.” She plucked his hat from his head and put it on her own, then returned her gaze to the line where the sky met the sea.

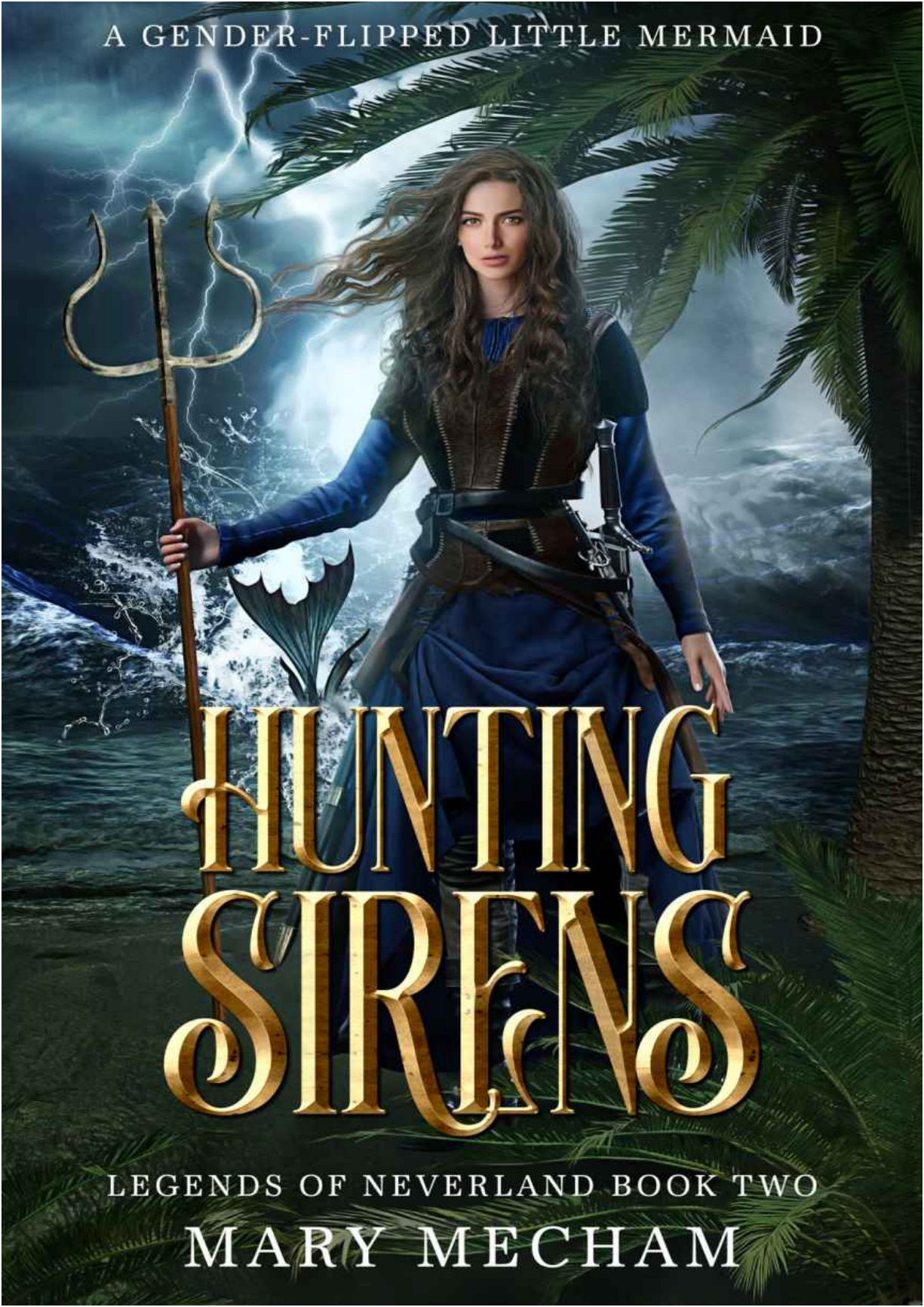
Sunset stretched across the water, bathing it in a sea of color and light as the sun dipped lower on the horizon, still speckled with the golden glow of pixie dust. Finally, all that was left was the majestic silhouette of the *Hope of London*, mesmerizing against the blazing half circle of the setting sun. Neverland was saved at last.



IF YOU ARE CURIOUS ABOUT WHERE JAMES AND TINK WILL TAKE PETER PAN AS they venture beyond Neverland, watch for the next book in the series...

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A GENDER-FLIPPED LITTLE MERMAID



HUNTING SIRENS

LEGENDS OF NEVERLAND BOOK TWO

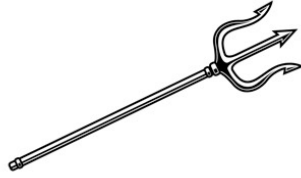
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A GENDER-FLIPPED LITTLE MERMAID RETELLING



(Legends of Neverland Book 2)

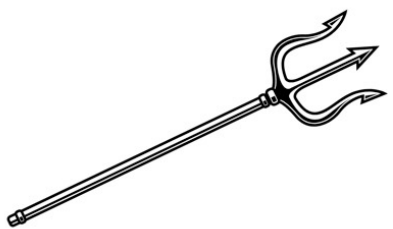
She was destined to hunt sirens to extinction... but can she complete her mission before one of them captures her heart?

Trapped on an island nation and surrounded by bloodthirsty sirens, the starving people of Haven Harbor are losing hope. Treva, a Deaf blacksmith immune to the tempting call of the sirens lurking in the deep, steps into the perilous role of Siren Hunter. If she can rid the waters of enough sirens, her people could be free at last.

Unbeknownst to her, another creature dwells in the sea, even more ferocious than the dreaded sirens. When Treva faces the monster and loses, her life is saved by a handsome siren who has no voice. Can mortal enemies set their differences aside long enough to unite their nations? Or will Treva ignore her growing feelings and finish what she started?

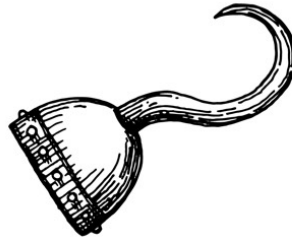
Treva is certain of one thing—that the famed Siren Hunter of Haven Harbor would never fall for one of her prey.

Hunting Sirens is the second book in the Legends of Neverland series but can also be read as a stand-alone novel.



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Happy Reading,
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Hunting Sirens

Inspired by “Little Mermaid”

Poisoned: Snow White’s Story

A Disability Inclusive Snow White Retelling

Ugly: The Stepsister’s Story

Inspired by “Cinderella”

A Curse of Gold and Beauty

Inspired by “Rumpelstiltskin”

Laurel of Locksley

Inspired by “Robin Hood”

Laurel and Baron

The sequel to “Laurel of Locksley”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary is a born and raised Texan with a love of theater and books overshadowed only by her passion for disability advocacy. After she was cast in a theatrical production of Cinderella as the Ugly Stepsister, Mary decided to give a voice and background to her character and created her first novel *Ugly: The Stepsister's Story*.

When she is not writing, Mary is an active disability advocate and speaker and holds multiple leadership positions in various disability rights related organizations, including running her own non-profit and coordinating Disability Book Week each year. Her dream is for everyone with a disability to find themselves represented in literature.

Mary lives in Texas (and will never leave!) with her husband and three children.



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