

Single Shots



A Pirate's Paradise
by Julia Talbot

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1786 the West Indies

"Well, Mates, the jury is in agreement," cried First Mate Walter Crenna. "We find the Captain guilty. What the punishment, then, as it's you he's wronged, lads?"

Darien Keane, Captain of the Widowmaker for at least a few more moments, glared impartially at his mutinous crew. His bloody First Mate, for fuck's sake, putting him on trial, when he and Walter both knew who had sold off the best of the crew's cut at the last port of call.

Cowardly bastard.

The sun beat down on Darien's head as the men clamored for his untimely end, his hat long lost in his struggles to free himself. He fought the grimace that tried to form when Walter tugged his bound hands, so long tied behind him that his arms screamed in agony with every movement.

"Quiet!" Walter shouted, and an uneasy silence fell.

"Whipping and to the fishes, then?"

"Whipping, aye," piped up the bosun, George, who had ever been loyal to Darien. "But we'll set him out somewhere he's got a chance. You've given us no proof, Walter. None."

Darien smiled a little at his only champion since this whole mess had begun, nodding his head. George had let the men shout him down several times, but this time he seemed intent on holding fast.

"I'll shoot any man who tries to put him on the plank," George said, and he was a good enough shot with the black powder pistol he held in his hand that the men backed away

from him. "Yer all stupid and blind, you are. Captain's been good to us, he has. You'll regret it."

Good man, that George. The men subsided somewhat, murmuring amongst themselves until Walter began again.

"I still intend to exercise my arm against his back!" Walter shouted. "Who's with me?"

Darien sighed. Right bastard. He tilted his head up to watch the sky, the sun dazzling his eyes. It made it easier, for when Walter pulled his head back down the faces of the men faded into a spotty blur, and Darien could not see their bloodlust. The rough cuff to the back of his skull cleared that right out as his eyes watered, however, and lost all of his good work.

"Well, Captain," Walter said, spitting the last word. "Have any last thing to say for yourself?"

"Only that I have been your friend and kept you from the hangman's noose countless times. You think that by being rid of me your guilt will go unnoticed, but you are not smart enough to survive without me, Walter. You shall pay for this somehow, in this life or the next."

He said it slowly, as distinctly as possible with his lip split the way it was, and loud. The sound of truth rang in his voice, and a ripple went through the crew just before the whip cut through the air and landed on his back.

The first blow surprised a cry out of him, feeling like a line of liquid fire bisecting one shoulder blade. After the first, Darien held it in. Damn the man for not even untying his arms, as each blow cut into the skin there as well, and would make it that much more difficult to heal. It would make it

more difficult to function, as well, wherever they chose to put him off.

By the end all Darien heard was the roaring in his ears, and the jeers of the men who held him up. He lost count of the lashes at twenty, and had only the vaguest thought that the most he'd ever administered at one time had been five.

Perhaps he should have been a sterner man.

The buzzing in his head finally proved loud enough to drown everything else out, and the last thing Darien saw as his eyes rolled back in his head was the obscenely cheerful blue sky.

* * * *

"It ain't right," someone said, sounding almost as though they were speaking underwater. "It just ain't right, George. He's hurt bad."

"I know, Robert, me boy. But better this than overboard with the sharks."

Oh. Oh, no, he'd rather have the sharks. Really. Darien croaked, trying to get whoever it was jostling him about to stop, to simply throw him in the water and let him die. Far preferable was that to the excruciating, grinding pain that made everything else singularly unimportant.

"Hush now, Captian," the first voice said. Robert. That was Robert, the ship's carpenter. "You've got you a right nice nest here, you do. And sooner or later sommat will come along, right George?"

"Sure."

He felt them lower him, turn him so he lay on his belly like a dead man floating in the water. Darien snorted, the sound carrying all of his outrage and hopefully none of his fear.

"I know it ain't right, Captain," George told him. "And I'm sorry. I've half a mind to stay with you."

"Then you've only half a mind, George," he managed, his voice coming out raw and unrecognizable to his own ears.

"Walter will stop first off at a major port and offload anyone still loyal to me. You'll be on your way home to England in no time. He'll want his own crew."

"Well, it still rankles, sir, leaving you here."

"What choice have you?" Trying to open his eyes, Darien blinked at the sand and at the tree trunk directly before him. Well, at least they were leaving him in the shade. "Did he allow me water?"

"Aye, sir. Three days' worth, and a day of grog."

"How generous." Darien smiled, letting his eyes drift shut again. "Well, thank you, George. Robert. For everything. You should be on your way."

"But Captain..."

"This is my last order to you. Go!"

"Aye, sir. God speed, Captain," George said, one big hand touching the back of his head.

"And to you, George."

He could not even stir himself to watch as they left. He could hear their footsteps, hear them loose the oars on the dinghy and start to row from shore, and then they were gone.

Leaving him God knew where.

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They'd left him too close to the beach, that much he could tell. Depending upon the tides and the elevation of the land, it might become a problem. Trying to lift his head brought him only another rush of absolute agony, though, so Darien let it go. Let himself drift.

By nightfall he had contracted a fever. His body grew so hot and dry that Darien thought he might just blow away on the wind, should even the smallest breeze arise. He had not been able to bestir himself to take any water, or indeed, take in his surroundings. He simply lay there, his face on the ground, and waited to die. Prayed for it, in fact.

It came as rather a shock to him the next morning to find himself alive. Though, really, he could have been in Hell. The lack of insects and carrion birds eating away at his wounded back and arms made him believe he might be, in fact. Truly, if this was all Hell had to throw at him, Darien thought he might be able to laugh in the face of it. He'd encountered fierce heat and pain before, had he not?

At least he was in the shade. Though if he was in the shade, maybe he wasn't in Hell. And how could he be in the shade in both the morning and afternoon if he sat under the same tree?

It was all too much for his fevered mind. Darien licked his parched lips and decided to just believe he was in Hell.

"You are not in Hell."

Darien started, the voice coming utterly unexpectedly. "Really?" he croaked out. "Are you certain? You sound French. That must mean Hell."

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A merry laugh rang out, and Darien wished he could turn his head, but when he tried his consciousness grayed out about the edges.

"Ah, only an Englishman would insult his savior. Do you have a name, monsieur?"

"Darien Keane. Lately of the Widowmaker."

"This is not a name I know." The man, for it was only a man, not a devil judging from the warm hand that lifted his head, placed a drinking flask at his lips. "Will you take some water?"

Water. Oh. It tasted faintly brackish and lukewarm, but it was the best thing Darien could ever remember. The water slid over his cracked lips and down his swollen tongue in tiny rivulets, easing him like the first run off from a rain eases parched earth.

"Who ... no. Where am I?" Darien asked when he could speak once more.

"I wish I could tell you." The voice was smooth, sweet, like very good rum. Darien wished he had the energy to see if the face matched. "My crew set me off here some time ago."

"You too?" Well, that was both disheartening and reassuring. "What was the name of your ship?"

"The Duquesne."

He thought on that for a long while, but could not recall a ship running under that name along the West Indies and Amercias. "Is it a trading vessel, then?"

"Not at all. A corsair."

"Corsair! You *were* lost."

A long pause followed, and finally Darien braved the pain to look at his new companion. Peering up and to his left, Darien saw a shadowy blur that resolved itself as he blinked into a well shaped man with a heavy beard and dark brown eyes. A mouth appeared amongst the heavy black facial fur as the man spoke.

"We were not that far off course, I believe. No, it was the damned rain that went on for days. Weeks. The men blamed me, said I was cursed. They set me off here ... what year is it?"

"I..." Darien stared. "It is the year seventeen and ninety three."

The little patches of tanned skin he could see above the man's cheeks went ashen, the color leeching right out. "You cannot be serious."

"I assure you, I am."

"You ... I ... You should sleep now. When you wake I will have soup for you to drink, to help you regain your strength. Would you like more water?"

A new note had taken over than smooth voice, a frenetic one that drew Darien's brows together. "I would. And your name, please, Sir."

"Francois Le Blanc," the man said, lifting his head for more sips of water. "Sleep now, English. We will talk more, later."

Darien did as he was bid, letting himself sink back into the healing slumber he so needed. This time as he drifted off, he was thinking not of death, but of how that name sounded very familiar to him, somehow.

* * * *

Francois sat on the end of a fallen tree, staring at the Englishman he had found under a tree on his beach, just like a fallen fruit or nut. Darien Keane was an unknown to him, and Francois prided himself on his knowledge of the Captains of the Barbary Coast. Of course he had been gone a few years, and things changed. The life of a Corsair was a perilous one, as he well knew.

As for the man's assertion that it was nearly one hundred and fifty years he'd been gone, well, it was nothing short of ridiculous. It had to be delirium.

His beard still held no gray, and his bones had not bent with infirmity. As far as Francois could tell from his hash marks carved into a tree, he'd been lost nearly two years. Two years only.

Sighing, he went to make soup using the meat from the bird he'd snared just that morning. He wet the cloths on Keane's back, as well, the herbs he'd crushed helping to keep the bugs away, the covering keeping the birds from being attracted.

The man had still bled when Francois found him, sluggish trails of the red liquid trickling from the torn flesh that could only mean a flogging. The arms and shoulders held bad gashes, but the one across the shoulder blade had flayed to the bone. Francois had packed it and covered it, and had sat and hoped as he nursed the man through his fever.

Maybe with two of them they could build a boat big enough to get off the island and get back to Algiers.

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He wondered, not for the first time, if his lady Duquesne still sailed. Oh, what a beautiful lover she had been to him. Maybe once Keane recovered from his delirium he could tell stories of her. Francois certainly hoped so. Keane seemed far too pretty to be so badly damaged as all that.

The man looked the epitome of anglaise. Gilded hair and bright blue eyes coupled with the accent to make him the perfect son of the Empire. Well, all but the deeply tanned skin. That was the skin of a sailor, certainly.

His little fire caught and Francois put his hollowed out cooking vessel on the flame, filling it with water, meat and herbs. He would add a few fruits later. His store was going to become low quickly with two of them, and he would have to go to the center of the island soon to gather more. Hopefully Keane was a quick healer.

When the soup had boiled long enough for the sun to come around a full quarter of the day, Francois went to wake his guest, settling next to him with a bowl and a rough wooden spoon. He put his hand to the one place he thought might not be sore, the back of Keane's head.

"You should eat, monsieur. It will help you."

"Mhn?" Keane mumbled, trying to stir. "Oh. Bloody Hell."

Francois laughed. "No. Not Hell. Just an island. Come, would it help you to sit up?"

"I don't know." Groaning, Keane propped up on his elbows staring about. "You know, this looks less and less like a West Indies island all the time."

"You say *I* was lost? This is not the West Indies, mon ami. We cannot be too far from Tunis."

Really, the man was damaged. "Twas a shame, too, for he was even prettier than a few hours before, his face less gray with a day's growth of golden beard on him. He made Francois want to cut off his own long beard, made him want to preen a bit just for his benefit.

Most men would simply say they had lived alone so long that even a man looked good. Francois could not claim such, as he had always found men to be the fairer sex.

"All the way up, then," he said, placing a hand flat under Keane's belly and helping to lift. The pain would be excruciating, he remembered that well. But Keane seemed strong enough, despite his damaged mind.

Once upright, Keane glared at him with an expression of complete outrage. "You've quite lost your mind, you know."

Francois pondered that. He supposed it was entirely possible, as he had certainly been quite ill for a long while, not having himself to take care of him. The thought had his eyes crossing.

"Perhaps I have, but I know where my ship sat, roughly, when they put me off. I sailed the Barbary Coast exclusively, mon ami."

"And we were not far off Barbados when my men mutinied." Keane snapped back, his accent becoming ever more clipped. "I cannot possibly be halfway 'round the world now."

Snorting, Francois spooned up a bit of soup and stuffed it in Keane's mouth. "Why not?" he asked. "You expect me to believe I have been here nearly one hundred and fifty years.

Why should you not believe you have traveled miles as you slept?"

"Mad. Utterly mad. How can one hundred and fifty years have passed?" Keane tried to back away from him. "If I did not know better, I would think the crew set you upon me simply to make me crazed as well."

"Ah, well, at least you do know better than that." Now that Keane stayed sitting he could simply tilt the bowl to the man's mouth and watch him drink the soup down eagerly. The strong appetite encouraged him.

"Only because none of my men is that wily," Keane said with a shrug. "You, on the other hand, seem perfectly capable of deception."

"I have not lied to you. I am Francois le Blanc, Captain of the lady Duquesne. My men put me out on the fifteenth of March in the year sixteen and forty five. I have kept count since then, and I believe only two years have passed." He tried not to puff up with his indignation, but the urge did not pass easily.

"That name sounds so familiar..." Keane swayed with the sudden breeze, eyes closing, his lashes making little gold crescents on his cheeks.

"You should rest, hmm?"

"I'm terribly itchy. I assume, if you have been here nearly a hundred and fifty years, that we have a fresh water source?" The barest of chuckles accompanied the words.

"We do. You should sleep. We can get you a bath once you've rested."

"You're very kind for a madman, and probably a dead one, at that."

Francois laughed, the feel of it rising in his chest to boom out of his mouth, surprising him. "I am. Sleep now. We will argue more later."

He eased Keane back to the ground, intent upon letting the man sleep once more before trying to move him inland a tiny bit to his camp. Then they would talk some more, and indeed, see who was mad.

* * * *

The cold woke him. When he opened his eyes Darien feared for a moment that he had gone blind. No separation between the night and his sleep could be found, neither a star in the sky nor the light of the moon showing through what finally resolved itself to be a canopy if sorts, surrounded by dense trees.

The sullen glow of coals finally resolved itself as Darien's eyes adjusted, and he thought briefly of moving closer to the warmth of the banked fire, but the stiffness in his back had him moaning at even the smallest movement, which frankly infuriated him. He had taken shot balls to his ribs and sword wounds through his thighs and even a scalp wound that tore a strip of skin right off his head. Why did a whipping from Walter, of all confounded people, have him brought so low?

Rough snores sounded off to his left. Darien turned his head slowly, staring at one Francois le Blanc, who lay flat on his back, arms outstretched as if embracing the night. The man had cut off the bushy beard, and his cheeks fairly glowed

in the darkness. Darien would not speculate as to why, or how, the man had shaved. He was, instead, intent upon why the man seemed so familiar.

The idea came to him so gradually that at first he thought he had dreamed it in his fever. Eventually it came clear, however, and Darien recalled the chapbook that had made its way about London perhaps five years before. Tales of the Barbary Coast, or some such, one of the dreadful romances that seemed so popular among the dilettantes and ne'er do wells that populated the upper classes. The book had detailed the lives of the Tunisian, Algerian, and European pirates who were the scourge of the Mediterranean.

One of them had been Francois le Blanc, Captain of the Lady Duquesne. A roughly sketched portrait of the man accompanied the story, supposedly drawn by one of le Blanc's captives.

The only problem Darien could find with the idea was that supposedly le Blanc had died in sixteen hundred and forty five. Or at least disappeared and never been heard from again.

Until now.

It was impossible.

The dull ache in his shoulder turned to screaming agony as he sat up, and his groan had le Blanc rolling up and to his feet, a knife clutched in one hand. Well, that at least explained the shave.

"I beg your pardon for waking you," Darien said. "I needed to move."

"Your shoulder is cut to the bone, mon ami," le Blanc said on a jaw-cracking yawn. "It will pain you for some time. I could stitch it for you, but I wanted to make sure no infection came first."

"You have a needle and thread?"

Le Blanc answered with a soft laugh. "I have a bone needle and some sinew. It will hurt. They left you some things, as well, but I have not gone through them."

"Ah, a gentleman pirate, just like your legend says."

"Does it now? How delightful. What else does my legend say?"

"That you died over a hundred years ago. I read a book about you. You were one of the reasons I became a privateer."

Darien bit his lip after that, not wanting to sound idiotic. He'd thought Francois le Blanc a handsome rogue, and the stories of his exploits had delighted Darien to no end. Contemporary accounts from le Blanc's returned captives said he kept his crew in line, offered his accidental passengers the best in food and wine, and was as charming as the day is long at sea.

"Ah. Well, as you can see I am not dead, and I am not over a hundred and fifty years old. So one of us is acting under a dreadfully amusing illusion."

"I woke you," Darien said, unable to think of a response to that. "I'm sorry."

"Non, non. It is no trouble. I sleep the hottest part of the day away, no? So if I am awake at night, it is no trouble. Tell me about why you are here?"

Le Blanc moved to stir the fire, and Darien could see the man's face so clearly suddenly. The scribbled portrait he'd once seen did not do the man justice, but it was obviously the same visage.

"So you say you never sailed the West Indies?" he asked, still trying to make sense of it all.

"I did not. And you were never on the Barbary Coast. So. We have a mystery, hmm?"

"We do. Tell me about Algiers." Why he was so reluctant to talk on their predicament he didn't know. For now he was content to listen to le Blanc talk on Algiers and Tunis and the cities there, and how a man might get his throat cut for blinking at the wrong fellow. Or how a man might get rewarded for blinking at the right one.

"You are a ... lover of men, then?" Darien was himself, but he rarely came out and asked someone.

"You need not fear for your virtue, Keane," le Blanc assured him. "Even though it is we two, I can control myself."

"I am not worried." He paused, thinking how that must sound. "I ... I can take care of myself."

"Of course you can, mon ami."

They stared at each other for long moments; the air felt like a storm was gathering, charged with lightning.

The moment broke when he shifted back and his shoulder had him grunting, his eyes and nose stinging from the fierceness of the pain.

"Here, you should lie down again," le Blanc said. "There will be time enough to talk later."

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"There will." Perhaps it was avoidance, but it seemed the better part of valor to let le Blanc ease him down, settling closer than he had before when Darien shivered.

He drifted back to sleep soon after, trying not to think of the strange situation he found himself in or how attractive he found his mad companion. The feel of le Blanc's hands on him did not soon fade, following him into his dreams instead.

* * * *

Nearly two weeks later only a lingering stiffness and healing itch remained of Darien's wounds. He had been able to get himself up and about, exploring a bit of the island, and to his dismay none of the flora or fauna held any familiarity. As one approached the interior of the island, the beach sand gave way to forest loam, an amalgam of rotting vegetation and fertile, if acidic, soil.

Brightly plumed birds and small tree animals abounded, and le Blanc assured him that larger predators also existed, both cat and reptile.

The climate stifled him. He had taken to stripping down during the long, hot days, for otherwise he never dried out, and that way he thought he might save his clothing for when they found a way off the island.

He and le Blanc rarely spoke of their disparate history or the date argument. Instead they made plans to build a raft or talked about the decadent luxuries of their favorite ports. Le Blanc had sewn his worst wound shut and Darien had shared the last of the bread and grog George had left him, and all in all, it was not unpleasant, being marooned.

They sat now sharing a meal of some sort of fish and a fruit so tart it drew his lips up into a bow. Le Blanc had a fine dusting of sand and salt on his legs, which were left bare to the knee by his washed thin breeches. The contrast of the golden-white sand on le Blanc's tanned skin fascinated him, as did the play of sunlight on le Blanc's chest, made to look dappled by the leaves of the tree above them.

"Have I something on me?" le Blanc finally asked him. Apparently he had been silent and staring too long.

Darien felt his cheeks heat. "No. I was simply..." Devouring.

"I see." He got a smile. "Shall I look at your shoulder?"

"If you must." His answer came clipped and harsh, but Darien could not bring himself to apologize. As he healed, le Blanc became more and more alluring, and he fought it wherever he could. Having those hard, solid hands upon him would not help.

"I must. Turn about." Oh, the bastard, smiling at him just so.

Licking the last of his fish from his fingers, Darien turned and let le Blanc touch him, let the man poke and prod and ultimately pet him a bit. His skin drew up in gooseflesh and his nipples went hard as each stroke down the length of his spine made him shiver.

"I think that's enough, le Blanc."

"Why will you not call me Francois? And I shall call you Darien, hmm? It seems silly to stand upon ceremony under the circumstances."

Francois. Well. He supposed ... Darien jumped when he felt le Blanc ... Francois' breath on the back on his neck, raising the tiny hairs there. He moved quickly, scrambling away.

"Very well," Darien said brightly. "I shall call you Francois. What are we to do to get off the island, Francois? The raft will take a great deal of work."

When he glanced at Francois from under his lashes the man frowned at him, finally nodding sharply. "It will. I have never been able to create one that would hold together past the current that surrounds the island."

They say there for a long moment, staring, the current between them flowing hard, before Francois stood abruptly. "I am going to fill the water skins. I'll return soon."

Darien watched Francois' behind until it went out of sight, then sighed and rolled his shoulders. The temptation to take what the man offered was strong, but they did have to live with one another until they found a way off their little prison, and seeking temporary relief from their lust would only complicate things.

Perhaps Francois would take himself in hand and release some of the tension. The thought had Darien reaching for his own prick, and he stopped, staring down at his hand. He rarely indulged in self-abuse. What on earth was the matter with him?

A thorough exploration of le Blanc's camp, his first since coming to live there, amazed him. Francois' resourcefulness simply astonished him. There were plates and bowls carved from fallen wood. A full set of needles and all sizes of plant and sinew threads imaginable took up a pouch made out of

skin. Every bit of bone, wood, leaf matter and animal skin Francois had been able to salvage had been made into something useful.

Darien wondered if he would have fared half as well.

Finally exhausted, and thus saved the urge to grab his prick and stroke until he spent, Darien sat, using the rest of his small stores of energy to draw out a plan for a raft, hoping that Francois would approve. And when it came nearly on nightfall and Francois had not returned, Darien banked the fire and curled up to rest himself, hoping his rejection had not done what he had feared capitulation would do; drive a wedge between them.

* * * *

After a fortnight with Darien Keane, Francois felt ready to slit his own throat. After a month he was ready to cut off his prick.

They lived together quite well for the most part, sharing food and sharing work easily. Once Darien recovered from his injuries the man pulled his weight, which Francois appreciated.

No, it was the prancing about half naked and covered with sweat that made him crazed. His fingers curled into fists most of the day to keep from reaching out, and Francois spent half the day in a state of perpetual hardness. It was utterly ridiculous.

The raft building went ... slowly. They had agreed on the design, but cutting the green wood they needed was a laborious process. The lashing went much more smoothly with

two, however, and Francois felt they might get a tight enough bind to actually make it seaworthy.

He still had a thousand burning questions about the time and place Darien supposedly came from, but they had both been reluctant to bring it up.

One afternoon, however, after watching the back of Darien's increasingly worn trousers dip to show him more and more of those perfectly male buttocks, Francois distracted himself by asking.

"So what is the climate like these days toward privateering?"

Darien glanced up from braiding leaves together to make rope. Those blue eyes never failed to startle him, as even before he'd only his own brown-eyed reflection to stare at, he'd sailed with Arabs and Portuguese, who all seemed as dark as he.

"Well, it was encouraged during the uprising, but is frowned on a bit now."

"Uprising?"

Biting at the end of one thread with sharp teeth, Darien nodded. "Aye. The Colonies. They gained their independence some three years ago. During the conflict the crown encouraged us to, er, run afoul of the American ships."

"The Colonies..." Well. Francois shook his head. They had been little but a collection of spice traders and ruffians in his time.

Darien kept sneaking looked at him, that well-shaped mouth pressed together in a rather pissy line. He had found Darien to be something of a prude, much more so than any

other pirate he'd ever met. Really, the lad should have gone into the navy.

"Do you really continue to expect me to believe you are Francois le Blanc?" Darien finally asked.

Rocking back on his heels, Francois stared, his mouth opening, then closing. "What else should I expect you to believe?"

"Well, obviously you are not as old as all that, and I assume you, like me, had heard of le Blanc and decided to call yourself that when I arrived. What is it? Have you never made enough of a name for yourself? Can you not put aside your need to impress and simply tell me the truth?"

"The truth..." Growling, Francois lunged, grabbing Darien Keane by the throat and pulling him up off the ground so they stood face to face. "The truth is that you drive me mad. I have bathed and shaved more in the last month than I have in the last year. I have indulged in more self-abuse than I ever have in my life. I am hard all day, and I want to touch you more than anything else I have ever wanted in my life."

He shook Darien. Hard.

"That," Francois finished, "is the truth."

Wide-eyed, his expression one of pure shock, Darien stared, his mouth dropping open. Francois chose to think of that as an invitation, and leaned down to kiss Darien as hard as he'd shaken the man.

A shocked sound fed into his mouth, but Darien did not resist him. No indeed. Instead Keane wrapped those brown, work-hardened hands around the back of his neck and held

him, mouth opening beneath his as Darien kissed him right back.

Oh, he had dreamed of this. Perhaps he had been alone too long, for the kiss undid him, better than any phantom of his fevered imaginings. Francois crowded close, feeling Darien's body all along his, loving the heat and the lean firmness of male muscle. So long. It had been so long.

Darien broke away from him finally, appearing as dazed and needy as he was himself. And more wary.

"This will complicate things greatly, Francois," Darien said, but he did not let go, now did he?

"I think a little more complication will not kill us, Darien. Exercising any more restraint just might, however."

His prick would simply fall off if they stopped. That was all there was to it.

"You think so? I do not know..."

"Oh, for God's sake, stop thinking. There is no one here to see." He lunged, taking another kiss, this one harder, more demanding, and damned if Darien didn't just melt under it. Sun-warmed lips became kiss-hot, swollen, and Francois groaned to think of them about his prick, sucking him like a practiced whore.

Not that Darien would even know how, as prissy as he could be.

Still, Francois availed himself to that fine young body, his hands sliding up and down Darien's bare back, feeling muscle and bone under the fine skin, feeling the scars as well, still so new he worried about hurting. Darien showed no signs of pain, moaning and wiggling for him instead, crowding closer,

seemingly convinced by his argument and his other means of persuasion.

The sun beat down upon them and Francois decided he had no desire for a sunburnt backside, so he hauled Darien with him into the shade of the trees and sank to his knees, letting his weight pull Darien down as well. They fell together on the sand, lips and tongues moving, tasting, and finally moving to other patches of skin.

Francois licked his way down Darien's throat, tasting salt from the sea as well as from sweat. The difference in textures fascinated him. How Darien's mouth stayed as soft and smooth as a woman's when the skin of his throat felt rougher, more weathered, remained a mystery, but one he would happily explore over and over.

When Darien scrabbled at his worn trousers, Francois chuckled, grabbing hold of those searching hands. "You could try touching other parts of me."

Drawing back as if stung, Darien flushed and stared just beyond Francois' left shoulder. "I'm sorry," Darien said. "I fear most of my experience has been onboard a ship, where speed is a necessity."

"Well here we have nothing but time, mon ami." Cupping Darien's cheek, Francois turned that sweet face for a kiss, soothing the stiffness right out of Darien's posture.

"I must seem a fool," Darien murmured against his mouth.

"No. Just not as experienced as I. I promise, Darien, it will be good to go slow."

They went slowly. Amazingly slowly. He used his mouth on Darien's chest, his hands holding narrow hips as his lips

closed around one brown nipple. Maybe no one had ever done that before, because Darien arched up as if burned. A shame, if no one had explored such sensitive territory. Like a pirate following a treasure map, Francois worked his way over to the other nipple and bit down on it, trading one sensation for another.

"More. Oh, Francois. More."

"Mmmhmmm." Darien's belly was flat and ridged with muscle, as a man who worked a ship should have. Tracing each line made for a long, slow wander, and Francois relished it, letting his teeth nibble right beside the navel, letting them bite hard on the hipbone. Now it was he who opened Darien's trousers, pulling at the makeshift button that held them loosely closed, letting Darien's cock spring out to rub against his cheek.

Such a fine piece of flesh it was. The foreskin had pulled back already, exposing the lush, purplish red head, which leaked clear droplets for him. Francois licked at it, letting the taste explode in his mouth, his eyes sliding closed at the shape and texture of it.

He heard Darien grunting, heard the deep, needy sounds, and it made him feel like the most powerful man on the earth. Darien reached down to open his mouth more, opening him so the whole of that prick might slide right into him. Francois took it, tongue laving the underside, his chin resting against Darien's fuzzy balls by the end of the first thrust.

"Oh. Oh, *damnation*," Darien said, hushed and breathy.
"No one has ever..."

No one. How sad. Francois had been with a young man once who could fit both of Francois' not inconsiderable balls in his mouth. Perhaps one day he would try such a thing with Darien. For now he would simply suck.

So hot. So fine. The skin there felt delicate, thin over such hardness. Francois reached up with one hand to cup Darien's balls, to roll them, and he almost choked as Darien began thrusting hard and fast, only seconds passing before hot seed fell on Francois' tongue, Darien clearly unable to bear such pleasure anymore.

When the shudders ended, Francois crawled up Darien's body, clawing at the loose sand on either side, and pressed his needed prick against Darien's hip. "Now, cher. Now would be the time to take me in hand."

Dazed blue eyes blinked into his, and Darien nodded, licking his lips. "I ... yes. I will."

Clumsily, Darien opened his trousers, and Francois pushed into the touch, panting with his need, poking and prodding, painting Darien's skin with his wetness. The rough nail at the end of Darien's thumb scraped across the head of his cock, and Francois cried out, jerking wildly as his seed shot from him, the tiny pain just bursting along every nerve and making his little death seem like the real thing.

"Mon dieu..."

"Yes," Darien agreed, head fallen back so those blue eyes stared up at the trees above them. "My God."

* * * *

Two days. It had been two days since they had ... since Francois had. With his mouth. They had not spoken on it since, and Francois had offered no other touches, no kisses. Darien had no idea what to do, or how to broach the subject.

And he wanted to.

It was ridiculous, how much he wanted Francois. The man was a liar, and one who obviously believed his own lies after all this time. Le Blanc might even be insane. What if he had developed his mad Francois le Blanc theory while still onboard his own ship? Perhaps that was why his crew had put him off.

They were working on the raft late in the morning, both pulling at opposite ends of a rope made of vines and sinew, when suddenly the rope went slack, and Darien stumbled backward, hands flailing to keep his balance.

"Damnation, le Blanc!" he shouted. "Give a man some warning next time."

"Be still."

The hard words, spoken low and raspy, made him go absolutely quiet, his hands pausing in the motion of brushing sand from his backside. He peered over the breadth of the raft, and saw that le Blanc had a reason to want him quiet. A large snake lay coiled and weaving nearly at le Blanc's feet.

"Is it poisonous?" he whispered.

"Oui. My knife, cher. Where is my knife?"

"I have it. I'm not sure if my aim will be good enough."

"Well, it had best be, hmm? Or you will find yourself alone on this island."

The thought gave him a terrible pang. Not so much panic at being alone, but pain at the thought of Francois dying specifically. How odd.

"Let me come around."

"Carefully," le Blanc said, sweat starting to pour down his face. "He is more curious than anything at the moment. That might change quickly."

"Of course." Darien eased about, facing the snake now, as Francois did, and he could see the shape of the snake's head now. It was not a species he knew, but he did know that triangle of death. He had seen it many times in the colonies on other snakes. He studied the angle, deciding there was no way. "Put your hand back."

Francois complied immediately, and Darien put the knife carefully in his hand.

"I will need you to distract it," Francois said. "Move to the side. Confuse him a bit."

Swallowing hard, Darien moved, easing out until the snake's head swung his way. He knew he was well out of striking distance, but his heart still pounded until he felt sure the serpent must feel the vibration along the ground between them.

He blinked the sweat from his eyes, and when he looked again the snake lay dead, the blade of Francois' knife through its head. Darien blew out a breath of relief, staring as his hands began to shake. "That was far too close, le Blanc."

"It was. I have not seen its like before." Francois glanced over, his pupils so dilated they swallowed his irises. "Are you bad luck, Keane?"

"I did not think so, once. Perhaps I do now..."

"Well," Francois said. "We have our dinner now. I will soak it in salt water."

Bile rose in his throat. "I say we burn it. We can have fish for our supper."

A keen look was Francois' only reply, that and a truly Gallic shrug. Pulling the knife out of the carcass, Francois took it up and walked away, presumably to be rid of it.

Darius sat. Rather more suddenly than he meant to, in fact, his legs weak.

What would he have done if Francois had been bitten, and indeed, died? The resourceful Frenchman was good company, a fine worker, and an amazing lover, albeit a once-had one. Darien thought he might just perish without the man.

He got up as suddenly as he'd gone down, crashing through the undergrowth where Francois had disappeared. The man's delusions no longer concerned Darien at all. Who cared who he thought he was. Darien knew his character now. That was all that mattered.

They crashed into each other when Francois appeared suddenly, Darien bowling him over and sending them both to the ground. He took immediate advantage, leaning down to kiss Francois' open mouth, his tongue pushing in.

Francois did not fight him one bit. Instead those brawny arms wrapped about him and the scent of sweat and male musk surrounded him as Francois kissed him back hard, holding him so close it seemed they might melt into one another.

They rolled to their sides, leaves and twigs poking against their skin. Darien reached for Francois' thin beeches. The fabric made a harsh rending sound and came away, and he cursed. "I'm sorry."

"Hmmm? Shh." Kissing him silent, Francois worked out of the torn fabric, rubbing against him furiously.

Darien took that as a sign. He wiggled out of his own rough breeches, letting skin touch skin, and he reached between them, bringing their cocks together to rub. This he had done once before, with a beautiful Spanish sailor somewhere in Kingston. That had been furtive and rushed. This was rushed as well, but gloriously free. Darien grunted and moaned, the sounds loud to his own ears, and worked them both, needing something he could not begin to describe. He only knew it had to happen now.

When Francois' hand slid down his back to cup his backside it made him squirm. When one rough finger slid between his cheeks and tapped the tiny hole there, Darien gasped and bucked. And when Francois slid one finger deeply inside him, he went utterly mad, crying out and rocking, his cock spurting seed all over his hand and Francois' trapped cock, his vision going gray about the edges.

Dimly, he felt Francois move against him, fast and hard, and he heard the deep, raw sound as Francois arrived, but he barely knew any of it, so lost was he in the roaring in his own ears.

"No one has done that before, hmm?" Francois asked when Darien finally returned to earth.

"No. No one. I. You ... Indeed."

"So formal." A sharp smack to his backside had him jumping, even as Francois laughed and laughed, the sound so deep and robust it had him smiling in return.

"Yes, well, one tends to fall back on early training when one has no idea what else to say."

"So are you from the fancy, then?" Utterly boneless beneath him, Francois seemed not to mind the scratchy vegetation they lay on, so Darien chose to ignore it as well.

"Not terribly, I suppose. My father owns several merchant ships, so we never lacked. My mother was the daughter of a minister, though, and insisted on overseeing my education. What about you?"

"Eh. You say you know my story." Shifting, Francois moved out from under him, standing and holding down a hand to help him up. "My father was a sailor, and so am I, hmm? Maybe if my mother had been a lady, not a streetwalker, I would have fine manners."

"Perhaps." Darien stifled a sigh. For a moment he had felt a closeness...

"What brought you to me in such a rush, mon ami? You nearly did more damage than the snake." Francois picked a leaf out of his hair.

"Sheer, blind stupidity, apparently," Darien replied, turning on his heel. "A mistake I shall not repeat."

With that he strode off, nearly foiled in his attempt to make a grand exit by his open trousers. So much for dignity.

* * * *

Darien was worse than any woman.

They had nearly completed the raft, and though Francois was not at all certain it was seaworthy, he had to admit they had done well. This in itself was an amazing feat, considering Darien had spoken perhaps five words to him since the incident with the snake.

Francois had no idea how to explain that the business with the snake had shaken him, and he had no idea how to react. It was not so much the fact that he had come so close to death. Living as he did death seemed close every day, simply waiting to swing his scythe. Nor had it been Darien's reaction.

No, it was the snake.

Francois had lived and sailed the Barbary coast for nearly a decade. He knew the puff adders and pit vipers of Tunis, Algiers, Morocco and Tripoli well, as well as the vipers that inhabited the isles of such as Crete and Sicily ... The sort of snake they had encountered was a complete unknown to him, and it led him to believe that perhaps, just perhaps, Darien had been in the West Indies. If that were true, though, what did that mean about their little island?

That, combined with Darien's continued disbelief that he was who he was, had made him caustic, and he had clearly ruined what had passed between them.

Finally, though, he was driven to apologize, because they could not make a plan to leave the island without talking.

"Are you going to remain angry at me, mon ami?" he finally asked, coming to hand Darien a skin of fresh water.

"I am not angry." The mouth said so, but the stiff set of Darien's shoulder and the hard tilt of the sun-bleached head told him otherwise.

"Hurt then, and I am sorry for it."

Darien whirled on him. "I feared you were going to die. I let it get the better of me. I assure you I will not trouble you again."

"Who says it was a trouble?" Reaching out, he put a hand on Darien's chest, feeling the heartbeat there thump against his palm. "I reacted poorly to your question about my family, and I was rattled. I am sorry."

Blue eyes, so bright against Darien's tanned face, searched his. "I thought you had decided I was a mistake."

"Never. If I had found you in the white city of Algiers I would have wanted you. It only seems as though we have no choice but each other because we are here, and that makes us both unsteady, oui?"

"Yes." For the first time in three days Darien smiled for him. "I do not want to think I am simply convenient."

"Neither do I, cher. And I do not want to think that you are so desperate you will lay with a man you think is a cheat and a liar."

Darien stared at him a moment, then sighed, shoulders making a fine approximation of Francois' own Gallic shrugs. "I don't think you're lying, Francois."

"Then you think I am deluded."

"I do not know what to think. Some of the things you say ... you do sometimes strike me as someone from another place and time, love."

They progressed if Darien could unbend enough to call him love. "I confess, that was part of my problem the day with the

snake. I had never seen one of its like, and I thought I had seen them all in this part of the world..."

Silence prevailed for a moment between them, the only sounds the rustle of the breeze and the call of sea birds.

"You said you had been here two years," Darien finally said. "And you have never seen a snake?"

"Not like that. I have seen several common to the Barbary coast. That is not one of them."

"What do you think it means?" Raising one hand to cover his, Darien stroked the back of his hand. His skin tingled, the fire rising between them as if it had never been doused.

"I do not know." He stared at the raft. "It makes me afraid to leave."

Jerking back as if stung, Darien stared at him, looking aghast. "What? Why?"

"Well..." He'd given it more thought than he'd like the last few nights. "What if I have been here the last hundred and fifty years? What will leaving do?"

"That's ridiculous." Darien turned back to his work, hacking away at an end of a vine. "There's no way that much time has passed."

"Then one of us is quite mad."

"It is entirely possible." Darien chopped harder. "I do not care. Once we get off this island and I have my boat back, we can decide which one of us is."

"Yes, well, with any luck, my ship is nothing but rotted timbers by now." Abruptly, Francois turned away from the work and the still-oozing wood and the sight of Darien

chopping so determinedly to get away from him. "I think I shall take a walk."

He had not wandered his island in too long, not since Darien had come. At first Darien's injury had kept him close by, tending to the wounds. Then the fascination with the man himself had kept Francois from wandering. Now he needed to get away.

In all the time he had been there he'd never managed to explore the whole island. It was vast, especially to a man who had no idea where the next fresh water supply might be, and Francois had only ventured so far. He had his landmarks, and he noted them now, the twisted tree with the lightning struck branches, the large formation of rocks that looked like a pile of skulls. He had actually pulled one out once, just to be sure.

Gradually, though, Francois became aware of a difference in the fauna. The tress and vines seemed denser, the ground becoming loamy under his feet. He had never felt the island had a climate in keeping with say, Tunis or Algiers. It had, in fact, seemed more like the lush river valleys in North Africa. Now it seemed even less recognizable.

In fact, he could not ever recall seeing that fruit. He took one with him on his return trip several hours later, his legs torn from tromping through the underbrush, his feet and calves covered in stings and bites.

He found Darien asleep not at the raft site, but at their camp, curled up with is head on his arm, breathing steadily. Oh, he would miss that man when they went their separate ways. Nudging Darien with his toes, he sat and considered his

fruit. It had an odd, reddish purple skin and looked almost like a pomegranate, but not quite.

"Hmm?" Stirring, Darien sat up, blinking, his overlong hair and rough shaved beard glinting in the shaft of sun coming through the trees.

"I brought you a gift. You just have to tell me how to eat it."

Darien stared for a moment at the fruit in his hands, eyes wide. Then he said, "Cut it in half and eat the seeds."

"Ah. So it is like a pomegranate." That made sense. Simply a variation on...

"No, it is a passion fruit."

Said so flat and bald that he could not disbelieve it, so Francois only nodded. Of course, it would be one that Darien knew, from Darien's world. Since the man had come to the island it had changed to accommodate him. The thought chilled him, even in the heat of late afternoon. Goosebumps rose on his skin.

"Well, do you like it?"

"I do."

"Then share it with me." His knife needed sharpening once more, but Francois managed to hack the fruit in half, watching as Darien scooped out seeds with his fingers and ate them. He followed suit, surprised by the creamy flavor and the way they melted on his tongue.

"I want to try to leave in less than a fortnight," Darien said, breaking the long silence that had fallen between them. "Do you think the raft will have cured enough by then?"

His heart dropped to his knees, but he only nodded, picking at the skin of the passion fruit. "If we soak it in the salt water and then set it out in the sun, then yes, I imagine so."

"You needn't sound so excited."

His head snapped up and he met Darien's eyes head on. "I told you..."

"Yes, yes. I know about your misgivings, but I cannot fathom staying here the rest of my life with you."

That stung, just as Darien no doubt meant it to. Francois handed over the rest of the fruit, shaking his head. He got up and grabbed his pallet, pulling it away from Darien's so he could lie alone. "I will help you get it ready then, and see you off. I will be as happy to be rid of you as you are to leave."

He rolled to his side, facing away from Darien, but he could hear the man snort.

"Fine," Darien said, sounding like a sulky child.

"Oui," he said in return. "Fine."

Today they simply could not seem to talk to one another without snarling, tearing at each other and inflicting hurt. So Francois closed his eyes and decided not to talk at all. He should get used to it. In a fortnight he'd be alone once more.

* * * *

Darien did not believe for one moment that Francois would let him leave alone.

According to his calculations, they had spent nearly two months together by the time the raft cured. They had fought, loved, and eaten together, but they had never really talked

on their trip again, or on the supposed difference in their years.

Now, though, he knew he could not avoid it any longer. The raft was ready.

The day dawned bright and clear after nearly two days of storms. The sky held not a cloud, the heat rose even early in the morning, and he and Francois had been lazy, lying about and feeding each other fruit.

"Let's go for a swim," he suggested, rolling to face Francois. He's persuaded the man to pull their pallets together with no more than one night spent apart. He liked the closeness.

One dark brown eye rolled his way. "Mmm. That sounds good."

"Then get up, you lazy lump." His fingers tangled in Francois' hair, tugging. "Come on."

Somehow he felt the need to have one last carefree day, and he loved the sight of Francois' brown, muscled body cutting through the blue-green water. His cock twitched when he thought of it, grew hard when he saw it and was starting to warm to the idea even now.

They wandered to the beach hand in hand, something else he had become accustomed to. The feel of Francois' callused hand along his palm and fingers seemed necessary now, something he knew he would miss once they arrived back in the civilized world. If the world he and le Blanc inhabited could be called civilized at all.

The sun gilded Francois' body, and when the thin, worn breeches landed in a pile of cloth on the beach, leaving the

man nude for him, Darien caught his breath, awed as he ever was.

"You're the most beautiful specimen, le Blanc."

"Am I?" Stretching, going up on tiptoe with his arms over his head, Francois grinned over at him. "Let us see yours."

Darien stripped, feeling none of the flush of shame he had the first time he had done so in front of Francois. Now his body knew what to do, his cock rising as he turned this way and that for Francois to see him.

"You are the beautiful one, cher," Francois told him, eyes hotter than the sun as they roved over his form.

"I am scarred." His back had healed, thanks to Francois, but every time he moved the pull of his too-small skin reminded him of it.

"Those scars brought you to me." One of those eloquent shrugs came with that, then Francois was off, bounding out into the sea and diving once the water got to his waist.

He could not resist the pull of that body, the need to be near Francois, and so Darien waded in, the water warm against his legs, getting cooler farther out where he had to start stroking to stay afloat.

Once the water buoyed him he forgot about le Blanc for a moment, reveling in the sheer joy of the water. This was why he'd become a sailor, this feeling of utter weightlessness, like the ocean cradled him lovingly, and would keep him safe from everything.

A hard hand closed about his foot, making him jump and gasp as he went under, water filling his mouth before he spit and clamped it shut. Surfacing long before he needed air,

Darien paddled in a circle, looking for Francois and laughing as the man's dark head popped up right beside him.

"You nearly scared me to death," he said, splashing at Francois.

"You were clearly not thinking of me, mon ami, as you were supposed to."

Well, he was now, hmmm? With that stare directed at him, how could he think of anything else? His cock being so hard made his leg scissors damned uncomfortable, though.

"Back to shore, le Blanc, and I will show you what I am thinking."

They raced now, both of them swimming strongly. The waves began to push them inland instead of out, as well, and they rolled ashore almost together. Francois' upper body strength allowed a tiny lead on him, but he did not mind. He got to watch that hard, tanned backside as Francois left the water.

Darien pounced, getting no more than three feet from the waterline before he could not contain himself. They went down, full length in the sand. He kissed the salt sea off Francois' lips, then dipped inside to taste more, heat and man. He cupped the back of Francois' head, those wet curls catching at his fingers, and pulled up, wanting more.

He got more. They rolled over and over, both of them scrambling to remain on top. They finally settled side by side, his leg over Francois' hip, their cocks lined up together and rubbing. They dared not do more, with all the salt and the sand, but it would be enough. His little death already tiptoed

up his spine, the sensation like feathery wings flying right up to the base of his skull.

One touch of his searching hand to Francois' cock had the man moaning for him, hot seed falling into his open palm, and Darien shouted, scattering the birds that always lined the trees along the beach. His seed shot from him with a violence that belied the shortness of their tussle.

Perhaps because it felt like the last time.

The tender kiss Francois laid on his mouth told him that he might not be alone in that thought. Not at all.

"Are you ready to leave on the morrow, then?" Francois asked, proving it true.

"As ready as I will be. Are you still determined to stay behind?"

"Oui." Now Francois only looked sad. "As much as I adore you, cher, I cannot go."

"You are still being quite ridiculous, Francois. If we cannot leave the island then how did the men who left me here get away? How did your men when they set you off?"

"How do you know they did?" Francois asked, prodding his own worry into the light. "What if they sank the moment they left the island?"

"I do not, but we have never found them."

"The island is larger than you think, and they might have gone down like stones rather than wash up."

They had a stalemate then. He could tell. "So you will not go."

"I will not."

It seemed impossible that he would not change Francois' mind, so instead of letting his heart sink, Darien simply smiled. "Then let us have tonight."

"Yes," Francois said with a kiss. "Let us have tonight."

* * * *

Darien made it as far as the current that ran around the island. Oh, he'd passed the swells, the raft nearly tipping him off, the water so much darker there, almost black. The sun still barely peeked over the horizon, as he'd snuck away, preferring not to wake le Blanc.

He hated goodbyes, and somehow his farewell to Francois le Blanc seemed far too painful for the short time they had been together. Best to avoid it.

As the raft settled and the deep running current pushed him in a lazy circle, the light began to play tricks on him. At first he thought the spots on his hands came from the dappled shadows that lingered from the night. As the sun rose more fully they became clearer, liverish dots standing out on the backs, the veins rising like those of the oldest salt Darien had ever met.

For the longest time he simply stared, unable to fathom it.

Then, as the sun rose fully over his little raft, he hung his head over the side, trying to see his reflection.

The ocean never lies still. But the long hank of hair that fell over his shoulder told him all he needed to know. All of the color had leached out of it, the golden-white lock now just white, with a tint like that of ashes too long on the hearth.

He was aging, even as he watched. His skin thinned, the tracery of his veins showing through, and it seemed his muscles shrank away, leaving sunken flesh and bony knobs behind.

"My God," he said aloud, the tremor of an old man's voice surprising him. "Francois was right."

What else could he do but jump in the water and swim for shore. He had to return, not for himself, for clearly he lay on death's door now, the way he wheezed after only a few strokes against the current.

No, he needed to warn Francois, to tell him he must never try to leave the island.

Darien could die happy knowing that Francois remained. And as the water took him under halfway to shore, he hoped Francois heard his desperate cry. He loved the man too damned much for it not to echo on the wind and the waves.

* * * *

Waking alone had doubled him over, his pain like a living thing in his belly.

So long. Francois had been alone so long, and the brief respite he's had from his own company had spoiled him mercilessly. He should have gone with Darien, even if it killed him. Better to be old and half dead with Darien than to be young and spry forever and have only his own voice to keep him company.

He sighed. It was Darien he wanted, though. A whole ship of men might crash upon his shores and he would never care

for any of them the way he did the Captain of the Widowmaker.

Just as the sun came up over the horizon he swore he heard Darien's voice, and that finally had him up and pelting to the beach, hoping to find the man himself, his mind changed about leaving. Only an echo came to him on the waves, though, and Francois fancied it a goodbye, perhaps one as mournful as his own.

He spent the day sitting under a tree on the beach, staring out at the waves, wondering if Darien still lived. The treacherous mistress of the sea played cruel tricks on a man, he knew, and it could be that Darien had never made it past the swell, his little raft crushed to nothingness. It hurt his heart to think it, and Francois curled up, knees to chest, and slept, shutting the world out for a time. Or at least his little sandy part of it.

The chill of the night wind coming in off the water woke him. Goosebumps rose on his flesh, and his nipples hardened painfully, reminding him that he lay on the beach, not as his little campsite with its fire and rough coverings.

Jaw cracking on a yawn, Francois rose stiffly and turned inland, only to have a flash of something pale catch his eye down the beach a ways. A shark, perhaps, or some other large fish washed up on shore? He should check, for if it were still fresh, he'd have meat for days.

As he neared the jetsam, his heart kicked into double its rhythm. Surely his eyes deceived him, showing him what he so desperately wished to see, but he would swear he saw pale golden hair and deeply tanned skin, one lighter than the

beach it lay on, the other darker. Francois began to run, falling to his knees next to the man, for it was a man, once he got close enough.

A complete sense of déjà vu came to him as he put his hand on the still form and turned the man over. Instead of raw, open wounds under his hand he felt raised scars, still new enough to be soft, and he knew when he saw the man's face that it would be Darien. Returned to him.

His savage joy nearly died in his breast when he saw Darien's face, so slack that he thought surely the man had stopped breathing. But as he lifted Darien to him, pounding the man's back, he heard a wheeze of breath, and Darien began coughing, water dribbling onto Francois' shoulder.

It undid him, and Francois let out one gasping breath that Darien would later tease him about, calling it a sob. He simply called it relief.

"You are well, mon ami. You are safe. I have you," he said, cradling that dear form close to him, one hand rubbing circles against Darien's back.

"Had to ... warn," Darien said, his voice a saltscrubbed croak.

"Shhh. All is well. I promise." He needed to get Darien to camp, give him fresh water to drink and bathe the sea off him.

"No. Now." One of Darien's hands poked weakly at his shoulder, and Francois drew back to look into bloodshot blue eyes. "Had to tell you. You were right, love. All along. Never try to leave the island. I ... I am old now."

He stared, the same face he'd fallen in love with meeting his eyes. Francois shook his head. "No, Darien. You are just the same."

"But look." That hand thrust between them now, waterlogged and wrinkled a little, but perfectly fine. And Darien seemed to notice the same, for his eyes widened, and he laughed aloud. "Oh. Oh, Francois. I am young again. Thank God."

"I think the sea has damaged your brain, Darien."

"No. No, I will tell you all later, but believe me, you were right not to leave."

"And you came back to see if it would reverse whatever spell had a hold on you?" he asked, his heart sinking again. Really, it was like a floundering ship, up and down, going under one minute, racing to the surface the next. Francois decided his poor heart would simply explode soon.

"No," Darien said firmly, raising his head to kiss Francois firmly on the mouth. "I came for you."

The struggling boat that was his heart bobbed right to the surface, as shiny and new as a one just out of the shipyard. "Oh, good," was all he said before bending to take a kiss. It was the only reason that Darien could have named that would not have left him at the bottom of the sea. Thank God Darien had chosen him over all else. His fickle mistress had brought him luck at last.

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