
PETER & PAN

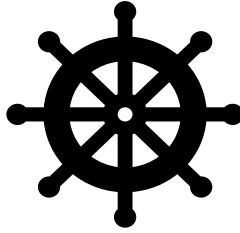
HOW PETER BECAME PAN

WRITTEN BY DIMITRI BALCAEN

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BASED ON 'PETER PAN' BY J. M. BARRIE
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TO NOAH AND ROBIN

I'd sail the seven seas for you



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DIMITRI BALCAEN**

PETER & PAN

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SISTERS OF THE ATOM

Sisters of the Atom - The Hunt (Dutch)

Sisters of the Atom - Collision (Dutch)

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GRIMOIRE

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I

THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR

James could hear his neighbours screaming for help, but he kept on running. The safety of his family was all that mattered now.

From afar he could see that the flames had already reached his house. How had the fire been able to spread so rapidly? Half of Bishop's Lynn seemed to be ablaze by now. During the docking of his ship it hadn't been as bad. But a little voice at the back of his mind had urged him to run. He didn't care what his crew thought of that.

James was their captain, though more in spirit than in rank. As smugglers, he and his men were happy to take advantage of the ongoing conflicts between France and their native England. But now, at the end of what we would eventually call the Hundred Years' War, it looked as if their luck had run out.

Smuggling had not made them rich. This was now convenient for James, who couldn't afford a sturdier front door. A well-placed shoulder combined with his fast approach were enough to break into his own home.

It was suspiciously quiet. No blaze to be seen here. For now, only smoke had found its way down the stairs. But that worried James all the more. What if they were still in the bedroom? He was about to rush up the wobbly stairs, regardless of the hell that awaited him there, when he saw the figure sitting in the corner.

'Audrey?'

No answer. But it had to be her. Fear gripped James' heart. She didn't move, but the glow of the flames that had begun to burst through the ceiling was reflected in her eyes. Fearing the worst, he crept up to her.

The smoke was already beginning to take his breath away. The heat was increasing by the minute. Although it became more difficult to see anything in the room, James didn't lose sight of two things: the door and his wife. The latter was almost within his reach.

He could see her face clearly now. While James' eyes were tearing from the smoke, there wasn't a drop to be seen around hers. James was ready to give up hope and continue the search for Peter. But then his eye fell on her chest. The movement was minute. It only stood out because the rest of her body was so still. She took short, jerky gasps of air.

'Audrey?' he asked again. He took her by the shoulders and shook her gently. Perhaps he had imagined it, but James thought she glanced at him for a moment. That was all he needed. He had to get her to safety. This had to be done first. He couldn't worry about Peter now.

The room wasn't that big, but it was sufficiently packed to cause confusion in the smoke. James had made one crucial error. In his preoccupation, he had lost sight of the door. The smoke was now beginning to intoxicate him as well. Thinking became more difficult with every gasp for air. His actions became sluggish. Even his wife, whom he otherwise lifted with ease and swung around at Peter's delight, now began to weigh him down.

They had to get out as quickly as possible. And with haste came risk. Something hit James' shin harder than expected. Probably just a stupid stool that Peter had left lying around, but under the circumstances it was enough to knock him down.

Even before he hit the ground, James had lost all hope. He would die here. Not on the high seas, as Audrey had always feared, but with her in his arms. The only thing missing was Peter.

'Capt'n? Where are ya?'

James couldn't believe what he was hearing. Had he followed him? The simple soul. He didn't know any better.

'Smee! Over here!' James replied wearily.

He looked up and saw the chubby figure coming towards him.

If he dared to go through the flames ahead of him, James could hardly let him do everything alone. With great difficulty he found his second breath and crawled upright. Smee was now at his side. The smiling man looked at him with the eyes of a worried child.

'You good?'

James nodded. 'Audrey needs to get outside quickly. Help me out.'

'And Peter?'

James didn't answer. He bent down and lifted up Audrey by himself. That made him waver again. But despite his many faults, Smee had taken the hint. He would never ignore an order from the captain.

James had roughly seen where Smee had come from. That was good enough to redirect him in the direction of the door. Together they hauled Audrey out without further incident. James made sure there was enough distance between them and the house before they stopped. Their house, his home, wouldn't last much longer.

When he was sure that they were safe, as safe as they could be in the inferno that surrounded them, James dropped to his knees. Audrey was still frozen. James saw that Smee wanted to ask if he was all right and stopped him. He didn't have the courage to say 'no'.

Because of the smoke, it was still painful to breathe. But it was even more painful for James that, back in the open air, he could think clearly again. Several times he looked back at the building and then back at his wife. Reality began to sink in. He hadn't been there for them when they needed him most.

Unashamedly, he cuddled up to his wife. His face was wet with tears. Smee, too, couldn't hold them back any longer.

'Audrey, I'm so sorry. I didn't find Peter. I couldn't find him...'
James sobbed into her ear.

'... Peter...'

The word was no more than a sigh, but it burrowed into James' brain. Was he imagining it? It had to be. He sat up straight.

Audrey lay as motionless as before. Even her eyes remained unblinking as they stared into the night above her.

'Capt'n, look,' said Smee.

James followed the gaze of his surprised crew member up to Audrey's hand. To his surprise, he saw it tremble. Every now and then, her index finger would twitch, only to snap back immediately. James' gaze followed the direction in which she pointed. There lay the stables. It couldn't be a coincidence.

With great difficulty and some help from Smee, James managed to stand up.

'Smee, stay with Audrey. If anyone passes by, ask for help. Or at least water, so her eyes don't dry out further. I'm going to find Peter,' he said.

Smee nodded. He may be a simpleton, but James couldn't imagine anyone more loyal. For the time being, Audrey was in good hands.

James staggered towards the stables. The fire had not yet reached there, but it wouldn't take long. It didn't belong to them, but Peter enjoyed all his adventures there with his friends. Would he be so brave now, between the panicking horses that could stampede at any moment?

The gate to the stable was ajar. That was a good sign. From outside, James could already hear the fearful cries of the animals. Every now and then a horse would stomp and try to break open the stable door. James had always heard that they could smell danger.

James wondered where the stable owner and his hands were. Probably out helping to fight the fire. Still, it was strange that none of them had stayed behind to lead the horses out. James would have to do that himself once he had found Peter. He wasn't exactly what you would call an animal lover, but he couldn't bear to leave them to their fate.

'Peter? Where are you?!' James shouted.

No answer, though it was quite possible that James' cries were lost among all the whinnying. For an 11-year-old, there were

plenty of places here where an adult would never be able to find you. James knew only a few of Peter's hiding places. To lure him out of the others, a stern word had usually been enough.

'Peter! You don't have to be afraid. Dad's home again!' cried James.

'Ah. The boy was right. He said you were going to come and get him.'

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere. At once the stables fell silent. The horses hardly dared to move. They would sooner face the fire than what had just spoken. This was the difference between fear and terror.

'Henry? Is that you? This is no time for jokes! The fire can reach us at any moment,' James called back.

The stable boy was known for his inappropriate jokes and recognisable but above all voluminous figure. A figure that James now saw slumped against the wall, just like Audrey, with eyes wide open. A pitchfork was clutched in his hand.

'Is that his name? He tried to come between me and Peter,' it echoed.

James gulped. As a man of faith, he began to fear that dark forces were at work here. Yet he tried to hide his fear. Weakness would be the end of him. He was sure of that.

'Are you worried about *him*?' the voice asked disdainfully.

James shook his head. Audrey had shown signs of improvement, however small. With any luck, that meant their condition was only temporary.

'Only about Peter' he replied.

'I can guarantee you that he is in good hands.'

James listened carefully to the words. He hoped that with some luck, he would be able to trace their origin. But the answers the voice gave seemed to come from every direction.

Since that didn't work, James tried to appease the voice. 'I don't doubt it. Thanks for keeping him safe. But I'm here now. Let me protect him from here on out.'

That made the voice laugh. A sound so deep and animalistic. It

took a lot of effort for James not to tremble. Nevertheless, there seemed to be something sad hiding underneath the mockery.

'If only it were that simple,' it echoed, 'Tell me, what is your name, sailor?'

'James. James Barrie.'

'Well, James, allow me to repeat myself. Your son is in good hands. Trust me when I say you'd better leave now,' reiterated the voice.

The voice sounded so convincing that James almost complied. Almost, but not quite. His thoughts were occupied with other things. He had scanned the entire room during the conversation. Around him there was nothing to see. Logically, only one place remained.

'Not without Peter.'

James looked up. Instinctively, he made a sign of the cross with his hands. There, between the beams, was the source of the voice. In the dark it was just a frame, but it suggested enough. James saw two curling horns on its head, glowing green eyes and a hole in the middle of the creature's chest. Behind it lurked a smaller silhouette.

'You shouldn't have done that, James,' growled the creature.

There was no time for hesitation. Even before the phantom had spoken his words, James was at Henry's body. He snatched the pitchfork from his frozen hand. The fingers let go with an unpleasant crack. But James had no time to feel guilty. He heard something that sounded like a couple of musical notes. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement. Driven by fear, he turned around, ready to send the beast back to hell.

And stood face to face with Peter.

It had been several weeks since James had seen his son. Boys his age often go through growth spurts. But this was simply impossible. James glanced down and saw what he had feared. Peter's feet were not touching the ground.

The eyes that looked at him were just as soulless as those of the others. The rest of his body seemed to be contorted as well.

Only his mouth could move freely.

'Don't worry, Dad. Pan said he will take good care of us,' said James' son.

James didn't believe a single word that came out of his child's mouth. But at least he now knew the name of his enemy. That in itself was worth something.

'Why are you doing this to me?' he shouted without looking up. Who knows what could happen if he took his eyes off Peter for a moment?

'Doing to you? James, I'm giving you something no one else got: a chance to say goodbye,' Pan replied.

From between the beams, a few more notes resounded. Peter's feet touched the ground. His muscles seemed to relax. Before James could do anything, his son had already pulled him into an embrace. He had not done that since he was a toddler.

The pitchfork clattered down on the floor. James didn't know what to do.

'I can't let you go, Peter,' he said.

'We have no choice,' Peter replied bravely.

James knelt down and took his son in his arms. He grasped as hard as he could, even though it hurt Peter.

'Do you hear me, Pan? I won't let go of him!' cried James.

'I'm sorry, James. I know how painful it's to lose a child. But we need Peter. He's a ... special boy,' Pan said soothingly.

'Don't you dare take him. I'll kill you if you try!'

But Pan didn't even give him the chance. A short tune was enough to turn James into a statue. A change in tone and Peter pulled loose from his father's embrace. James could only watch helplessly as his son rose into the air. Their eyes crossed one last time, but it wasn't his son who stared back.

For a moment it seemed as if James was alone. The horses began to whinny again. The smoke gathered and the fire couldn't be far behind. James could only stare helplessly ahead. Yet he was sure he felt a presence behind him.

'I hope you survive this, James. I'm not as cruel as you think.

But if you make it to dawn, I advise you not to pursue us. Next time I may not be so understanding,' Pan whispered to him.

With these words, Pan disappeared into the night.

James was left behind between the wild horses and the helpless stable hand. After what seemed like hours, but were probably minutes, he saw the first flames appear. The dry straw on the floor would feed and multiply it. Above him he could already hear the roof creaking. James didn't need to look up to know that this wasn't a good omen.

The situation seemed hopeless, so James decided to do the only thing that Pan couldn't take away from him: pray to God. The chance that He would come to his aid was small. But who knows? Perhaps there was still justice in the world.

III

GODSPEED

Wake up, James. Your time has not yet come.

Those words echoed through James' mind as he awoke. Was that what he had prayed for? An answer from a higher power? No, he couldn't bring himself to believe that. It was probably just his ego talking to him.

Reluctantly, James opened his eyes. But everything around him was dark. He heard voices, but they sounded distant and hollow. His whole body ached. And yet, it should have been worse. Had he not seen the fire approaching?

In any case, this couldn't be hell. His suffering wasn't that bad. Hesitantly James started feeling around. Soon his hand touched something. It still felt warm and he was sure he could feel it crumbling. He tried the same with his legs, but he couldn't stretch them that far.

The truth dawned on James. Against all hope, he had survived both the fire and the collapse. Now he had to escape from under the rubble under which he was now trapped.

Could this be called luck? James doubted it, after what had happened to Peter. But it was a better situation than he could have hoped for. At least this time there was hope.

James now began to twist himself into the strangest of positions, hoping to assess his situation. He didn't have much room, but soon he felt the draught of the upper world. He pushed aside everything he could and began to make the hole bigger. Soon there was light coming down the small hole. But James didn't dare go any further after he recklessly pulled away a piece of wood and felt the beam that was lying on his legs slide away.

The cry of pain echoed in the tiny space. James was sure they were not broken, but both feet were beginning to lose feeling. That meant that blood was no longer flowing through them. If he stayed in the pit much longer, the result would be worse than a simple fracture.

'Hello!?'

For a moment James thought he was hearing voices again. But this one came from the small opening he had made.

'Help! My legs are trapped under a beam. I can't move,' James shouted back.

'Hold on. We'll get you out,' replied the voice.

The voice came through the shaft loud and clear. So clearly that James even heard what he said to the others.

'Can you believe it? There is still someone alive under all that rubble. How are we going to get him out from under there?'

'With a lot of effort and even more patience.'

James pretended that he had not heard. He could have shouted back that he was afraid of losing his legs, but that wouldn't have made any difference. In any case, the men would do what they could to get him out from under the rubble as quickly as possible.

There was nothing left to do but wait. James was used to it by now. On the high seas, that was often the case. But at least then you could make yourself comfortable. Now James thought back to the experiences of last night. He wondered how Audrey was doing and feared what would happen to Peter.

Revenge grows best in the dark, nourished by pain. Pan, who in James' eyes had to be an emissary of the devil, had said not to follow him. James wouldn't follow that advice. Even if it cost him his life, he would get his son back.

The numbness had now spread through his legs. At first it was a relief, a respite from the constant pain. But the thought soon faded. James had once seen an accident where someone's leg had been under a rock for hours. He had not been there when the quack cut it off. The possibility of the same fate befalling him haunted his mind.

It's easy to lose your mind in the dark. But the ever-closer sounds of debris being hurled around kept James on the right track.

'Are you still there?'

'Yeah,' groaned James. He bit back that he wasn't really in a position to leave. It wasn't too late for them to throw some extra stones on his makeshift grave.

'Just hold on a little longer. We're almost there.'

The voices were already sounding clearer. One of them was definitely from a friend.

'Lift, you lazy bums!' James heard.

With one last effort, the largest chunk was lifted away. At once, it became freezing cold. The light of the chilly December sun blinded James.

After blinking a few times, he began to see his saviours through half-open eyes. His neighbours, the same people he had run right past when they needed him. He was going to feel guilty about that for a long time. Next to them stood Bill Jukes, one of his more mouthy sailors.

'Morning, Captain. I'm glad we found you,' he said optimistically. Yet James heard something more in his voice. Something wasn't right.

The other men raised the beam in the meantime. As soon as it hung a few inches in the air, Bill, together with another neighbour, dragged James out of the hole. The beam plopped down with a sound that betrayed its weight.

'Thank you, Jukes. Did Smee send you?' asked James.

Meanwhile, he tried to get up. At first glance, there was no permanent damage to his legs, but it would be a while before he could get back up on his own.

'Smee? No, Audrey sent us. We haven't seen Smee since he brought her to the ship with some passers-by,' replied Bill.

'Audrey! Is she all right?'

'Barely, Captain. We took care of her as best we could, but me and a couple of others had to take care of our own families.'

There was that undertone again. As if Bill wanted to ask something, but didn't know how to start.

'Bill, what is it?' asked James, who was in no mood to beat around the bush.

'Well, your boy and mine are pals, aren't they?' asked Bill hesitantly.

'What of it?' asked James.

'Audrey said you were here to look for him. Do you think...'

'That Hob was here too? No, I would have found him then,' said James. But that didn't reassure Bill at all.

'It's just... I can't find him anywhere, Captain. And just before we found you, we found someone else. Completely burnt. If it isn't Hob, and since you were looking for Peter here...'

This time it was Bill who didn't finish his sentence.

'No, Bill. That must have been Henry. Peter's not here,' murmured James.

'Oh, praise the Lord!' cried Bill, far too loud.

The others around them looked at him angrily. Bill didn't care. There was still hope for his child. That was all that mattered to him.

'I don't think we're welcome here anymore, Jukes.'

'As if we weren't used to it already,' Bill replied.

James leaned on Bill and hobbled off down the rubble. As he passed, he tried to thank his saviours as much as he could. He saw the stable owner staring at the charred body of his servant. Someone had already gone to him to confirm his identity. For a moment James wanted to go and talk to him, but he wouldn't have believed him anyway. James wasn't even sure whether he believed it himself.

'Don't mind them,' said Bill, misreading James' expression.

'I couldn't save him,' said James. His rational side told him he had other things on his mind at the time, but still it gnawed at him.

'Well, you probably tried,' Bill replied.

Wrong, I even broke his fingers before he died, James thought.

'And besides, be happy that you're still in the land of the living. You haven't seen Henry. It's a miracle you got away with this. You're not even bleeding,' Bill continued.

Had it been a miracle? Or just pure luck? James couldn't imagine that Henry had not prayed at least as hard for his life. So why would God have spared him?

'They are going to blame me for his death,' said James.

'Aye, but they do that with everything. Those suckers still resent that Audrey preferred a dirty outsider like you over them.'

James glanced at him sideways.

'Their words, not mine.'

Yet he was right. James had been a lost soul before he arrived in Bishop's Lynn. He had already lost count of the years he had wandered. He had forgotten the reason for his pilgrimage the moment he first laid eyes on Audrey. That she in turn chose the poor pilgrim above all others, nobody had understood.

The two walked on in silence for a while. Around them, a few houses still smouldered. In general, a large part of the city had been spared. The fire was mainly confined to the neighbourhoods around the harbour. Still, James thought it took on a strange pattern. Here and there an individual house seemed to have been set on fire just like that.

'Say, Captain.'

'Jukes?'

'Do you think everything is all right with the boys?' he asked. And there Bill revealed his true nature. The man was feared in the surrounding neighbourhoods because of his appearance. Although tattoos dated back to classical antiquity, in 1453 it was still a spectacle to see a man tattooed from head to toe.

He himself never spoke about it, so many rumours circulated. Children whispered about a pact he had made with dark creatures, while their grandparents gossiped about a criminal past and the punishment he now had to bear. The only thing James had managed to get out of him was that his wife liked it. She was the only one who knew the truth behind it, because above all Bill

cared about his family.

'I don't know, Jukes. But we'll do everything we can to find them.'

James could already see his ship. He had not bothered to give it (or her, according to everyone else) a name, despite the insistence of his crew. They would have chosen something obscene anyway. But James reasoned that a name didn't add much value to a smuggling ship.

Nevertheless, James had to admit that he was proud of his vessel. The caravel was cutting-edge technology in that era. No other ship was as manoeuvrable and easy to steer. A few journeys back, they had managed to make a good deal with a Portuguese 'trading partner'. James wisely ignored that a few ships of the Duke of Viseu happened to be hijacked around the same time.

When the two-master had first been moored, it had attracted a crowd of spectators. Now it was the same, although this time the ship served as a gathering place. They were the kin of James' crew members. That made them one big family. A family that seemed smaller than usual.

Where are all the children? thought James.

He and Bill reached the group and were warmly received. Each of them looked up to James. In him they saw a born leader who had brought them all together. James, however, saw it differently. He saw outcasts, just like himself. People who were doomed to choose between crime and death. He had simply taken the choice out of their hands and made the crime as mild as possible.

There was a lot of gossip, speculation, contemplation and conjecture around them. Occasionally someone tried to speak to him, but James stayed out of the conversations. He didn't have to be part of them to know what they were about.

Eventually they found Audrey with Bill's wife, Mary. Some of the crew had put together some crates to give them a seat. There was still a blanket around her shoulders. The tears on her cheeks were not yet dry and she was still shaking from her paralysis. She saw him, he saw her. James pulled himself loose from Bill's

grip, even though his legs were barely cooperating. No one was surprised when he sank to his knees at her feet and hugged her around the waist.

'Did you find him?' she asked.

James' silence said more than words ever could.

'Did... Did you see *it*?'

She feared the answer more than the silence.

'Yes,' he whispered.

'We're not the only ones,' said Audrey.

James raised his head and looked at her.

'Why doesn't anyone say anything about it?'

'Look around you. It's all they are doing. But none of them talk about that ... that devil. Almost all of them tell a different story. The only thing that remains the same is that the children have disappeared,' replied Audrey.

'All the children?' asked James.

'As far as we know, it's only the surrounding neighbourhoods. Every family here has lost at least one person. Some of them even more. But never younger than three or older than twelve.'

James couldn't help looking at Bill. He and Mary had given them some privacy. Mary was in a bad way. In a few weeks their son would have turned twelve. That had to be eating away at them.

His gaze wandered over the group surrounding the ship. Every face was either sad or worried. James couldn't believe it. Something inside him broke.

'Help me out,' he asked Audrey.

With her support, James got up the crates. He stood there unsteadily, but at least it attracted their attention.

'Our children have been taken! Aren't you furious?' he cried.

'Of course we're angry, Captain,' replied Robert Mullins, father of two girls, aged 4 and 6. The Navy had discharged him for intoxication. James had helped him get off the drink by reminding him of his responsibility as a father. He now bore the scar above his eye from that encounter with pride.

"Then why are you still talking? I know what each of you has seen, even if you don't dare to talk about it! Are we going to leave our children to that fate?"

In terms of a speech, this was crap. James looked as if he could collapse at any moment. But there was a strength behind his words that his legs couldn't muster at the moment.

'But Captain, we don't know what to do,' remarked Alf Mason. His eldest son, Roger, stood beside him. He was just under 16. The youngest of four, Wyot, was nowhere to be seen. He never knew his mother. Although Roger had proved himself a guardian of his little brother in recent years, there was still a place for both of them at Audrey's table when Alf and James were away.

'How can you say that, Mason? In front of your son! You should be busy getting everything ready for departure. We're going after our children!'

This provoked some cautious cheering.

'Mr. Barrie,' said Starkey, the only one who called James that, 'Don't forget that there is no trace of the children. Who knows what direction they are going, let alone where they are going.'

Elric Stark was better known among the men as Gentleman Starkey. He was as much an outsider as James. They didn't know much about him, except that he was once an assistant professor in London who came to seek adventure. Now he took it upon himself to educate the children whenever the ship was ashore. Among them he was universally loved.

His good manners and refined appearance contrasted sharply with the rest of the crew, who didn't share their children's love for him, but none of them spoke fluent French, Spanish, German, Greek or Dutch. This made him so indispensable that James had symbolically given him the rank of first mate, even though he couldn't tell port from starboard.

'I... I know, Capt'n.'

James searched the audience.

There stood Smitty McPhee, or Smee as everyone had been calling him for years now. He was trembling under the attention

and had clearly not slept a wink. James had known the old Irishman longer than anyone else. He had been there when the horse had kicked him in the head. He had never been the same since. His wife left him shortly afterwards. But according to James, he remained the best sailor he had had the honour to work with. There are things your hands never forget, even when your brain does.

'Go ahead, Smee,' James encouraged. The man had just saved his life. The least he could do now was trust him.

'Uh...' Smee hesitated. He fidgeted with his hands to everyone's frustration.

'You have nothing to hide, Smee. We have all seen the impossible here, even if nobody dares to say it out loud,' James tried.

'They were flying over the water, Capt'n,' said Smee, 'Really, the children and the devil!'

The crowd erupted in chatter. But nobody dared to laugh at him.

'Nonsense,' shouted Donato Cecco, 'Are we going to listen to someone who still believes in fairies?'

A large part of the audience agreed with him. With his handsome face and charismatic personality, that wasn't difficult. Yet not everyone fell for it. That is why he was here and no longer in Italy. He could handle angry husbands, but the incident with the governor (and specifically his daughter) was beyond his capabilities. Officially, he had no children. Yet today he didn't seem as carefree as usual.

This made Smee even more upset.

'So what? Cecco believes in mermaids!' he muttered.

'Yes, but they are real! I have seen them with my own eyes,' Cecco replied.

'In the dark after a night of drinking. I don't think that counts,' cried Alf.

The group chuckled cautiously.

'Enough!' yelled James.

The laughter stopped immediately.

'Smee, are you sure?' he asked.

The old Irishman nodded. That was good enough for James. But he still had to convince the others.

'If Smee says he saw the children, I believe him. But it was dark and we were surrounded by chaos. That can influence the mind. Just look at Cecco's mermaids. They were probably taken on a ship. Is that possible, Smee?'

It didn't feel right to play with Smee's fragile mental state like that. But this was a matter of the greater good. Smee would have forgiven him, if he understood.

'Maybe,' he said hesitantly.

'There you have it. Human traffickers. It wouldn't be the first time we've had run-ins with them,' said James.

Strangely enough, this reassured the group. A logical explanation for an illogical event. It didn't matter that they didn't believe in it, as long as it reassured them.

'Which way did they go, Smee?'

Smee had previously struggled with every word, but this answer came automatically.

'North, maybe Northwest.'

'Heading for Scotland,' said James, largely to himself.

He looked around him. Everyone was staring at him with hopeful eyes. Now and again there was a look of disbelief, but that was their problem. As long as he had enough men to run the ship.

'Well? What are you waiting for!' he shouted, 'Cecco, collect all the goods you can find. We don't know exactly how much of a head start they have, so we need to be prepared. Mullins, Mason, you're in charge of the ship. Make use of anyone who is willing and able to help. We're going to get our children back!'

James was so absorbed in his role that he half expected cheers from his audience, but it wasn't the time. His crew fell back to their usual roles, led by the designated crew members. James had never known them to be so diligent.

Bill was still standing nearby. Together with Audrey, he helped James down from his makeshift podium.

'No weak knees, Captain?' he asked.

'Not the time for jokes, Jukes,' replied James. But he couldn't blame him. Everyone handles situations like this differently. Bill hid his worries behind a layer of dry humour.

'Sorry, Captain. What do you want me to do? Help with Alf and Robert?'

'No, bring Smee and Starkey here. We need to talk,' said James.

'You got it,' Bill replied.

Bill left with Mary. She was probably going to help with the other women. The heavy lifting might be for the men, but the subtleties were left to them. James returned to the crates. His legs were still shaking. He leaned against Audrey.

'Are you sure about this?' she asked.

'Yeah. I trust Smee,' said James.

'Then I want you to take me with you.'

James wasn't surprised. That was how he knew his wife. Fearless. His rock in the surf. And that was what he needed most at this moment.

'If I could, I would. But I don't know what awaits us. You saw that demon with your own eyes,' he said.

'James, I ...'

'I can't lose both of you,' he said weakly.

Audrey looked at him. She saw fear.

'Then I will stay here and wait for you,' she said.

She sealed her promise with a kiss on his forehead.

'Thank you.'

They sat together for a moment, while the commotion around them grew. It didn't take Bill long to find Smee and Starkey. When they were facing James, Audrey decided to let them talk. If she had to stay behind, she was determined to do her part now.

'Mr. Barrie, you needed us?' asked Starkey.

'Otherwise I wouldn't have called for you. We need to get everything in order, starting with Smee.'

'Me, Capt'n?' Smee said anxiously.

'Don't worry, Smee. I didn't want to do this in front of the whole crowd. But we need to be sure about what you saw. I thought you had stayed with Audrey. So tell us exactly what happened.'

James saw the man tremble. It took him so much effort to put his thoughts into words. But eventually he would get there.

'Capt'n had asked me to look after Audrey until someone passed by. Capt'n was long gone and then someone came to help. We brought her here. Starkey was here with some others. Starkey helped,' he stammered.

'That's right, Mr. Barrie. There wasn't much I could do, but I kept her eyes moist and tried to keep her as comfortable as possible until one of the men could find a doctor,' added Starkey.

'And what did you do in the meantime, Smee?' asked James.

Smee looked at the ground in shame.

'Well?'

'I ... Uh, I told him he was in the way, Mr. Barrie. I didn't see him after that,' said Starkey.

James could have been angry, but he appreciated the man's honesty. And he had to admit that at that moment there wasn't much Smee could have done.

'It's all right, Smee. You did exactly what you had to do,' said James. With that, Smee's face brightened a little bit. 'But tell me, what did you do after that?'

'Waited on the deck, Capt'n. Looking at the water. The fire was scary,' said Smee.

And yet you ran straight into a burning building to save me, you brave fool.

'And?'

'It was dark. But I have good eyes. After a while I saw many shapes flying above the water. But not like birds.'

'Children?'

'I didn't know it. But then I saw more, much closer. They came from here. And there was something bigger. I saw its

horns,' rattled Smee. He was starting to panic.

'I believe you,' said James. No more was needed. 'But why didn't you notify everyone immediately?'

Smee stared at his feet again.

'Starkey?'

'We found him this morning, sobbing in one of the smuggling spaces, Mr. Barrie,' said Starkey, 'But what he tells us just can't be true.'

'Believe it, Starkey. I have seen it too. If you had seen it with your own eyes, you would have shared the space with him.'

'But...'

'Patience, Starkey. There's still one thing I need to know from Smee,' James interrupted.

Smee looked up. He was still ashamed of his actions, even though James had shown understanding.

'Smee, how fast do you think they were going?' asked James.

It couldn't have been much faster than the ship, Capt'n,' said Smee, confidently. At moments like this the sailor in him came back to life.

'Thank you, Smee. You did well. You may go and help the others,' said James.

Smee left the others with a wide grin. Bill looked at him silently. He hadn't said a word during the conversation, but now he couldn't help himself.

'This is madness, Captain!'

'You don't have to tell me that, Jukes. But that doesn't make it any less true. Didn't you hear the others talking then?'

'Aye, but I thought they were making monsters out of shadows. You know the follies they say about me. But here you say you've seen the devil himself.'

'Not the devil. Pan. That's his name. Does that mean anything to you, Starkey?'

Both Bill and James looked at the learned man with hope.

'Apart from the cooking utensil? Only that it means 'everything' in Greek. And I vaguely remember some Greek demigod with

the same name. But if you expect me to figure out which demon this creature is, you're better off with the bishop,' Starkey said.

'It was worth a try,' said James.

'Was that all, Captain?' asked Bill.

'I think so. It's time we did our bit. What's left to be done?' asked James in turn.

'It looks like everything is going smoothly. But I think a conversation with the harbourmaster is in order, Captain.'

'With Jonathan? Why? I'd rather avoid him as much as possible.'

'Maybe because he's headed straight for us,' said Starkey.

James looked back and saw that the harbourmaster was in a foul mood. They had a certain rapport, even though they didn't like each other personally. Still, Jonathan wasn't a bad man. He knew that the smuggling ship was a lifeline for lost souls, so he let them do their thing. But that he had lost 'his' Audrey to James, he couldn't stomach after all these years.

He stopped right in front of them.

'Barrie, what the hell are you doing? I didn't give permission for this,' he said before the others had a chance to greet him.

'Do we need permission to go and rescue our children?' asked James.

Jonathan thought carefully about his words for a moment. Then, without saying anything, he took a seat next to them.

'You too?'

Bill and Starkey nodded. James didn't acknowledge the stupid question.

'And you want to go and find them by the shore?'

'Pursue seems a better word,' said James.

'I'm not so sure about that. Larkin left this morning with a large group of men in the western direction, after they had found traces of a caravan. According to him it's gypsies.'

'We have our doubts about that,' said Starkey.

'Tell me, what do you know that they don't?'

Jonathan was unmarried and had no children. He had not