



Subjective Pain Scale

He enters, rolling like an old sea-dog. It's Max, and he looks as rough as ever, fresh in from a stormy crossing. He makes for the starboard chair.

'It was a bad night ...' I venture, empathising.

'Aye,' he breathes, his voice rumbling like a propeller under strain, 'twas a foul one that, terrible wind in the bilge.'

He grimaces and so do I. 'Well think of this as a safe harbour', I say, skilfully moving the conversation on. 'How can I help today?'

His expression clouds, his dark brows hanging like threatened rain. 'The wind', he repeats. He motions with a calloused hand: 'In the bilge.'

I remember Max is not a ship's captain after all. I smile reassuringly lest he thinks I thought he was. Probably never 'driven' a ship in his whole life!

'Lost in the deep?' Max asks, reminding me I have gone adrift.

I stand quickly, ushering him to the couch. 'Pedalo over to here and let's have a look at you.' He winces at such a weak link in the nautical metaphor but comes.

There is a solemn silence while I prod and poke. He breaks it with the odd sigh, groan, and filling of sails, but mostly he respects it.

'Well,' I announce, as he regains his chair, 'smoking's to blame.'

He looks up sharply. 'It's a way of life!' He pats at the pipe and tobacco pouch rolled inside his sou'wester. 'A man needs comforts through his toils!' he growls.

'Surely this is affecting your aim, though?' I have remembered his vocation. That pinnacle of applied sports physiology: darts.

Suddenly, he is on board. 'Two things scare me. The first is getting hurt. But that's not nearly as scary as the second, which is losing.'

Yes, and he's a Lance Armstrong-quoting aficionado of past coverage of the Tour de France too. Feeling like we are now a flotilla, I encourage him with a careful misquote of the cycling supertanker-turned-shipwreck: 'Pain is temporary. If you quit, however, it lasts forever.'

He looks at me long and hard. I hold his stare confidently, sensing this is a flat calm,

that a fresh breeze will soon blow. Max's blue eyes hold me like pools on which the sun has not yet set.

'Alright', he says at last, reaching inside his sou'wester and pulling out his pipe. 'Take it and keep it as a memento of respect for what you have achieved here and as a reminder to stay true. Don't go overboard and hound the rest of the boys at the Jolly Roger, mind!'

I take this pipe wrought from purest ivory of narwhal hunted in the far northern ocean. I nod, humbled, murmuring another Lance quote: 'I'm not going to participate in any kind of witch hunt. I've done too many good things for too many people.'

Feeling so smug, I forget to offer any cessation support. He's not getting up to go either.

'I want tramadol', he says simply.

'It's a controlled drug now', I protest, fingering the ancient carved pipe awkwardly.

'I can do monthly visits, but keep it shorter next time.' Suddenly it feels like he's at the helm.

'Would paracetamol do?'

He winces. 'These hips are really bad, and you did like the pipe.'

'I thought you'd won it.'

'Aye captain, and you thought I was a sailor too.'

Sweat is beading on my brow. 'What about your sport?' I try desperately.

Cue his final quote, the *coup de grace*.

'Never a failed test. I rest my case.'

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