



Matelots

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Brethren: Raised By Wolves, Volume One

Matelots

Raised By Wolves

Volume Two

W.A. Hoffman



Aurora, Colorado

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Dedication

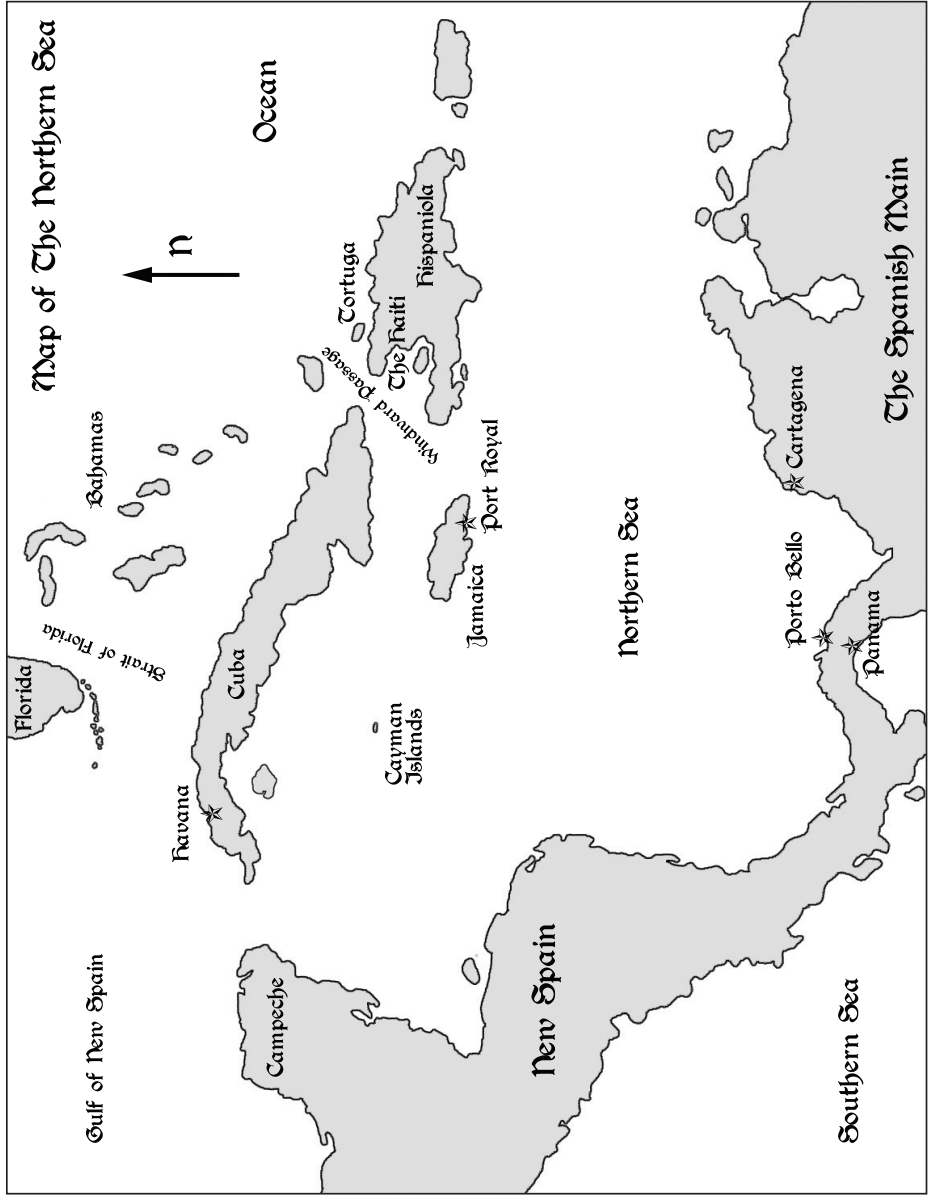
This book and its brothers have been labors of love and faith, made possible by the following people. I dearly wish to thank:

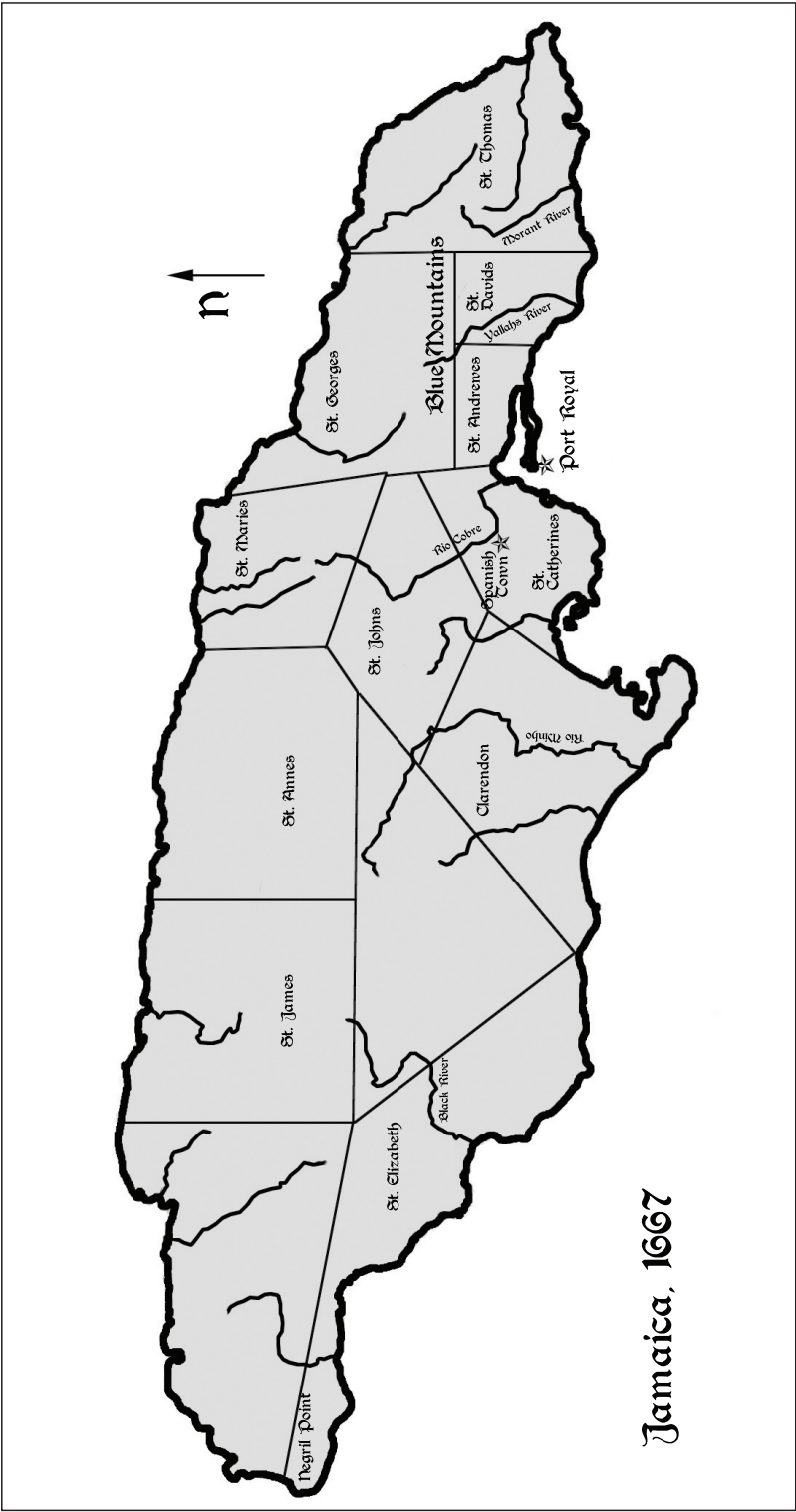
My husband, John, for being my matelot through thick and thin, artistic despair and ecstasy, and for richer or poorer. Thank you for loving me. I could not do it without you.

Barb, my editor and bestest writing buddy ever, for her unflagging optimism and encouragement, loving critiques, and eagle eye. Thank you for helping me look good.

My mother, for teaching me how to dream and always reach for what I want. My brother, for being my biggest fan. My sister, for her love and support. My father, for teaching me to think and judge for myself. I am very grateful I was not raised by, or with, wolves or sheep.

And all the people who have read my work, either this piece or others, and offered their support and encouragement. Thank you all.





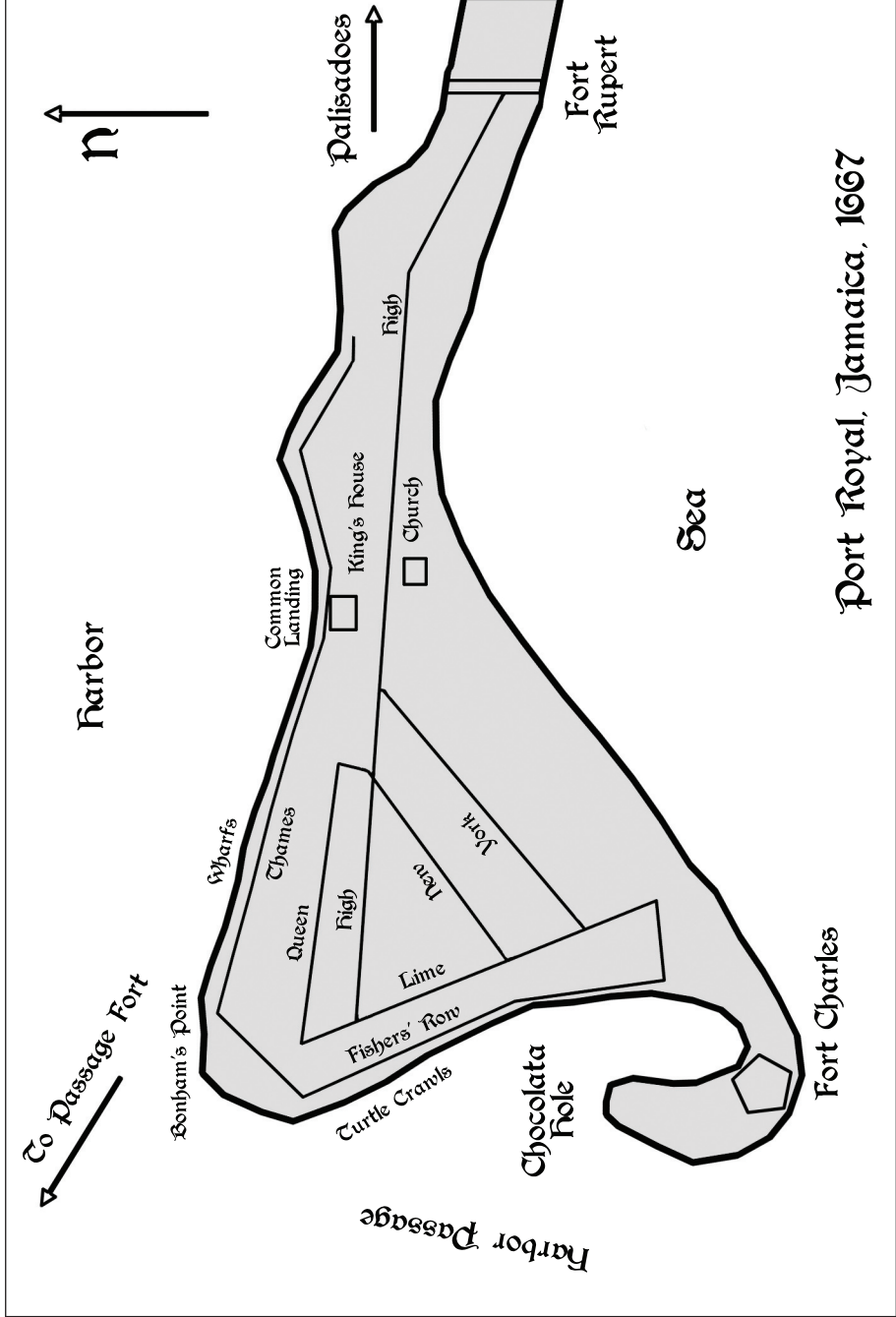


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Interlude

Autumn
1667



August, 1667

The Spanish call the promontory we perched upon Punta Negril, though I know not why: there is little black about it. In that strange adaptation of names from one language to another that often occurs in the West Indies, the Brethren call it Negril Point, or simply Negril. It is a rocky escarpment, about two miles wide from north to south, which juts a good league into the sea on the southwestern tip of the island of Jamaica.

I sat upon a rock on its northwestern edge, overlooking the two-league strand of beach that runs due north along the western coast. More than a hundred feet beneath, the shore on the point is a honeycomb of deep blue coves. To the south and west, the azure sea seemed to stretch forever, until only the grey bank of a passing storm separated the water from the brilliant blue sky. To the east, the rocky hill that is the top of the point joins more of the same until it jumbles into ruddy hills. To the northeast, between the white strand of beach and the hills, lay a great bog.

The *Virgin Queen* lay at anchor below me, riding the gentle swells of the long bay before the beach. I could see the little figures of our crew strewn all along the sand, basking in the rays of the sinking sun: delighting in the freedom of land even though our voyage from Île de la Tortue had been quite short. None had ventured up the promontory to join us; and as the way was often quite rough, such that Gaston had oft been forced to carry my wounded body upon his back to make the climb, I did not blame them.

I turned from the vista of the sea to find my matelot. He was wandering in circles, with his gaze alternately on the hills to the east and the ground at his feet. My breath caught as the sight of him stirred my heart and loins. He was beautiful, made all the more so by the fact that he was mine. He had doffed his kerchief, and the slanting rays lit his red hair such that it appeared afire, and glinted off the brass and steel on his weapons and the gold hoops at his ears. His maroon breeches and tunic were wine in the golden light, and the browned skin of his bare legs and arms glowed like old bronze. He stood tall, the only perpendicular form against the horizontal curves of the ruddy hills. I wished for the millionth time in my twenty-seven years that I possessed some talent for painting, so I could capture visions such as this.

He felt my gaze and turned to meet it, only to still and stand staring at me for a time. His intensity was such I became both curious and self-conscious.

"Will you join me to watch the sunset? You labored so to bring us here," I called to him.

He smiled slowly and came to me. His eyes, dark spots with a hint of green at a distance, became emerald orbs blazing from his painted mask as he approached. They held an awe that made my heart ache, as it seemed directed at me.

"You make the quite the picture," he said huskily.

Though with his broken voice he spoke no other way, I felt as I often did when his face held the love it did now: that the throatiness of his intonation was the result of a deeper stirring, and for my benefit, without a merely physical cause.

"I was just thinking the same of you," I said, my voice equally deep with emotion.

He dropped to sit beside me, and smiled as he rubbed the stubble atop my head.

"Your hair is gold in this light, and looked to be a halo," he said.

"The distant clouds were wings. It appeared as if an angel had perched on this rock, having just landed from on high."

I grinned. "You were quite the composition yourself, a gold and red lion stalking about the wilds."

He frowned and his gaze went to the sea. When it returned to me, he grinned widely and pointed at a place in the waves.

"See there, that stretch of water."

I looked where he indicated. "Oui."

"That is the color of your eyes. At this moment."

I laughed, recalling his despair at finding a gem that would match my eyes after I had found the emeralds that matched his.

"Truly? I cannot believe they are so blue."

He nodded with a sage smile. Then his lips were on mine, a soft press that I savored while wishing for more. But instead, his mouth departed and he rubbed our stubbled cheeks together languorously, much as a cat would.

"How do you feel?" he murmured.

I snagged his hand and brought it to my crotch.

"Will," he chided with amusement. "I will know you are dead and gone the day you do not have rise."

I snorted. "You think a mere thing such as the exertion of attaining this locale would thwart me?"

"Non, never." He touched my bandaged side and sobered. "Seriously."

"Worry not. I feel well enough. You said yourself that I am healing. And you are the physician."

"Oui, that was before I brought you here." He looked away.

"And here we are, not watching the sunset. After so much effort..."

His gaze returned to me, and anxiety gripped his features. "I did not bring you here to watch the sunset."

"Ah. Then?" I asked calmly.

"I wish for you to live here." He looked back to the place he had been standing. "I believe I can build a small dwelling from stone. There is little wood here, though I can haul some from the forest for a roof, and fronds from below for thatching."

Though I was intrigued by his idea of building a dwelling in such a locale, with such a view, it would be a lonely place to live without him.

"You wish for me to live here?" I asked. "What of you?"

He sighed. "I am sorry, Will. I must go. For a time."

"I thought we discussed this when we left Île de la Tortue. I shall accompany you into the wilds whilst you regain control of your sanity."

Actually, I had hoped his sojourn into the wilderness could be avoided. In the days we had spent sailing here, Gaston had appeared to recover from the damage Doucette wrought with his attempted cure; but now, my matelot's forbidding and guilty mien told me I had been deluding myself. He had been hiding his madness, just as he had painted his Caribe mask over the bruises Doucette left upon his eyelids.

"You truly feel you must go alone?" I asked gently.

He nodded tightly, his eyes moist.

I caressed his cheek. "You have been fighting quite the battle, have you not? And here I have been quite the blissful fool, writing my letters."

"I have kept you drugged," he said.

I sighed. He must have been dosing the water he gave me with small amounts of laudanum. Thinking back on it with a clear head, the last week had been somewhat hazy. All the trouble and revelations of Île de la Tortue had seemed pleasantly distant in our wake. I had spent much of our sailing here attempting to compose letters to my sister and Rucker: trying to set down all that had occurred since I had last seen them, in a manner that was honest yet elusive of injurious details to the parties involved. I was such a damn fool.

"And yourself?" I asked.

He nodded. "I must... stop. It is a siren that will..." He shook his head bitterly.

"Will summon us onto rocks from which we might not recover," I said. "I understand."

I had failed to keep the bitterness from my voice. He winced. I swore and dove atop him before he could stand.

"I am not angry with you," I hissed, more from anger than from the pain the sudden movement had induced. "But with myself for not seeing. I am ever so full of myself. I am a poor partner to you indeed."

He thankfully did not struggle in my embrace. He did not seek to return it, either.

"You never have reason for shame on the matter," he said sadly. "The only poor thing you have done is to partner with a madman."

"You have no reason for shame, either. It is not your fault. None of it. Not your madness, not your father sending you away, not your sister, not what your father did, not your exile, none of it. You are a victim of sad chance and poor judgment on the part of others."

He shook his head in refutation, and I heard how hollow my words fell in my own ears.

"You can at least forgive yourself," I said with less rancor and more truth.

He smiled sadly. "I do not know if I can. I only know I must... think... alone. I must... go into the wilderness as I have always done, alone, and... Will, I love you."

"I know. And I understand."

And of a sudden, I did. Had I not always relished my time in the wilderness between cities, the times of quiet contemplation, vitriolic self-loathing, and eventual renewal that came from staring at camp fires or the stars in some lonely field, far from whatever city my stupidity and poor fortune had forced me to depart at dawn's light?

"I will be here for you," I added warmly.

"You could return to Port Royal with the others, once Striker sees to the legal matters with the ship."

"Non, I will make myself available to you. I will not retreat to some place you might not wish to come and I will surely not wish to inhabit without you."

He held me tightly. "I will return to you. I swear I will always return to you."

September, 1667

Rays of bright noontime light stabbed down through the thatch of the roof, like shining spears of truth. I felt they burned where they touched me as I lay upon the hammock. I should stand and go above to patch the holes they revealed. They were my doing.

I alone had woven the fronds. Gaston had dug the hole in the side of the hill so that the earth comprised three of the hovel's walls. And he alone had collected the rocks for the front wall and the sections of the others that rose from the hill. He had carried the wood from the forest. He had brought the fronds, mixed the mortar, built the walls, and raised the roof. All I had done was the damn frond weaving, and I had failed.

Had I ever accomplished anything of substance in my life that did not have holes in it?

I thought not, but revisiting all of my prior sins by unearthing memories long buried was entirely too much effort. So my anger drifted away like the motes of dust swaying in the beams of sunlight. I had truly achieved – if such a thing could be said to be an achievement – a state of despondency of such magnitude as I felt I had not witnessed before. I was prostrate and dumb in awe of it. I no longer felt the need to pleasure myself. I was likewise beyond hunger. The only other times I had felt thus, I had kept myself buoyed upon strong drink so as not to truly experience the depths of despair. This time, I was painfully sober.

A shadow blocked the light from the doorway. My heart leapt, and I turned my head to the left to see. It was not Gaston. Instead, my reverie was eclipsed by a golden god.

He stood outside the door: there was no room for him to enter, as the entirety of the dwelling was little more than the width of the hammock.

"LiamSaysThey'veNa'SeenYaFerTwoDays. YaAilin?" Pete asked.

I vaguely remembered that Liam had come around the day before. I had sent him away.

There was something important in Pete's presence. It came to me: Striker and Pete had returned from Port Royal. They had left before Gaston did.

"Will?" Pete queried with more concern.

"I am gripped by acute melancholy. How are you?"

He frowned and looked about. "HeDead?"

"Perhaps. I cannot know. He went to the forest a fortnight ago, perhaps longer. I have lost track of the days."

Pete sighed. "E'llComeBack."

I felt the smile creep across my lips. "I tell myself that, or at least, I did. Now, I do not know. I have failed...again, somehow. I am destined to be alone. I am..."

He drowned my words with a loud disparaging sound, rather like the noise of a horse.

My smile widened. "The irony of this ailment is that I know I am thinking horrible thoughts. I am not mired in them so much that I cannot see the edge of the bog. Nay, I am far more familiar with the territory. It is just that, while I am here, I am stuck fast until the ailment passes. I can do nothing for myself on the matter."

He scratched idly at his hip, his gaze on the horizon.

"ComeDownTaTheBeach."

"Nay, I do not wish for company."

His rolling eyes were the only warning I received before he grabbed the side of the hammock and flipped me onto the floor. I scrambled to my feet and bashed my head on the low ceiling beam. I cursed and glared at him.

"YaDon'tGetDownThere, IBeatYarArse."

I knew I would lose both the argument and the arse-kicking that would follow.

"I miss him, Pete," I sighed. "My life, my very soul, has never been so entwined with another. I feel as if a giant hole has been torn in my being, and I am in despair of what has become of me: that I am not whole without another. And I despair of what will become of me if he does not return."

He studied the ground, and scratched his short beard with a prolonged sigh. When his gaze at last met mine, he had donned the mien of elder – or perhaps eldritch – wisdom that always gave me cause to liken him to a god of old.

"ThatBeTheWayO'It."

"Of what, matelotage, or love?"

His lopsided smile was ancient. "Aye."

I chuckled and stooped to crawl under the hammock. He moved aside to let me exit. I squinted at the light. The sky was blue in every direction, and the sea bluer still. I met his gaze.

"What shall I do if he does not return?"

"LayAroundAn'Die. I'llLetYa'Then."

I smiled. "And how will I know when he will not return?"

He grinned. "I'llBeTheJudgeO'It."

"Truly, and why will you be the arbiter of my fate?"

"YarNoGoodAtIt. YaThinkTooMuch."

As I agreed with him on this last, I offered no further argument. I donned tunic and sword belt, and coated my exposed flesh with fat: the beach below was plagued by stinging insects at dusk.

We made our way down the path at a good pace, but not so fast I could not ask of news of Port Royal.

"ModyfordLikedTheEmerald," Pete said, in response to my questions about our ownership of the *Virgin Queen*. "ThoughtItAFineBribe. SoTheShipBeOurs. NoAdmiraltyCourt."

"That is good to hear. I would not have us afoul of him over evading the marque."

Pete snorted. "HeThinksStrikerHoldsGreatPromise."

I gauged his tone. "And you take umbrage at that?"

"MorganAn'ModyfordWant'ImTaBecomeLikeBradley, An'Marry, TakeLand, AllThatShite."

"Oh," I said with sympathy. "I am sure Striker sees that for the foolishness it is."

"I'mNot."

He pulled ahead, so that I had to hurry to catch up, and I surmised he wished that topic closed.

"What other news?" I asked.

"TheJewSaidWeCouldRentHisHouseNoMore."

"Why?"

Pete shrugged. "HasAThingToDoWithTheHousekeeper. SheConvertedToThaChurch. SheBeMarriedTaTheodoreNow. TheJewBlamesUs."

"Stop! What? Good Lord, man, when were you going to impart that bit of news?"

He paused and turned to face me before giving another impartial shrug, but he could not completely hide the mischief in his eyes.

"MenBeFoolsAllTheTime. ItNotBeNews. OtherThanUsNa'Havin'AHouse."

"Theodore is our friend," I chided with amusement, and then added gently, "And not a buccaneer. He betrays no matelot in the doing of it."

"Aye," Pete said with a thoughtful nod.

He shrugged yet again. "HeWishesTaSeeYa. HeSentYarLettersTa England. An'HeSentANoteFerYa."

I sighed and took the lead on the path. "I should see him, but..."

"YaThinkGastonWillThinkYaGoneMissin'."

"Aye."

"IfHeWeren'tMad, IWouldSayThatWereShite. ButHeBeMad."

I glanced back at Pete, and found him nodding somberly.

"Well, WeCouldBringTheodore'Ere."

"If you can tear him away from his new wife."

I grinned. Theodore had been lonely and obviously smitten with Rachel, but to convince the headstrong woman to abandon her Jewish faith and join the Church of England in order to marry him must have required courtship of a most devoted nature. I wished I had been able to witness it. Of course, on the other hand, converting could have been a thing she wished to do.

They were lucky to be in Port Royal, where such a thing might not bring a man of Theodore's social stature to ruin. Here in the West Indies, her being a white woman carried far more weight than her being a Jewess by birth.

"Any other news?" I asked.

"BradleyBeGettin'Married."

"That I deem foolishness. So Captain Bradley has his plantation and wife. At least Siegfried died before he must suffer it all."

"Aye," Pete grumbled. "EBeLuckyInThat."

It was assumed to be the natural order of things. A man roved with other men, partnered with them, lay with them, until he had enough money to do the proper thing and settle down as a planter, with a wife, and all that that implied: mainly that he no longer was about men. For many of them, it was as it should be; but for men such as Pete and myself, who truly favored men, it was a dire future. I wondered what would become of us, especially myself, as my father surely expected me to marry, and it would certainly be a requirement of my inheriting. So it was likely I would not inherit, as marrying and all it implied was not a thing I wished to embrace. I was determined to do as I had promised Gaston, and abandon it all for him. That was, of course, if I had him.

We were approaching the others, but I slowed. "Your mission was to cheer me, was it not?"

Pete smiled thinly. "IBeDoin'ARightPoorJob."

"Love is worth all we might suffer for it, is it not?"

Ancient wisdom did not now fold about him like a mantle: he appeared human as his gaze drifted to his matelot and back again. He frowned with pursed lips.

"Aye," he said with more resignation than conviction.

"If you ever need cheering."

He chuckled deeply and led me toward the fire.

There were a score of men about it. Our cabal, and a dozen or so experienced men, including most of the Bard's better sailors, had chosen to spend the autumnal fallow – the season of the storms the natives called hurricanes – on our ship or here at Negril. Cudro, Liam and Otter, and Julio and Davey, were all my neighbors up on the point. Striker and Pete, and, of course, the Bard had chosen to live on the *Virgin Queen*: a good thing that, as we apparently no longer had a house

in Port Royal.

I was greeted warmly by all, and I roused my melancholy heart to embrace everyone with at least a modicum of the heartiness they bestowed upon me. They were true friends and they deserved as much.

We passed several bottles of rum and supped on roast fowl. In addition to the birds we dined upon, Striker and Pete had brought me a coop of chickens. I supposed I should be grateful, but all I could see of the matter was a good deal of bother, not the least of which would be hauling the damn cage of birds up the hill. I seemed to recall Gaston mentioning he favored eggs, though, so I drank and cajoled Pete and Striker into helping me get the chickens to their new home in the morning.

When the sun set at last, I wandered away from the others to walk in the surf and attempt to enjoy the flaming majesty of its descent – and to cease being taunted by all the happy couples about the fire. They had said nothing untoward, but all had asked of Gaston; and I had spun a lame excuse about his being out hunting, knowing all the while that Liam had told the lot of them my matelot had been missing for weeks. I had grown tired of their sympathetic glances and even more wearied by their sitting about one another in casual embrace. Not all of them were paired, but most were, and every time an arm went companionably about a shoulder, my back grew colder and my arms emptier.

A presence loomed in the dimming twilight to my left, and I turned swiftly to find Cudro. He stood gazing out at the last tendrils of sunlight beyond the waves. I had grown accustomed to the big Dutchman, despite my intermittently-harbored ill will over his past treatment of my matelot.

“He’s been away, what, a fortnight?” Cudro rumbled in French.

“About that.” I frowned. I did not wish to discuss the matter with him.

“Do you see him at all? I keep thinking he might be sneaking in at night and avoiding us.”

“It is not your concern,” I said somewhat harshly. I regretted my momentary rancor and sighed. Cudro’s curiosity seemed born of genuine concern. “I am sorry to snap so.”

He waved me off and heaved a sigh. “I know why you do. Perhaps you should.” He studied me with speculation and nodded to himself before sitting and turning his eyes back to the sea. “I am a man prone to... obsession,” he told the night beyond. “It has been my undoing more than once. I set my heart upon a thing and...” One large fist clawed and grasped the air in front of him. “I am like a bulldog. I cannot let go. It is in my blood to hold on, whether my body is slammed about and broken on a post by the object of my desire.”

I nodded and sank to the sand beside him.

He faced me and spoke earnestly. “I fell in love with him when first I saw him. He was... Well, you know well how he is. He would sit away from us and talk only if we spoke to him. I knew it wasn’t arrogance

that kept him away. I saw him as shy. I made overtures. He rebuffed them. Then a circumstance occurred in which he was forced to reveal the scars. I could not imagine a man that ill-used, and I thought it must account for the madness everyone spoke of. I wanted to... touch him. I wanted to see him smile. I wanted to rescue him. It was a thing I had done before with others. I..." He waved his words away and met my eyes. "I latched onto him and refused to give up. Yet the more I tried, the more he refused. And then one night he said some bitter things and I was drunk and others had heard him and... by then I had decided I wanted to..." He sighed. "If I could not gentle him down, I thought I might break him. So... I provoked him and he came at me." Cudro pointed to a scar along his left forearm and opened his vest to show another along his ribs. "It took three men to bring him down. And then he would not stop cursing me. I hit him. Once he had his wind he hurled curses at me again. So... I regret how far it went. I will always rue that day."

On this new description I could picture it all quite clearly; and having been in the face of Gaston's rage, I could well understand how things had gone awry.

"I am sorry I have been unable to forgive you," I said. "I think I can, now. I have stood in the face of his madness and heard things that curdled my blood. He seems to possess unerring aim for those places most... soft... upon another when he is thus."

"I saw what occurred on the galleon, though I did not hear it."

I shrugged. "If I had not knocked him senseless with my first blow there, I daresay I would have hit him again while Pete held him. Yet..."

"You already had him. He already cared for you," Cudro said wistfully.

Things tumbled through my mind as I let myself recall what Gaston had said that day. "He lashed out at me from... fear over that, I feel. He does not favor men, as I feel you and I do."

Cudro grinned. "Oui. I have known I preferred men since I first found my manhood. You?"

"The same, though I did not truly understand it then."

"Who does?"

We regarded one another with new understanding.

He grinned. "However did you net him?"

I thought of how it might look from his perspective, or that of anyone else my matelot had rebuffed. I was thankful I had not pursued Gaston *per se*, at least not in the traditional manner. Then I remembered Striker's amusement at the duration of our relationship. "How long do you think I knew Gaston prior to the *North Wind* sailing?"

He grinned. "Months I would imagine, though I know not how. You did not sail on the *Josephine*, which Gaston arrived on, and she had only been in port a few weeks. It has been a curiosity to me."

"I see." I grinned back. "I met him two days before I met you."

"Damn," he said with awe.

So I told him of how we met and how we became matelots, and Cudro rumbled with amusement at the unwitting part he had played in the scenario.

When the humor passed, Cudro regarded me with wonder. "So he pursued you."

"Oui. So it seems. And I am well glad of it. I would have been just as smitten had he not evinced interest in me, and probably just as thoroughly rebuffed as all who came before me."

"So all it took was a book on philosophy?"

"Apparently." I still wondered what Gaston had seen in me that afternoon. "I blame the Gods, Fates, what have you. It was as if we were destined to meet."

He chuckled. "You were the one he was waiting for."

I raised an eyebrow.

"He said that once, that he was waiting for someone. I had asked him if he liked being alone and he had replied that he did not, but he was waiting for a certain person and he would know them when he met them."

"Truly?" I murmured.

I wondered if Gaston had meant it, or if it had been yet another diplomatic tactic to retard Cudro's advances. Either way, he had met me. The whole of it filled me with renewed wonder. We had been fated to meet, had we not? He would return. He would not leave me waiting any longer than he had to. All would be well. And in the meantime, I had made a new friend.

I clapped Cudro's shoulder. "I am pleased we have finally spoken of this."

"As am I," he sighed. "I have known what he must have told you, and I can imagine what you must have thought. If he were mine, I would hate any who harmed him." He shrugged and changed the tack. "So truly, he has not recovered from events on Île de la Tortue? It has been a matter of discussion and concern."

"Has it now?"

"Among those who care for the both of you." He nodded vaguely toward the fire.

"Well," I said, "I would rather that than my enemies finding delight with it."

He chuckled. "You have dangerous friends. You need not fear enemies."

I felt this was true. It burned away even more of the melancholy.

When at last the others began to sleep – all clustered in the smoke of the fire to keep the damned insects at bay – I took a torch and the remainder of a bottle and staggered home. Though my heart was far lighter, I did not wish to sleep with so many about when I was so alone.

My hut was empty, but between the rum and something Cudro had said, I had begun to muse on the concept of Gaston stealing in to check on me from time to time. I had oft woken from dreams these last weeks

feeling he had been standing beside me.

Having no paper, I searched about with the torch until I located a small plate of rock. I wrote, "I miss you," upon it in French with charcoal. And then I climbed into my hammock and set the rock upon my chest, such that he could see it if he did come by. It was whimsy, but I found it comforting.

In the morning, the rock was gone. I found it sitting beside the fire pit. I would have thought my recollection of writing upon it and taking it to bed to be the result of rum-addled delusion if it did not now have "J'taime" written on the other side.

I cradled it in my hands for a long time before finally placing it on a little shelf in the hut. Then I went down to the beach to fetch the chicken coop and more fronds to repair the thatch.

October, 1667

A shot rang out in the heavy afternoon air. At first I was unsure as to whether I had actually heard it, and then I knew I had. I left off work on the wall and took up a weapon and ran to the top of the hillock that composed one side of my dwelling. I quickly spied Cudro waving and pointing from his house to the west. He signaled that a ship was coming around the point and gave no further sound of alarm. Otter and Liam joined me, as their home was a little farther east, and we walked to the edge in time to see the *Virgin Queen* dropping sail.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” Liam roared. “I were sleepin’. The daft bastard coulda’ just came ’round an’ tol’ us the *Queen* be here.”

“Well, he does not often have a chance to discharge his weapon,” I said.

I returned to the work of laying stones before my mortar dried. There would be a party tonight on the beach, and I had ample time to attend it. I need not rush off now.

Thus it was with surprise that I looked up a time later and spied a jacketless and panting Theodore cresting the promontory and staggering toward my house. Pete and Striker were with him, carrying a sea trunk I recognized, and my dear barrister’s coat and satchel.

Pete reached me first. He shed his baldric in one smooth movement, and dropped it in a hurried heap with Theodore’s satchel and coat on the bench before my home. Then he was upon me. His embrace hurt both my ribs in its rigor and my heart with its unfamiliarity. I had not seen the two of them in three weeks, and no one else living upon the

Point found need to touch me. I truly needed to be embraced more often. Striker followed Pete, and I did not wish to release either of them.

"Gaston?" Striker asked quietly by way of greeting.

I shook my head. "He is still... hunting. He lets me know he is well, or rather, still living, from time to time, but I have not seen him still."

"It has been a month now?" he asked.

"More than that," I sighed. "But in speaking to Cudro, I have learned that he once heard Gaston would disappear into the Haiti for months at a time, which agrees with things my matelot said in passing. I try my best not to worry. As I said, at least he comes around and leaves some small message for me on occasion."

"He'll always return to you," Striker assured me.

"I know," I sighed. I had settled that matter in my heart a month ago. I did not now doubt his eventual return; I only wished to know when.

"And look what we have brought," he said, and gestured to panting Theodore, who was finally joining us.

Striker was carrying a bottle of rum in the hand he pointed with, and I snatched it. "Good, rum, I have been dry. Oh, you meant my barrister," I added, after taking a good pull from the bottle.

Theodore ignored me. He stood gasping, turning in a slow circle to take in the entire vista.

"My Lord, Marsdale..." he began.

"Will," I corrected him as he drew his labored breath.

He gave a disparaging snort. "Will, then. My Lord, Will, I see why you have not returned to Port Royal."

"Is it truly such a distance?" I teased as I embraced him.

"Nay, nay, this, all of this." He waved his arms to encompass the view when we parted. "If I had this to look upon daily, I should not care what else might occur in the world, either. Ah, and we shall see the sunset from this vantage soon. I can only imagine its glory from here."

I had not thought him to hold interest in such things. This added another mark of favor in his already full account.

"You are welcome to stay and visit as long or as often as you wish, though my accommodations are meager." I indicated my hut.

Theodore gazed upon the dwelling for the first time and raised an eyebrow. "I suppose it keeps you dry."

"Aye."

I chuckled. The hut was as crude as it had been when first Gaston built it, but I had decided to enlarge it, and now it almost had two rooms. I had collected a great number of limestone blocks and begun to lengthen the walls, so that there was a much larger chamber in front of the original sleeping space. The eastern wall and the section of the northern wall running from it to the new door were complete; I had even made a window. The western wall would be identical except for orientation. It was the height of my chest, and the latest layer of stone had been the object of the afternoon's labor. Within a few days, I would

have to go with some of the others to cut and haul more wood for roof beams.

I proudly told Theodore, "I will eventually manage an entire manor house."

"And here I never envisioned that you came here to build something... literally," he said with a smile.

"Neither did I, but I have found great satisfaction in it."

"You should apply for a grant of this land," he said and looked about again. "All of it."

"As it is not arable, and therefore useless, I assume the Governor would grant it without a second thought."

"Aye," Theodore sighed. "But... Will... be thankful it is useless in its beauty."

"I am, as I know if it had less esoteric value it would soon be overrun by greedy wolves. I am well-versed in those ways of the world."

"You should all apply for grants here," Theodore added, indicating Pete and Striker.

Striker nodded seriously. "I would not mind owning that bay to the north, the one with the good anchorage."

"I'llTakeThis'EreBeach." Pete pointed at the long strand running north.

"And that great bog behind it?" I asked.

He shrugged, but his eyes narrowed craftily. "Be'ArdTaRoustAMan OutO'."

As I was sure Gaston was quite familiar with the place, I did not gainsay him.

"Only you would think of owning land you could hide upon," his matelot teased him.

"IffnTheyKnowYaOwnIt, ThenTheyKnowWhereTaFindYaAlready."

"He has a point," I said.

"Aye, that he does," Striker said and shrugged. "Still, I would own land. Perhaps I will tire of the sea someday."

Pete snorted.

"And even if you do not," Theodore said, "it will be a thing you can leave to your descendants." He frowned and looked from Striker to Pete and back again. "Should you ever have any."

Striker frowned at that, and Pete sobered somewhat as he gazed upon his matelot's now stiff shoulders. I thought of another conversation from their last visit, and sighed.

Theodore distracted me from watching them further with a light touch on my arm. I turned to him expectantly and found his mouth partly open, as if he had been about to speak. His face said he had apparently thought better of his planned words, though.

"I mailed your letters," he said too quickly.

"Aye, Pete said you had. And I read the note you sent before." It had said little.

I wished to ask him what he decided not to say, but thought

better of it. He would tell me in good time, or perhaps it was best to let his unspoken words lie, as they might have been another ill-considered utterance among men with matelots, as his comment about descendents had been.

"They should arrive in England soon," he added. "The ship I sent them with was sailing there directly and not to the northern colonies."

"Lovely," I replied. I thought of the joy I hoped their recipients, my sister Sarah, and my former tutor, Rucker, would find with the huge tomes I had started on the voyage from Île de la Tortue. I had finished both missives here, while recuperating from my wound and watching Gaston build the first part of the hut.

Liam, Otter, and some of the others had joined us, and were greeting Pete and Striker boisterously. I led Theodore to the western edge of the promontory so we could continue to converse.

"How do you find married life?" I asked.

"I find it suits me." His smile said much more than a thousand words could hope to convey.

I laughed. "I am pleased to hear it. And how is Mistress Theodore?"

He took a deep breath and glanced about to see if anyone was near. No one was, but he dropped his voice conspiratorially anyway. "She is with child."

"Well done, my good man."

He chuckled heartily. As it passed, he stared at the horizon with a satisfied smile. "When I first ventured here, I thought I would return to England as soon as I could. I did not intend to stay beyond the business I was sent to accomplish. And then that business led to a lucrative arrangement that required my remaining for a short time. And that short time became... Well, I have been here seven years now. I have always harbored the notion that I would return someday. Now I do not. Now I envision a large house, and many children, and perhaps a position in the local government."

"Though I would wish that last on no man," I said with a smile, "I suppose someone must be a public servant. And I feel in your case, you would actually serve those you administered and not merely your own ends. As for the rest, I am very happy for you, my good friend. I wish you every happiness."

"Thank you."

He sobered somewhat as he contemplated me.

"What of you?" he asked. "Why will you not return to Port Royal? Striker has implied it has much to do with your matelot, but he has said little as to the particulars."

I was not sure which of the particulars I should relay, though I knew I should tell Theodore if I told anyone at all.

"Gaston is mad," I said at last.

"I have heard rumor of that. How so?"

With surprise, I realized I could not answer that in any meaningful fashion. I tried to recall the description Gaston had first offered me, and

then I remembered his words to Doucette.

"He experiences acute emotional states in which he is unable to control his actions or faculties. During these times, he is greatly debilitated in reason, and he becomes a threat to those around him: both friend and foe. On occasion, he even forgets what occurs during a bout. His bouts can be triggered by items or memories of traumatic incidents in his life."

Theodore nodded thoughtfully. "I have heard he poses corpses."

I sighed. "Aye, that is why he is known as the Ghoul. I have seen that, once. He means to offer them respect after a fashion."

"Did he stab you?" he asked.

"Aye, but by accident. He meant to kill Doucette and I got between them."

"Who was this Doucette?"

"Doctor Dominic Doucette is a French physician. He became Gaston's mentor after a fashion. He was assigned to care for Gaston..."

And there I stopped, unsure of what to say. Theodore studied me in patient silence. The truth of much of the tale was not a thing that should be related to anyone, even Theodore; but, I needed Theodore to understand certain aspects of the situation if he was to help us with the legal part of that entire morass of insanity that was Gaston's past.

"Gaston was exiled here by his father, a French Marquis. They had a... misunderstanding, a disastrous... they had a falling out, over the death of Gaston's sister. Not that they got on well before, but... I cannot divulge all of the particulars of any of that, even to you."

Theodore nodded sagely but remained silent.

"I can say it is all related to Gaston's madness," I continued, "which is a thing that haunted his mother, and has haunted him since childhood. It was made far worse by the... circumstances of his departure from France."

There. I had managed to say what I felt Theodore needed to hear, without saying that Gaston's father had nearly flogged him to death for killing his twin sister after committing incest with her. I did not believe my good friend would understand or forgive my matelot for those transgressions, which sounded so horrific in name. Only I, who had heard the tale from his lips under duress, could possibly comprehend how and why what occurred was more tragedy inflicted upon my love than an evil that he did. I felt sure any other would hear the words alone, and not the aspects of the tale relating to his sister – on her deathbed – manipulating Gaston into helping her live her last laudanum-induced flights of fancy.

"In your note," Theodore said. "You mentioned that there was a legal document you might need me to review."

"Aye, that is part of the matter. Gaston's father had Gaston declared incompetent so he could never inherit, and then he named Doucette as Gaston's guardian. As we see it, Gaston cannot set foot on French soil again. I feel he should become an English citizen, and thus possibly

leave the entire matter behind him.”

“I could easily petition for that,” Theodore said. “But I would see this document.”

“It is in French.”

“I assume your French is sufficient to translate it.”

“Aye.”

“Where is Gaston now?” Theodore asked.

“Somewhere.” I gestured at the rest of Jamaica. I thought that would be accurate, as I doubted he had left the island. “He suffered a bout... and he has gone off to be alone and try to recover his reason. He leaves me messages to show that he is well – in body, at least.”

“Can you tell me what occurred on Tortuga?” Theodore asked. “I have heard a number of things regarding that as well.”

“Doucette felt he could cure Gaston’s madness by what amounted to torture. I rescued him. In the ensuing battle, I shot Doucette, and the French captain Pierrot nearly beat him to death. But that... treatment he attempted... is largely responsible for Gaston’s current fall into madness.”

My bringing Gaston to remember the events that occurred with his sister had been the rest.

Theodore watched the sinking sun with a thoughtful mien. I nearly felt disposed to disrupt his thoughts so he could actually appreciate the coming blaze of color, as I doubted he was seeing what was before his eyes.

“You will not abandon him,” he said at last. It was not a question, nor did it contain resignation: it seemed to simply be a fact he felt the need to state.

As such, I did not answer it.

“Are there any other aspects of note that I might be apprised of?” he asked.

“Gaston is very wealthy. His father exiled him with money, sent money for him every year, and sent money to Doucette to pay for his care. Doucette’s wife gave it to us.”

“Gold?” Theodore asked with interest.

“A small chest of it, mostly florins.”

Theodore nodded appreciatively.

“And where is it now?” he asked.

“Gaston buried it in the morass there behind the beach, and then had me memorize the markers he set as to where it could be found.”

“Good,” Theodore said, “so it is safe and I need not worry about safeguarding it.”

“Aye.”

“All right, let us watch this sunset,” he said. “And then we will review the French document and I will tell you of Ithaca.”

I had nearly forgotten the damned plantation. “Is there anything I wish to hear?”

“I doubt it.” He smiled.

"Is there anything I need do?"

He smiled with pursed lips and returned his eyes to the horizon. "If you trust my judgment, I do not believe there is anything you need address prior to the conclusion of Gaston's current madness."

"I trust your judgment on such matters," I said sincerely.

"Then we will let such things lie until you know you will have a matelot at your side again."

I sighed. "I will actually be quite relieved to do that."

"I thought as much."

We watched the sun set in companionable silence, and then went to join the others. The next day, with both of us suffering the ill effects of too much rum, we finally managed to read through the French document.

Theodore determined what I had surmised: that it would now be best if Gaston were English.

"However," he added to his earlier thoughts, "You realize another solution would be to have his father grant you the guardianship?"

"I feel that would be unlikely," I sighed.

"As do I, but I thought it should be noted. I would be remiss in my duties otherwise."

"We cannot have that," I teased.

"I will draw up the papers. The granting of his petition should not pose a problem."

"You will have Governor Modyford sign it while sipping brandy," I said with a grin.

"As I have him sign many things," Theodore grinned, and then quickly rubbed his temples, as if that much movement of his mouth had caused him pain. "Thank God we do not conduct business over rum."

I laughed. Until last night, I had not in my wildest fantasies ever conceived of seeing Theodore so deep in his cups that he would argue with Pete about the proper way to dance a jig, and then dance one.

"There is one aspect of this matter you will need to address," he added. "A name. I assume Gaston is not his given name. What shall this new citizen of England be called?"

"Nay, it is not his given name," I sighed.

That was Gabriel. I did not think he wished to be known by that name. Nor did I feel he could or should use his father's title. Yet, he had shown great pride in speaking of his lineage. The chest his father had sent had born the crest of the Sable family. It was his family name.

"Gaston Sable," I said with more assurance than I felt.

I hoped Gaston would not take umbrage at my choice.

"And should this Mister Sable apply for a grant of land?" Theodore asked.

"Aye."

A thing occurred to me, and I did not like the taste of it.

"You," I said, "and perhaps you alone of all the barristers on Jamaica, will take my word as to legal matters for my matelot because

you respect the buccaneer institution of matelotage, do you not? But after this business is completed, I will have no say in that land or any other legal aspect of his existence under English law, will I?"

Theodore nodded. "Precisely. In that, it would be more convenient, especially considering his madness, if his father were to grant you his guardianship as he did Doucette."

I supposed he was correct in that; but I liked the idea of Gaston's father considering him a thing that must be seen to less than I favored the knowledge that under English law, any bond we had was irrelevant.

"Once this is accomplished," Theodore continued, "I suggest that you have the land deeds changed to provide for joint ownership, and I will insist that you draw up testaments as to the deposition of your assets upon death. You can't bury everything in a morass."

"Is this how other buccaneers address the matter?"

"Aye; truly, changing deeds and seeing that other assets are owned jointly will provide you with far more legal standing than marriage or even inheritance."

Gazing upon the matter from that perspective, I wondered why it rankled that we could not be perceived as being married. I could not name the nuance of marriage I required. It was surely not sanctification by the Church.

"Ah, and there is one other matter I wished to broach with you," Theodore said. "Would you be inclined to purchase my house? I have had a new one constructed."

"As we are no longer letting the Jew's, I feel that would be prudent," I said.

"Wonderful. I hoped you would feel that way."

He produced a bill of sale for the house from his satchel. I signed it and thought little of the price. I was becoming a man of property, and it did not have a damned thing to do with my father. I was pleased in that.

After another night of buccaneer debauch, we sent Theodore back to his wife.

Two nights beyond that, I was leaning on the newly finished west wall, considering the stars, while smoking a pipe preparatory to going to sleep, when Gaston returned to me. At first I thought him a fanciful vision contrived of smoke from the dying cook-fire. Then a gust of night breeze cleared the haze, and I saw him distinctly. I barely recognized him: he was filthy, wearing crudely-stitched leather hides, and bearded, with a shaggy mane of hair, dark in the dying firelight.

From his stance and expression, I could see he had adopted the demeanor of a child, as he sometimes did in his madness. It was in this state that he arranged corpses.

"I am very pleased to see you," I said softly in French.

He seemed relieved at these words. Then he slowly extended his right hand, as if I were the one who might startle as he appeared ready to do. He held two eggs.

I had surmised a fortnight before that he was responsible for what I

had initially believed to be the poor laying habits of my hens.

"Would you have me cook those for you?" I asked.

He nodded tightly.

"All right, then, bring them here; you can set them on that stone there if you do not wish to hand them to me. And, likewise, you can sit over there if you wish. But I dearly wish to hold you. I realize you..."

He was in my arms. The eggs were crushed against my back and I did not care. He was sobbing, and that did concern me, but not so much that I was tempted to release my tight embrace for some time.

An hour or so later, I at last had him quieted, fed, shaved, and cleaned up a little. He still would not speak, seemingly content just to stay in constant contact with me. We at last curled together in the hammock.

In the morning I found myself alone again, in body, but thankfully no longer in spirit, no matter how inauspicious his behavior had been. He had returned to me, even at his maddest. Someday we would make right of it all.

Negril Point

December
1667



I

Twenty-Seven

Wherein We Prepare to Weather Storms

“Well the drink did flow an’ the blood did spill, but iff’n’ the boys wish ta fight ya best be lettin’ ’em,” Liam said, and took another long pull on the water skin.

I had been exerting myself with such dedication for the last hour that my vision now wavered and my heart pounded. Liam appeared an odd apparition: with his darkly tanned skin and pale hair he looked as if all the colors had been reversed, and he was dark where he should have been light. Then he cleared a bit in my sight, and I winced anew at the blue and black blotch across his face and eyes. It was due to his already much-maligned nose taking another blow in the altercation he spoke of. I was sure that when he healed it would have yet another crook. I wished Gaston had been about to see to mending it, if such a thing were in the realm of medicine and not the Gods.

I sat in the sand and considered Liam’s words, slowly forming my own above the pounding in my ears. “That is very true. I am glad I have been safely here and not amongst so damn many bored buccaneers this autumn.”

Liam snorted his amusement and handed me the water skin. “But ye missed all the fun, Will.”

The Bard walked up and glared at us. “What are ya’ sittin’ about for? We’re not done here.”

I looked about. The beached *Virgin Queen* eclipsed my view of the sinking sun to the west.

“Is not the entirety of the ship upon the shore?” I asked. “Is she not

ready for careening on the morrow?"

"Aye," he sighed, sounding as tired as I felt. "But with the storm rolling in, we need to tie her down."

He stomped off toward the pilings. Hauling the brig ashore had been exhausting labor and taken most of the day. I wanted to be done with it all, but the Bard was correct: if we did not lash the ship down now, the approaching storm could well toss her back to sea like a boy playing with a stick, even if it was too late in the season to be a true hurricane.

I pushed my aching body upright and followed Liam and Otter to the nearest pylon, to begin hauling on the ropes the Bard and Cudro were setting. Soon I abandoned all other thought except what was required to keep my grip on the cable, and I pulled with the rhythm of the shanty Striker sang.

When at last our vessel was as safe as we could make it, I stumbled down the beach to soak my hands and feet in the waves and watch the sun sink below the horizon. The storm was approaching from the east, and other than the increasing winds, there was no indication of it in my view of pink light and green sea.

I looked away from the sunset. I did not think I would ever tire of finding pleasure in the colors or serenity of it; but it was a thing I witnessed every day, and I no longer felt the need to attempt to etch each one into my memory. Nay, I rather wished to view something else, namely my matelot. Though I had often seen him throughout the month of November, he had been gone again for a good ten days. And, even when I did see him, I did not see the man I loved so much as his shade. Though he was not always childlike in demeanor, he still did not speak to me when he put in his sudden appearances. And then, the last time I saw him, I woke from a dream to find him standing over me, a ghostly apparition with a knife in the dim light before dawn. I had not slept well since. I did not think I would, until I could hold him in my arms again and we could converse.

Today, in the quiet aftermath of the labor and the calm before the storm, men sprawled all along the beach. Liam was in Otter's lap. The water skin he had been drinking had been replaced by a bottle of rum. Nearby, Pete and Striker were likewise entwined, both with a bottle and each other. Julio was conversing with them, with Davey embracing him from behind. Near them, the Bard stood talking with two of his seamen, a couple in number as well as comportment, with Dickey a shadow hovering at his side.

I frowned at that. Why had Dickey chosen to sail down here with the others? And why was he still dressed as a buccaneer in canvas breeches with a kerchief on his head and earrings, and not decked in the latest finery from London? I snorted at my foolishness. What did it matter? He was at least with others, whilst I stood here alone looking upon pairs and clumps of human companionship.

Cudro joined me on the beach: it was often his wont, as we were the only two without a partner among the men wintering at Negril. Some

days that galled me, as I did indeed have a matelot; and then there were times when I was grateful for his company, and even more grateful his loneliness had not driven him to make foolish overtures.

"Will you be seeing him tonight?" he asked in French, as he dropped to sit beside me in the sand.

"Perhaps." I frowned.

He shrugged. "I was just wondering if he still possessed the good sense to come in out of the rain."

"This will not be the first storm of the season, and he has weathered all but the one three weeks ago without me."

During that storm, we had spent a pleasant night curled together in the hammock for warmth. As always, he had not spoken and had been gone with the morning light, but I had been damn pleased to have him there nonetheless.

I heard someone approaching Cudro and me, and turned to find Striker and Pete. As they were nearly naked, the bruises and scratches they received in the brawl Liam had spoken of were evident. But such things were merely scuffs on otherwise beautiful bronze sculptures; things easily rubbed away.

Pete collapsed gracefully onto the sand at my side, his blue eyes flashing with amusement even in the dim twilight. He threw an arm around me, and pulled me close to kiss my temple. I could smell the rum on his breath, and I smiled, even though the sudden contact with another stirred my loins and pummeled my heart as it always did. Nearly bald, with more pale stubble on his jaw than his scalp, and with a swollen black eye, Pete was still the handsomest man I had ever seen.

"WeMissedYa," Pete rumbled.

I returned his playful kiss and grinned. "So I have heard. I feel I missed little but abuse."

Striker chuckled richly from the sand on the other side of his matelot. "True. And a tale to tell your children."

It was a thing oft said, but I seized on it with glee. "Would you truly speak to them of such?"

"If they be boys and of an age," he said thoughtfully, and scratched the coal stubble on his strong jaw.

Belatedly I recalled that Striker had once had a child and would not take issue with producing another. I felt the fool as Pete stiffened ever so little beside me. I wondered what Gaston and I would do, were one of us to wish for a child. Not that it would ever matter if Gaston did not recover from his madness. A pall descended on my heart, and I shrugged Pete's arm away restlessly.

Pete did not seek to return it; Cudro shifted uncomfortably on my other side.

Striker frowned in the awkward silence. "What is it, Will?"

I could think of no way to explain that did not entail things I did not wish to discuss with them at the moment. I cast back along the conversation, seeking some purchase to pull myself clear of the sudden

mire, and found only slippery slopes. I gave up, deciding the other side might offer more promise.

"We should decide where we are all to weather the storm," I said.

Striker cocked his head at the sudden turn of topic, and then looked to what could be seen of the eastern horizon along the hills.

"I share the Bard's thoughts on it," he said. "It is too late in the season to be a hurricane. It's just a storm."

My thoughts were now as dark and roiling as the unseen clouds toward which we peered. I wished to be away. "Be that as it may – and I do hope you are all correct – but I feel I should return to my abode."

"Will he be there?" Striker asked, alert for whatever I might reveal.

I sighed. "I do not know. I hope he will arrive because of the storm."

"How long since you've seen him?" Striker asked with a gentler tone.

"Ten days or so," I muttered at the sand.

Pete sighed, and I glanced up in time to find him shaking his head sadly at Striker.

"So tell me," I said with as much quiet jocularly as I could muster.

"What do you all discuss in town betwixt opportunities to brawl?"

Striker chuckled. "The two of you."

"I am glad we serve at least some purpose," I said without rancor.

"Amusing one's fellows may be considered laurel-worthy in certain circumstances."

"Not out of amusement," Striker said sadly.

"Then in sober contemplation on how fortunate it is not to be us." I smiled with equal melancholy.

"That'dBeCloser," Pete said with a thoughtful nod, and then his face split in a grin and he returned his arm to my shoulder to shake me mercilessly. When he relented, his eyes met mine and the shadow of ageless wisdom overtook him. "ManyWishTheyLovedAnotherSo."

I nodded thoughtfully. Though my reason wished to refute him, my heart found peace in the sentiment and clung to it. He rubbed my stubbly scalp and pressed a hard kiss to my forehead before releasing me roughly. Striker and Cudro regarded me with kind amusement.

"All who know you, worry," Striker said. "Those that don't know you are not allowed to discuss it about those that do."

I found that interesting, and reassuring as to the quality of my friends, but it did make me wonder what was said that they sought to silence. Not enough to ask of it, though.

"Thank you," I said solemnly. "You need not worry too much, though. He will return as he always does, and someday he will recover sufficiently to return to town and sea."

"By the New Year?" Striker asked.

I frowned.

He continued, "Morgan wishes to raid late this winter. He's calling for all interested to meet him in the cays of Cuba. Pierrot and I – and Savant, another French captain – wish to provision before that. Morgan believes in taking what's needed from the Spanish. I believe 'tis best to

have food about while waiting for the Spanish to show.”

“We’ll be raiding towns.” Cudro grinned. “Don’t have to wait.”

“Hungry men make bad decisions,” Striker said.

“I would concur with that,” I said. “Does Morgan not feel this way?”

“Morgan feels hunger makes men brave,” Striker sighed.

I shook my head with bemusement. “I would think there is a vast difference between bravery and desperation.”

“If there is, I’ve never seen truly brave men,” Striker said thoughtfully.

“Truly?” I asked. “So all men you have been in battle with have been desperate?”

“In some manner.” He nodded. “But I’d rather they be desperate for gold than victuals.”

“Ah.” I pondered it, and changed the set of my thoughts on the matter. Every man I had seen who seemed brave in facing another’s sword had been either desperate to obtain something or to escape something. I could not think of a single exception. If desperation was not involved, men fought with very clear heads, and there was little bravery about it: none was required because they did not choose to act unless the odds of success were well in their favor.

I returned my attention to the true import of his words. “You wish to sail by the New Year?”

“Aye, before the Twelveday if it can be managed.”

“What is the date?”

“December seventh.” Striker grinned.

“Well, damn,” I sighed.

“Will you be able to join us?”

I shook my head as the implications sank deep. “I do not know.”

Pete rubbed my shoulder. “WeKnowYaWillNa’Leave’Im.”

“I have high hopes he will return due to the storm,” I assured them – and myself – yet again.

“But you don’t know if he’ll wish to sail,” Striker said.

“Aye,” I said sadly.

We let the matter go and joined the others at the fire. Delaney produced his fiddle, and my comrades drank and danced with good will, if not abandon, as the winds strengthened. I sat at the edge of light and laughter and contemplated bravery and desperation.

I had not been led from my father’s house at the tender age of sixteen by bravery, but driven by desperation. I had reasoned that whatever horrors the world might offer, they had to be pleasant compared to those I had known. But now, was desperation what drove me to raid against the Spanish? And did I feel driven at all? Could I not simply remain in this pleasant place and while away my days? I had no need of money. As for my inheritance, Theodore knew where to find me to have me handle such affairs as I must.

Watching the dancing men, I knew it was loneliness that drove me now. I wished for companionship. Yet here I was alone, amongst

such true friends, because none were the one I desperately craved. I wanted Gaston. That drove all things. But could I while away my days here without the others, waiting for him to truly return to me in mind as well as body? That was a question I must ponder. Though my heart had ached for him, I had not been without at least some solace and companionship. What would the days be like with no one? And yet, what if he were to return and stay? Would that not be enough? Or would I live in constant fear of his leaving again? Would it not be better for us to be trapped upon a ship where he could not desert me?

I cursed my traitorous and unworthy thoughts and drank.

At some point in the waning festivities, I became aware of Dickey watching me intently. I offered greeting, and he smiled as he came to sit beside me.

"How are you?" I asked. "We have not spoken of late."

I tried to remember the last time I had spoken with him alone. It might have been when he assisted in my rescue of Gaston.

"I am quite well, thank you. And you?" he asked.

"As can be expected."

He cleared his throat. "They say... he is often... not about."

I smiled. "Nay, he is not." I did not wish to discuss it yet again.

"And to what do I owe this honor?"

"I have news of a sort," he sighed. "And I need your advice."

I chuckled. "Gods, I have often made a piss-poor job of my life, of which you have seen at least one example. Why ever would you seek me out?"

"Bah," he snorted. "If you are so poor at it, then you can at least tell me what you would not do twice."

I was truly amused, and minded of my earlier words to the wolves and Cudro. "Aye, that may be my purpose: to stand as an example for others. What counsel would you have of me? Or would you rather speak of this news you have first?"

"Let us address the news first," he said quickly. "I have seen Tom. At a distance, that is. We have not spoken. He arrived on one of the French ships, the *Belle Mer*."

I snorted. "Well, that settles the question of how he has gotten on since we left him on Tortuga." We had left Tom behind after he betrayed Gaston and me to Doucette. "I wonder if he has learned French."

Dickey shrugged. "I thought you should know. I know that things will not end well for Tom if ever you should get your hands upon him." He seemed a trifle melancholy.

"Do you blame me?" I asked.

"Nay," he sighed. "When I saw him, I was gripped for a moment by the urge to thrash him myself. But truly, Will, I do not feel he understood the severity of the situation."

"He sided with another against his own." I patted his shoulder. "But nay, you are correct: he was a right idiot before, and probably still does not understand."

This elicited a grin. "I wonder if he has taken more to the ways of the Brethren." Dickey looked away. Even in the dim light of the fire, I could see the red upon his cheeks.

I raised an eyebrow, and did not strive to keep the humor from my voice. "And what ways would those be?"

"Oh... you know, about the taking of a matelot and all..." He petered off sheepishly and glanced my way. He snorted disparagingly when he realized I was teasing him.

I grinned. "Aye, considering his earlier protestations, I think Tom will have learned French first. He would have had to in order to fend them off, since he was not all that proficient with a blade or a piece."

We chuckled and I thought of handsome young Tom amongst so many amorous strangers. I would have felt pity, if I did not remember his arrogant dismissal of the need for matelotage. I did not feel that any would take what he did not offer; but they would ask a great deal, and he would not make many friends if he let his former opinions on the matter be known. I was minded of Cudro: if one as determined as the big Dutchman found fancy with Tom, he was surely in trouble. That was disheartening, and I wished to think no more on it.

"Well, then, you have delivered your news," I said as my humor faded. "What advice would you have of me?"

He cleared his throat again. "Well sir, I am recently... enamored of an individual. And I do not know if I should bare my soul on the matter."

I was pleased to hear it and decided against the obvious questions, such as who, and what gender.

"You cannot divine this person's feelings toward yourself?" I asked.

"I have no experience with such things," he said. "The workings of love are a thing I have only read about or observed at a distance."

"Are you well acquainted with this... individual?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes and nodded.

"So this is not you worshipping from afar?"

"Nay. I see this person every day," he sighed.

"And this person is... available?" I asked. "Your love, if announced and accepted, would not be forced to remain unrequited because this person has other commitments?"

"Nay, they are as alone as I," he said wistfully.

Once again I wondered at his presence here, and his not being in Port Royal with his business partner, Belfry, awaiting their first shipment of haberdashery goods. I now surmised this infatuation to be the cause. This meant it was not a young lady he was enamored of.

"I must know. Who?" I asked.

He took a ragged breath and flushed. "The Bard."

My mouth fell open as I struggled with this surprising information. He sighed heavily and buried his face in his hands.

"I know, you think me a fool," he wailed.

"Nay, nay. He is an attractive and well-respected man, possessed of

a fine wit and humor.”

“I know. Believe me, I know. And...” he stammered. “I cannot see what he would want in me. I once... I once asked him of his former matelot, and he described a big forceful man much like Cudro. I am anything but a man like Cudro, though the Bard said that if he were to do it again, now, that he might not make the same choices. And, and... I want... to make him happy, to...” He shuddered and his face was so flushed I thought his eyes might go red. “I do not envision... I mean... I do not wish for...” He gestured about.

I handed him the bottle of Madeira I had been nursing. He took a long pull. This seemed to steady him somewhat.

“I am sorry,” he said quietly. “I have never spoken of such things before.”

I stifled all amusement. “I understand, truly. I will not pass any judgment on you, Dickey. Sometimes it is better to speak. It clears the head and the heart.”

He took another long drink and began talking slowly with a great deal of nervous gesturing. “It is the strangest thing. I wish to touch him, to embrace him. I sometimes even wonder how his touch would feel upon... my person. Yet... I cannot envision... having carnal knowledge of him, or he of me. I.. When I take myself in hand.” He even gestured for that, and he flushed anew and took another drink. “When I... I think about Milly Brown. She was a maid in our household. She was... well endowed. And she was the first woman I ever saw... in the altogether. She was involved with the gardener. I would sneak out to their trysting spot and watch them from the trees. Her... endowment would be exposed, and it bounced quite a bit as he... And she would make this noise. This little pleased... squeaking... with each... thrust. I have... Will, I have never been with a woman.”

“That is nothing to be ashamed of,” I said.

I was proud of myself for not having dissolved into laughter.

“Well, that is kind of you to say, and at least one of us feels that way.” He took another pull and this time his hands stayed at his sides. “I used to watch Tom sometimes. Then I would imagine it was me with his conquest, or Milly Brown, or... They all squeaked in my fantasies.” He grinned sadly. “Is the squeaking fairly common?”

“Some noise often is. All sounds of that like are similar, and all are quite precious when you are the one invoking them.”

“Ah.” He smiled.

“So you do not fantasize about the Bard in that fashion?” I asked with a reassuring smile.

He chuckled and flushed anew. “Nay. I cannot envision the squeaking. I cannot even envision him making the sounds I have heard the other men make. And likewise, the idea of... lying beneath him is... not repulsive to my thinking, but it is very distant from my pleasure, if you understand my meaning.”

“I do.”

He sighed. "We have all heard him bemoan... the lack of such activities in his life, and I do not know if I can offer him that."

This all sounded very familiar to me. I wished to tell him that Gaston was the one he should discuss this with.

"Dickey, you do not know that you cannot, either."

He shrugged. "True. I have told myself that if he were to touch me, then perhaps I would feel differently on the matter."

"You will not know what lies in that field until you walk it," I said.

"I do not know if he will wish for me to climb the fence," he said sadly.

"I see that you are here now, and not in town. How much time do you spend in his presence?" I asked.

"Well, Belfry and I knew few in town, so we often paddled out to the *Queen* in the evenings. And sometimes the men from the *Queen* came ashore, and we would all go to a tavern."

"So, it is often the Bard, the sailors, Belfry, and you?"

"Nay." He shook his head with a small smile. "Belfry often stays in town with Mister Theodore now. He has wished to become better acquainted with the other merchants, and Mister Theodore has been happy to introduce him about." He shrugged. "Often these days it is just the Bard and I. He is teaching me now. I was there whenever he taught Tom something on the last voyage, and so, well, I remember better than Tom does." He grinned. "The Bard insists I sail with you this winter. He says the haberdashery is a... Well, he says a great deal about the shop. It is not thing he would do."

I was equally amazed and amused. "Are you going to sail with us?"

"I have broached the matter with Belfry. He is reluctant to agree to my going until he knows if his bride will arrive this winter. Of course he cannot stop me. Yet, I did decide to be his partner for the endeavor, and I feel I should not abandon him. Also, he has atrocious taste in clothing, and I feel without me the enterprise may be doomed."

I was bemused. "Dickey, you are at quite the crossroads."

He nodded soberly. "That also weighs heavily upon my decision as to whether to tell the Bard or not. If I tell him, and he does not reject me, then it will change everything."

"Aye."

"He treats me like a man, Will." Dickey chuckled ruefully. "And here I am prattling on like some maid. It is ironic, is it not?"

I considered our words from several perspectives. "Do you feel that baring your soul to him on this matter is required in order for you to sail with us as his apprentice?"

"Nay."

"So there are two decisions facing you, not one."

He nodded. "Yet," he sighed. "I do not know if I can sail with him without telling him. What if he found another?"

I sighed. In order to fully grasp the situation, I needed to either speak with the Bard, or observe them together for a time. Conversely,

I did not wish to meddle. I looked about. The Bard sat in the shadows across the fire, speaking with Striker and Pete. I did not see how I could speak with him without it being meddling.

"So, on the matter of your heart, you fear rejection," I said. "Have you been drunk with him?"

"Aye."

"To the degree where you have to hang all over one another to return home?"

"Once." He grinned. "I do not remember much of it, though."

"All right, I would suggest drinking with him again, just the two of you, in a tavern. You pretend to be far more intoxicated than you are. As you stagger home, you initiate some form of contact, and see how he responds. If he rebuffs you, your dignity is intact: you can claim you were drunk. It is a time-tested tactic."

"What the Devil do I do if he responds?" he asked with alarm.

"Well, here is the true test of your commitment to the matter. Do you wish to have that problem? Once you have answered that question, find a way, drunk or sober, to ask the other."

He was silent for a time as we watched the fire.

"How did you know, with Gaston?" he asked.

"Oh Lord," I sighed, as I recalled our first meeting yet again. "I was smitten with him the moment I saw him, and he with me apparently. It took months to get the matter truly sorted out. We were named matelots by those around us well in advance of our actually becoming matelots, if you take my meaning."

"Ah."

"He does not favor men any more than you do," I said.

"Oh, and yet."

I shied from the truth. "He loves me."

"Of course," Dickey said as if I had scolded him.

"Nay, I did not mean it to sound so. Love brings greater pleasure than the flesh alone. He finds pleasure in pleasing me and in being pleased by me, even though a man would not be his choice if it were not I. Do you understand?"

Dickey smiled and nodded. "The flesh is easy to please, is it not?"

I seized on it. "Aye, it is."

"So my flesh should truly have no issue with the matter."

I found myself grimacing. "Aye and nay. Your manhood has its own mind at times, does it not?"

"Aye," he sighed.

"Well, if it does not favor men in the least, it may not rush to follow your heart at first. It might require some coaxing."

"Ah. Well, I feel it would be happy about the matter if it were the one... active, in the... endeavor." He was flushing again. "I do not know how either of us will react in regards the other. I am very...sensitive... there..."

I saw his concern, and instinct told me he was running from the

wrong boar.

I smiled. "Dickey, has it occurred to you, that quite possibly the Bard would prefer you do the bestowing? I do not know that for fact, yet... It is entirely possible. Do not assume one over the other, until you have evidence otherwise."

His eyes had grown very big.

"Oh," he said.

I searched my memory for every discussion I had ever held with the Bard, or mention I had heard him make. I decided there was indeed a pattern in his references.

"I feel he wishes someone to sail him," I said, "not the other way around."

Dickey groaned and slumped back on the sand. "Will, I do not know how to sail anyone."

"Well, let him teach you that, too."

He sat upright with a distraught expression. "Oh damn."

"What?"

"He has been waiting for me to... do something. He has... Good Lord, Will, he has been making innuendos for weeks. He's always saying I have no grasp of the wind gauge unless it's in the sails. I have been such a fool."

I laughed. I could envision the Bard making blatant overtures to poor besotted Dickey and having them misunderstood. I could clearly see him casting his eyes heavenward in frustration and bemusement.

Dickey stood.

"Hold. What will you do?" I asked.

"I will ... um..." He glanced nervously beyond the fire, to the Bard. "I should... speak with him on the matter."

"Aye. Give me my bottle first."

He took another long pull before returning it. And then he was off on stiff and seemingly reluctant legs. The Bard looked up at him curiously, and then his sardonic gaze flicked to me. I could not help but grin, and the Bard's eyes widened for a moment before he stood and led Dickey into the shadows.

As they disappeared from view, I realized all was silent around the fire, and a dozen pairs of questioning eyes were upon me. Striker made a crude gesture with the fingers of one hand thrusting into the circle of his other hand. I shrugged and laughed, and all guffawed and offered a toast to the potential new couple. I dearly hoped the Bard and Dickey were beyond the hearing of it, so that Dickey did not collapse with embarrassment.

With that, I decided to take my leave. The path up the point was not long, but it was made treacherous by my somewhat wine-sodden brain and the dark. The wind was now gusting so fiercely it seemed to blow the light of my torch away along with the flame and smoke. I was pleased to spy at last the glow of my cook fire, until I realized I had not left the fire lit – and then *pleased* was a very pale word for my elation.

The kettle was on, and a chicken roasting on the spit, but he was not in evidence. The door was open. I tossed my torch into the fire, and hurried into our tiny abode to find him stripped and preparing to bathe. The sight drove the breath from me.

I did not take offense at his initial startled glare, or his reaching for a weapon at my sudden presence. I drank him in. He was disheveled and filthy, as he had been every time I had glimpsed him this autumn. His shortly cropped red hair was stiff, and stood every which way. The Caribe-inspired mask he oft wore was a dark smudge from one temple to the next, across his emerald eyes. He had taken to shaving again, though not often, and in the candlelight, the stubble looked as if dried blood had been smeared across his jaw. As for the rest, the angle of the flickering light caught the ridges of scars encircling him, so that he appeared striped all about like a cat. Many might have thought him a horrific image. I wanted to embrace him. I held my ground, though.

"As always, I am very happy to see you," I murmured in French.

His expression softened, and he set the pistol back upon the chest. He touched it twice more in a curious fashion, and frowned at it. Then he caught his breath and shook off whatever whimsy had taken hold of him.

"How are we?" I whispered, and closed the gap between us. I always asked, though I now expected no answer.

He regarded me with confused eyes. It was a far cry from the feral glare I had been awarded upon my arrival, yet I knew him to be in the depths of his madness still.

"I should be..." He sighed and shook his head again, regaining more of his composure. "I should not be here... yet, but the storm... I did not wish for you to worry."

"Thank you," I breathed.

I gingerly caressed his cheek with the back of my fingers. He did not pull away; instead he took my hand in his and kissed it. Relieved and emboldened, I stepped in to embrace him.

"Non, do not," he said quickly.

He stepped back into the wall, and almost the tub in the narrow space. I recoiled a little at his rebuff, though I had expected it. But old fears smoldered in my heart, and his behavior when he was thus, fanned them to life.

He squeezed my hand painfully. "Will, I am filthy and infested with vermin. I would not have you itch as I do. Help me bathe and shave."

"Of course."

I turned away to fetch the kettle and hide my annoyance at my foolishness. He was the sanest I had seen him since August. I had no reason to offer complaint.

"I am glad you killed a chicken," I said to fill the silence as I emptied the boiling water into the partially full tub. "I can not remember when last I ate, and all they brought from Port Royal was rum and wine. We pulled the *Queen* ashore to careen."

"I know. I watched."

I thought of him watching us all day, and how damn lonely I had felt. Anger ignited, and quickly swirled to ash when it encountered my guilt. He had most probably been lonely, too.

"Did you feel unable to join us?" I asked.

He nodded and rubbed his eyes. "Too many people, Will. I am sorry."

I sighed. "I imagine they are difficult for you to manage now, but they do miss you. They worry for you."

He stood with his back to the wall and his arms crossed and the tub between us. He was thoughtful. "Do you forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive." I shrugged. "Now test this water and see if it is to your liking."

His eyes did not leave me, and he did not move. I sighed again.

I met his gaze and did not blink. "I forgive you for whatever you feel you need me to mete out forgiveness for."

He shook his head with the curious mixture of wonder and annoyance he often adopted when I said something he did not wish to believe about his person. It was his mien when I told him he was beautiful.

I smiled. "You are a man possessed of a most excellent character, a veritable saint, and I feel you could never intentionally do a thing unto another that would require their forgiveness."

He snorted, and his lips finally pulled up in something akin to a smile, though it lacked the impetus of a merry heart to truly make it one.

"I love you," I added.

"You are truly my fool," he said, as if it troubled him. What little amusement had touched him fled. He tested the water with a toe, and found it acceptable: his foot followed.

His words troubled me. "Am I truly so very foolish?"

Sensing my change in mood, he glanced up as he lowered himself to kneel in the bath. He studied me intently. The wind gusted at such an angle that it whipped inside and guttered the candle. I hurried to close the door.

Gaston spoke with a smirk when I turned back to him. "I do not feel you could ever engage in any foolishness I would feel the need to forgive you for."

I smiled, as much with relief as amusement. "That is good to hear."

We made short work of bathing him. I reveled in merely being able to touch him and assure myself he was truly present. When he was as clean as we could manage, he bade me shave him. After I finished his head and face, he stood, and looked at me expectantly. I raised an eyebrow.

"That too," he said.

I regarded his privates.

"That will itch," I said.

"It itches now."

I grimaced, and very carefully did as he instructed. He stared at the wall and did not do much more than twitch as I handled him. My manhood flinched in sympathy for seeing a blade so near another.

Once he was fully shorn, we rinsed him yet again. Apparently this finally left him feeling clean enough to embrace me.

I held him tightly with great relief, and found myself musing again on bravery and desperation. Was I a brave man or a desperate one to love him so?

No answer was forthcoming, and I nuzzled his neck to divert my thoughts. I assumed he would stop me soon, yet this time I did not fear reprisal if he was to do so. To my pleasure, he did not seem inclined to put me off, and his arms came up to rub the stubble of my scalp. My hands slid over him, familiarizing themselves anew with the texture of his scars and ribs. His heart and breath were slow and steady, and his lips delicate upon my ear. He smelled of soap, and the wind rattling the door smelled of rain and smoke, and burning meat.

"Food," I muttered with annoyance.

He chuckled as I darted out to fetch our meal.

To my delight, his playfulness only increased as we ate. We giggled and gobbled with little elegance, in order to further necessitate our cleaning faces and fingers with questing tongues. Soon, I was lying on the floor, ruminating on how damn fine life was, while he licked wine from my chest. When he brought me off, I told myself I need not wait, as this surely would not be the only time I came this night.

After that, we retired to the hammock, and he sprawled across it, seemingly with not a bone in his body.

"Make it all go away," he whispered.

I grinned, and went looking for the oil. He seemed utterly lacking in inhibition this night. My manhood was rising again as I contemplated how far he might allow me to go.

I found the oil, and turned to find him studying me with the predatory gleam of lust in his eyes. My breath caught.

"What?" I whispered.

"You are not revolting," he whispered back.

He had never regarded me with desire before. His manhood was not fully turgid, but it was not flaccid either. I watched as he fingered it absently, while his gaze crawled over me. This was truly a heretofore unrealized benefit to him being in his madness.

I found a knife, and carefully trimmed my nails and the horny skin around them. Then I smoothed them even further on the side of my whetstone.

He watched me with his head cocked. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing I do tonight is to hurt you. Do you understand?"

He shrugged, and his look was mildly defiant.

"Gaston, nothing. If it hurts, you will tell me, oui?"

His nod was somber, but it was obvious he harbored reservations as to the necessity of my words. I ignored that for the time being, and

joined him on the hammock. He took my kisses with hungry abandon. I anointed him with gentle caresses, as I had many times before. In the past, he had come to relax beneath my ministrations with happy little grunts and mewls. Tonight, he writhed and groaned.

I soon had him on his belly, and when I reached his buttocks and slid fingers into the crevasse between, he pushed up to offer me far more. I toyed with his opening, and he rocked against my hand with little thrusts.

"Oui," he breathed, as I pressed just a little inside.

I knew I could have him, but that would be a selfish thing born of my desires. Tonight would be for him. I wanted to paint over all of his furtive attempts at dissipation, and especially that one hideous night where last he had exercised his libido. Then I wished to fill the canvas with a new and vivid memory of carnal pleasure.

"Roll over," I urged.

"Non, take me," he whispered.

I gently slapped his buttock. "Trust me. If you are truly surrendering to me, then do not question me. Roll over."

He complied, and I was rewarded with the sight of his manhood in all its glory. It was lovely: short, but strong and elegant, with surprising girth. I resisted the urge to grasp it then and there.

While he gasped and squirmed, I pooled oil in the hollows of his hip bones, alongside his member. Then I lifted his rump, so that his hips were supported above the netting upon my knees. His legs found their way around my waist. I pushed them apart again, so that he was open before me.

I was struck dumb by the sight of him thus spread and ready. His eyes were trusting. A muffling wave of white flowed over the mural of all my conquests, until I could see none but him.

"I love you," I murmured.

"And I love you," he replied earnestly.

I could see him sinking into the fear though. His manhood was shrinking in the face of his change of demeanor. I leaned forward, and pulled his mouth up to mine for a gentle kiss. When I let his head drop, I met his eyes.

"My love, I will not hurt you. I will do nothing you do not wish."

He nodded, but his eyes were a child's. I considered abandoning the endeavor, and simply holding him, but the thought of his manhood straining so tightly urged me on. It deserved release at least once this decade if I could arrange it. He was indeed a skittish horse, and I was sure that if I could get him over this first hurdle, he would surely develop a taste for jumping.

I sat back, and returned to his opening. He tensed, and his member jerked. I slowly teased and cajoled until he relaxed. His eyes were heavy-lidded with passion again when I slipped a single digit inside him. I quested about until I found the lump of flesh I sought. At first his eyes shot wide and he tensed, but then as I established a rhythm, his cock

jerking in time, he began to arch and claw at the netting above his head. His manhood was soon resplendent once again. This time I did not deny myself or it. I dipped fingers in the oil and grasped it with my free hand. He was not long in coming. Truly, there was a moment when I was not sure if he would stop. I thought he would destroy what was left of his voice with his cries.

I released him and withdrew my finger when he finally ceased to spasm in my hand. His body slowly relaxed back to the hammock. He lay there inert and mute, with shallow breath, closed eyes, and twitching fingers. I slid my knees from beneath his thighs and retrieved a rag to clean us. He pushed the cloth away as I began to dab at his chest. He raised his head enough to regard himself, and slid his fingers through the pool of jism with wonder. When he fell back, his eyes found mine. His mouth opened and closed silently.

I put fingers to his lips and whispered, "Sleep, you have earned it."

He shook his head and reached for my member.

"Non," I sighed. "It is not..."

He was insistent. I sat astride him so that he could reach me. He scooped up his come and slathered it on my still turgid member. I gasped and laughed, and he grinned at me triumphantly. I kissed him with renewed fervor, and dropped upon him to slide until I added to the mess.

In the aftermath, we curled together and listened to the storm. Despite the now howling wind and drumming rain, I drifted to sleep with the pleasantest of thoughts. He had at last returned to me in spirit as well as body.

Sometime later, I was with Shane in the barn, but this was not one of our early pleasant forays into trysting. Nay, he had me pinned with an arm across my throat, while his other hand fondled my privates. It was a twisted thing, in that I knew I was dreaming. Beyond the first year, Shane had wished for little awareness of my pleasure. Why would I dream of him stroking me now?

The wind howled and the roof shook with the steady downpour. It was cold, the chill of a tropic storm that I found so odd in a land that did not know frost. My skin was clammy, except for where there was weight and heat behind me, and the fire wrapped around my member. I felt pressure against my buttocks, and he moved rhythmically. His lust was a thing crouched upon my back.

I hung, suspended by talons of violent passion in some limbo betwixt dream and waking. I knew not what was real. All was dark. I could not bring words to my lips. Instead a shameful whimper emerged from me, a sound I remembered all too well. I knew I should fling myself clear, but I could not move. The pain and fear roiled about inside me, seeking release, threatening to explode and tear me asunder. It found escape from my throat in a harsh ragged sob, that if I had not felt its rise and reverberation in my heart, I would not have known as mine.

At this utterance, he stopped and stayed as still as I. In some

unfathomable way, his lack of movement released me from my spell of paralysis; and with another cry, I tore myself out from under him and flung myself onto the floor. Despite the darkness, I found the corner of the outer room. I could not hear over the rain. I sensed movement toward me, and I struck out wildly with the panicked inconsistency of the boy I had once been. I hit him. I knew not where. He withdrew, and I was alone again in the dark and the past.

I curled in upon myself and sobbed, cursing the Gods for being so damn cruel.

I woke to silence and dim light. Rain no longer lashed the walls, but the wind still gusted. The door was open. Gaston was not in evidence. All smelled of wet dirt. My nakedness had been covered by our one blanket. I had not placed it upon me. On the wall, "J'taime" was written in charcoal.

Fear clawed at my heart anew, with talons as piercing as those I had felt last night, yet these did not immobilize me. I scrambled to my feet and out into the light. I found Gaston sitting by the cook fire. He rose at my approach, and picked up his musket and bag. He was dressed, packed, and armed to leave. I stopped, knowing if I came too close he would run. His emerald eyes were haunted. I know not what he saw in mine, perhaps the fear, and perhaps he would interpret it incorrectly.

"I love you," I whispered.

He shook his head in initially mute refutation. Then his words were delivered with rehearsed precision. "I know. That is why I cannot stay. I am still mad and have little control of myself. I have accomplished nothing these last months. I am as mad as I was when we arrived here. And I now know I am more a threat to you than before. I am sorry. I do not want you to waste your days waiting on a thing that will not happen. I may never be well. It is best for you if I go. I could not live with myself if I harmed you. You must understand."

As he spoke, I did not allow myself to think of precisely what he spoke of, mainly the events of last night. Instead, one thought rose from the depths of my soul: my love made me brave, not desperate.

Thus, anger replaced the fear. "Non. I will not understand. You will not leave me again. If you go I will follow, and do not think you can escape me. The world is not large enough to hide you, and I will follow you across the River Styx herself if necessary. If you love me, you will stay, and we will endure and conquer this madness of yours together."

He frowned with wonder, and the hint of a smile graced his lips. "Will, I will surely kill us both."

"Oui, that seems likely, but I for one will be happier if I do not die alone. And just this once, do not call me a fool for it."

"You are not a fool," he murmured. "You make my heart ache," he added with a small smile.

The anger fled and I played along with our old jest. "Do you wish to kill me?"

"Non, the other one," he said and walked past me into the cabin.

When he returned he was without his weapons or bag.

He tossed me my breeches. "This path you set us on will be a challenge, Will."

"Oui, I well know it. Yet the Gods know I adore a challenge, and I am sure that will be my undoing."

Twenty-Eight

Wherein We Learn to Ride the Winds

We spoke no more for a time, and busied ourselves repairing our roof in the aftermath of the storm. Other than his complimenting me sincerely on my extension to the hut, we worked silently side by side; and though our silence was not awkward, it was not companionable either. Our eyes were oft upon the other, only to dart away upon gaining the other's notice. I mulled through last night's events, and wondered about a good many things.

When Pete and Striker arrived, I was not sure whether I was happy to see them. They appeared relieved to see both of us. Gaston appeared ready to retreat to the woods at the slightest provocation.

"Came to see if you blew away," Striker said, as they watched us come down from the roof.

"Nay, you are still blighted with our existence," I sighed. "And all others? The ship?"

"No true harm done." He addressed Gaston. "It is good to see you."

My matelot nodded curtly, but remained silent and distant. I did not miss the look Pete and Striker exchanged.

As they had brought a bottle, and we had several dead fowl due to the storm, we proceeded to set the chicken to cooking and then joined them in drinking nearby in the shade, away from the heat and smoke. Striker made conversation about who had suffered what minor damage.

"Took us a time to find the Bard," he chuckled. "Here we thought him washed away, but nay, he was carried out on the tide of love. When we found them, the man was reluctant to come and look over the vessel.

First time I've seen him care for anything more than a ship."

I was amused. "The heady rush of new love will do that."

"ThatBeenATimeInComin'," Pete added with a grin, and shook the bottle admonishingly at Striker, who rolled his eyes.

"Pete swears they've been enamored of one another for a time," Striker sighed.

"Based upon what I learned last night, I would agree," I said. "But only one of them understood the nature of it."

"And the poor swain sought you out for advice?" Striker teased.

"I told him he was a fool for it," I grinned.

I glanced at Gaston. He was sober and tense, and I noted he was not drinking. I thought that wise. I tried to remember if I had told him of Dickey's revelation last night while we ate. He was not regarding me during the conversation with curious eyes, though, so surely I had.

Striker continued, "When we finally did get him to the ship, he pronounced we could start careening her at once. I would have preferred to wait until Cow Island. With so many hands it would go quicker. But this way, it'll allow us to field more men to hunt whilst the French careen."

This caught Gaston's attention, and he eyed me quite curiously. I felt other eyes upon us.

"Striker wishes to sail soon. I will let him tell you of it," I told Gaston.

I then gave the other two a jaunty grin and said, "We did not speak much last night."

They took my meaning, and at least appeared a trifle embarrassed to have been exchanging another one of their now annoying glances, which I knew I interpreted correctly as concerned and pitying.

Striker quickly told Gaston of all he had told me concerning Morgan's plans and his own. My matelot remained silent, but nodded thoughtfully when he finished.

"So are you two with us?" Striker asked.

I began to shrug, but Gaston beat me to answering. "Whatever Will wishes." He stood and went to check on the chicken.

"If you two look at one another in that manner again, I will shoot one of you," I muttered without regarding them, and followed Gaston. I heard matched chuckles in my wake.

I knelt next to the fire and watched him turn the spit. "We do not..."

His gaze was sharp and cut me off handily. "There is no reason to stay. What do you desire?"

"Do you feel... ready...?"

He shook his head. "But it matters not. Three months of steeping you in misery has solved nothing."

"It has not all been misery, and... It is more important that you are well and happy. Being on a vessel surrounded by others will make things better?"

He studied the fire and finally sighed. "It will be much as being

bound. On a ship amongst many I cannot run wild, and I am constantly minded of it. And you are still my touchstone of sanity."

"Thank you. But... we could do that here and..."

"Will! Decide!" he hissed.

I winced at the rebuke, though it was earned. He was giving me the right to choose. I needed to trust that he would abide by my decision, and not blame me later.

"We will go. I grow weary of this place... without you," I said softly.

His eyes softened and he nodded. "You are the best happiness I have known. I will be with you. And truly, Will, my way did not work. We will try yours."

I was not sure what my way was. The heavy mantle of responsibility settled across my shoulders, and for a brief moment I thought I might be smothered by it. But then the weight subsided, and I felt comfort under it. I was indeed loved and trusted.

"Thank you, and we will manage," I murmured, and kissed his temple.

He smiled sadly and shooed me off.

I walked taller back to Pete and Striker. "We will sail. When?"

They appeared dubious, but quickly changed their mien at my glare.

"As soon as we finish careening," Striker said. "Will you be able to assist?"

I shrugged. "We will do what we can."

The remainder of our repast and visit passed amicably enough, with Gaston even finding amusement in some of Striker's tales of his boyhood on pirate vessels on the seas about England. Then it was night, and the wolves found a likely hollow in which to sleep in our yard. Gaston and I retired inside.

Gaston regarded our hammock with reluctance.

"We can be as chaste as kittens," I assured him.

He snorted. "Are kittens chaste? I have seen them lick each other quite heartily. And puppies are worse; they are ever cleaning one another's arse."

"And mounting one another, oui," I chuckled. "Nuns, perhaps."

"I have never seen nuns sleeping together; I would not hazard to guess what goes on beneath their habits. The monks I knew were... odd at times." He frowned. "I do not believe man is chaste by nature."

I forced myself not to hold my breath, or release it in a sigh. He was in a curious spirit.

"May we speak of last night?" I asked.

He nodded without regarding me, and busied himself with cleaning grease off his fingers. "I feel we must."

I sat in the interior doorway on the hammock, and dangled my feet, composing my words.

"I thought I dreamed..." I said at last.

"Will..."

"Let me finish," I said quickly. "At first I could not separate memory

from dream, or dream from reality. I feel... you have... found something you thought lost. I would say that if this is a result of your time wandering about, then it is good. And I will welcome your advances, if you would but wake me first the next time you feel the need."

He turned to regard me solemnly. "It was not me." At my frown, he held up a placating hand and smiled weakly. "Let me finish. Remember once when I described my madness as an unruly horse that I am unable to ride?"

"Oui. Do you feel it acts without your knowledge?" I found this alarming: I had often wondered how connected all the shadows of himself he showed when mad really were. "You have often said you do not remember..."

"Events, when it is running wild, non, not clearly, but I am there, clinging to it; I just do not have the reins. Will, the Horse has never suffered from impotence. I believe I have mentioned this: when I am mad I am quite functional. I believe I have been... hampering my function in that regard, because all thoughts of lust were part of the Gordian knot involving my sister and that night. I always felt my lust led me astray."

"Do you feel that now?" I asked.

"Non, actually, and I feel some guilt over it," he sighed. "Since you made me see those memories again, I have been able to examine them, and I have come to regard some things in a clearer perspective."

I nodded. "So your time here has not been for naught."

He shrugged. "Non, I suppose not. But my objective upon coming here was to regain my sanity, and I have failed."

"Perhaps, yet... What do you regard from a clearer perspective?"

He sighed and looked away sadly. "I have come to see that my sister was as mad as I, or our mother. She seduced me. And I feel... betrayed in that regard. She planned the entirety of it, and cared not what would happen to me in the aftermath. She escaped her madness and pain and left me to our father's wrath."

I was relieved he had come to this conclusion, as it was one I had long held. Still I could see his pain.

"Oh, Gaston," I sighed sympathetically. "And she was the only one you ever felt truly loved by. I am sorry."

He met my eyes with a calm gaze. "And now I feel you are the only one who has every truly loved me."

I heard something in the ether between us, the shadow of denial. "And you do not know if you can trust me?" I asked carefully.

"Non, non," he shook his head quickly. "I feel my madness will harm you. It is I who cannot be trusted." He held up his hand in a bid for my silence, and I tried to still my refutation and racing thoughts.

He spoke calmly. "You once remarked that I could not fall from the horse because I am a centaur. I feel you are right, but not from the induction of the metaphor we originally established to explain ourselves in the world of wolves and sheep... rather from the perspective that I am both man and beast. I have... Plato's allegory of the cave has occupied

my thoughts a great deal. I have come to think that the Horse, my madness, is the thing you would see if you were to turn in your seat and look out the cave mouth into the light. And that the man is merely the shadow I have learned to cast upon the wall. I feel I am mad, and this rational face I show, sometimes, is merely a façade. It is a mask."

He looked away sadly at this admission, and my heart ached for him, but his words sparked new ideas that resonated with other suspicions I realized I had also long harbored.

"May I give my thoughts, as that concept has engendered a very strong image in my mind?" I asked softly.

He nodded.

"From my seat in the cave," I said, "I have seen you cast a number of shadows upon the wall, encompassing both horse and man. I feel you are a centaur in the light, both man and horse. And you move about, depending on... whether or not the Horse has the bit in its teeth, and thus you cast different shadows. Let me ask a thing. When have you felt most sane?"

He thought on it, and his answer was slow in coming. "When we sailed last summer, and when I lived amongst the monks. But Will, even then I felt I was in constant battle...."

"Hold a moment. When have you felt truly mad, so that there was no battling with the Horse at all?"

This answer was quick. "When I first recovered from the... flogging."

"So, for perhaps three years of your life, you have felt mostly sane or mostly mad. And you are twenty-eight years? What of the rest?"

He frowned, but a wry smile slowly replaced it. "I see your point. I have spent most of my life betwixt the two. But Will, you do not know how very hard I have to fight the Horse."

I clung to his metaphor. "Is that because the Horse is truly unruly and hateful of you, or because it wishes to go places faster and with less care than you feel prudent – because you feel it may lead you both into harm again? What does your Horse wish to do when it gets away from you? I know you are not truly a horse, but whenever I have had a horse refuse to go someplace, or buck beneath me, or wish to run in one direction or another, it always had a reason that made sense to it. Perhaps a snake was emerging from the hedge that I did not see, or it heard a thing I only later discovered."

He was thoughtful. "I see what you say, and... I must think on it. Sometimes, I think my Horse is my soul, and it is a thing of the truth and light and cares little for civilized shadows on the wall. But then, on occasion, it delivers to me urges or thoughts I cannot abide and call myself good, and I want no part of it. If it is the truth of me, then I am evil."

I wondered what thoughts could be so very dark. "Does that relate to the events with your sister?"

"Oui and non," he sighed. "I must think on it, truly."

"I do not feel you are evil."

"I try not to show you those shadows," he said solemnly.

I thought of last night, and of waking weeks ago to find him standing over me with a knife. I had many more questions, but I kept silent as he turned out the lamp and joined me in the hammock, his back pressed to mine. I mulled over events of the last two days, truly allowing myself to remember. I winced with shame at my humiliating reaction to his assault. That was a thing I must think over and reconcile, if not remedy. It brought to mind one other facet of the situation though.

"Gaston," I whispered. He had not yet seemed to relax into sleep.

"Oui."

"Last night, you stopped – or rather the Horse stopped, I suppose – when I cried out. I cannot see that as evil."

Now I felt the tension ease from his back.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Neither of us slept for a time. I do not know what dark thoughts he harbored, but my own swirled about chasing their tails. I laid many a curse upon his father and Doucette, as I had many times since Île de la Tortue. Gaston had been well before, to such an extent that I had not been able to comprehend his claims of madness except for rare instances. Yet, if I truly looked back over our life together, I could see hints here and there of his Horse's antics. I knew his assertion that he has always been mad was true, though I still chose to believe his father responsible for much of the Horse's wildness – even prior to the disastrous night eleven years ago. And I could surely blame that bastard Doucette for inciting it to run amuck these last months.

This did little to ease my troubled mind. I wished to have clear villains to revile, as I felt I had in my own life. I did not wish to blame Gaston for his Horse being an unruly creature. I could place blame for my tormented soul squarely upon two heads, my cousin Shane's and my father's. Then I realized even that was folly. I considered myself equally culpable, did I not? Was I not the one who taught my Horse to run instead of fight? Had I not allowed myself to be herded through life? Had I not been born with my own madness, which I too rode poorly, though with different result? That begged the question: could Gaston not learn to ride his Mount better? This, in due course, led to the allegation that I could learn to ride better as well; and that I could still blame his damned father and all the others for not teaching him how to ride in the first place.

And how apt was this allegory of a horse for our heart of hearts? I seemed to take to it well enough. Were we all not just beasts ridden by a rational soul attempting to control what God had wrought? And where was God in all of this? Was He not responsible for Gaston's having an abundantly spirited and sensitive Horse, or my having one that was too inquisitive and favored men? And could one learn to ride from another? And if so, how did one teach it?

I had trained a number of horses, some so spirited I was the only one they would allow to ride them. And there was a dark thought. Did

I not take pride in being the only one Gaston ever handed the reins to, just as I had taken pride in being the only one able to mount my great destrier of a hunter, Goliath or the others? Was that the unworthy pleasure I took in accepting the mantle of responsibility? Is that why I felt I walked taller under its weight? And all allegory aside, was that why I took such pride and satisfaction in our love, because I was needed?

I had never been needed before; I had always been the one doing the needing in my relations with others. I had always been the boy, ever running from trouble and ever seeking some small praise, a pat on the head, or perhaps a treat. And damn it all, could I not blame my father for that as well, as I surely never received a kind word from him as all boys should? And did he not allow me to be driven from his home prior to my becoming a man? I had to teach myself to become a man, to ride my Horse, and perhaps I have done a piss-poor job of it.

How was I going to help Gaston in that light? My Horse was always running amuck, was it not? But unlike Gaston, I did not cling to it for dear life; nay, I enjoyed the ride and whooped with glee as we jumped this or that fence and chased the sheep about. Yet, was that a fair comparison? Was my Mount as feral as Gaston's?

I saw us as horses, he a wicked black one unused to the traces or even paddocks: a wild creature of the woods, a mythic forest denizen peering into the world of ordered green fields. And I was a white creature born of those fields, but badly trained and misused, so that I trusted few and ran far. And we met somewhere in a meadow betwixt forest and pasture, and frolicked in the morning dew like colts, sometimes challenging and other times examining one another. And we would race, until we fell into step like a well-matched team, hooves striking in tandem, stride for stride.

I woke feeling I had little sleep, as if I had truly been running about all night. Gaston looked as weary as I, but we chose not to trouble one another on it, or discuss anything of merit with Pete and Striker around. We went about the day.

It took sadly little time to pack the belongings we would leave behind in the sea trunk. We closed my crude shutters, blocked the door, and caught all the chickens we could. Then, laden with Gaston's medicine chest, our weapons and traveling gear and the fowl, the four of us made our way down the hill to the beach.

I stopped to look back only once at my abode. It had been more a home than many places I had lived. I hoped Theodore had completed the land grants. I realized that was a thing I needed to tell Gaston of.

All were happy to see Gaston. He, of course, was not as pleased to see all of them, especially their pressing about and speaking loudly, but he made the best of it and I sheltered him as I could. That is to say, I was pleased he did not stab or even snarl at the men who I had to stop from embracing him. We could do little about their speculative looks, though. All seemed to wish to gauge his relative sanity. I understood to some degree; it was with effort that my eyes were not always upon him,

wondering if this or that would upset him.

They had already begun to scrape the ship free of seaweed, barnacles, and all other manner of things that adore adhering to wet wood in the tropics. Once an area was clear, another man would apply pitch to the seams and coat the surface with tar. Meanwhile, a few men painted what they could above the waterline to protect the wood there. Painting was not an option for the decks, but all of the vertical surfaces were thus treated. The Bard had chosen a lively blue for this coat of paint, and I thought our *Virgin Queen* would be quite handsome once we were done.

Gaston quickly chose to take a turn with the scraping. I was put to work stirring the tar. I was not enamored with sitting about the smoky fire, even in a fine sea breeze, but other than scraping or applying pitch, tasks we already had ample men pursuing, I have little to offer the careening process. As no one else wanted to sit about the fire with me, I was left alone, except for Davey and Julio coming to refill their tar pails. So I was both pleased and surprised when the Bard joined me, and then I remembered that he might have matters to discuss with me in private. I was correct.

"Apparently a 'thank you' is in order," he grinned. "Dickey has not shared the particulars of what was said, but I understand I have you to thank for raising the sail on the matter."

I chuckled. "He approached me to ask advice of how best to woo you, and over the course of the conversation realized he had misinterpreted a number of signals from your quarter."

The Bard sighed. "He is such the lad; I did not know what to say to him without being blatant."

"It is a new and somewhat thorny matter for him." I shrugged. "Until this summer, I do not feel he ever considered a man at all."

"Nay, he did not. And even now..." He studied the horizon with a frown and shook his head.

"Do you judge him insincere?"

"Nay," the Bard said firmly. He eyed me in a speculative fashion. "You favor men, true? As your first choice?"

"Aye."

"I don't. Not as my first choice. Men are a thing I learned since I went to sea as a boy. And he doesn't favor men. To me it begs the question of what we're about. Things aren't as they were in the West Indies a decade ago. There are women here now, though they be few. Granted, I spend all my time aboard a ship, and that's no place for a woman. There's no place in my life for a woman at all, as I wouldn't want one sitting in port. But Dickey has other choices he could make."

I was surprised and curious. "You are the one who knows so much of matelots, are you not? Does not the heart sometimes lead the loins?"

He sighed and awarded me a wry smile. "Sometimes."

"What is your real concern?"

"Damn you," he muttered with a grin.

"To the Devil with you as well," I said good naturedly.

He checked the consistency of my tar and played with the sand a little before finally speaking. "It is a huge thing, the taking on of another."

"Ahhh." I smiled.

"I'm used to being my own master," he said. "I rely on no man. I'm respected. I have my skills. I have my money. I have not had to share it all in a long time. I have yearned, but never reached, for another these last years. And, bless his heart, he's young. I'm afraid he's swept up in the tide of coming here, and he'll change his tack once the bloom fades."

"I see. Hearts can change, but in the time I have known Dickey, I have found him to be consistently a man, albeit young, of sober reflection and steadfast but principled loyalty."

"I know." The Bard smiled. "Else I wouldn't have found myself so fond of him."

"Are there other issues of compatibility, beyond the concerns of wisdom and the cynicism of maturity?" I teased.

"Nay," he chuckled. "Not that can't be won."

"Are there issues with gentling him down?"

He snorted and scratched his head with embarrassment.

"I do not mean to pry, and I will leave well enough alone," I said quickly.

"Nay, nay, ask away." He shrugged.

"All right then, understand, I usually do not engage in this topic to any detail with men I do not intend to bed."

He chuckled. "Neither do I."

"Am I correct in assuming you would rather be sailed than do the sailing?"

This time he laughed. "Aye. But it has been a very long time since that has occurred, Will."

"Ahhh..." I sighed.

"And he is such a pup. He knows ... nothing, yet he has a great deal of enthusiasm. And I had rather hoped he had sought your advice on that."

I grinned. "Well, send him back and I will tell him what I can."

"Truly, Will, I'm amazed he can pleasure himself without incident."

Davey awarded us one of his usual disapproving looks when he found us laughing such that we could not fill his pail steadily, leaving him to tend to it himself. This only amused us more until he left.

When we sobered a bit, I said, "I am sure you are a fine teacher in that as well as sailing."

"I've never had to teach another that," the Bard sighed. "It'll be an adventure. And my getting sailed in that manner will be a long time in coming."

I thought on my own fate at the hands of love and sighed. "I am sure it will be worth the time and effort."

"As am I. I shouldn't whine so. 'Tis good to have someone." He

shrugged.

And as if he had read my mind with the same ability he read the winds, he asked, "And you?" He looked up at Gaston, who was still working on the side of the ship.

"We are together," I sighed. "And I do not fear a change of heart. And I truly believe the things we hope to achieve are both achievable and worthy of the effort."

"But it is not an easy road you walk?" he asked kindly.

I shrugged. "Nay, it is not."

"Is he well?"

"It is made all the more difficult by the scrutiny of others," I said.

He nodded soberly. "Sorry, but Will, he's going to scrape those planks to paper."

I looked up and saw what he spoke of. Gaston was working at his section of planks like a man possessed, and I realized he had been at it far longer than a normal shift.

"I see your point," I said quickly. "Watch the tar, will you?"

Gaston did not stop when I joined him in kneeling on the angled hull. I had to place both hands upon his before he slowed. His eyes glittered with a dangerous rage I knew far too well. I did my best not to flinch.

"I think you should stop now," I said lightly.

He pulled away and flung the scraper down. He began to clench and shake his hands, and I surmised the old damage had made them numb again. I snatched one hand and turned it over to see the blisters. His callused hands had not wielded a tool steadily or with such force these last months.

"When last I did that to myself you became quite distraught," I chided gently.

He jerked his hand away and balled it into a fist. He hugged himself and studied his handiwork of the last hour. His eyes softened.

"They keep staring," he hissed. "I hate it. I have always been stared at. Always."

I knew and understood, but what could I say?

"I would hate to think that I have chosen a matelot so unremarkable that no one would notice him at all," I said lightly.

This earned me an exasperated look, just short of eye-rolling by virtue of anger.

"I am sorry they are as they are," I added quickly. "It bothers me, too. They generally become bored after a time, though, and move on to something new."

"Not when I give them new reasons to stare," he muttered. "I am sorry, Will. I thought I could do this simple thing, and they would indeed become distracted, but I kept feeling eyes upon me and it minded me of all the other times and..."

"I understand."

He looked at his palm and cursed quietly.

"I should stay with you," he finally muttered. "You should keep me on a leash." This last was quite bitter.

"I am sure your Horse will calm once it becomes accustomed to them again."

"Non, it does not wish to be calm for just such a reason. It feels it is an imposition, an offense, that it must be calm and not allowed to express itself. It is why I often hate being about others. It is not a polite shadow on the wall. I do not wish to play their games. To follow their rules. It is not fair," he ranted with more pain than anger.

That was indeed interesting, and I studied him with wonder. "Non, it is not. You wish to confront them?"

"Oui," he smiled ruefully. "I did as a child. I would yell and tell them to leave me alone. As you can imagine, that led to more trouble. And I was always punished for it. So the Horse learned to hate them."

I could well envision it. His fellow students would have been a pack of hounds on a fox.

"I thank the Gods I was not subjected to large packs of wolf cubs in boarding schools in my childhood," I said. "I did occasionally encounter the local herd of lambs on my father's lands. As I was a wolf cub, they would not play with me, and it left me more lonely than abused. Later, when I met wolves of my own age, I learned to be a jester in order to disguise my.... dissimilarity, because that is never tolerated."

"I am not amusing," he said sadly, and I nearly chuckled. Thankfully he saw the humor of his words and did not anger at my smile. A grin twitched at his lips.

"Non, you are not," I said. "I was blessed with the ability to play the fool." The thought pulled the smile off my face. "I am not proud of it. It shames me at times. Because, I too, want to tear their hearts out, and yet I make some jest and they feel safe and I allow them to. I feel the coward in that regard. I am not brave... in that."

He shook his head and smiled. "This from a man who will confront priests... and me."

"It is true," I sighed. "We do not always see ourselves as others do."

I looked about to see who might be watching us and found Davey glaring from farther down the hull. "Davey, for example. I doubt he understands what a belligerent goat he is. But is he brave in that regard? He surely does not feel the need to hide any thought he has."

Gaston smirked. "That is because they are few and fleeting."

I chuckled briefly. "What shall we do? I love some of these men as brothers, and the rest are our brethren as they are the Brethren. They mean no harm. And I know the knowing of a thing means little in comparison to the feeling of it."

"That is the crux of it," he sighed. "I know they are our friends, yet I do not feel that now. I feel this great gulf between us, caused by my madness. They have all looked askance at me since Île de la Tortue."

"I know. Yet, you did not have a great deal of trouble with our favorite wolves last night and this morning, or were you keeping an iron

grip on the reins?"

I knew this was due in part to the chiding I had given the wolves; and their seeing that Gaston was somewhat stable, thus they had not been staring.

"I was sitting well, and the Horse does not dislike them." Gaston smiled.

"Then let us do what we can to narrow that gulf with the rest of our cabal," I said. I saw two men talking with the Bard and eyeing us with annoyance. "And let us stop impeding progress on the careening and allow someone else to work up here. And we should see to your hands."

He solemnly followed me down to the fire. The other men went to take our place, and the Bard awarded us a jaunty smile.

"Thank you, mate," he told Gaston. "For settin' such a fine example. Now the rest of them will think they should work that hard."

I could have kissed him.

Gaston smiled weakly and bowed. "I am pleased to be of service."

The Bard chuckled. "Can you two tend this now?"

We nodded, and he clasped Gaston's shoulder and gave me a smile my matelot would not see and left us.

I knelt and stirred the tar.

Gaston sighed, "Why can I remember every slight, but find it difficult to trust that that man has always acted as my friend?"

"I think it is a matter of what we are accustomed to," I said. "I have known men who could not see wrong being done to them because they had never experienced it before."

"I wish to become accustomed to friendship and goodness," he said wistfully before frowning. "And love," he added, and kissed my forehead. "I will fetch unguents and bandages."

As I watched him walk away, I decided I wished to never become so accustomed to love that I did not feel wonderment at the sight of him. I did not want the welling of emotion he caused to ever become commonplace.

Gaston returned, and we set about bandaging his hands so that the blisters would not rupture and fester. Once we finished, he sat and looked about while I stirred the tar again. He seemed at ease.

"So was the Bard seeking your advice too?" he asked.

"Oui," I said with a smile. "He said he wished to thank me for whatever advice I gave Dickey; but in truth, I feel he wanted someone to assuage his concerns."

"What concerns?"

"Well, for the first part, he is concerned because Dickey does not favor men, and he wonders if Dickey is perhaps caught up in the Ways of the Coast and not making a wise choice."

Gaston frowned. "Dickey told us he wished to seek love wherever he found it."

"Oui, I did not relate that to the Bard, though. I feel Dickey is sincere and does not make haphazard choices. I did tell the Bard that.

Moreover, the Bard has not had a matelot in several years, he is not accustomed to sharing his life with another, and thus he views it with trepidation. He knows the degree of commitment involved in matelotage. He will overcome his own doubts because he is lonely, too, just as he will overcome their other concerns." I chuckled.

Gaston raised a curious eyebrow, and I sighed as I realized he might not find much amusement in the Bard's other worries, due to the nature of our relationship.

"Dickey possesses no experience with men, or women, and a great deal of enthusiasm," I said carefully. "And the Bard has not been with a man who did not know as much or more than he about the matter of trysting before."

"Did you have those concerns?" Gaston asked.

"Non, you did not possess an abundance of enthusiasm," I teased. He snorted.

"But truly," I continued in a more serious vein, "you possess a great talent for the matter and you have been an apt pupil."

He snorted again and rolled his eyes. "You have truly been an excellent teacher, then," he said sincerely. "But then you have had many to learn from." This last was only partially good-humored jesting, and I heard his jealousy.

It was my turn to snort disparagingly. "I have taught most of my lovers. But oui, thankfully, I was blessed with a few adept teachers amongst my countless conquests. You have been appreciative of their council on more than one occasion."

Julio joined us to get more tar. When he was gone, I found Gaston studying the horizon with a rueful smile.

"I enjoyed the other night immensely," he whispered. "That is a technique I would practice on you."

My heart skipped a beat, and my cock stirred fitfully and began to listen. "I am pleased to hear it. I have never been touched in that manner before. I would enjoy you doing so."

He frowned. "Never? Then how did you learn it?"

"Phillippe. I have not thought of him in a long time. He taught me to use that technique upon him. Gods, I remember how he thought me quite the bumbling and arrogant youth. He probably thought I had difficulty pleasuring myself without mishap. Yet, he was a mere two years my senior. Of course, he had been practicing his profession for a good six."

"He was a whore?"

I shrugged. "Not precisely, more of a courtesan really. No one paid him; they did him favors and gave him gifts."

"Phillippe? French?" His interest seemed genuine and not born of jealousy.

"Oui." I said. "When first I left England, I vowed two things. One, that I would learn the blade such that I could return to England and kill Shane, and two, that I would never be with another man. Thus I

went to Paris to seek a sword master. All of the bored English nobles sent to France during the Reformation spent their days practicing the sword and trysting. I did not wish anyone to know who I truly was, so I assumed the identity of a distant cousin and joined them. To convince all, including myself, that I had no interest in men, I seduced every woman I could find. I thank the Gods I ran into Madam Dupree, a wealthy widow in the courts, who was willing to teach a fool English whelp how to please a woman. I had been quite the ham-handed rutting bull prior to that. And so, I spent my days sparring and my nights trysting, and not with the men I was sparring with. And I came to the attention of Phillippe.

“Phillippe was effete to the extreme, and pretty. His clothes were the height of fashion, his every move was practiced in front of a mirror. He was not the type of man I have ever been interested in. He was very honest about his preferences, and though he was discreet with his patrons, I feel he harbored great ill will over the matter that he should be labeled and reviled for being a sodomite and they should not. As he was not a woman, he often was about in the practice yards and saw me in what might have been considered my native element, which is associating with other men. Thus he saw through my guise of womanizing and knew me for a fellow sodomite. And as I was not one of his patrons, it irked him to see me doing so much to be something I was not. Thus he set about to seduce me.

“As I was not attracted to him, I did not sense his intent. In fact, I pitied him. When he finally made to strike, I nearly killed him. With a blade at his throat, I explained that I did indeed favor men, yet I had been abused by one such that I had sworn off them. At which point he took pity upon me, and his interest in me transmuted into one of sincere altruism. He decided I should be taught how to enjoy men, and give them pleasure if I wished. I finally allowed him to pleasure me and I realized I could not deny my nature. And so I learned. He was the first man I bestowed myself upon. I never divulged the nature of Shane’s abuse, but I think he was wise to it. And I never allowed Phillippe to bestow himself upon me, not that he was interested in doing so. I would not now call what we shared love, but it was filled with mutual respect and fondness, and I missed him sorely when my other trysting led to my having to depart Paris after a duel.”

Gaston was watching me thoughtfully. “You have led a fascinating life.”

“And you have not?”

“I have never been seduced by a courtesan,” he said.

I shook my head. “Well, as I have on occasion trysted in order to put food in my belly, or keep a roof over my head, you have. Not that I am proud of it.”

He reclined on the sand and studied the sky for a time. My concern over his lack of a response was interrupted by Julio arriving for another pail. To distract myself still further, I commented on the progress being

made, and Julio spoke of it being an easy day's work compared to some. When he at last left, I hazarded a glance at Gaston, and found him watching me.

"You should not be ashamed," he said.

"You had to think on it, did you not?" I sighed.

"I can think of worse things."

I shrugged, though I felt no nonchalance. "Name them, and I have probably done them for money."

"Have you lain with your sister and then killed her?" he asked without any trace of emotion, as if he were asking me what I ate for dinner.

I laughed. "Non. And did you do that for money?"

He grinned. "Non. So performing the ugly thing for money is the issue?"

"I feel it is. Doing ugly things for love is not so very horrible."

He regarded the sky again with a bemused smile. "I must think more on it."

I thought on it while stirring the tar. I was far more ashamed of the men I had killed for money than the women I had bedded for it. But as killing men for gold was much of what we were involved in amongst the buccaneers, I felt it best not to dwell upon that, lest I find myself in such a moral quandary I must abandon the endeavor.

"How could you bed the women if you did not care for them, if you do not favor them?" he asked.

I frowned, and regarded him curiously. "I do not find woman onerous. Occasionally, I find them quite fetching. And my manhood cares not, once it is thrust into a warm hole."

"So, you did not truly do it for the money alone, but for the pleasure as well?"

"Oui." I grinned. "I have never bedded a person I found distasteful for money. In truth, I have never bedded a person I found distasteful."

"Then you have nothing to be ashamed of," he pronounced.

"Thank you for that exoneration of my sins."

"It is the least I can do. You always exonerate mine," he whispered.

I ignored the tar to regard him again. "Oui."

He was studying me with thoughtful eyes. The change in his mien was such that I knew the Horse to be wandering about again. I held out my hand, and he took it.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I never wish for you to have to exonerate me again," he said solemnly. He sat up without releasing my hand. He cradled it in his lap, and seemed to be searching for words.

"You have only been penetrated by the two, have you not?" he asked abruptly. "The Damn Cousin and the Spaniard?"

"Oui." I breathed. I felt discomfort at this turn of the topic, but I was curious.

"How long ago? With the Spaniard?" he asked.

"The night I left Florence. That was September of last year."

"Am I correct that you will need a great amount of preparation if I were to... be able to?"

"Is that imminent?" I asked cautiously.

I thought of the feel of him pressing behind me two nights ago. He had said the Horse was capable.

He did not flinch from my gaze. "You said you would have welcomed me if I had but woken you first?"

"Oui, I would," I whispered. "And oui, I will require a great deal of coaxing, even as much as I want you. Even with the Spaniard I found it uncomfortable and I bled. I am sure it will be easier with you, for several reasons, but initially I am sure it will be difficult for me. I fear Shane ruined me there, and that it will never be as it should." I had been dreading someday having to say those words, but now at least they were out.

His eyes had narrowed, and his grip on my hand was nearly painful. "How many times? With the Spaniard?"

I frowned. "Twelve, perhaps."

He appeared surprised. "And the Damn Cousin?"

"Nine," I whispered.

Shame flooded my cheeks. I had never admitted the number of times I had allowed it to continue before.

"You have been penetrated only twenty-one times?" he hissed. "Pete and Striker do that in a week."

I was surprised enough at the trail his mind was following to be amused. "And well I know it," I chuckled, "but only on their particularly amorous weeks. Generally they seem to keep it to only once per day."

He ignored my aside. "Was the Spaniard larger than I?"

I had only seen Gaston the once, and I had to think about Alonso. "I feel he was longer. You are wider in circumference, surely, and better formed."

Gaston snorted. "Will, I am not seeking flattery. My being wider does not bode well for the endeavor." He sighed. "Am I as large as you?"

"Non," I grimaced with discomfiture. "Not in length. In girth, oui, more so I feel."

"Good," he said distractedly, and then he was intent on his next quarry. "Why ever did you allow him if he made you bleed? The inconsiderate bastard. I shall kill him."

"I feel if I answer that, you will merely wish to kill him more," I sighed.

The intensity of my matelot's gaze told me that would not suffice.

"It was a thing he insisted upon on occasion," I said. "He would not allow for me to penetrate him. He wished to bestow. And I wished to be bestowed upon, and I cared for him, deeply, and I thought that perhaps it was time I chanced it again. So I allowed it. But I do not believe it was his fault. I am damaged goods. But all will be well. Why are...?"

He was on his feet and pulling me with him. He stooped, and pulled

the pot of salve from his bag next to where we had sat, and then he was towing me across the sand. I yelled to Liam and Otter, who were the closest to us, to see to the tar, and they watched us leave with bemused looks.

"You realize you are giving them all the more reason to stare?" I teased.

"To the Devil with them," he muttered.

I was curious and actually a trifle fearful of Gaston's intentions. "What are we doing?" I asked, when at last we stopped next to a slanted palm far up the beach and he released me.

"Performing an examination," he said briskly, and dropped his breeches.

For the first time in our history, I was pleased to see his member was quite flaccid. He greased his finger in the salve, and then with a quite comical expression of intense concentration, stuck it up his own arse and probed about. I sat on the palm trunk and smiled.

When he had determined whatever he was trying to ascertain, he removed his finger and turned to me. "Now drop your breeches and bend over."

As I could guess what he intended, I complied. As expected, he inserted the same finger in me. Thankfully, he was gentle about it. Still, I gasped, and had to battle a battalion of emotions, the most discomfiting of which was my manhood's interest in the proceedings.

"You are scarred all about, on both rings of muscle," Gaston pronounced when he withdrew. "There are ridges where I am smooth. But the scarring does not circumnavigate your anus; they run into it. This means that you can accommodate me, but it will take time to get you to open properly, as the scars will not stretch, therefore the undamaged flesh around them must be coaxed to stretch twice as much. I suggest we embark on a regimen of exercising your opening and inuring it to entry."

He refastened his breeches and strapped his weapon belt back on.

Bemused, and with my breeches still around my knees, I turned to face him. "I hesitate at the word regimen, but if you wish to stick your fingers up my arse on a daily basis, you are welcome to do so. However, you had best be kissing me first."

He glared at me with annoyance until the humor of the situation won through. Then he grinned and was upon me before I had time to laugh. He set to tickling me, and I set to stopping him, and we wrestled about in the sand until his superior skills at pugilism won out and I found myself pinned on my face with my arm behind my back.

The familiar panic struck and I gasped, "Get off me!"

He did not, instead he released my arm only to throw himself fully atop me, and wrap his limbs about me as much as he could. I was not pinned, just weighed down.

"Will, I love you," he whispered. "I will not hurt you."

The panic began to abate, and I took deep breaths until it passed.

"Are you angry or afraid?" he asked.

I examined my feelings curiously. "Neither, now. What are you about?"

"Always before, when you have panicked thus, I have drawn away. I thought perhaps to try another tactic. If we are to... You need to become accustomed to my weight upon you, as you have become accustomed to my being behind you."

I nodded as I was able. "Oui, I can see that. So you wish to add lying atop me to the daily regimen?"

He sighed, and moved to lie beside me and meet my gaze. "Will... I am unsure how to convey it. The Horse is capable, I am not. The Horse is not patient. When desire strikes, it will wish to chase it down and..."

"I had best be prepared," I breathed.

He shook his head and pushed up to his knees. "I will not allow myself to hurt you." He clutched at the sand and would not regard me.

I now saw the winding trail he had been following.

"So it would be best if I am pliant and prepared when the mood strikes you," I said gently. "Your Horse is not one for prolonged seduction."

"Do not... You are too kind." He shook his head bitterly and stood. He walked into the surf and hugged himself while glaring at the water swirling about his knees.

I rolled on my back and pondered the sky and far darker things. The breeze whispered of something, but I could not apprehend it. I merely knew I did not like the smell or taste of it. There seemed to be an implication presented between this discussion and last night's that his Horse did not care if I were willing or not. How was I to accept that? Did I wish to become inured in any manner to such a possibility?

I heard someone running up the beach. Gaston was still in the surf. I tensed, and got to my knees. Our weapons were strewn all about, and my breeches were lying somewhere near, but were not upon my person. Thankfully, the interloper was Striker. I expected to be teased for abandoning the careening to tryst, but instead he was quite agitated.

He ran to Gaston. "Please come. Pete is wounded and we've made a right mess of it."

Then I saw the blood all over his hands.

"What...?" I began to ask, but Striker was already running back down the beach.

Gaston glanced at me. I waved him off, and he followed Striker at a run. I set about donning my breeches and gathering our things, and then jogged down the beach well in their wake. I found them next to Gaston's medicine chest with a dozen others clustered about. Pete was apparently wounded in the right hand, as that was the appendage Gaston was examining intently in his lap.

"What occurred?" I asked Striker, as I dropped next to them.

"A damn splinter," he said. "We thought it not that deep, and I attempted to dislodge it, and then it seemed deeper, and then I

realized..." he stopped to swear vehemently.

As I could now see something of the wound, I saw the problem. They had cut quite the trench down the outside of Pete's palm. Gaston was asking Pete a series of questions and having him move his fingers.

"NotMyFingers," Pete said.

"Of course not," Gaston snapped. "I am trying to determine if you fools have maimed this hand for life. Then I will remove the splinter, which is now shattered and spread all about in the blood."

Despite the anger in his tone, his control was evident. There was no hint of the Horse or the day's earlier wildness, and I marveled at it. A medical emergency always proved capable of either calming or dismissing his Horse. I had once had the hubris to believe that my being in dire need was proof against his madness, but as I thought on it, I realized any wound made him sane for a time, or at least to appear so.

Pete was stoic and already inebriated, so he was quite inured to the pain. Still, even the most stoic of men jumps about when pricked. Thus Striker held Pete still, and I held Pete's arm immobile. After determining that no other injury had been done to impair the function of Pete's hand, by the splinter or the attempted removal, Gaston set about removing all of the wood. I was surprised Gaston could see anything in all the blood, and in truth he did not use his eyes to locate the wood, so much as his fingers and a very thin and long pair of pointed tongs. The splinter had broken, and it was delicate work finding and extricating all the pieces. I got to see how very many pieces there were, as Gaston dropped them onto my knee. Finally Gaston could find no more, and Pete merely mentioned pain, and no longer jerked when the wound was probed. Pete received ten stitches to close the gashes, and a liberal dousing of rum on the entire area, which truly set him to cursing.

I was stiff and sore across my shoulders when at last we were all relieved of the task. I could only imagine how Gaston felt. He was now watching the pot boiling his tools with the same intensity with which he had worked for over an hour on Pete's wound. He flinched when I began to rub his shoulders, and I paused.

"Non, please continue," he whispered.

I resumed my ministrations and murmured in French for his ears alone. "You did well. I have noticed you seem to have little difficulty with your Horse when duty calls you to be a surgeon."

"Oui," he sighed, and some of the tension drained from him. "It is a thing I learned around Doucette. It is another mask I don. And truly, the Horse is well behaved at such times. All of my concerns become... petty when faced with another's need of that nature."

"I hope you wish to be surgeon for this voyage," Striker called from nearby, where he had gotten Pete to sprawl in the long evening shadow of the ship.

The loud intrusion echoed my unspoken thoughts, and I flinched as the muscles stiffened beneath my fingers.

Gaston shook his head slowly. "Nay," he said in English, as loudly

as his broken voice could manage, so that he could be heard across the sand. "I am still... not myself. And when I am thus, I am far better at causing wounds than mending them."

This brought chuckles all around, and Striker sighed. "'Tis a shame. Any idiot can be taught to kill, but not many have the skill to mend."

"Aye," the Bard added. "In all my years of roving, I have not seen another who could have saved Dickey from the wound he suffered this summer."

Several men agreed. Gaston's discomfort should have been evident to all, and I was growing annoyed with them.

Still Striker continued. "I have found this lad by the name of Farley who wishes to become a buccaneer. He claims he is a physician. He swears he has trained at a university, yet I don't think he's old enough to grow a beard. I am sure he has not seen combat."

Gaston stood, and I glared at Striker until he winced apologetically.

"I will bring my chest and I will do as I can," Gaston told him, "but I offer no guarantees, and I will not be named as ship's surgeon." He walked away, toward the surf.

"I cannot do it, Will," Gaston said when I joined him.

"I do not question that. Non, I do question your saying that you cannot, as I do not feel your ability is in question, and I feel you can even when you are not well. But I do not question your lack of desire to do so. I understand. That is your decision. I only wish that you care for me if something is to occur, as you have always done since we met."

"That is not in question," he said fiercely. "I will let no other touch you."

He rubbed his eyes and I could see the wildness gripping him again.

I took his hands in mine, and he met my gaze with a mix of suspicion and curiosity.

"What can I do to calm you?" I asked gently.

He closed his eyes and gripped my hands tightly. "Do not let go."

I spoke in the same soothing tones I would use with a restless animal, and hoped he would not take offense or find me absurd. "I will not. We will weather this together. We will listen to your Horse, and do what we can to keep it calm. We will finish this careening. We will sail to Port Royal, and see Theodore, and tend to business. We will sail to Cow Island and... hunt bulls, I suppose. We will engage in this regimen you spoke of, and inure me to trysting."

My heart, which I now supposed could be called my Horse, shied at the unanswered questions I had concerning that matter, but I hushed it just as I was doing with him.

He was nodding as I spoke. "We will inure me as well."

"How so?"

His eyes opened and met mine calmly. "I must become inured to whips. Doucette was correct in that."

"Gods," I murmured, and tried to keep the grimace of worry from my face. "How...? I will not condone his methods in"

Gaston shook his head quickly. "His methods were crude in practice, but correct in concept. I must learn to see them without it triggering my madness. I must be forced to gaze upon them."

"I will force you to do no such thing."

He frowned. "But Will, you are the only one who can."

"How... how do you envision this therapy taking place?"

Understanding dawned, and he nodded quickly. "The same way we will inure you to the other. We will retire to someplace quiet and private, and you will show me one while endeavoring to keep my Horse calm. I trust you. I have put great thought into the matter, and I feel you are the only one who could show me a whip and not drive my Horse to panic."

I finally understood. "Ah, as you are the only one I could allow to... inure me to being mounted. But whereas, I wish to associate you with pleasure and all things carnal, I do not wish for you to ever associate me with whips."

He smiled, and then the familiar look of wonder mixed with annoyance suffused his face. "You truly wish to share this with me? You will walk with me even in Hell?"

My heart or Horse, and all other aspects of my true being, spoke very clearly on the matter. "Oui, I have chosen to be your partner in all things, even this."

My rational mind was concerned on many fronts. I reminded it that the Gods always seemed to favor bravery in the myths.

Port Royal

December
1667



II

Twenty-Nine

Wherein We Return to Civilization

Gaston woke me at dawn and led me up the beach well beyond the others. At first we frolicked in the waves, chasing each other about; then he headed north along the expanse of white sand, and I fell in beside him. We were not racing, merely running, and we soon matched one another in rhythm and speed. It reminded me of my dream, in which we were horses, or perhaps centaurs. I experienced a satisfaction with life I had seldom felt before, and I ran beside him for the sheer joy of it, until at last I could go no further, and I collapsed to my knees with a fierce pain in my side and laughter on my lips. I flopped to the sand to lie there gasping and laughing as he ran back to join me. We had run a good two leagues, and he looked as if he could run several more.

"You are done already?" he chided with a grin.

"Unlike you, I do not spend my days running about the woods," I gasped.

With an expansive grin, he fell to earth beside me, and we lay there in the morning light, listening to the surf and the changing of the guard between the omnipresent insects of the night and the ever-raucous birds of the day.

"I find peace in exertion," he said, after our breathing had returned to normal.

"Well, you cannot do that upon the ship." Then I felt the fool. "But, of course, that is why you are so intent upon our daily calisthenics there; is it not?"

He grinned. "Oui."

"And here I thought you always in training for combat. I did not realize you were waging a battle in an ongoing war."

"I did not think of it as such, *per se*, but oui, that is what I do while roving. Tiring my body makes the Horse more manageable."

I was relieved to hear this. I thought of how relatively stable his behavior and mien had been whilst we roved. It was probably truly best we sailed.

"All will be well," I said, more for my benefit than his. Or perhaps I was making a demand of the Gods.

"Oui." He rolled to me and kissed me gently.

I returned it in kind, and he deepened it in increments, adding subtle caresses that left me more than willing to do whatever he bade. Thus, I did not think twice of his asking me to roll unto my belly. Then he was atop me, and nuzzling my neck in betwixt gentle murmurs of reassurance, and I realized what he was about. I grinned as his hands wandered to my buttocks and I found he had brought a pot of salve. At least he had kissed me first.

I found the physical exertion did much to calm my Horse as well. Though I felt all the old fears, I was not so prone to bolt from them. However, I learned I could not initially tolerate his being atop me while fingering me. It must be one of the other, and I did not feel the least bit amorous whilst he did either. Yet he was patient and kind, and for the first time I truly believed I might overcome all of the damage Shane had wrought.

And so we began a morning regimen: for the next four days, whilst the ship was cleaned and repaired and finally floated. The fourth night we all moved aboard.

I was dismayed when I became acquainted with the *Virgin Queen's* cabin. Gaston and I had sailed here on the *Mayflower*, and not the *Queen*, so we had not had reason to examine this aspect of our vessel. Our brigantine was perhaps a quarter smaller than the English merchant ship on which we had last voyaged; and this difference applied to the size of the single cabin beneath her quarterdeck as well. It was bloody small after my own abode. Gaston was not the only one who would be forced to once again inure himself to the omnipresent smell and sound of men upon a ship.

The room was the width of the *Virgin Queen's* stern beam, a mere eight feet at waist height, and only twelve deep from bulkhead to galley windows. The ceiling was so low Cudro and Pete had to stoop their heads when standing, and all of us ducked under the beams. Much of the available space in the center was taken by a relatively large table. With the addition of several stools and a sizable desk built into the larboard bulkhead wall, there was little enough room to walk. And yet all six owners – Striker, Pete, the Bard, Cudro, Gaston, and I – expected to sleep here. The total would actually be seven, including Dickey.

I reassured myself that six of us would be in three hammocks, with Cudro in a fourth. And, thankfully, due to our being all of the ship's

officers, several of us would be expected to be on deck and not in the room at any given time. With all the beds in place, the space would be as cramped as the one in which I had sailed to Jamaica, but not so crowded as the alcove between cannon and bulkhead that Gaston and I shared with Pete and Striker for several months last spring.

The cabin's occupants could barely fit within its confines to contemplate the matter of hammock arrangement: a matter complicated by most of us eschewing slender bags of netting suspended from two hooks, preferring instead wider berths anchored at four points. Much discussion broke out and it was obvious the room could not accommodate all of us as we would like. Pete was particularly adamant in not relinquishing the wide nest they had already established high up between the beams. Their bloody hammock took up most of the ceiling.

Gaston finally tired of all the discussion and shouldered his way into the room. He slid the table to the larboard wall and dropped down to sit beneath it.

I joined him with a chuckle and announced, "We will be fine here. We will purchase some manner of mattress in Port Royal, perhaps."

"You're sure?" Striker asked.

"Quite," Gaston said firmly. "Nothing will drip on us here."

This elicited grimaces from all save Pete and me, who grinned. I had not considered that aspect of the matter. Dickey flushed, which amused the Bard.

The others quickly decided to compromise as was necessary. Cudro conceded he would be well with a narrow bed anchored at the windows and starboard wall. The Bard amended the arrangement of his existing hammock so that it would accommodate Dickey, and they also decided theirs would be put up during the day. The only ones not making a concession were Pete and Striker, and Pete seemed quite pleased with the matter.

We eschewed a watch schedule that night. Since the Bard and Dickey still required as much privacy as they could grasp in so small a world, they stayed on the quarterdeck alone. The rest of our crew had staked out prime space upon the deck, and thus only five of us shared the cabin. I lay upon the hard floor and ruminated on how very much I liked hammocks and good feather beds, and how very loud Pete and Cudro snore. I got little sleep. My matelot slept like a babe, and I wondered at his fondness for the undersides of tables. He obviously found great safety and comfort beneath them.

In the morning, we were not left alone to follow the private aspects of our regimen. Instead, we joined the others and assisted as we could in weighing anchor and sailing south around Negril Point. Once the Bard began to tack up the prevailing eastern winds toward Port Royal, Gaston and I found an open area of deck and engaged in calisthenics and a little sparring. We were teased in this, in that our fellows could not understand why we wished to work so hard on such a lovely day, when we only had a short distance to sail and need not be bored or

restless. We ignored them, and went at it with abandon, until we were both calmed and sated after a fashion in spirit. As it was a fine day, and all were on deck, we were then able to sneak below and tend to the more personal aspects of our daily regimen. I was relieved, and felt that if we could continue in this manner throughout our future voyage, all would surely be well.

The winds were fractious and not at all cooperative, and we did not achieve Port Royal until the evening of the second day. I would have said it appeared no different than it had when first I laid eyes on it less than a year ago; but the longer I stared, the more I realized there were quite a few additional buildings, which now formed an uninterrupted line all the way to the south shore. I thought it likely that another year would fill the entirety of the available space with dwellings and warehouses, from the Chocolata Hole on the west all the way to the wall at the Palisadoes on the east.

Gaston slipped an arm around my shoulder and held me close as the irregular blocks of buildings resolved themselves into a bustling hive of people. He had been doing well, and was once again at ease with our cabal. This is to say, he was pleasant and spoke on occasion or expressed quiet amusement at a jest, but he was far from jocular or expansive. As none expected ought else, all were relieved and reassured that he was mended. I knew better, but I shared that with no one, not even him. I was pleased that he had been willing to tend to the small injuries associated with the careening. And I saw less of the Horse in his eyes from day to day. Yet we had discussed little of his progress, or the madness at all, these last days. It seemed we had decided by mutual accord that dwelling upon it now would accomplish nothing.

The *Josephine*, Captain Pierrot's sixteen-gun brig, on which Gaston had sailed before he met me, was anchored just beyond the passage to the harbor. My matelot told me Pierrot disliked entering the confines of the harbor north of Port Royal, despite its size, as he did not trust Governor Modyford. I did not blame him.

Another French vessel, an eight-gun sloop named the *Belle Mer*, rode the shallow swells nearby. She minded me much of our formerly beloved *North Wind*, as she was low and sleek.

There was much cheering between us and the skeleton crews aboard the two ships, as we passed them to enter the passage and the Hole. These were the vessels in whose company we would sail to Cow Island, and our arrival and their presence meant that all could shortly leave and escape Port Royal's fat merchants and greedy tavern keeps.

There were two sloops in the Chocolata Hole, but we knew neither of them. Both were all the way up to the shallow beach and offloading cargo by means of ramps. Many of their barrels seemed to have Spanish markings, and I surmised they had been engaged in smuggling with Spanish colonies, which were always ill-supplied by their own Crown.

We anchored in the middle of the small bay and, leaving a few men aboard, rowed ashore. Once there, the six men outside our cabal ran off

to foolishly spend what money they had, despite Striker's admonitions that it would be best if they bought a keg and returned to the ship. The eleven members of our cabal chose to buy a hogshead of wine and roll it to the house.

I reminded myself that it was my, or rather our, house, but I did not feel it to be so. I felt I would always view it as Theodore's, especially since I had not laid eyes on it since it came into our possession.

"So how many of you are dwelling at the house?" I asked them.

Striker stopped and turned to address Gaston and me with a guilty mien. "About... your house," he sighed.

Pete snorted and clapped him roughly on the shoulder before awarding us a jaunty grin and saying, "WeGotDahgs."

The others were laughing, though some appeared as sheepish as Striker: especially Dickey, who appeared mortified.

Striker added, "We did not secure a housekeeper."

I grimaced as I began to understand. The fairly tidy members of our cabal – Liam, Otter, Cudro, the Bard, Julio and Davey – had all spent the autumn either at Negril or on the ship, with only brief visits to Port Royal. And Dickey and Belfry had acquired a shop and lived there. This meant that the house had been occupied by Striker and Pete, and any other man they thought might need a place to sleep. I was sure there had been a great deal of revelry. I was equally sure no one had cleaned.

Dickey spoke earnestly. "We did try to locate a housekeeper, but there were none to be had. It is said that some of the ships sailing this year should bring bondswomen, though."

My imagination ran rampant. Gaston was a pillar of controlled anger at my side.

"Does it still stand?" I asked stoically.

There were nods all around.

"The holes in the walls not be that big," Davey scoffed.

At my look, Pete snapped, "We'AdTaShootTheRats. NowWeGotDahgs. NowNoRatsAn'LessRoaches."

"I am sure that has been a marked improvement," I said.

"How many dogs?" Gaston asked quietly, with sincere interest and no rancor.

Pete brightened at this and held up four fingers. "An'TheBitchJust Birthed."

"Puppies?" Gaston asked with a small smile.

"Aye, SixO'Em." Pete beamed. "ComeOn. SheBeGoodWithMe."

He led a now-eager Gaston toward the house.

I addressed Striker as we followed with the rest in tow. "You will, of course, compensate us for any cleaning and repair."

"Aye, aye," he sighed. "I am truly sorry, Will. We live like beasts when left alone and not on a ship."

Two dogs greeted us at the door; or rather, they assessed our worthiness to enter. I had seen a number of the dogs the Brethren used to hunt cattle before, but never at close range. They had once been

Spanish mastiffs, and they still maintained the size, massive head, and short coat of their ancestors; but they had been running feral about Hispaniola for nearly a century. The ones greeting us were male. One was black, and I judged him to weigh as much as a man, if not more. His brindle-brown companion was almost as imposing.

The house was indeed the disaster I had envisioned. The dining table had been moved into the front room and positioned in the center with stools and chairs all about, very much like a tavern. The dogs had been successful in disposing of the edible debris, but they could do little for bottles, steins, broken glass, candle tallow, and anything else drunken buccaneers discarded. There were a number of bullet holes all about the bottom of the walls. One enterprising rat had apparently climbed a bookcase, though, as there were holes here and there at the height of the shelves – until the matter had been ended at the top, where there was a good deal of dried blood. Everything smelled of urine: so much so that I was relieved not to see excrement.

“Most beasts know not to piss where they sleep,” I noted to Striker.

“The dogs do,” he said defensively.

“Only when the walls have been marked by men first, and they feel they must cover the stench.” I pointed at one stain near the ceiling that would have required a horse-sized dog to accomplish.

“We will see to it,” he sighed. “All of it.”

“We’ll be sleepin’ on the ship then,” Liam said.

“We’ll be sleeping at the shop tonight,” the Bard chuckled.

I supposed I should check the rooms upstairs, though I thought it likely that even if they did not smell as the downstairs did, we would be better served on the *Queen*. Yet I dearly wanted some more days of privacy before we sailed. I found I was to be thwarted: the sleeping chambers were somewhat better than the downstairs – less garbage and no piss – but both held a good deal of gear.

“Pete and I have the one, some of the other men the other,” Striker said from the bottom of the stairs. “I will have to locate the other men. We’ll clean it out by tonight.”

“Nay,” I sighed. “Do not make haste about it. Gaston and I will sleep on the ship.”

With that, I decided to ignore further inspection of the house and looked about for my matelot. I found him in the back room. Theodore’s massive old desk was there. It had been shoved into the corner, such that the overhang of the top and the knee space beneath formed a den. Pete and Gaston were lying on the floor near the opening, their weapons discarded atop the wooden expanse. All sign they might be dangerous men had fled them, as they lay there wearing happy smiles whilst playing with round waddling puppies. Gaston waved me over, and I shed my belt and baldric to join them.

He proffered a lazily wiggling black loaf with barely opened eyes and said, “Smell.”

I hugged the little bundle to me, and drank in the milky smell of

innocence.

The bitch was a huge golden brindle animal, nearly as big as the black male at the door. At my inclusion in the cuddling of her young, she emerged fully from the den to examine me. Though I had no plan to ever harm her pups, I hoped the one I held would not experience any duress beyond my control whilst in my care, as his mother's head was larger than mine, with jaws that could surely encompass my face. I did not recoil from her sniffing, though, and thus she judged me acceptable.

Gaston grinned at me past the puppy lying on his chest, and I smiled back. He seemed at peace with the world in a way I had not witnessed before. I wondered if we could take puppies on the ship.

The tableau was broken by Liam. "How many there be? Six? Ya should pick tha biggest two an' drown tha rest."

Pete sat and glared, puppy held protectively in his lap. Beside him, the bitch growled, at Liam and not the Golden One. Gaston's look would have scared the Devil.

"NoOneTouches'Em," Pete rumbled.

Liam took a step back. "Aye. But... Iffn' ya do nothin', they'll just breed like rabbits an' the house, Hell, the whole town'll be overrun with 'em."

I sighed. He was correct, and I was familiar with culling packs of hunting hounds; but I was never the one who needed to do it, and holding the bundle I now did I could not see how anyone could.

"Don'Care," Pete spat.

"We will take them to Negril when we return," Gaston said. "There are wild cattle there, though they are sparse. And it is easy enough to geld the males."

"Aye," Pete said with a pout.

"May as well take them with us now," Cudro said calmly from the doorway. "To Cow Island. The four dogs are hunters."

Gaston nodded. "The puppies can be moved, though their dam will like it little. I will not abandon them there, though."

"It was not my suggestion," Cudro added quickly. "We could establish a pack at Negril after."

"I don't want dogs on my ship," the Bard said from the front room. "I know they're cattle dogs, but they will shit like any other."

Striker gave a rueful chuckle, "As if we have a podium to preach from."

"Speak for yourself," the Bard snorted. "Fine, I see I'll not win this, but someone best be cleaning up after them."

"We will," I assured him.

The Bard's head poked around the corner and he eyed me with speculation. Upon spying the puppy I held, he snorted and rolled his eyes.

The others at last retreated to discuss who would go out and acquire victuals. Pete, Gaston, and I stayed. The sun was setting and the room was filling with shadows. The bitch decided all had experienced enough

excitement for one day, and rolled two puppies back behind the desk before retrieving the ones we held by the scruffs of their necks. I scooted over and deposited mine at the entrance to her den before she felt the need to relieve me of it. She shouldered me aside with Gaston's puppy in her mouth. I retreated to my matelot's side, and the three of us listened to the puppies mewl as they realized they were about to be fed.

"TharBeTimesIWishIBeADahg," Pete said quietly. He appeared as melancholy as he sounded. "ButThenIThinkItBeGoodTa'AveGunsAn'Knives."

"Aye," I breathed. "Sometimes one needs a great many teeth."

"Don'KnowWhyIWeren'tDrowned. Weren'tWanted."

I heard Gaston's long slow breath. I remembered his onetime comment that due to the poorness of his breeding, in that both of his parents were in some way mad, he should have been drowned at birth.

"I would imagine you were the pick of the litter," I said gently to Pete. "The strongest win out and survive. I, on the other hand, was merely the only male, and that was my sole value."

"YeComeFromALongLineADahgsWithBigTeethTho."

I chuckled. "Aye. Wolves really. Bred and raised as one."

"But you are not a wolf," Gaston said. "You are a centaur, and we have a great many weapons with which to kill wolves and protect sheep and puppies." He stood. "I wish to walk."

"Do you wish for company?" I asked.

"Oui," he said softly.

"WhatBeASinTar?"

"A mythical creature, half man and half horse," I told Pete while standing to follow my matelot.

"HorseOnThaBottom?"

"Aye," I chuckled as I tried to envision the opposite.

"IBeAWolf."

"Aye, you are. You are more a wolf than any with a pedigree a league long."

Pete snorted with amusement, and we left him alone listening to the feeding puppies. We slipped out the back and up the side alley to the street. When I fell into step beside him, I found Gaston's face composed into an emotionless mask and his eyes distant.

"How are we?" I asked.

"I am in control."

"I see that."

He sighed. "Liam distressed me. And the state of the house. And all of this." He indicated the busy avenue we walked.

"I know." I took his hand. "And you are doing well. I merely wish to know if we should withdraw and allow the Horse to recover."

He did not reply and we continued to walk.

"I want a den," he finally muttered as we reached New Street. "And a mother to watch over me." His tone was one of curious contemplation, as if he found both interest and amusement in his observation.

I grinned. "I just had the most disturbing vision of that bitch carrying you about by your head."

He smiled and sighed. "I do not have an urge to suckle."

I threw my arm across his shoulders. "My love, I understand, truly. I would give you all you missed in your childhood if I could."

"I know. I will be well pleased tonight with a private place and you to hold me."

"Then let us find one."

The house would not do, neither would the ship if privacy were our aim. I had seen little to welcome me on the outside of any of the inns, and I felt the insides would be worse. I only knew of one man in town with a house who might welcome us.

"Let us see if Theodore has a guest room for the night."

Gaston was not overly pleased at this suggestion, but he acquiesced relatively quickly, and we turned up New Street. I soon spotted Theodore's shingle, well lit by a lantern, as we approached the intersection with High Street. The house was truly twice the size of his last one, at least in the vertical dimension. This dwelling was no more than ten feet wider than the last, but it was a solid three stories with a gabled fourth. Warm and inviting light spilled from the lower windows into the twilight.

We knocked, and a dignified Negress answered. I was not sure if she spoke English, but I gave our names and she nodded cordially and let us into a small foyer before withdrawing to announce us.

Theodore was embracing us mere seconds later. He ushered us into his office, which was separated from the entrance hall by a set of double doors. Rachel, or rather Mistress Theodore, peered at us from a second doorway leading into a back room. Seeing who we were, she nodded politely and left.

"I am so very pleased to see both of you," Theodore said, as we sat about his new desk, a massive teak piece that dwarfed his former dining table.

"We just arrived this evening," I said.

"Alone?"

"Nay, with our shipmates. They are at the house."

He grimaced. "I have seen the house."

"Striker promises to compensate us for the damages," I said.

"Where will you stay until repairs... and cleaning, can be accomplished?"

"I am glad you asked." I grinned. "I hate to trouble you, but might you have a guest room we may avail ourselves of for the night?"

He laughed. "I wondered why you came to me so soon. Of course. You are very welcome, and I will not hear of your staying elsewhere until your house can be made suitable."

"Thank you. It will not be for long. We plan to sail before the Twelveday."

"So soon?" he asked with some small alarm. "I heard Morgan

planned to sail late in January at the earliest, after the cane harvest."

"We wish to provision first," I said. "Do you have need of me?"

He sighed, but Mistress Theodore and the Negress entered before he could speak. They bore trays of wine, cheese, biscuits, and fruit. We stood. My stomach growled at the smell of food.

Theodore chuckled. "You can join us for dinner as well."

"Thank you. Mistress Theodore, you look well," I told her in all sincerity.

She looked truly healthy, though a touch heavy: as pregnant women are often wont to do even before their bellies truly show. Beyond her being with child, I thought perhaps some of her radiance was due to the lovely yellow of her dress. Before, I had only seen her in the plain and demure couture of the Jews, who rival the Protestants in drabness in the name of morality or some such rubbish.

"Thank you, Lord Marsdale." Her eyes flicked over Gaston and me. "And you two look as you usually do, but it is good to know you are well."

"I have asked them to be our guests until their house can be made suitable," Theodore said.

She awarded him the look that ladies give their husbands to say there will be later discussion about his judgment. Then she turned to the Negress. "Hannah, we will need a bath set in the guest room."

The woman frowned curiously.

"Lord Marsdale is fond of bathing," Mistress Theodore explained with a shrug.

The Negress nodded and regarded us with compressed lips and disapproving eyes, before leaving the room with decorous steps. I thought it likely she and Mistress Theodore got on quite well.

"Do you still have Sam?" I asked them in her wake.

"Who do you think will haul the water upstairs?" Mistress Theodore asked. She quickly added, "And you can't have him to clean your house."

"That was not the intent of my inquiry," I said pleasantly.

"I would suggest acquiring a housekeeper," she said. "Those two cannot be left alone, not and live like men."

I did not need to ask which two she meant. "We have noted that."

She smiled. "And find one that cooks pies. Pete's over here every other day."

"You have befriended him," I said.

"I suppose some would consider that a blessing." She shook her head with a sigh. "And I do, truly, but he's a big child and he's not mine," she said in a softer tone.

"I understand. We will be at sea soon. And either before or after, we will do all that we are able to procure a housekeeper who can cook."

She nodded curtly, apparently pleased she need chide me no more on the matter, and turned to her husband. "So they will join us for dinner as well?"

"Please," he smiled.

She smiled at her husband in a truly pleasant manner. She paused in the door as she left, and awarded me a serious look. "My bed linens are new. I would appreciate them not being soiled unduly."

I nodded with ill-disguised horror. Memories of concealing my adolescent nighttime dissipation from the upstairs maids returned to me and I wondered if we should sleep on the floor. Gaston appeared as appalled as I, and I gathered he was remembering his own childhood fear of servants.

We sat, and Theodore poured wine and awarded us an apologetic shrug. "She is a forthright woman."

Gaston wore a mask of incredulity.

I chuckled. "Aye, but she is honest, and you are pleased to be married to her."

Theodore looked to the doorway where she had exited and smiled warmly. "Aye. She can be very... companionable." He seemed a little embarrassed at this admission and sipped his wine quickly.

"I am pleased you are happy," I said. "As you are the one married to her, which is all that matters."

"Aye." He gave another nervous glance to the back doorway and then whispered. "Do not let her know I told you about the child, please. She feels the need to be very private about the matter."

Gaston appeared concerned. "Does she have a good midwife? Most physicians are useless in this matter."

Theodore nodded. "There is a well-respected woman in town, and Mistress Theodore is well by all accounts."

"That is good to hear," Gaston sighed.

"So, you sail within the fortnight?" Theodore asked.

"So I am told. We plan to visit the plantation. I will write my father. Is there ought else I should do?"

"Well, there are the matters we discussed in October, and... the matter we did not."

I frowned. He sighed and went to the shelves lining the wall to pull two leather satchels and place them on the desk. One was marked "Williams/Sable", and the other, "Marsdale".

Theodore spoke as he opened the Williams/Sable packet and withdrew documents. "I saw to all of the legal matters. Gaston is now a citizen and you both..."

"What?" Gaston asked.

He looked from one to the other of us and I realized something quite important.

"I forgot... to tell you, these last few days," I said. "Theodore came in October and we parsed the French documents and..."

Gaston seemed to be struggling to remember what I was talking about.

"As you were not considered a competent Frenchman," Theodore said smoothly. "I thought it best you become a new Englishman." He

handed Gaston a document. "Mister Gaston Sable. Blame your matelot for the name if you dislike it."

Gaston studied the page and touched his new legal name in a curious fashion. Then the tension left his shoulders and at last he nodded.

"It is acceptable," he told us. "I did not wish to be English, and not French, but I suppose it is as it must be."

Theodore smiled. "Gaston, no one has told the French you are no longer French. It is simply wiser if you do not go near them."

"Ah." Gaston nodded, and then his gaze was on me alone. "Thank you for remembering my surname," he said quietly in French.

"I am relieved you are pleased."

He thought on it and nodded. "Oui, I am."

Theodore was pulling more pages from the satchel. A crude map was among them.

"What else have you wrought?" Gaston asked me quietly.

"I believe we own land," I said.

"Aye, generous grants. Both of you and several of your associates will soon own that coast you dwelled upon. There is one grant that still needs a complete name. The governor has assured me he will grant all that we ask, but I still require signatures before the formal request is filed. I need a surname for Pete, but they have not delivered one."

"We will see to it," I assured him, and perused the map. We would indeed own all of the point, beach, morass, and even the semicircular bay to the north. The map had rough squares drawn in and names jotted within them: Striker, Pete, Cudro, Liam, Otter, the Bard, Davey, Julio, Gaston and myself all owned adjoining lots of land, which varied in apparent size from thirty or so acres to several hundred. Striker and I had the largest, with him owning the bay to the north and me owning the point itself.

"All of the dwellings are now on land I will supposedly own," I noted.

"I could do little for that," Theodore sighed. "I am hoping you can work out some arrangement amongst one another."

"I am sure we can."

Gaston touched the block with the name Sable. It was smaller than mine and lay east of the point proper.

"Damn you, Will," he whispered in French. "You have made me a man of consequence."

"I am sincerely sorry for that," I replied, and gave him a hopeful smile.

I was relieved that his answering smile was warm and amused.

We signed our grant requests. Gaston paused for a time before signing Gaston Sable in his neat script. Once relieved of the pen, I slipped my hand under the desk to caress his thigh reassuringly; and once he set the pen down, his hand came to cover mine. A small smile graced his lips as he passed the papers back to Theodore.

"What else is there?" Gaston asked.

"I have taken the liberty of writing a last will and testament for each of you," Theodore said, and produced two more documents for us to sign. "These name the other as the sole inheritor of all of your possessions. If you are to die together..." he spread his hands wide to indicate it would then be up to God.

"We will have to consider what is to become of the land and house if we should perish mutually," I agreed.

Gaston shrugged. "Decide as you will," he said to me in French. "I will not outlive you. If I should die, you know where the gold is buried."

I made no attempt to gainsay him; and as he had been quite disimpassioned about the utterance, I was left to decide whether it was romantic or tragic. I could make no such determination. It made my heart ache either way.

"We will think on it, together," I said.

He shrugged again.

"And now," Theodore sighed, "we must discuss the things that you said you would leave to my discretion in October."

I remembered what he spoke of. I looked to Gaston again. "Theodore said there were things that need be dealt with but not immediately, things of which I might not wish to hear regarding my father and the plantation. I told him that I trusted his judgment as to whether they could wait until we returned here or not."

Gaston nodded amicably, and Theodore opened the other satchel.

"First, I was able to purchase a number of Negroes for the plantation," Theodore said.

"I suppose we will see them when we visit," I sighed. "And we had discussed the need for them before I left."

"They are even more necessary now," he said with a sad shrug. "A number of the bondsmen have died."

"That is sad to hear," I said.

I thought of all the men with whom I sailed to Jamaica and wondered what I would find when I visited Ithaca.

"Is the why of it known?" I asked.

Theodore shrugged. "They seasoned poorly. I know you knew them such that their names might have meaning. I will leave Fletcher to the telling of it."

I nodded resolutely. At least good Fletcher was still alive.

"And then there are the letters from England," Theodore said. "They arrived in September. I do not feel concern that you will fault me on withholding your father's; but in hindsight, I feel some guilt that I did not deliver the others to you in October, because you might have wished for them. As for your father's, I have not read his missive to you, but I know what he wrote me, and... well, I thought we would have more time to address the matter prior to your sailing again. As it is..." He sighed heavily and pushed the satchel to me across the desk.

I regarded the satchel with trepidation. I knew I truly did not want to know what Theodore thought it wise to withhold from me.

"As always," I said, "I am sure you had my best interests at heart."

He stood and rounded the desk to pat my shoulder. "I hope you will continue to feel so. I will leave you with it then, and inquire as to our meal."

He withdrew through the back door, closing it after him. Gaston and I regarded one another. I pushed the satchel toward him. He opened it as if it might contain snakes he would have to kill. There were four letters. I recognized my father's script on the first, and so did he, as he set it aside. The next had very fine and pretty writing that looked to be female in origin. The third was from Master Rucker. The fourth much-battered packet, to my utter amazement, was from Alonso, and addressed to me at my father's estate. I was pleased it had been forwarded.

"What is wrong?" Gaston asked as I continued to stare at it.

"This is Alonso's hand."

Gaston glared at the packet.

"The Spaniard?" he spat.

I sighed and snatched it from him to break the seal. "It is dated the day after I left Florence." I handed it to Gaston. "You read it and tell me what it says."

He handed it back. "My Castilian is not proficient to that degree."

I glanced at the last page, which contained many crossed-out words and blots of ink. "Even I will have a hard time reading it; he appears to be quite drunk by the end."

"Read it," he said.

"I do not know if I wish to."

"Why?" he asked.

"Well, you throwing a jealous fit for one."

He rolled his eyes and slumped in his chair. "I am sorry."

"And for another," I said, "I truly do not wish to read it yet. I can guess its contents, as it was written after he woke to find me gone. I do not imagine it to be pleasant."

"He did not know you were leaving?" Gaston asked with sincere curiosity.

"Non. He wished for me to accompany him to Spain and then Panama. I did not wish to spend the rest of my life posing as his manservant."

"Why would he even ask such a thing?" Gaston snapped.

"Non, non." I smiled at him. "I am ill using his intent. In the end, he offered to go elsewhere with me. But for us to remain together, one or the other would have had to sacrifice a great deal. And as I have explained several times over, I did not love him as I love you."

He took the letter and smoothed it flat and slid it back before me.

"Please," he said solemnly. "Now I am curious."

I could refuse him nothing. I read Alonso's letter.

It started angry. He had woken to find me gone, without even a note. He had been incensed that I would leave him in such a way. Then

he had either let time pass or indulged in a bottle. The sweep of his handwriting relaxed and yet became tidier. He admitted he had been corresponding with his family for some time, and that he had broken the trust between us first. Then he began to list all of the things he wished he had said to me. Some were simple, such as "I love you," which I realized he had never truly said. Others invoked shared memories, such as complementing me on insulting a don who had given us a bit of trouble. This was interesting, in that I remembered Alonso being furious at the time. In this letter, he admitted that he had actually admired my courage, or stupidity, in the face of insurmountable odds. He wrote of his fondness for our lovemaking, and how he honored that I had trusted him after all that had happened to me. That was something he had never told me, either. Toward the end of the letter, it was obvious, as I had noted when glancing at it, that he was deep in the wine. His script became quite difficult to read. He went on in detail about how he did not know if the letter would ever reach me, or if it would be read by others, and how he did not care even though he had said things that one man should never commit to paper concerning another. He even said that he realized now, that if he had been willing to take those risks, if I had been more important than his family honor, then perhaps I would have stayed with him.

It was not what I expected. It led me to hidden veins of emotion I had long since thought banished or dissipated. I finished the letter in tears. Thankfully, Gaston did not question me as I buried my face in the side of his neck and cried. I was grateful for his comforting arms, as I thought again of all the things I would miss of Alonso.

I mourned him as if he were dead, because he was dead to me now. I would never see him again, and I doubted I could ever get a letter to him, even though I knew his family name and estate just as he had known mine. I was sure a letter from England would be questioned, and if his life had followed the course he had described to me, then he would already be in the New World. And knowing what I did now of political matters here, I would never be able to go to Panama. So he was dead, and I had received this last letter from a ghost.

When most of the emotion had passed, the cynical portion of my spirit roused itself, and I wondered how hard Alonso had tried to retrieve this letter after he posted it.

I wiped my eyes.

Gaston regarded me with concern and curiosity. "Was it hateful?"

"Non, on the contrary."

He frowned.

"Let me read it to you," I said.

"You do not have to," he sighed

"I want to, because I want you to understand. You wanted me to read it, now you have to listen."

"Is that how it is?" he asked. "So what am I to understand, how much he loved you?" His tone was light but his eyes were hard.

"Not... precisely. Your Horse truly fears all others, does it not?"

He snorted. "This is not a thing of my Horse." He sighed. "Not entirely. And it is not fear," he added with vehemence. Then he shook his head and rubbed his temples. "I do not want to argue. Not tonight."

"I am sorry."

"Will," he sighed. "I think of this man touching you and it fills me with frustration. You shared things with this man. He was with you before me. I have been with no one except..." He shook his head. "Every time you touch me, it is new to me. When I touch you, I want you to feel the same. I realize that is selfish. I wish to possess you... even in the past."

"You do. My love, you overshadow all that has ever occurred in my life. I can think of no other I have known without comparing them to you. They do not exist to me now except in your shadow."

His smile was slow in coming, but it finally lit his eyes. He handed me Alonso's letter again. "Read it to me."

So I did, explaining my observations as I went, and ending with my thought that he probably tried very hard to retrieve the letter once he was sober. When I finished, Gaston took the pages from me and folded them neatly, compressing the creases until the poor battered papers were flatter than they had been.

"I wish to meet him," he said as he set it aside.

"And what? Kill him?"

"Non," he grinned. "Make him jealous. He lost you." He handed me another letter. "He is a fool. And you are correct; he is no one to be jealous of."

"Thank you." I chuckled at his change of heart and mood. I regarded the feminine script and broke the nondescript seal with a shrug. I flipped to the last page to read the signature. "Sarah."

"Your sister, oui?"

I nodded and read. She had been delighted by the letter I sent her. I calculated, based on the date, and realized this was in response to the first short note I had written her, and not the massive volume I wrote on our return voyage from Île de la Tortue. I would not receive a response to that until the ships began to arrive in January.

She apologized that hers was short, as it had to go on a ship soon. She wished to come here someday and see it all for herself. She asked several questions of matters and details she wished clarification on. She mentioned that she had made the acquaintance of Master Rucker, and he had taken to providing her with a steady supply of political and historical tracts on the subject of the West Indies, and she was quite fascinated by them and by his company. I was greatly pleased to hear it.

She joked that she was going to tell me to give greeting to Gaston, but realized I would let him read this, so she addressed a paragraph directly to him. She thanked him for making me happy, and wished us both well. Gaston was pleased and amused by this. I was pleased she had given such credence to my mention of him; despite the rapport I

had established with her, it was not a thing I would have expected.

Then her letter took a more serious tone. Shane had been furious at his plans being thwarted. Our father had decided it was best to keep them apart, and she had only seen Shane briefly at our mother's funeral and our sister's wedding. At which point, she changed her tack, and spoke of our mother's passing. Sarah had felt a great and unexpected sorrow over this: but not of the loss, rather guilt and sadness that she did not feel any great need to mourn. So she postulated that perhaps she was truly mourning not having a mother, rather than feeling the loss of the woman who had filled the post in name only. I decided that I truly adored my little sister, and that at least I could say I had one family member in the world.

"I wish to meet her as well," Gaston said as he finished.

"And make her jealous?" I teased.

He smacked my arm painfully, and toyed with Rucker's and my father's letters.

"This first." He handed me Rucker's letter.

It was much as I expected from the man, and I reminded myself that when he wrote it he had not yet received the letter I wrote him that would answer many if not all of the questions he listed in this one. I put it aside after explaining this to Gaston.

He shrugged and handed me my father's letter. "Then we must read this now."

I grimaced and nodded. It did not match the dour tone I had expected. My father mentioned Elizabeth's wedding and my mother's passing in a few brief sentences, as if it were a perfunctory duty that must be gotten out of the way so that serious things could be discussed. He seemed pleased I was enjoying myself and had found something to do with my time, as he had not expected planting to suit me. In actuality, I supposed, he was relieved I was out making war on the Spaniards, and not gambling and whoring with his good name all over Port Royal. To my dismay, he appeared to have a very specific agenda for the rest of the missive.

He suggested that, since I was engaged in dangerous enterprises, perhaps it would behoove me to produce a legal heir. He said he would be very pleased with me when I married. He assured me that marriage need not be a thing of love. It was a thing of duty, and any sensible young woman would understand that and turn a blind eye to my philandering with whomever I chose, as long as I practiced a modicum of decorum. He went on to offer the proceeds of the plantation as a means of support for my starting a family.

It was extortion. Thankfully, I did not need his money.

Then he put the noose around my neck. He said that, as incentive for producing an heir, he would give me the plantation upon the birth of my first son. To that end, since he was sure there were few young ladies of sufficient breeding available, he was arranging a marriage for me and would send a bride as soon as one could be procured.

Gaston and I regarded one another in shared horror.

"I am going to kill your father," Gaston said.

"May I hold him down?"

"Will it be necessary?" he asked.

"Non, but I feel I will garner great satisfaction in being a participant."

We sat in silence for a time, each contemplating the coming wave of disaster. I was roiling in anger. I had truly expected this at some junction; why should I be surprised now?

"Will," Gaston whispered into the growing darkness. "The Horse is very distraught."

His fists were clenched and there was fury in his eyes. I was not sure where he could vent it. The object of it was not present.

For my part, the room appeared to be reeling. I decided retreat was in order, and perhaps a den. I slipped out of the chair and around the desk, pulling Gaston after me into the knee space. He curled against my chest and we held each other like scared children, or perhaps puppies. I did not feel that I had teeth or weapons, and I very much wanted someone to come and protect me. But it was not to be. We only had each other. I assured myself that was far more than most were blessed with.

I heard footsteps a while later. I supposed it was time for dinner. I also supposed the person who had entered the room was our host.

"Theodore?" I queried.

The steps approached, and so did a lamp. Theodore peered under the desk at us. I nodded a greeting. He perused the letters on the surface.

"May I read your father's letter?" he asked.

"Please," I said pleasantly.

He scooped it up, and to my amusement, pushed the chair aside and sat on the floor next to us. He gave me a curious look, and his gaze flicked to Gaston. I looked down; my matelot's eyes were tightly closed.

"We are not having a good day," I said. I was thankful I had been forthright with Theodore as to Gaston's madness in October. It made additional explanation unnecessary now.

Theodore nodded. "Due to this?"

"It added to a prevailing situation," I said. "Coming to Port Royal has been... difficult."

He nodded and read. When he finished, he sat it on the desk above us. "It is much as he wrote me, only friendlier."

"I will not do it," I said.

Theodore took a large breath, preparatory to sighing, but he held it in and shrugged instead.

"Non." Gaston stirred in my arms and extricated himself enough to turn and look at me. He appeared calm again, his face truly a mask.

"Non, what?" I asked in French.

"It is a thing you must do if you are to inherit. You are a nobleman; it is expected. Non, it is required. You can do much good with the title.

You must do this to gain it. It will be meaningless to us, non?"

His words did not sit well with me, and I could not at the moment name the reasons why. I told him, "We will discuss it," and switched to English and my attention to Theodore.

"I do not wish to wed or bed a woman, especially not one my father might select. I do not wish for any but my matelot to think they have some claim over me."

"Of course," Theodore sighed. "I did not think you would feel otherwise on either count. As for the latter, under English law a wife is not a thing to be concerned about when compared to a man's legal partner in any enterprise. As you have already, you are free to establish whatever ownership of property and disbursement of your assets at death that you wish. She and your father will have no say in any of that, and your father will only be a consideration concerning matters of the title or property associated with it, such as your family estate in England. The plantation, however, once he gives it to you, can be owned jointly with Gaston. None can gainsay that. As for the former, if you do not wish a bride of your father's choosing, then make your own choice."

"And how am I to do that here?" I asked.

"I have taken the liberty of researching some of the better families here," he said carefully. "I have determined that there are three possible candidates with sufficient breeding that your father might not demand an annulment if you were married to one of them upon the other bride's arrival."

"So you have been planning this for months." I was oddly amused.

"Well," he sighed, "this conversation surely."

I snorted. "Well, I have said I feel you to have my best interests at heart. I suppose I should allow you to pick a bride for me. Better you than my father. I mean no sarcasm in that."

He smiled sadly. "Oh, Will... You have met one of them," he said brightly.

"Truly? I can not recall meeting any..." And then I could.

"Miss Christine Vines," Theodore said. "Her father is the second son of the Baron of Hapsmarch, and by some twist of fate and romance, he married above his station into a noble Austrian house that was in dire straits."

All that Miss Vines had said the night I made her acquaintance at the Governor's house returned to me. She had been educated in Vienna, and said she could make several fine matches there. She was only on Jamaica because her mother had died recently, and her father had needed her. I also recalled her frustration over being expected to marry, at being a girl and limited in her choices. And her vivid blue eyes, and lilting voice, and long limbs, and lovely features.

Gaston was frowning, and then his eyes shot wide. "The Brisket?"

I frowned until I remembered why he called her that, and then I could do little but chuckle.

"I cannot explain," I said in response to Theodore's confusion – and

then tried to anyway. "Miss Vines was the road not taken and the meal not eaten. Gaston and I had quite the argument over my statement that if I had not met him first, I would have been quite smitten with her."

Theodore decided he did not need to understand more. "The other two young ladies are of strictly English lineage, but ladies they are, and not commoners. A number of earls and viscounts own plantations here, and some have actually brought their families temporarily."

I did not care who the others were. Damn me all to hell, I could see taking the Brisket for a wife. I did not feel Gaston would be the least bit reasonable about sharing me with her, though, because Miss Vines would matter.

"I have much to think on," I said firmly. "And there is much Gaston and I must discuss."

Theodore nodded sagely and appeared a trifle relieved. My matelot appeared distraught, but now I was sure his Horse was plunging about in a new direction, and I was not sure if I could provide it comfort over this matter.

I sighed. "May we eat now?"

I was sure I heard the Gods snickering.

Thirty

Wherein We Chart an Unexpected Course

The meal consisted of an interestingly spiced stew, for which I complemented both Mistress Theodore and Hannah. The table was well set with linen and pewter. It minded me much of the last time we dined in a fine room, at Doucette's. Thankfully, we were free of priests this night; but when I thought of sleeping in this house, with its fine white-walled rooms, and how we had fared the last time we had done such a thing, I began to feel uneasy. This was, of course, ladled atop the unease I already felt over my father's plans and the decisions I must make. I had little appetite, not even for the wine.

Gaston nudged me with his foot, and I looked up sharply to find his eyes motioning toward Theodore, and the room engulfed in awkward silence.

"I am sorry," I mumbled.

"I was just asking when you would be visiting the plantation," Theodore said.

I sighed. "As I am not entirely sure of Striker's plans, I suppose I should do it sooner rather than later. Would it be possible to go tomorrow?"

I gave Gaston a questioning look. He nodded.

"That will be fine," Theodore said. "I would like you to see the place before we discuss anything of merit concerning it. I will send Sam to fetch your horses in the morning."

I shrugged. "It seems a pity to send someone all the way to Ithaca to fetch them when we just have to ride there. We can let another pair and

have them returned to the livery."

"Ah, aye, but they are not on the plantation," Theodore said. At my sharp glance he shrugged a trifle sheepishly. "I found a fine pasturage for them outside Spanish Town. They have been well treated, and not ridden. They have had quite the life of leisure."

"Was that not possible at Ithaca?" I asked.

"There was some... resentment over there being idle horses." He shrugged. "That need be fed. And it was felt some of the men might use them to escape. Not that I can see the Negroes doing so, they are scared of them."

"Donoughy?" I had not always seen eye to eye with our plantation manager, but I had not doubted his willingness to follow my instructions since last summer. I cursed myself for being a fool. I should have visited the plantation during the fall so that I was well remembered; but of course, I had chosen Gaston over the sheep on the plantation. It was a thing I knew I would always do.

"Aye," Theodore sighed. "Please, do not be angry with him; though, I well know you will be, and not merely for the horses. He made comment that Ithaca was a working plantation that needed beasts of burden, and not a gentleman's country estate. I thought it best to remove the objects of contention."

"Thank you," Gaston said.

My matelot appeared far more thoughtful than angry. I was mystified as to the current working of his mind. I was mystified as to a great many things and they all seemed to weigh upon me. My strength took flight to follow my appetite, and a great exhaustion settled over me.

"I do not wish to know what else I should even be angry with him for," I said. "Aye, please have the horses fetched to the Passage landing in the morning. Now, if you will all excuse me. Thank you again, Mistress Theodore, for this meal. I am sorry I have not done it justice."

I left them, and retrieved my bags and weapons from Theodore's office. Gaston joined me before I had finished hefting them.

"I do not feel well," I told him.

As we reached the second floor, I realized I had not thought to inquire as to where the guest room was, but there was a door open in the hall and I spied Sam coming out of it. He seemed pleased to see us.

"Master Marsdale, you be wantin' the bath now? I bring a kettle."

There was a small brass washtub with clear water in the middle of the room, and a sheet of canvas beneath it. There was a stack of cotton cloths for drying next to it.

"Aye, please Sam. This will be fine. And thank you. And, how are you, Sam? I see you have a woman of your own kind in the house now."

He frowned, and then glanced about and stepped in close to whisper. "Master Marsdale, she not be from my people, and that not be no woman. Women be soft. That one don't have a soft thing in her."

"I am sorry." I smiled in spite of my mood. "I am well pleased you are here and we will not be left solely to her tender mercies." I gave him

a coin, and he grinned. "We will also need boiled water in bottles on the morrow. If you could place them outside the door."

"Anything for you, Master Marsdale. I get kettle now."

I closed the door and found it did not lock. It was a nice room in the corner of the dwelling, with windows in both outer walls. Even from where I stood, I could feel a little breeze. Unfortunately, it was furnished with a bed rather than a hammock; but as it was placed somewhat between the windows, I supposed it would be tolerable. Of far more concern, all the surfaces seemed to be painted or lacquered white. This added to the overall appearance of cleanliness and left me uncomfortable. I did not know if my weapons were clean enough to deposit anywhere, and I was afraid my bare feet would leave horrid prints on the floor.

Gaston had preceded me into the room, and set his weapons on a trunk, which he now leaned upon, watching me.

"What would you have of me?" he asked gently.

I handed him my weapons and bag, and collapsed in the chair near the desk. I had left footprints across the clean floor.

"Make it all go away," I sighed. "We do not need this battle now. We have enough to..."

His fingers were on my lips and he kissed my forehead. "Hush." He smiled softly. "There is this small desk here, and this chair, and perhaps with the bed linens we could make a den."

I could but smile in return. "I thought you were never allowed to play with the furniture as a child."

"I have always felt safe beneath them," he whispered solemnly, as if it were a great secret. "My sister and I would crawl beneath a table in the nursery when it stormed. Even though we were in a great stone house, we always felt the ceiling would collapse, or perhaps the windows would shatter."

I understood. "I always sought comfort amongst others, and if that was not possible, I would press myself into some corner where I could see all that approached."

He grinned. "If you are very small under a table, you can see their feet, and attack them there if you must, but they cannot see you unless they lean down; and then they are off balance and easy to topple."

I smiled. I could well envision the feral little red-headed demon he must have been.

Sam knocked on the door, and we started. We bade him enter and he emptied a kettle of boiling water into the tub and withdrew with a polite bow.

Gaston blocked the door with the room's other chair after Sam left.

"Remove your clothes," he ordered softly, as he doffed his own. "I will bathe you."

"Why are you so calm... now?" I asked.

"You need me."

My battered heart swelled, and the pressure brought a tear to my

eye. "Thank you."

I removed my tunic and shed my breeches without standing. He moved the lamp closer to us, and I forced all other thoughts to recede except for how very beautiful he was in the flickering golden light. Soon my eyes roamed contentedly, watching the glide of muscle under skin.

"You bathe first." I breathed.

He crossed the room to lean on the arms of my chair, with one knee between mine. I let my head fall back to gaze up at him with curiosity and amusement. I saw the mischievous twinkle in his eyes before his mouth closed over mine. His kiss was languid and sensual. It burned all memory of my duress away. There was only him. When he withdrew, I tried to follow like a pup after a teat.

"I wish I had attended school with you," he breathed on my lips. "I wish I had been the first to touch you. To kiss you. To fuck you."

My heart was pounding with nearly painful intensity, and I gasped for breath as my already-stirring manhood sprang to life. He was not the first to say such things, but for the first time, I felt he would be the last.

He came in for the kill. The first kiss had been a promise, the second was an answered prayer. I became limp, and slid down until my naked crotch encountered his knee. Fire erupted in my groin, leaving me flushed and breathless. His mouth left mine to trace over my jaw and down. I clawed feebly at his shoulders as he nipped the side of my neck, and then bit and sucked. I gave a strangled laugh as I realized he was marking me. The pain and pleasure were one, and it was divine.

When he finally stopped and stood, I was aroused to the edge of discomfort. He grinned triumphantly at me. I chuckled with amazement that he had endeavored to seduce me so readily and succeeded so handily. He ran a fingertip up the underside of my manhood, and I gasped and pushed his hand away.

"Not yet, you have me on the brink and I want it to last as long as possible. It is an exquisite agony, rather like my heart aching."

"I will endeavor to make you truly miserable, then," he whispered, and retrieved a pot of salve from his bag. He set it beneath the chair and smirked at my hungry eyes.

He bathed for me. He was not coy or practiced; he merely made sure I saw every gliding stroke of his hand over his flesh. Wet, he glistened in the lamplight. It was as if I watched a sculpture come to life and display itself for my pleasure. I had never desired anything as I did him.

When he finished, he slid my chair closer to the warm water, and began to clean me with a cloth. I held out as long as I could. When he bade me lift a little, and began to clean my buttocks, and the private place between, I gasped and reached for my manhood. He blocked my attempt, and took me in hand while continuing his other ministrations.

As his fingers sank deeper, I realized they were greased. I coiled with anticipation. He stilled as I tensed, as he did when we practiced our morning regimen.

"I am not afraid," I breathed.

I willed myself to relax. He slipped a single finger inside me, as he had every day this week, and I savored the sensation. But this time he was not content to play about my opening. This time he went deeper and probed about, until he found the front wall of the passage, and the lump of the organ there. He pressed gently.

I exploded with fear and pain.

I found myself in the corner. I did not remember leaving the chair or fleeing across the room.

He still knelt beside the tub. His eyes were wide.

"Will?" he breathed. He was coiled to flee, and looked as scared as I.

"I..." I had to tell him something, but the words would not come.

"Hurt," I gasped.

This seemed to mitigate his fear, but it added to my internal agitation. Why had it hurt?

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked as he crept toward me.

I did not want to be touched. "Non. Stay back."

Pain gripped his features.

"Non, non, please. I just cannot bear to be touched now, even by you."

He stayed where he was. "I am sorry."

"Non. It was not you. That much I am certain of. You touched... a memory."

His eyes narrowed, and I shook my head in frustration at my inability to grasp what had occurred.

"I do not know if I can explain," I whispered.

He nodded. "Has that happened before?"

"Non, that is the issue. It has not. I mean... Damn it." I sighed, and forced myself to think slowly and recall other memories. "No one else has touched me there. Not even Alonso. I do not understand why I reacted so... except that it reminded me of... Shane, and what he did. Though he never did that. The only thing he entered me with was his cock."

"The lump, it is an organ," Gaston said calmly. "The thing I touched. It sits around the vessel that delivers urine from the bladder to the penis. I have seen it. It is just outside the rectum."

I frowned. "How have you seen one?"

He shrugged. "Learning to be a surgeon, you dissect bodies."

I grimaced, and he smiled weakly.

"Can it cause pain?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I do not know of that aspect of it. It did not cause me pain when you touched it. Has it hurt anyone else you have touched?"

"Non, though...", I sifted through more memories. "There was one man who claimed it was uncomfortable because it was very intense in sensation. He did not like it."

"Perhaps you are the same."

"I need to remember." I met his gaze. "I need to let myself remember. I may vomit as I have done in the past."

"I will be here." He smiled reassuringly. "And I will clean it up before anyone sees."

I nodded, and tried to recall the feeling he had engendered by touching me there. I thankfully could not reclaim it in its entirety, but I could find enough of it to lead me to the memories it had brought to life. I ignored all the other emotions and thoughts that went with Shane's assaults, and concentrated on the ephemeral recollection of the sensations. I found it.

"Shane hit it with his cock when he entered me," I said. "Rammed it actually. Many times."

"You did not throw up," Gaston said.

I smiled and crawled to him. "Non, I did not. I did then, though, once. He hit me for that."

Gaston embraced me, and I was relieved I found comfort in it and not more phantom memories.

"Do you think he ever realized how much you loved him?" he asked. "And that your love is the only thing that stood between him and death?"

"Non, I do not. I think he thinks I am weak and never posed a threat to him." Then I truly heard his words and my shame transmuted to wonder. "Thank you, for reminding me how I should perceive it."

"I am glad I can serve some purpose. I am sorry," he whispered.

I shook my head.

"Even if my error was inadvertent, it caused you pain, and for that I am sorry. We will avoid that spot," he added solemnly.

"I think that wise," I chuckled. "I do not understand how Alonso avoided it."

He frowned and nodded thoughtfully. "We need to discover that."

I marveled again at how very calm he was, yet this was not the mask he wore when he tended the wounded. This was another face of his Horse.

"I wish you could see yourself as I see you now," I whispered. "Then you would never call yourself evil."

He held me tighter, and eventually we moved to the bed, where I was reasonably sure we did not muss the sheets, as we were clean and did nothing but embrace one another.

We woke to a knock on the door. Gaston sprang from where he was sleeping on my chest. The sudden lack of heat was chilling. I grabbed the weapon beside the pillow and opened my eyes to find my matelot on his knees above me with a pistol pointed at the door. I recalled where we were, slowly. It seemed quite bright out. Gaston seemed a trifle wild-eyed. I wondered if he had been awakened from a dream.

"It is assuredly the maid," I whispered, then called to the door, "Aye?"

"It is Hannah, sirs. Will you want the morning meal?" She had a husky voice and a strong accent, but her English was proper and well enunciated.

"We will be down," I said, as cheerfully as I could manage.

Gaston slumped to my chest.

"A little tense this morning, are we?" I whispered.

He glared at me and sighed. Then he touched my neck and grimaced.

My fingers went to the mark he had left last night, and I became acutely aware of how sore it was. Now that I thought on it, I realized I could feel the throbbing in my neck. I probed along the edges and found it was larger than I expected. I would not be hiding it. This pleased me. Here with him, it was not a thing to be ashamed of, but a badge of honor.

He slid up my chest to kiss me with gentle mirth. "I am truly sorry," he chuckled. "I did not mean to do so much. I should prepare a poultice." The more he spoke, the funnier he seemed to find the situation.

I grabbed his head quite firmly and pulled his neck to my mouth. He submitted, even though I knew he was not naïve as to my goal. I licked and then bit; and he made a contented sound, and shifted to provide me better access. I did not attempt to cover as much territory as he had, but I did leave him well marked. Once finished, I felt pride in the damage I had done.

"I have never exchanged those with a man before," I said.

This pleased him, but he frowned. "So you have with a woman?"

He pushed himself off me and I pulled myself up the headboard to sit. He returned to sit astride my legs. He was semi-turgid with the need to relieve himself, just as I was. Still, the sight of him not being completely flaccid caused a true stir in my manhood. I suppressed a sigh.

"Oui," I smiled. "I once connived to start mischief with one. I marked a lady upon her bosom whilst she was drunk. Her husband thought far more had occurred than had, though I had done little more than kiss her and leave the mark."

"Were you forced to duel with him, or was that your intent?" he asked with amusement.

"Non, my intent was to cause her angst. She had trifled with the affections of a friend of mine. Her husband cared not what she did, as long as she was discreet. He was furious. Her season was ruined, as he sent her away to their winter home, right in the midst of the very best parties and balls."

He smiled. "You are an angel of justice."

"Perhaps, but I do not mete out the Gods' justice, merely my own."

"That alone should strike terror into the hearts of wise men."

I grinned. "Non, if they are truly wise then they need not fear me."

He fingered his neck. "That is an interesting sensation. It is quite pleasant to receive."

"You did not realize that before you did it to me?" I teased.

"I assumed it was not wholly unpleasant, as I have seen many men

wearing the results." He grinned. "I have assumed a great many things I have not experienced to be pleasant, and with you I have found my assumptions well-founded."

I slid my hands up his thighs and regarded him with a touch of wonder. "You are in a rare mood this morn, non?"

He gazed into my eyes thoughtfully. "I am greatly confused and troubled about all things, except you, yet you seem to be the catalyst for all of my woe."

"I am sorry. You are the balm for all of mine."

Guilt suffused him. "I did not mean..."

"Non, non. Neither did I."

He kissed my forehead and crawled off me and then the bed. He was now very far away, despite the small size of the room. I cursed myself roundly for precipitating this change in his demeanor, as I was most surely the cause of it. In my consternation, the entire list of all the reasons I might feel angst recited itself. I forced myself to follow him from the bed and dress.

I discovered several onion bottles of water outside our door. We moved them inside, and drank most of one before slipping down the back stairs. We performed our morning necessities in the yard, and ventured back into the house to find Theodore eating his meal. We joined him, and Hannah quickly brought us plates and food. Mistress Theodore was not about, and as women with child are often not about in the early hours, I did not ask.

Theodore inquired politely as to our plans for the day, and whether they still involved traveling to Ithaca.

I answered truthfully. "I do not know if I should have anything to do with Ithaca, as I feel I have abandoned it already," I said slowly. "I would rather return to Negril and be done with the matter."

"That will not do," Theodore said sadly. "Will, though that land is to be granted to one John Williams, if he is not, in truth, the Viscount of Marsdale, and thus the Earl of Dorshire's heir, and therefore someone the Governor would curry favor with..." He trailed off.

He needed to say no more.

"I understand," I said. "I assume some question of identity and legality might put all of the land grants there into question."

"Precisely." He nodded to himself. "There is a thing I would have you read."

He went to his office and returned with a letter which he handed to me. I recognized my father's hand. It was dated the same as the one I had received announcing his marriage agenda for me. I regarded Theodore curiously.

"Read it," he said.

"I would not have you break a confidence."

He sighed heavily, and pushed his plate aside to lean on the table with both elbows and rub his temples. "I have come to admire you, Will. I would rather I was in your employ and not your father's. Yet, if that

were to be, then I would not be able to offer you the services I can, such as this. Read the damn letter."

I was touched. "I am honored to be held in so high a regard."

He snorted and pointed at the missive.

I read. Theodore had been correct; my father's words to me had been far friendlier. Theodore was a man in his employ, and this was business, and thus the Earl of Dorshire wrote accordingly. It minded me quite firmly that the two men had never met, and that my father would never treat a man of less than noble birth as his equal. He was a wolf, after all.

In the letter, the Earl of Dorshire made it perfectly clear that Theodore was to do all in his power to secure his son's capitulation to his aims, lest the whole endeavor be for naught. Though he would never state it so to Theodore, or expect him to even know there were difficulties between us, in this letter, my father told my cynical eyes that unless the plantation could be used as a means of keeping me on Jamaica, he intended to abandon the endeavor. He tasked Theodore with preparing a suitable dwelling for a lady to inhabit long enough to produce an heir, and then he implied that said lady might not stay on Jamaica, as he wished any heirs to return to England where it was safer and healthier.

I finished the letter with poison in my heart.

"He wishes for me to stand at stud so that he may have an heir, and he hopes fervently that I will not live to return to England," I told them.

"I think that a bit harsh," Theodore said.

"You do not know my father."

"Would you give him a child?" Gaston asked in French as he finished the last page.

I answered in kind. "As you cannot give birth, nor I, I have little interest in..." And then I understood what he truly asked. I thought of my own hellish upbringing in my father's house. "Non. I would not subject another to that, especially not my own flesh and blood."

Gaston nodded with a small smile. "We do not need his money."

Nay, we did not, and Gaston's father's guilt over his son's hellish upbringing was to thank for that.

I returned to English and asked Theodore, "How much does my father pay you?"

He shook his head quickly. "That is not a concern."

"We have the means to exceed it," I said.

"I know, but if I take your coin, then I am in your employ, and as I noted, then I may not be as useful to you, as your father would need to hire another agent here, and we would have to deal with whoever that might be on matters of the plantation and anything else your father wishes. This person might not be as friendly with the governor."

I studied him and found him resolved. He was suggesting a thing that I knew was not in keeping with the ethical parameters of the practice of English law.

"You work for my father, but you are my friend," I said solemnly.

He appeared relieved that I understood. "Someday, someone may claim that my interests are conflicted," he said carefully.

"If that is to occur, I will do whatever you advise in order to dispel the notion. What can I do to aid in that now?"

He sighed yet again, and smiled ruefully. "I am sorry, Will, I do not mean to be an added burden, but it would be best from my perspective, and the perspective of several others – though Striker stands well with many here on his own accord – but for the rest, it would be best if you did your father's bidding, only inasmuch as is required to get him to sign the plantation over to you. Then, for all intents, my business with him would be finished. I realize, of course, this could be perceived as a ploy on my part to elicit what your father seeks anyway, but truly it is not. It merely happens to run concurrent to your father's aims. I would also be relieved of this burden if he disinherits you. Then I would be pleased to be in your employ whether you are a Viscount or not. But I truly feel you, and all concerned, would be better off in the long run if you were to produce an heir and gain the plantation and all that it implies. For now, at least, no matter what your eventual goals or plans might be."

"As always, I trust you to have my best interests at heart," I said.

I looked to my matelot. His eyes met mine, and I could see he was thinking a great deal.

"We have much to discuss," I added. "Thank you for this." I handed Theodore the letter.

"I am sorry, Will," he said solemnly.

We returned upstairs to gather our things.

"I do not wish to discuss it now," Gaston said once we were alone. "I feel we should follow our regimen, and speak of it all when we are more relaxed in spirit."

I had to concur. My thoughts were not pleasant, and I could only imagine his. "The ride will improve my spirit considerably. What of you? Should we spar, or perform calisthenics?"

He thought on it. "I feel the ride might serve for me as well, but we will not have a chance for privacy afterwards."

"Thus we should attend to my treatment now," I sighed.

I soon found myself arse up across his lap on the bed. His preparatory kiss had done little to shake my mood, and as his fingers began their work, my mind twisted along bramble-filled trails while I submitted to his ministrations.

I pondered submission. It was easier, was it not, to submit? It brought peace, even if one lost; it still brought an end to war if one merely laid down one's arms. But I did not want to lose. I did not want my father or any other to triumph over me.

But was I not teaching myself to submit gracefully with this daily regimen? Nay, I refused to name it such. I was doing battle. I was dueling with the ghost of Shane in this. And the exquisite discomfort

Gaston wrought was akin to the ache in my legs during a deep lunge. I envisioned Shane at the tip of my blade, eyes wide with surprise that my reach exceeded his, and the knowledge that I would someday defeat him. This image filled me with peace.

"You are doing well today, Will," Gaston whispered reassuringly. "I have two fingers within you."

I grinned. I would drive the blade through Shane's heart on the day Gaston entered me in truth. I anticipated that moment with renewed vigor, not driven by lust, but by pride.

We finally gathered our things and departed for the wherry landing, by way of Lime and the length of Thames, as we needed to pay a visit to the gunsmith. As always, Massey was pleased to see us, and we left our muskets and several pistols with him to be inspected and repaired before we sailed. Then we wandered through the markets and shops.

As we passed a leatherworker's shop, which sold all manner of items from mule harnesses to baldrics, Gaston seemed distracted, and his eyes kept returning to it. I finally peered at the place in earnest, until I realized what was holding his attention: the rack of whips.

"Well, at least you are able to gaze upon them," I said gently.

"We must begin that aspect of my regimen," he said quietly. "Purchase one, please."

"Of what variety?" The rack held everything from riding quirts to cat-of-nine-tails to horsewhips.

"One as would have scarred me," he said and turned away.

He had never discussed the whip used to scar him, but I felt it was a horsewhip. I thought perhaps he should start with a simpler one. I did as he bade anyway, selecting a coil of braided leather nearly twice my height, with a handle as long as my forearm. I talked the proprietor into giving me a burlap sack to stow it in.

When I left the shop, Gaston was gone, and I experienced a moment of panic until I saw the apothecary across the street. I found him inside purchasing more of the salves and oils we enjoyed, and some additional supplies for his medicine chest. He shrugged in response to my curious look, and eyed the sack I carried askance.

"That was wise," he said.

"I thought as much."

We said no more of it. We stopped at our house for Gaston to intoxicate himself with the smell of puppies for a time. Our friends and many others appeared to still be intoxicated with a less pleasant substance, and the house was filled with snoring men sprawled here and there. We did not attempt to wake them. The bitch – who Gaston decided to call Bella, though I would not have described her as beautiful – was pleased to see us, especially when we offered her a good meaty bone from the butcher. So we played with pups until they hungered and their mother began to collect them from us.

Cudro staggered through the room, and we waved to him and let him know we would be at the plantation. He seemed cogent enough to

remember this, and so we left him to tell the others.

We finally finished working our way up Thames to the wherry landing, and let one to row ourselves across to the Passage landing. We spied a boy waiting with our steeds before we reached the shore. As we had not seen the animals in many months, and had not known them for long before, I was curious if they would remember us. As we approached, Diablo, my sorrel gelding, tried to take a bite out of the lad holding his reins. He had not changed a great deal. Gaston's bay gelding, Francis, was tractable as always.

"They be a bit wild, sirs," the boy said when we claimed them. "They have been fat and sassy in the pasture for three months now. Do you have saddles?" He seemed concerned.

"Nay, we have ridden them before without," I assured him.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, I haven't met a buccaneer yet that could ride."

I laughed. "I have only recently become a buccaneer. I still retain my gentlemanly skills."

This seemed to assuage him somewhat, and he took my coin, though he tested it with his teeth before nodding happily and pocketing it.

"I be named Cedric, sir. You can send someone to Byerly to ask for me, and I'll come fetch 'em from here when ya return, iff'n' ya wish, sir."

I agreed to this and he hopped on his waiting mule and rode off.

Gaston was eyeing Francis' back with trepidation. "It has been many months; perhaps we should have procured saddles."

I scoffed. "Non, you mastered riding without when last we were here. It will return to you as naturally as walking, once you are up."

He awarded me a disparaging look, and vaulted onto Francis' back. The animal immediately sidestepped in response to the sudden and unfamiliar weight. To my pleasure, and Gaston's mild chagrin, he moved with his mount and did not lose his barely-gained seat. I gave him a triumphant smile, and he rolled his eyes.

Our mounts were indeed fractious, and I quickly remedied this by allowing them to burn off their friskiness in a good run to Spanish Town. They were far more tractable when we slowed to thread our way through the traffic there. Yet we had experienced the wind in our teeth and wanted more, so we put our heels to them as soon as we had clear road ahead of us again. And thus, we made excellent time to Ithaca. We only slowed in the last league in order to cool the horses.

Ithaca did not look much like the rough land I remembered from nine months ago. It now appeared to be a proper plantation, though small. There were seemingly vast acres of thigh-high cane growing in somewhat orderly rows. It would be several feet taller than a man by this time next year, and nearly ready for harvest. At its current height, I could see the backs of the recently acquired Negro slave gang bobbing along in one area. Several white men stood about watching them.

I could not recognize the overseers at this distance, but I knew I had sailed here with them, and had once worried that they would be the

ones stooped at weeding while someone threatened them with a whip. I was not amused by the irony, but saddened. I had wanted my flock of sheep to become wolves, had I not? But they had become lowly wolves, the type that could not pick on sheep of their own color, but rested their status upon men foreign to them and easily subjugated. The wolves that subjugated men of their own kind were the fearsome ones, the ones to be respected and reviled in full measure.

"All I need do is get some damn woman with a male child and all of this could be ours," I sighed bitterly.

"Yours," Gaston said quietly.

"Ours, since you are now English."

I wondered if that too would be threatened if I were no longer the Viscount of Marsdale.

"I did not wish to be an Englishman," Gaston said.

"I do not understand," I said. "You are an exile. You are disinherited. And if you return to French soil, you are considered incompetent to even manage your own affairs. Why would you wish to be French?"

"If I am English, I feel I will be forced to become steadfast and wear wool in the tropics," he teased.

We were nearing the compound proper, and I pulled Diablo up. Gaston stopped when he realized I had, and turned Francis about to face me.

"Are you so proud of being French?" I asked. It was not my real question, but it was one I wanted answered and a likely place to start. "Not that you should not be, I am just trying to understand."

He nodded. "Oui, more than I expect at times. And more so, I am proud of being noble. It means much to me. Despite... everything. I cannot explain it."

"Is that why you wish for me to maintain my title? Do you truly feel I should marry?" That was the great question I wanted an answer to. "When I once said I would walk away from it for you, you urged against it. Is this why?"

"In part," he sighed. "I lost what was due me, and I would not have you do the same."

"You realize that you, who suffer jealousy over my ever having touched another, would be forced to sit somewhere alone while I went and bedded another."

He looked away, but his mien was resolved. "It would be a woman, and that will not matter so very much. She will not be my opponent in any way. You said you find pleasure in them. Why do you find this so very difficult? You can marry and bed one, and then he will give you the plantation, and we can conspire to keep the child from his clutches."

I shook my head. "What if he demands next that I send my son to England to be properly educated, in order to remain in his good graces? I will not have him win. I cannot countenance his sitting in his damn office gloating that he has won, that he has made me behave as a proper son, and bed a woman and produce a child. This is the damned bastard

who let Shane abuse me so that it might put me off men; though he swears he did not know the extent of it. That I will believe him on, only because he would have put a stop to it if he had realized his precious Shane had been committing sodomy with anyone. But Aye, he allowed me to be beaten and harassed in the name of correcting what he felt to be another defect of my character. He admitted it!"

Gaston's eyes went hard. "You have not told me that."

"Non, I have not. I have not wanted to remember it."

The anger left him as quickly as it had arrived, and he slumped dejectedly. "I do not know. He cannot be allowed to have things as he wishes. Yet... I want puppies, Will. Or whatever centaurs have, colts perhaps. I wish for progeny and we cannot bear them."

"What?" I was sure I had not heard him correctly.

"I cannot father any, as I am mad, and it is very likely a thing I could pass to another as my mother did to my sister and me; but you are not. You could have children. And they would be mine, somehow."

I was momentarily stunned beyond the ability to speak. Never, in my wildest flights of fantasy, would I have considered such a thing. I had never wanted children. I still did not.

"I will father as many children as you wish," I finally said. "But not for the title or...my father. Though I will do nothing to hinder that, if you truly wish for me to have it as well. But it will be on our terms, and they will be our children, and... I leave it to you to choose a mother to your liking."

"What of the Brisket?" he asked carefully.

"We can meet her, and you can form your own opinion." I thought that a very poor choice, as she would cause no end of complication and trouble. But perhaps it was for the best. Upon our meeting her, I was sure he would become jealous and this whole matter would pass. Resolving matters with my father would still remain; but then, perhaps, we would die while roving and be done with it. I truly did not wish to think on it any further.

There was still one thing that we needed to clarify, though. "If I die, you will live, because you will have to raise the children properly so that they do not fall into my father's clutches."

He thought on this before nodding soberly. "You must not die."

"Neither must you," I said solemnly. "Because I swear, if you die and leave me with a house full of children and a damned wife, I will follow you to Hell and drag you back."

I set Diablo toward the compound at a canter.

Francis caught us a moment later and it became a race. Once we were at a full gallop, Gaston did an amazing and foolhardy thing. He sprang from his horse's back and toppled me from mine, so that we rolled into the nearest cane. We came to rest with him atop me. My skin was scratched by sharp leaves, and my ribs battered by thick stalks. I thanked the Gods none of our pistols had discharged, and we had not been impaled on one of our scabbards. He grinned down at me like a

fool, and I could not help but return it.

"I will never leave you," he said.

"Nor I you. But my love, why the Devil have you not mentioned wanting children before?"

"It was a distant thing I felt I had no hope of ever achieving," he said seriously. "And now I have you, whose pedigree does not include madness, and who needs to marry anyway in order to do good in the world."

He kissed me deeply, and I cared not about fathers and wives. I wanted to make him happy.

"We will consider wives," I said.

He nodded and let me up. The pall of angst wrapped about my heart released as well; and as we rode into the compound, I felt at peace, despite this disturbing new knowledge of my life's future course.

Ithaca now had buildings in addition to the barracks shed. Unfortunately, one of them was a high-walled stockade to house the slaves. Apparently the bondsmen were all living in little huts. The foundations for the other structures had been staked out, and the first water mill was nearing completion.

Fletcher, who was so thin I barely recognized him, approached. "Lord Marsdale! Gaston! How good it is to see you," he said with great enthusiasm.

He was truly gaunt. His wide shoulders were thankfully not stooped, but his tunic hung loosely upon them, and his handsome face was a mass of angles and little flesh.

"Fletcher... And you," I said carefully, "though you truly look a shade of your former self. What has happened to you?"

"I had the fever," he said with a touch of embarrassment.

"Have you recovered?" I asked. "Should you be about?"

"In part. I no longer fever, and I have an appetite, but my strength has been slow in returning."

Gaston sighed, and fixed Fletcher with a stern eye. "Will you follow instructions I give?"

Fletcher frowned and nodded. "Do you know of a cure?"

"Nothing as simple as a draught," Gaston said. "We must change your diet. Are you growing any food here?"

I looked toward the garden plot Gaston and I had started clearing in the summer. It was fallow. I sighed.

"Nay, sir," Fletcher said, "we still get proper English food. I don't touch anything that grows here. The slaves are growing a thing or two, and Donoughy says that's fit for them."

"Fletcher," I chided gently, but with mounting frustration, "a man cannot live on five-month-old salted herring, mealy flour, and wormy apples. Not well, anyway."

He shook his head. "Pork and beef are expensive, and we have not the men to clear land for pasturage."

His frown said much. I saw why Theodore wished for me to come

here. They were stubborn sheep.

Gaston and I exchanged a look.

He turned back to Fletcher. "You let the cattle and pigs run wild, and you hunt them."

"We can't give the men weapons," Fletcher said with alarm.

"Donoughy says if they learn to hunt, they'll leave."

"And then Gaston and I will hunt them down and shoot them in the eye," I snapped.

He recoiled at that, and I regretted it somewhat, just as I still rued shooting poor Creek.

And I supposed Donoughy's fear was valid, especially considering how often I came around. A threat had to be seen in order to be effective. If they learned to fend for themselves, they would not stay to finish their contracts; yet if they remained here, they would die of malnourishment and other ailments. They were still no better off than the Negroes they watched.

"And you, my Lord? Have you been wounded?" Fletcher asked.

I started to tell him I was quite recovered from the wound I had suffered in August, but then I noted he was eyeing my neck with a grimace, his fingers hovering above the place where Gaston's mark would have been on his own flesh.

"Nay, he bit me," I sighed.

My matelot's eyes widened with embarrassment but he stayed silent.

"Oh," Fletcher said, and flushed. Then disapproval shuttered his face and he took a step back. Apparently he had not warmed to the ideas of sodomy or matelotage these last months, any more than he had warmed to the local food.

He remained distant until he led us to the mill, and then his pride got the best of him. He had designed the water wheel and was understandably proud. I was impressed. After having done a little of my own building, I was in awe that trees could be felled and shaped so precisely as to fit with forged iron to make a building and the workings inside. It looked to be a thing that would stand for decades and harness the river to grind tons of cane.

There would be another mill next to it, and then a boiling house, curing shed, and rum distillery. Someday, there would be a proper plantation house; and Fletcher showed us the site they had chosen for it, on the hill overlooking the river.

I conceded it would be very nice, and wondered when we would build it. Part of Theodore's instructions included its construction, though Theodore had also procured a site in town just down the street from his. If we were to have a wife, she must be housed somewhere. I decided it would probably be best to ask her where she wished to be, since it would be her house, whoever she was. We would not dwell in it for most of the year, if I had my way. Then it occurred to me that Gaston might wish to cuddle with these heretofore-unforeseen children, much as he did with the puppies. The thought of seeing him so was pleasant, but

it would necessitate living with them, and I did not think that would be pleasant at all. I had never been about an infant that it was not wailing.

On our return to the cookhouse and barracks, we passed the graveyard. I was mortified to see how many crosses sprouted there, and that I knew every name and some well. Patterson and the Jenkins brothers had passed. I counted: of the forty-one men with whom I arrived on Jamaica, twenty-three were dead within a year. And this did not count Tom, Harry, and Dickey, of which Harry had died within a month of our arrival. Men die all the time, true, but not at this appalling rate in all of Christendom; not unless there is war or pestilence. I supposed it could be said that both were constants in the West Indies. The crew of the *North Wind* had been cut down by half as well, but none of them had died by disease. And if nothing else, that alone would have made me thankful I had taken to the seas, despite the shipwreck. At least I had not been trapped here, near swamp vapors, eating rancid food.

I decided we would build a house for the wife in town.

As we came into the compound again, my gaze was drawn to the stockade.

"Have any of the Negroes died?" I asked Fletcher.

"Oh aye, my Lord. Ten of the fifty Mister Theodore purchased in September."

"Why are they not buried in the graveyard?"

Fletcher was appalled. "They are not Christian, my Lord. We gave them over to their fellows and the savages let the bodies rot. Now we burn them."

"As they are not Christian, perhaps it is their custom."

"Only the Devil knows, my Lord," he said with a sad shake of his head. "According to the ship's captain, they come from five different tribes. Which is as we wanted, since that way they can't all speak to one another to plot an escape or mutiny."

I sighed. "Perhaps the ones who died first came from a group with customs the others were unfamiliar with. Perhaps they were not sure of your intent in giving them the body."

"My Lord, why would you be willing to excuse them?" he asked with sincere curiosity. "You are kind to the extreme. They are ignorant savages. They are not men."

"Then perhaps you should endeavor to instruct them. Fletcher, in the Italian cities I met a number of black Moors, and even a Nubian, who had skin every bit as dark as these Negroes, and they dressed, spoke, did business, and worshipped money and Christ much like any other man I have ever met."

He flinched at this. "My Lord, I pray for you," Fletcher said solemnly. "You seem determined to commit heresy and blasphemy at every turn."

"Fletcher, should it not be heresy, if not blasphemy, to assume one knows the will of God at every turn? If God has issue with me, then that is between the two of us and not you. And does not God wish all of his

good men to spread the word of His teachings? The Jesuits make quite the industry of it."

"So you would have us minister to them?" he asked with a faint mien of guilt.

Beside me, Gaston was suppressing a smile, and I realized the direction I had stumbled in my rancor. I did not want Fletcher foisting his brand of religion upon a bunch of hapless men. I also saw that he had been considering it.

Fletcher was frowning at the stockade. "Do you truly feel they can learn the teachings of our Lord?"

"I think all men are capable of it," I said carefully.

"Donoughy will not like it. If they become proper men then..."

"They will have to be treated as such," I finished for him as I saw where it led. I decided that Christianity would not be in the slaves' worst interests; on the contrary. "Fletcher, you are a man of God in your fashion, do you feel that you can attempt to instruct them?"

"They would have to learn the King's English first," he said as if the task were daunting.

I struggled to suppress my amusement. I was truly Satan's snake in the garden of ignorance.

"Aye, they will," I said with assurance. "Do you feel you can instruct them? I will tell Donoughy it is required. If he gainsays me, I shall dismiss him. And you will all learn to eat decent food, even if it kills you. God chose to put edible food on this island. How dare the lot of you turn your noses up at His bounty?"

He gave a low groan and awarded me with the chiding eye of a man bested in sparring by devious footwork he should have seen coming.

I smiled kindly. "It is all a matter of interpretation, Fletcher."

"So you say, my Lord," he said with a thoughtful frown. "You surely choose to see it like no other."

We returned to the main buildings. Their original cook had died of the flux, and they now had a man named Curly, who was bald. He plied us with rum, and I availed myself of it. Gaston did not drink. Instead, he borrowed a pot in which to boil water and picked through their store of victuals to see if there was any he would allow us to eat. I understood his quest had failed when he handed me a strip of boucan from his belt pouch. I ate it without complaint.

The men began to arrive, and they were delighted to see us. Grisholm, our carpenter, still lived, as did Humboldt, the widower who had become a bondsman rather than marry. They were nearly as thin as Fletcher. Donoughy was the only one who appeared to be none the worse for ten months at Ithaca. But then, he had seasoned to the West Indies years ago. He did not appear pleased to see us; and as I knew he would wish to hear what I had to say even less, I took delight in his discomfiture and gave him hearty greeting.

I went to peruse the Negroes before they were locked away for the night. They were a sorry lot. Though not yet as thin as the bondsmen,

none appeared healthy. I was damn glad I was fortified with rum before I had to meet any of their eyes. Not that many would look me in the eye. The few that did were whip-scarred, and I found shameful irony in that.

As they were led away, I turned on Donoughy. I did not dance about the matter, choosing a clean thrust instead. "I wish for the Negroes to be instructed in English and the ways of Godliness, and I want that garden plot planted and men eating what it produces."

I could see the "nay" hovering about his lips and eyes, but he was too clever to let it settle.

"My Lord," he started carefully. "You can't teach them..."

"Why," I asked, "because they cannot learn, or because they will then be able to understand all that is said and speak amongst themselves?"

"Both," he said.

"Did we not once have a discussion as to well-used men...?" I asked.

"These are not Christian men," he said firmly. "You cannot expect them to ever behave like good men. They are savages."

I smirked. "And I believe the Greeks thought the same of the Romans... But that is what truly scares you."

He did not know enough of history to understand my reference. He regarded me with mute anger.

I sobered. "They are men, much like any other. They differ from us in the color of their skin and the way of their customs, just as the yellow men from across the sea, and they have huge cities. We know nothing of where these men come from, of what they know, or what they can learn, because we cannot talk to them to discover it. And there are Negroes all over Port Royal who can speak English."

He chose a different tack and his brow smoothed a little as he tried it. "My Lord, we cannot spare them. Teaching takes time."

"They are not doing anything right now, are they? They can learn English by torchlight."

He sighed. "And who will teach them?"

"Fletcher," I said.

He did not speak it, but his shoulders told me of his capitulation.

"Now about the other," I said cheerily. "What are your arguments there? Surely you have eaten food grown on this island."

"Aye," he said tightly. "But we cannot..."

I fanned my ire a little. "Afford it or spend the time growing it, aye, aye, aye! Well, let me lend another perspective to that. Those bondsmen cost my father, what, thirty pounds apiece, at least? And how much for the Negroes, and how many are dead and gone and that money lost?"

"It wasn't bad food that killed them!" he said vehemently. "Men die just coming here... my Lord."

I kept pressing. "I know of the diseases here, Donoughy. However, I was told in England that many of my bondsmen would die in the crossing, but I insisted they be well rationed, and behold, only three died on the voyage, and they were already sickly. And I have seen men

die of the flux here because they were treated poorly when there was a better remedy. I question *English* wisdom concerning how one must live in the tropics, or anywhere beyond England for that matter. I swear, if the lot of you were foxes innocent of the ways of men, you would starve if placed in a barnyard because the chickens would not look like quail, and you would freeze in the rain because the underside of a coop did not appear exactly like a fallen log.”

He had crossed his burly arms, but his face was thoughtful. “You will take responsibility for all of this?”

“Donoughy, my father will blame me no matter what happens. And so you know, he has little love for this endeavor. It was an interesting diversion, perhaps, but I truly feel he expects no return on his investment now. He merely wishes this place to be a... point of leverage as regards my behavior.”

“What, my Lord?” he asked.

“He has offered it to me if I do his bidding on another matter.”

He regarded me speculatively. “Will you do his bidding?”

I scratched my neck and sighed. “It appears I may yet. The ways of it are a mystery at the moment, but my feet seem to be set upon that path.”

This seemed to change his demeanor considerably. “All right then, my Lord, we will grow food and teach the Negroes English.”

I cursed my stupidity for not starting with that aspect of the argument.

Gaston had been standing nearby, listening. As we returned to the others, he slipped to my side. “It only provides leverage if you allow it,” he whispered in French.

“It only provides leverage here if I allow them to think it will,” I replied in kind, and then I stopped and met his gaze. “You are the only person who has a lever long enough to move me on anything.”

He nodded solemnly.

The evening meal was served, and we all sat about and talked. Since they had honored guests, several bottles of rum were opened. I found them often in my hands.

Gaston did well. He kept me between him and all others and spoke little. I spoke a great deal, all of it meaningless, as I have learned to do in such situations. In time, it was much as it had been when we sailed here together. They all asked what we had been about and were disappointed to learn we had done little these past months but hunt and read, and that we had not suffered another shipwreck or the like. I did tell them of coming upon the galleon in the fog, and they enjoyed the tale immensely.

At last we were able to retire. We walked into the night and away from the light and smoke of the fire. I was pleased Gaston had possessed the presence of mind to slather us with hogs’ fat to prevent our being eaten alive by the ever-present cloud of insects. I would not have thought of it. I was now quite pleasantly drunk.

Many of the men graciously offered the use of their huts, and we declined as gently as we could manage and retreated to the mule shed where our mounts were. At first, the smell of horses was reassuring, and then old memories intruded and I regarded the pile of hay on which Gaston dropped our bags with dismay.

"We should sling a hammock," I slurred.

He shook his head slowly. "Non, this will be fine," he assured me as one would a child, or properly in my case, a drunk.

"I cannot share hay with you," I said sadly. "Not even you, who I surely love more than life itself."

He sprawled on his back on the mound and regarded me curiously.

"The first time with Shane was in a barn in hay and... we trysted often in the stable, and I...before it was bad. Still it evokes the evil. The smell and sound of it. I..."

He stood and embraced me. "I wish I could obliterate all trace of him," he whispered in my ear. "I wish I could reach into your heart and cut away every memory."

The room swam, and I clung to him. "I wish you could, too."

"Where do you wish to sleep?" he asked in a gentler tone.

"In your arms, but not in straw."

He led me outside and leaned me on the wall. When he returned with our things, including the water he had boiled, he burdened me with the bags and my weapons, and took my hand and we walked away into the moonlit forest. Despite the celestial light, I could see nothing beneath my feet. I let him take me where he would. At last we stopped at the site of the proposed house, on the hill over looking the river. I was intoxicated enough to feel unease that we must have passed so close to the graveyard, and just sober enough to know my fears were absurd, all of them. He pulled me down into his lap, and gave me a bottle of water. I drank as much of it as I could manage. Then I curled against him and slept.

I woke to yellow light from the horizon. I was pleased to discover my head did not ache overly much. I rolled over, and found Gaston playing with the onion bottle the water had been in. He grinned when he saw I was awake, and motioned for me to join him. I received a sweet kiss for the effort of sitting up.

"What are you about?" I asked: slowly, as the words took time to think, and my mouth was slower still in producing them.

He held up the bottle, mouth down. "This is your anal passage."

I blinked. Perhaps I was still dreaming.

"What are we discussing?" I asked.

He took a wad of hog's fat, and stuck it to one side of the neck of the bottle, so that it formed a lump. "That is the organ inside. Thus, this side will be the front of your passageway."

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. "Go on."

He picked up a stick as long as his hand. "This is a penis."

I was beginning to grasp what he might attempt to illustrate. I

nodded.

"How did you receive the Spaniard?" he asked.

"On my back, with my legs up: so that I could always see him."

He positioned the bottle on its side, with the lump atop the neck. Then he poked the stick inside the mouth and wiggled it about. He nodded to himself.

"Did he stay upright? Or did he lean toward you?" Gaston asked.

"Both. When he leaned toward me, I would draw my legs up to my chest on either side."

Gaston nodded and imitated these movements with the bottle, thrusting the stick in and out. "Here, see, it does not touch the lump from that angle."

I did see. The stick scraped along the back side of the neck, across from the lump.

"And the Damn Cousin?" he asked gently.

"Always from behind, usually standing, or close to it. He would push me over things, but I would be bent at the waist, not below."

Gaston held the bottle upside down, with the lump away from the hand holding the stick. He thrust the wood in the mouth again. If he did not push it straight up, it brushed the lump. I understood.

"He would thrust forward, not up," I said.

Gaston adjusted the angle. The stick poked the lump every time. It rammed it, and then slid up the wall of glass above.

"We will never use that position," he said, as if it were but a curiosity.

I regarded him, and mischief tugged at me.

"What position do you wish to use?" I asked huskily.

His eyes widened, and he actually flushed. I was greatly heartened by the sight.

He awarded me a look of remonstrance.

"Non," I shook my head. "Do not look at me so. You are the one rattling sticks about in bottles when I am piss hard."

His lips quirked a little. "Will," he chided, "that part of you is never at rest."

"I beg to differ. You only feel that because it always stirs in your presence. When you are not about, it is not either."

He smirked. "And what do you hope to gain with your flattery?"

"An answer to my question. How do you wish to take me?"

With another remonstrative glare, he tilted the bottle forward, so that the lump was down, and the neck was at an angle, such that the mouth was a little higher than much of the bulb. "On your hands and knees, or perhaps elbows and knees," he said quietly. He put the stick in and it slid along the back of the neck, away from the lump.

He was going to be the death of me, always making my heart pound so. As I envisioned his words, my member stirred beyond its morning needs. I could see myself kneeling before him, presenting him with my arse. He would grasp my hips and thrust. I would cling to the

headboard and whatever else I could reach. It was a thing I had seen and done unto others, but I had never experienced it.

"I would be delighted," I assured him. "Whenever you wish, please."

He chuckled, and leaned over to nip my lips. We kissed.

"What do you fantasize about?" he teased.

I gave it serious thought. "On my side. With my leg up. You either lie behind me, or atop me from the side. The position does not allow for great depth, but it does allow for... kissing, and other caresses."

He kissed me again, and then he was pushing me onto my side to demonstrate. He slid his knee under my leg, and pushed it up, until his groin was where it should be. I let the pleasure flow through me as his free hand roved about my chest and dipped to my member. Supporting himself with one arm, he humped away at my hip and handled me with practiced ease.

I attempted to imagine how it would feel if he were inside me. I discarded all of the memories of pain from my times with Alonso, and concentrated on the brief moments when it had promised great pleasure.

When I came, Gaston lowered himself upon me, and milked me with rhythmic squeezes, until there was no pleasure left and I was only possessed of the lingering need to relieve myself in other ways. His hand was still on me. I looked up questioningly, and he awarded me a daring grin.

I had never pissed while held by another. I took his dare, and willed myself to do it. After a second's confused hesitation, my member decided that, though the hand upon it may have been unfamiliar and possibly unacceptable, the action was necessary. I watched the stream arc away and puddle on the dirt with amusement. Thankfully, I was a little uphill of it, as I was surely too tired to move.

"I am now empty," I said, as he shook the last drops away.

"Truly?" he asked with a grin.

"From that organ."

He chuckled and stood, pulling me up with him. He regarded the separate puddles of jism and urine.

"The building site can now be considered either blessed or defiled," he said.

I laughed. "Last night I decided that any home we place a wife in will not be near this foul place of pestilence."

"I think that wise," he said soberly.

"We should go back," I sighed. "They are surely awake now and wondering where we are."

He shrugged. His mien was devoid of humor. "Let them think what they will."

I wondered at his change of mood and spoke lightly. "Oui, as I am sure they will think nothing even remotely close to the truth. I sincerely doubt they are harboring fantasies of us running amuck in the woods playing with bottles and sticks."

This brought a reluctant smile to his lips, but then he shook it away with annoyance. "Non, because they think little, if at all."

"How shall we proceed with our regimen this morn?" I asked, while eyeing the sun rising over the Blue Mountains to the East. "I feel I have accomplished my part."

"Oui, I will excuse you of further diligence on the matter. I performed calisthenics before you woke. And..." He stooped and picked up the sack with the whip. "I contemplated this a great deal."

"Did you sleep at all?" I teased.

He smiled wanly. "Some."

He was regarding the sack he held at the length of his arm. He swung it a little.

"Do you feel you accomplished anything of merit with your contemplation of that?" I asked. "I feel your being able to heft it an advancement."

He nodded. "Oui. I feel... I should perhaps learn to wield it. That it will not suffice to merely become inured to its presence, but that I should master it."

"Yesterday, during your ministrations, I came upon a metaphor for my increased accommodation." I explained my image of dueling with Shane, and how I was not submitting, but battling.

He was smiling and nodding when I finished. "I may envision flogging my father."

I frowned. "But... I thought you forgave him."

"I do." He shrugged. "But I can think of few others I would want to strike with one; and he deserves to know how it feels."

His smile was as bright as the newly risen sun, and I laughed with him.

We gathered our things, but paused before walking back toward the buildings below. I glanced at him curiously, though my feet were no more willing to move than his. The laughter was gone, and he had once again descended into somber annoyance in contemplation of Ithaca.

"I feel we are done here," I said to reassure him. "We need not stay long."

He nodded, his eyes still on distant thoughts. "Much will change once we own this place."

His *we* filled me with unexpected happiness. We had settled on a new course, had we not? And perhaps it was much like battling the ghost of Shane. We would duel with my father. Our objective would not be to defeat him, but to feint and distract him from standing in the way of a goal we wished to achieve. It was a thing a wolf such as he could never understand. I was not even sure how to name our destination, but I could see the doorway to it lying somewhere beyond my father and the confines of English societal expectation.

I grinned. "Oui, we will not have slaves."

"And we will not grow sugar," he said. "It is vile. We will grow some useful crop."

“I agree most heartily. So we had best be getting on with the wife and heir business, before these men waste a great deal of time building mills and the like that will never be used.”

He smiled at me with a regard that warmed my soul, and I took his hand and led him down the hill. I supposed we would learn soon enough if the Gods favored this new course.

Thirty-One

Wherein We Meet a Formidable Opponent

We said our goodbyes at Ithaca, and made regrettably fast work of riding to the Byerly farm to fetch Cedric. The boy accompanied us to the Passage wharf, and there we left him to return the horses to their lazy existence.

We reached our house by early afternoon. No one was there except for the dogs. Much of the debris had been cleared, from the interior of the building at least. There was now a large pile of garbage in the yard. I hoped it would soon find its way onto a cart and out to the Palisadoes. Bella seemed pleased to see us, and she happily chewed the new bone we had brought her while we rolled about in puppies for a time.

Then we were off to Theodore's. He was with a client when we arrived. We stowed our things in our room and ate some pie not destined for Pete.

"I did not expect to see you so soon," Theodore said as he joined us in the yard.

"Well, we have much to attend to if there is ever to be hope of setting things right," I replied with a shrug.

He sighed. "Aye, what would you have me do? Donoughy is only doing what he is..."

I waved away his further words and asked, "Where do the Vines reside?"

This brightened his demeanor considerably.

"Truly?" he asked. "Well, Sir Christopher has two plantations in Clarendon, and a house and warehouse in town on High Street."

"That's lovely; where would we find Miss Vines? I have no interest in her father at this time, unless you feel he need be wooed also."

"Nay, he will be delighted to have you pay his daughter a call." He frowned in thought. "There is a soiree of sorts at the Bennets' tomorrow evening. I suppose..."

"Nay. I wish for Gaston to meet her in private. Then we will decide if she is even a consideration. If she is, then any courting will be direct, and due to the lack of time we possess, hastily done. I see no need for social gatherings. Would she be in town, or should we go and fetch our horses again?"

Theodore was chuckling. "She may be in town. The ships will be arriving soon. Many of the wives and daughters come to town to greet them, in the hope of being the first to buy whatever finery they might carry. Their residence door is well marked on High Street. Will you go now, as you are thus attired?"

"I do not see why not," I said. "They already know my title. And they know me to be a buccaneer."

He shrugged. "If you reach the point in the matter where it is necessary to approach her father, I would suggest you dress properly, and go alone."

"I understand," I sighed. "But in dealing with the lady, we are a pair."

He smiled and nodded his acquiescence.

The Vines' town house was indeed marked nicely with a carved plaque. It was a dwelling every bit as large as the one Theodore now owned.

I knocked, and a diminutive maid answered. She curtsied properly at my title, and hurried off to announce us with a well-enunciated, "Aye, my Lord". I doubted she was a bondswoman.

We waited in the small, dark entry hall. Gaston's arms were crossed, and he appeared exceedingly ill-at-ease. I felt little better, though I was at least used to meeting young ladies.

"We could run now," I offered. "The door is not locked."

"Non, let us get this behind us," he said.

"If you do not find favor with her, it is no matter. We can look at the other two Theodore mentioned."

He snorted. "You found favor with her before."

I bit my lip. "Oui, and... that is the cause of my concern."

"How so?"

I shrugged. "I do not wish for you to view her as an opponent."

He shook his head. Though my eyes were becoming accustomed to the dim light, I still could not accurately gauge his expression.

The maid returned. "If you will follow me, sirs."

"Trust me, and I will trust you," Gaston hissed in French.

"I love you," I murmured.

We followed the small woman down the hall to the back of the house and out to a lovely garden. Apparently Sir Christopher owned

the lot all the way to Queen Street. The garden was nestled between the warehouse on Queen and the house on High. Heavily laden trellises obscured the view of the cookhouse and the surrounding yards. It smelled headily of all manner of blooms. Miss Vines and another girl awaited us on benches in a gazebo at the center of this pocket of Eden.

Miss Vines was everything I remembered: golden hair, blue eyes, pert features, long limbs, and a svelte figure. Her dress was a yellow as vivid as the blooms around her, with sprays of white lace. She was a vision of loveliness formed by Diana and polished by Venus, made all the more enticing in that I knew her to be blessed by Athena as well.

She was perched on the edge of her seat, watching our arrival. She sprang to her feet as I entered the gazebo. She appeared truly delighted to see us.

"Lord Marsdale, what a surprise," she said in greeting and curtsied.

"Miss Vines, I hope it is a pleasant one," I said as I bowed and kissed her offered hand.

Her gaze shifted to Gaston, and perplexity tightened her features. I turned to look. He was standing on the step to the gazebo, slack-jawed and wide-eyed, his gaze affixed to Miss Vines as if she were an angel suddenly appearing from on high.

Amusement won over embarrassment in my heart. It was no affront to me that he should react to her so. I should have expected it.

"Allow me to present my matelot, Gaston Sable," I said with a smile. "Please excuse him. He has not met a lady the likes of you before. And that is more literal truth than figurative flattery."

She smiled with bemusement behind long fingers. "I understand. Truly. As I believe we once discussed, I receive that often here on Jamaica. And sadly for the men about, the admitting of it is not hubris on my part."

She indicated the bench beside her. "Allow me to introduce my dear friend, Agnes."

I had forgotten the other girl was present. She stood awkwardly, which I suppose could not be helped: she appeared to be all bony limbs. Her auburn hair was pulled back into a waist-length braid that only served to accentuate her slim shoulders, long neck, and sharp nose and chin. A simple brown dress did little to reveal whatever figure she might have possessed. The girl's only truly pleasing feature appeared to be her large grey eyes. I judged her to be more girl than woman, barely past her adolescence, as she apparently had no need of stays to support her bosom.

She sketched a less than graceful curtsy, and seemed poignantly aware of the image she presented. I bowed politely.

"My Lord," she mumbled, and sat abruptly.

"Agnes is... shy," Miss Vines said quickly.

Gaston had closed his mouth. His eyes found mine. I saw helpless desperation.

"It appears we will have to carry the conversation," I told Miss Vines.

She smiled and turned to sit. Then she showed a deftness of social grace which demonstrated her training to attend a court. She gracefully retrieved her fan from the bench on which she had been seated, and crossed the space to sit next to Agnes, leaving her original seat free for Gaston and me.

I sat. My beauty-addled matelot made his way carefully into the gazebo, as if he were crawling into a lion's cage. He sat heavily beside me, with evident relief.

"Would you like some tea?" Miss Vines asked.

She indicated a delicate lidded ewer and several diminutive cups on the table between us. I had to remember where I had seen their like before. The substance was a concoction of leaves from the orient, steeped in boiled water. It, and the delicate porcelain used to serve it – which hailed from some nation of the Far East called China – were all the fashion in certain cities. I had heard it called several names, including chy or chey. I supposed tea was an English version of the name. I had thought the drink quite bitter. I was pleased to see that Miss Vines had a bowl of sugar available to mitigate that.

She poured each of us a cup, and I indicated that she should add a good deal of sugar to ours. I did not think Gaston would take anything from her directly, so I passed him one of the cups and took the second. I smelled mine; it possessed a pleasant and exotic odor, much better than I remembered.

He sniffed the liquid suspiciously.

"It is just an infusion of leaves," I assured him in French. "I do not believe it is medicinal."

"I have heard of some variations that are," Miss Vines said in flawless French. "I have heard of medicinal infusions, such as chamomile, being added to the tea leaves. This blend contains vanilla."

At the discovery that she spoke French, Gaston's eyes went wide again, and I worried for the delicate cup he held. Even if he did not break it, I thought it likely he might slosh the contents. I was pleased he was not drinking yet.

"Do you...?" Miss Vines began to ask Gaston.

He dropped his eyes to his cup.

She addressed me. "Does Gaston speak English?" she asked in English.

"Aye, as fluently as you speak French," I replied. "And Miss Agnes, does she speak French?"

"Nay," she said.

Agnes seemed no more prone to meet my gaze than my matelot was prone to meet our hostess'.

"Then we will, of course, confine ourselves to English," I said.

This, of course, did not answer the unspoken question of what we would speak about. I could see our hostess was quite curious as to the reason for our sudden visit.

"So," Miss Vines said brightly, "it has been nearly half a year since

last we met. What have you been about?"

"Ah, well, we have not been shipwrecked again."

I told them the edited version of our last adventures. This topic relaxed Gaston enough for him to drink his tea. Agnes listened raptly, but she fidgeted constantly: twining her long fingers together over and over again in a manner I found mesmerizing. I was oft forced to pull my eyes from the poor girl's lap, for fear my gaze would be interpreted inappropriately.

"So you are a surgeon?" Miss Vines asked Gaston when I reached the part where Dickey was wounded.

He cleared his throat. "I am trained as a physician."

They were the first words he had spoken since our arrival in the garden, and I was relieved to hear them.

"How wonderful for you," Miss Vines said.

Silence fell upon us.

I dove into it. "Gaston has surely been the reason for my survival here. He has several theories concerning... water, and the prevention and curing of the flux."

I looked to him, and found he had no intention of speaking.

I suppressed a sigh. "While residing in a monastery in his youth..."

"Excuse me," Miss Vines said. "You were a monk?"

"Nay," Gaston said quietly. "I planned to become one, but circumstances occurred that brought me here before I could join the order."

"I see," she said.

Her gaze met mine, and I could see that she now understood my earlier comment about his not having seen any women like her.

"So," she said, "you learned a cure for the flux at a monastery?"

"Nay," Gaston said with a touch more confidence. "I learned the cure from a Moorish-trained physician. At the monastery I observed water through a lens ground to provide magnification, thus I learned that most water has many small creatures swimming about in it. I do not know if they cause illness, but I do know that drinking water that has been boiled does not."

"Truly?" Miss Vines asked. "It is a fine thing I am drinking a great deal of this tea then. The water here has always smelled foul to me."

"Wh-wh-what... do they look like?" Agnes stammered.

"Aye," Miss Vines intoned enthusiastically. "If we had one of those lenses, Agnes could draw them. She is quite the accomplished illustrator of flora and fauna." She turned to Agnes and implored, "Show them, dear."

Agnes appeared as if she would rather crawl under the bench and away. She grabbed a battered sketch book from behind her back and clutched it to her belly.

"Please, Agnes," Miss Vines cajoled. "These are educated gentlemen. They have seen art. They will appreciate yours."

At last the girl stood abruptly. She thrust the book at me with a

defiant jut to her chin.

I accepted it gingerly, and vowed I would say something nice no matter what the volume contained. As soon as I saw the first page, I realized I would not be forced to lie. She was truly talented. Most of the pages were filled with delicate charcoal sketches of birds. She had mastered perspective and proportion. Her detail, shading, and texture all illustrated nuances of the feather pattern of her subject or the bark of the tree it perched upon. Many of the drawings implied movement.

Gaston reverently sat his cup down and pulled the book toward him, so that it rested between us. We went through it page by page. Some of the earlier work had been done on her voyage here. There were gulls, pelicans, porpoises, and even sharks. There were illustrations of the sails and rigging. Most of the rest involved the local flora and fauna of Jamaica. The recent pages all contained sketches of Miss Vines, though: beautiful pieces of portraiture.

When we reached those, Agnes was suddenly upon us. We allowed the flushed girl to close the book and take it.

"Agnes, you are truly remarkably talented and skilled," I said.

Her eyes filled with tears and she bobbed her head in gratitude.

"You possess the skill to produce informative medical and nature illustrations," Gaston added. "Where did you learn?"

"My father," she said sadly. "He had a talent. He went to university."

"What became of him?" I asked gently.

"He died of the plague," she said. "Mother remarried and we came here with her new husband last year. Then she died... of the flux, last month."

"Agnes' stepfather has no use for a talented daughter," Miss Vines said coldly. "She must hide her sketchbook and charcoals here."

I winced sympathetically for both the deaths and the girl's current circumstances.

"I would like to see those creatures in the water," Agnes said with determination.

"Perhaps we can order lenses," I offered.

Gaston nodded. "It could be done. I would like a telescope."

"Oh, aye," Miss Vines intoned.

"I suppose we can see what can be ordered before we sail," I said.

"You are sailing soon?" Miss Vines asked.

"Aye, before the Twelveday."

Miss Vines slumped dejectedly. "Well, you must spend more time with us before you go."

"We would like that," I said.

It was getting late, and I had seen the maid and another woman eyeing us from the house.

"May we call on you tomorrow?" I asked.

Miss Vines gave me a devilish grin. "If you do not, we will be forced to take to the streets to track you down."

I returned her grin. "Then I suppose we have no other recourse."

We made our farewells and slipped into the street by way of the passage between her house and the next. Gaston was silent and would not look at me.

"Well, is she suitable?" I asked, once we were several houses down the street.

He scowled at the rutted road before him. "Oui."

"Should we call on her tomorrow?"

"Oui," he breathed.

"Will she be an opponent? Because if so..."

He cut me off with a disparaging snort and a glare. "Will, she is a formidable opponent!" His gaze softened and he searched my face. "She is... intelligent. Educated. Beautiful..." He shook his head. "I know you favor me because I am a man, but I truly cannot understand it."

My gut roiled and the beast there tore at my heart. She was indeed a formidable opponent, but she was mine, not his. I was such the damn fool.

"I do not favor *you* merely because you are a man. I favor you over all others, because... you are you," I said sadly.

"If she were a man, you would still choose me?" he asked earnestly.

"Oui."

"And you truly wish to touch me, more than her?"

"Oui."

"You humble me," he said, and studied the street in thought.

Doucette's question, as to whether I would release Gaston if he ever found a proper woman, returned to me. I felt driven by some hideous urge toward self-castigation.

"Would you rather touch her than me?" I asked.

He recoiled as if slapped, and guilt sprang upon his face. He regarded me with beseeching eyes. I nodded with a sad smile. I had my answer. I had known it before I posed the question. There was a reason I had steadfastly avoided looking at his crotch while we sat in that gazebo.

"I love you," he implored.

"I know," I said. "I do. Truly. I do not blame you in the least. It is as it should be, is it not? You favor women, as the Gods most surely intended. She is beautiful. I am attracted to her, and I do not favor her sex so very much. That is to say, I would take her over many handsome men I have seen. Some of that is due to her intelligence and spirited demeanor, yet..."

I was rambling on foolishly. He looked to be as close to tears as I.

"I understand," I said, and walked down the street.

He fell in beside me, and his arm went around my shoulder. I did not stop walking, but I did not shrug him off either.

"Will, we will find an ugly wife," he said.

I shook my head. "Would you want our puppies to issue from a dull and ugly woman neither of us found interest in?"

"Non," he breathed. "I will never be with her," he said with more

force. "Never."

I thought on it. That was not the answer.

I stopped and turned to him. "Non. I would rather you bed her to your heart's desire. That... we both did."

Images of the three of us frolicking, as I once had with Teresina and Alonso, came to mind. I smiled. "I would rather we shared her, and perhaps even shared a bed – the three of us – on occasion."

His eyes widened, so that I could well see him entertaining images similar to mine.

"Truly?" he asked.

"Truly." I grinned as my cock stirred fitfully at my thoughts. "I would dearly love to be suspended in ecstasy between the two of you, with you in me while I am in her."

He took a long slow breath. I wanted to cup his crotch, but we were still on the street. I cast about and spied an alleyway, and quickly steered us into its twilight shadows. I pressed him into the wall behind a stack of barrels. He took my kisses passionately. He was indeed hard beneath my fingers. He gasped and clawed at my shoulders. And then suddenly, those fingers were around my wrist.

"Non!" he hissed.

Surprised, I stepped back. His eyes glittered with fury, the Horse's fury.

"Non, it will not have this," he growled. "It is a traitorous organ. If it will have pleasure, it will be for you, and with you."

I was slack-jawed as I struggled to refute him. "But, my love, I care not what gives it rise. Once it is in my hand, its pleasure does come from me, does it not? I will be more than pleased at that."

It did not matter. He was beyond reason, and the object of our discussion had been dismissed to flaccidness once again. I knew his Horse still had the bit in its teeth. I could not make sense of it. He was the one who could not perform, not the Horse. I was not sure of the Horse's feelings for me at times. And, damn, I was beginning to think of that aspect of him as a separate being.

"I do not understand," I implored. "Do you want me?"

He closed his eyes and held very still. I cautiously closed the distance between us.

"Gaston?" I whispered as I touched his arm.

He flinched, but then his hand clutched mine.

"Will. Hold me. Do not let me run."

I embraced him, and he clung to me. Our hearts slowed, but my mind continued to race through a maze. I could find no exit. I could only hope he would help me understand once he gained control. Thus we held each other in that fashion until the full grey of dusk settled about the alley.

"My love, may we return to Theodore's?" I murmured.

He nodded, and we walked there, hand in hand. We slipped into the yard from the alley. I bade him sit on the cistern. I wet my kerchief

and wiped our faces. He was distant to the world and submitted to my ministrations without reaction.

"How are we?" I asked.

He started, and then slowly shook his head.

"I am sorry, Will," he whispered.

"No need. Can you speak of it?"

He shook his head.

"Do you wish to eat?"

He gave another shake.

"Then let us be off to bed."

We encountered Theodore in the back hall.

"We were wondering when you two would return," he said jovially.

Then his gaze fell upon Gaston and he frowned. My matelot was not looking at him, or at much of anything. I shook my head and mouthed to Theodore that I would speak with him later.

Once I got Gaston into our bed, I knew it would be much later, as my matelot would not release me. I retrieved a bottle of water and a piece of boucan, turned down the lamp, and settled in with him cuddled at my side. He slept.

I did not, for a long time. When I did, my dreams were troubled. A giant hand kept trying to pluck us up and stuff us in a sack to drown us. We ran about in a huge room, hiding beneath the furniture.

In the morning, I woke to find him sitting at the edge of the bed, holding my hand. He appeared calm, and his greeting smile was sad and self-deprecating. I rolled onto my elbow and gave his hand a squeeze.

"How are we?" I asked.

"We are deeply chained to love," he murmured.

At my frown, he shook his head.

"I am well enough," he said.

I nodded and waited.

He sighed with a rueful grimace. "All things carnal are very confusing to me."

"Hmmm, I see that." I smiled.

He returned it, only to sober quickly with narrowing eyes. "My madness is a thing I only wish to share with you. If you... we... marry, I do not wish for the wife to know. I do not know how this might be possible, though. I suppose she will have to know, but I would not trust another to... care for me when I am thus. This is not because I am ashamed – though I am – and would hold her regard of me in such esteem that I would not wish to sully it. Non, it is because it is a thing of great privacy between us, and I do not wish to allow another into this... aspect... of our partnership. I do not wish to have another as close as I hold you, ever."

My heart ached. "Of course, my love. I do not wish for any wife we may take to ever interfere or be involved between us. It will be a thing we do for children, and to appease my father for a time, nothing more."

He seemed relieved that I understood. "Thus, I will never bed her."

I nodded. "I will never suggest it again, my love."

I kept my brow smooth. His words troubled me, but I felt I understood them. They made me all the more proud to love him, as they placed me above all else in his life. But there was the nagging feeling that it was a thing he was possibly doing against his nature, and I did not know how we would resolve that.

"Shall we court Miss Vines?" I asked.

"I feel she will make a fine mother," he said seriously. "She has qualities that, when combined with yours, should make for excellent children."

I sighed. "I have not made mention of this before, but those same qualities may make her less than eager to wed."

He frowned, but nodded his agreement. "I suppose that is so. You will need to discuss it with her. When we visit today, you should inquire as to her feelings on the matter. I am sure I can distract her friend and leave you two alone."

With bemusement, I wondered what else he had planned for the day. Yet there were things on my agenda as well.

"Will we discuss last night?" I asked gently.

He met my gaze. "I want you, Will. My lust for her is a thing of the beast. It is a thing without thought. My love of you is a thing of my soul."

"That is beautiful to hear," I said with a sad smile, "But, is your lust for her a thing of your Horse?"

He frowned in thought. "Non, not that beast. It is... simply, as you put it, what the Gods intended, though I am not sure if I believe that. It is my member thinking for itself. My Horse... my Horse wants you. But..." He grimaced and looked away.

"I am sorry, my love, that I do not understand why, if that is the case, you have not plundered me mercilessly many times over."

He winced, and sighed guiltily. "Because, Will, my Horse would plunder you mercilessly, and I will not allow it."

"Oh," I said stupidly, as a great many things leapt from the shadows so that they now made ordered sense and I could at last perceive the whole of the pattern. As I had feared, his Horse would plunder me whether I was willing or not, and prepared or not, and perhaps his Horse wished to do so if I was not, and thus he thought it evil.

I sagged back onto the bed and contemplated the ceiling.

"I am sorry, Will," he whispered. "I told you I am an abomination."

"Non... Why? I mean why would you... it... wish to? If I understand your meaning. Is it because it... you... that there is anger in that it is a thing you would not do if left... if I was not..." I sighed. "Do you feel I have led you astray?"

That was how Shane had felt.

I felt very cold.

He leaned over me, so that he eclipsed all. His eyes were beseeching.

"It is because I wish to possess you as I feel you possess me," he

said earnestly. "I want to drive all memory of the others from you. I want you to submit to me, even if... it pains you. It is evil."

He wanted to rape me.

He was filled with remorse. I smoothed a tear from his eyes with my thumb and tried to calm my own Horse, which was flailing and plunging about so that I was possessed of the urge to push him away and run.

He would not. He was doing everything he could to mitigate the matter. It was the reason behind our morning regimen. He was entrusting me with horrible thoughts that plagued him, the ones he feared.

I had thoughts I should not think. I let myself envision him upon me, the hard danger in his eyes, his manhood the sharpest of swords. My traitorous organ stirred quickly. I gasped. Not solely because of its enthusiasm, but because it was joined by another in wanting such a thing. My Horse wanted that very much. It quieted and tensed with anticipation at the idea.

I felt sick.

"I understand," I whispered. "Non, that is not correct. I do not understand why either of us... My Horse would allow yours to do that very thing, and welcome it."

He frowned. "Will?"

"Truly. It sickens me. I could not... *I* could not allow that and live with the aftermath. I could not forgive either of us. Yet, I understand it is a thing of our Horses and... We must control them, else we will ride off a cliff on this matter."

He dropped to my chest and embraced me. I held him in return. The ceiling was very white. I kept thinking, placing one thought after the next.

"Are you aroused by those evil thoughts?" I asked.

"Oui."

"But you are not aroused by the idea of bestowing yourself upon me unless it is violent?" I asked.

"It is the knot, Will. Every time I feel I have teased a strand free and begin to follow it, it becomes a jumbled mess again. I cannot make sense of it."

He pushed up onto his elbows and regarded me.

"I am here," I whispered.

"I know. And it is the miracle of my life. Yet... it is so unfamiliar, this... being loved. It is all-encompassing. I sometimes wake feeling I am in chains. I feel completely possessed by you. I cannot live without you. And it is wonderful. But it chafes. In time I am sure I will become inured to the weight of it. But for now, the Horse bucks about."

The weight of which he spoke covered me again. My Horse did not buck about; it settled under the saddle, or perhaps into the traces. It resented his not wishing to do the same. I smiled sadly.

"I understand," I said. "I feel, as you do, that it is an unfamiliar burden, yet I take pleasure and reassurance in it."

He was suffused with guilt once again, and I held him close.

"Non, non, my love," I murmured. "I do not say that to hurt you. We are different, that is all."

There was a quiet knock on the door, and we started.

"We will be down for the meal soon," I snapped.

"I am sorry, sirs," Hannah said. "There are two boys to see you."

"Boys?" I asked.

"Aye, sir, masters Chris and Art," she said. "They say there is no hurry, as you would not be expecting them yet."

Gaston and I exchanged puzzled looks.

"We will be down shortly," I called with less rancor.

Her steps receded down the hall.

"There must be some confusion," I muttered.

"Could it be the boy with the horses?" he asked.

"Non, perhaps, but I feel his name was Cedric. Damn, we will not know until we go down. And I do not wish to go down. We have much to discuss."

He smiled and pressed a kiss to my forehead, then the bridge of my nose, and then the tip, until he reached my lips. That kiss was deep, and I let him take me under with it, into the safety of love, away from fears and Horses and madness.

When he let me up he said, "We have a lifetime to talk, do we not?" He looked hopeful.

"Forever." I smiled. "Because as I have said, I will follow you into death not to lose you."

He was solemn. "Will, you must not ever let me hurt you. I will do all in my power..."

I put my finger to his lips. "It need not be said."

He kissed my finger and stood. I watched him don his weapons.

Cloying and rancid thoughts curled about my head. I loved him. Would I stop him? I had not stopped Shane because I had loved him. The memory of the paralyzing fear I experienced the night of the storm combined with my knowledge that my heart of hearts wanted him to ravage me, and the result did not bode well for my ever fending him off.

But I was correct. I would never forgive either of us if it were to happen. It simply must not come to that.

"What will we do for our regimen this morning?" I asked, as I finally eased out of bed.

"Let us see to eating and the matter of these visitors," he said smoothly, as if our prior conversation had not occurred. "Then I thought we might retire to the Palisadoes to spar. We can find privacy there afterwards. We will bring the sack as well."

I nodded and availed myself of the chamber pot. He packed a bag and hefted the sack in question gingerly. I was not sure if I wanted to address his issue with whips today. And then I realized I was not sure if I wished to undergo his fingering me with these new and ugly thoughts swirling about, but I supposed that was the entire point of the exercise.

Hannah informed us our guests were in the yard. Theodore was eating. I glanced outside, there were two lads sitting on the cistern, scuffing their feet in the sand. I did not recognize them. With a shrug, I joined Theodore at the table. Gaston sat in his usual chair and Hannah gave us plates.

“Do you know those boys?” I asked Theodore.

“You do not?” he asked curiously. “They are not ones I employ as couriers. Hannah says they were very specific in asking for Lord Marsdale.”

“I am going to eat,” I sighed, “and then I will discover what misapprehension led them here.”

“Perhaps Massey sent them,” Gaston said.

“There is a thought,” I replied.

“Will you be going by your house, or your ship, today?” Theodore asked.

“Should we?” I asked.

“I wish to submit the land grants today. I still need a few signatures,” he said.

“We will send the men around,” I assured him.

He nodded. “Thank you. And find a surname for Pete.”

With food in our bellies, we at last walked out to greet our guests, Chris and Art. They bounded to their feet at our approach. The taller of the two gave a clumsy bow, made even worse by his failure to remove his hat.

“Good day, my Lord, sir,” he said in the husky voice of a lad not yet a man who wishes to appear older.

There was something vaguely familiar in how retiring the other boy was.

“What is this about?” I asked.

I met the shorter boy’s blue eyes and nearly dropped my jaw. They were the same eyes I had watched over tea the day before.

“Chris, my Lord, we met yesterday, though ye may not remember as we weren’t dressed as we are now,” Miss Vines said with a devilish grin.

I pulled my gaze from her and glanced at Gaston. He recognized her as well.

“This be Art,” she said, and pointed to the very uncomfortable Agnes. I glanced about, without being obvious, and found us alone.

“Does this ruse work often?” I asked.

“Even with them that know me, my Lord,” she said.

I chuckled. Gaston was not amused. He appeared more knotted with consternation than annoyed, though.

“What are we to do with you?” I asked the girls.

“We were hopin’ to tag along and learn a little of buccaneerin’,” Miss Vines, or rather, Chris, said.

I nodded and grinned. “Ah, all right then, we were going to the Palisadoes to spar.”

“That would be right wonderful ta watch, my Lord. Would ya be

willin' ta teach a soul?"

I actually thought that might offer great amusement. I glanced to Gaston again. He shrugged and returned to the house.

"I think we may find amusement in that," I said. "On one condition, a buccaneer never calls another of the Brethren *sir*. And you can kindly skip the *my Lords*. I am Will, and he is Gaston."

She nodded her agreement.

"First we need to stop by our house," I said.

Gaston returned, without the bag he had packed or the sack. We exchanged a look of mutual understanding. Two aspects of our daily regimen would obviously wait. At least we would exercise.

With the "lads" following along, we made our way to the house. I gave fervent prayer to the Gods that none would be home when we arrived. I had been fooled by Miss Vines' guise for a moment, and I could see where one who did not know her would be quite taken in; but I could not see how the disguise could resist much scrutiny.

Agnes' disguise was nearly beyond reproach. She had looked and moved like a gangly boy when she was in a dress.

I concentrated on Miss Vines. I watched her as we walked, seeking any disparity that would give her away. After observation, I had to admit she was quite convincing. She had obviously bound her bosom quite flat, and the loose and simple linen shirt she wore hid all signs of it. Her hips were slim to begin with, and her baggy breeches showed nothing amiss. I imagined her hair to be tightly bound and pinned under the hat. This was fine under the circumstances. She would only be in trouble if she had to remove it. She had practiced walking and acting like a lad. There was nothing girlish about her gait or mannerisms. She did appear to exaggerate certain things a bit, but that was common for a lad wishing to appear to be older than he was, just as was the attempt at deepening her voice. She had mastered speaking like a commoner as well, and though it was not necessary as part of her ruse of pretending to be a boy, it did hide her true status and matched her attire.

However, her hands and feet were slim, delicate, un-calloused, and unmarred. She did not appear to have worked much at all, or walked about her entire life barefoot, as a boy her supposed age here on Jamaica would have done. Adolescent lads usually have large feet and hands they have yet to grow into. And she possessed the fine white complexion of a young lady who avoids the sun, not the golden tan of any youth in the tropics. The first matter would have been solved if she wore boots and gloves. The second would have been solved by her being in any other clime in Christendom, as most of her skin would have been covered. In fact, the matter of her passing as a lad would have been very easy if she were fully dressed in hose, shoes, periwig, coat, and the like.

By the time we reached our house, I was more concerned that someone would be committing buggery on the table than I was that any would realize they were girls.

The front room appeared cleaner than it had the day before, and

smelled better too. Someone had put great effort into cleaning the walls and corners of piss. The back room still smelled of dog, and rightly so. We found Pete sleeping with the puppies. I was relieved he had breeches on.

I looked to the girls, and was amused to find wide eyes. Miss Vines met my knowing grin with a snort and quickly looked away. There was a slight flush on her cheeks.

Agnes was reverent and whispered, "I would dearly like to draw him."

I thought of her fine portraits of Miss Vines that I had glimpsed and agreed. "I would dearly like to see you render him on paper. Perhaps that can be arranged someday."

I realized I would like to see her rendition of Gaston even more. Perhaps I had found a way to show him what I saw.

Gaston dropped down beside Pete and took up a puppy. The Golden One woke and eyed the "lads" standing near me with momentary curiosity before talking to Gaston. I decided a good dose of puppy breath was necessary, and dropped down to join them.

The girls were uncertain. Agnes finally joined us, and I passed her a puppy, hoping she would not coo over it in a ridiculous manner. She did not; she merely held it and smoothed its wrinkled skin with gentle touches. Nor did she squeal or in any way panic when Bella came to inspect her.

Miss Vines held her distance and watched us from behind a mask of detachment. She looked every bit the part she played. Lads trying to be men do not often have time for puppies: that is a boyish thing.

Striker joined us, with a bucket and brush in hand. His glare at Pete told me who had been doing much of the cleaning. His lack of interest in the "lads" told me he did not recognize Miss Vines in the least. I introduced them as Art and Chris, and he barely nodded.

"The house is looking much better," I told him.

He awarded me a grim smile. "I am glad you think so. Liam and Otter have been asking about; they have had no luck locating a housekeeper. Would you ask Theodore of it?"

"Aye," I said. "Speaking of Theodore, he needs any who wish for the land grants to meet with him and sign the papers. Please tell all our cabal. And Pete will need a surname."

Striker sighed. "Damn, I suppose in this instance he cannot use mine."

"You have never adopted a surname?" I asked Pete.

"Nay. TheyGiveMeOneAtNewgate. NotMine."

"Then we will have to name you," I said, and looked to Gaston.

He frowned in thought. Pete regarded us with suspicion.

I thought of my titles for him. I called him the Golden One, so perhaps Golden was an option, but perhaps it was a bit odd. And I thought of Striker and him as the wolves.

"Wolf," I said. "Peter Wolf."

Gaston nodded.

Pete thought on it, and looked to Striker, who grinned.

"I like it," Striker said.

Pete slowly grinned. "MeToo. I'llTakeIt. 'CauseIGotTeeth SoseICanKill SpaniardsAn'ProtectPuppies."

He hoisted the puppy he held up high, and it squawked in surprise, earning him glares from Bella and Gaston. He quickly brought it to his face and cooed reassuringly.

Striker and I laughed.

"Aye, aye, such a mean damn wolf," Striker teased.

Pete stuck out his tongue at Striker.

"What are your plans?" Striker asked me.

"Palisadoes, sparring, teaching these lads a thing or two about swords."

He shrugged. "Have a fine time, then. We'll see Theodore."

We handed Pete our puppies and departed.

"Are all buccaneers like them?" Agnes asked once we were out the door. "They seemed very nice."

I chuckled. "They are unique amongst men. Nay, I feel most of the Brethren are not so very nice, and if you were a Spaniard or any other man those two despised, you would not find them nice at all. But Aye, most we choose to sail with are goodly men."

"You need a housekeeper?" Miss Vines asked. She spoke quietly and without the attempt to disguise her voice or breeding.

"Aye," I said. "We need someone to watch the place while we rove, and we need someone to maintain some degree of order when we are in port. Do you know of anyone available?"

She looked at Agnes, who was regarding a cart we passed. "Aye. Agnes' father wishes to sell her as a bondservant."

Agnes whirled on her friend with betrayal all over her pinched face. "Christine!"

"Hush," Miss Vines admonished, and looked about.

No one seemed to be looking at us, but we hurried on anyway.

"Agnes's stepfather has wished to sell her since her mother died recently," Miss Vines continued a block later. "He has not, yet, because I have hired her as a servant, and thus he receives some income from her existence. Yet he still wants the pounds her contract could bring. I do not have the money, and as much as my father is a kind man, he will not see that we need another bondswoman."

"You need worry about it no longer," Gaston said firmly.

I grinned and addressed Agnes. "Aye, we will see to it. I have no interest in owning you, girl, but if it will give you a safe place to live and freedom of a different sort, we will arrange it. If you wish, of course."

She shot Miss Vines another hurt glare before nodding thoughtfully to me. "I know nothing of housekeeping, sir. In England we had servants, and here, my stepfather has slaves."

I shook my head. "Agnes, the only things we will require of you are

that you live in the house while we are roving so that it does not burn down and no one takes up residence there. You would keep the cistern, woodbin, and lamps filled. And make sure the dogs are fed so that they do not roam the streets. You can practice art to your heart's content. When we are in port, I do not know... I do not believe that house will be affected by any of our other plans. I do not know who will reside there. Currently, it is home to a whole host of our associates. I think merely having someone female about will mitigate most of the damage the house suffered these last months. However, it would be nice if you learned how to cook. Pete is very fond of pies and we boil all of our water."

"I could do all of that," she said.

"She should learn to shoot," Gaston added.

"Who would I have to shoot?" she asked with alarm.

I snorted. "Any of our guests attempting to shoot rats inside the house. Or pissing on the walls."

She was horrified, and I relented.

"Nay, nay," I assured her, "it will not be so bad. Merely threatening to shoot them should suffice."

She was still wide-eyed as we walked through the gate at Fort Rupert.

As always, this chance to do philanthropy pleased me; yet, I wondered if I would rue it in the end. My attempt to help the sheep of Ithaca had surely gone awry. And I honestly could not blame myself alone in that. Aye, I had left them, but it was possible that even if I had stayed things would be no different, other than my tearing my hair out with frustration. On the other hand, our rescue of Davey had provided him a better life. Agnes' situation would remain to be seen, and I resolved to allow myself to feel pleasure at the initial promise of it.

We began to travel up the beach, seeking a place where we would not have an audience. Many of the buccaneers waiting to sail lived on the Palisadoes in little camps scattered here and there. To be clear of them, we knew we would have to go a good distance, and we settled into a jog to cover it. The girls brought that to an end after a hundred yards. They were already winded. I supposed it was to be expected, as they rarely had occasion to run anyplace. It would probably be a great effort for them to walk as far as we must. After all, they were women, and gentle ones at that, and thus not used to any form of labor or exercise.

And so we walked. Agnes bemoaned not bringing her sketchbook. Gaston engaged her in conversation about the plants we saw, and soon the pair of them were meandering to and fro between the water and trees. Meanwhile, Miss Vines and I walked a fairly straight path along the top of the surf. I knew this to be by Gaston's design. Yet I was loathe to have the conversation he was giving me opportunity to engage in. Thankfully, Miss Vines was a forthright young woman.

"I was concerned we would not see you today," she said. "I thought it likely I would not see you for another six months, but then you did seek

me out this time.”

She awarded me a sly smile.

I smiled in return. There was no reason to dissemble; it would merely waste time.

“As I am engaged in dangerous enterprises, my father wishes for me to marry and produce an heir,” I said quickly.

This took the smile from her lips; she nodded to herself with her eyes on the horizon.

I continued. “According to the last letter I received, he is choosing, or has chosen, a bride, and is sending her forthwith.”

This brought a questioning frown, but she still did not turn to meet my gaze.

“I do not feel I shall like any bride he may choose,” I said. “I wish to choose my own.”

She nodded with full understanding. “I see. So you choose to woo me?”

“In this less than romantic manner, aye.”

“And I am deemed to have sufficient lineage?” she asked wryly.

“According to Mister Theodore’s research, aye.”

Her smile was fleeting. “I do not wish to marry nor have children.”

“I thought that your likely sentiment,” I sighed.

“Yet you feel I may be swayed, else you would not be here now?” she asked with a frown.

“My dear lad, I am walking up the beach to go and spar with my matelot. You sought me out this morn.”

“Touché. Is that not the term?” she asked.

I grinned. “I believe you are using it correctly.”

She sighed. “I daresay all of the men who have courted me would be appalled, if not terrified, by my wearing breeches. I can make strong men blanch by expressing my opinion. I do not wish to ever become what they wish for in a wife. I see the others of my sex living purportedly happy lives and I cannot conceive of it for myself. I never wish to live as they do.”

“What aspect of their existence do you find so unacceptable? I am merely curious. I can guess, but I would have you clarify it.”

“They do not think,” she said after a pause. “Or have a care, beyond the confines of their households and the welfare of their offspring. They live confined little lives, devoid of adventure and even discourse. They may as well be cattle lowing in the field.”

“Do you feel this is a natural state of affairs, or one forced upon them?” I asked.

“Both,” she snapped. “For many, they never wish to rise above it, and the ones that do are told they are unacceptable. They are reduced to games of intrigue and seduction in order to achieve anything of worth in the world. They may not battle with sword or coin to sway the future, or even defend their beliefs and honor. They must find a way to get a man to do these things for them.”

I had planned to disabuse her notions by saying I had met many a powerful woman, but I realized she was correct. Teresina was a fine example. All of her power issued from her ability to control men, which she excelled at. In the end she was trapped by it.

"I want to be able to do so many things!" Miss Vines yelled with a fervor that attracted the attention of Gaston and Agnes. "I read of great kings and generals and I want to lead a nation and win battles, not bed the men who do and bear their offspring. I want to learn to fence. I want to learn to sail. I would like to study medicine. I would attend Oxford. I would learn mathematics. All of that is denied me because of my sex. I hate it. I pray daily that some blessed event will occur and I will not be as I am.

"I must marry," she spat. "I must because I have no other recourse. I do not wish to become a nun, though I have heard there are nunneries that harbor intelligent women. But then I would be trapped in ways I am not now. I suppose there are alternatives within the courts, but then my entire life will revolve about pleasing men, and I absolutely refuse. If I do not marry, I have nothing of my own. I have nothing of my own now. I can inherit from my father, but some man would need to manage it for me, because other men would not deal with me directly. I am not a person unless I bear some man's name, and then I am his property."

She was distraught to the point of tears, and I knew not how to comfort her. I had not considered the whole of it from her perspective. I had met women who were unhappy with their lot in life, and complained of a disparity in the way things were managed, but I had not understood. I thought it much like the occasional bleating I heard from sheep, protests made quietly against the rule of wolves by those that would never raise arms and thus become a wolf. Miss Vines was right, she could never even become a true wolf; she could only be the mate of one.

It was made worse in that she was of noble blood. She was not even known by her own name. She was not Christine Vines, but Miss Vines, her father's daughter, and once she married, she would be Mistress Whoever. I vowed to call her Christine.

Gaston and Agnes had joined us and heard it all. Christine walked into the surf and tried to compose herself, with Agnes hovering helplessly nearby. I looked to my matelot and found him as surprised by her words as I.

He joined me. "I would not add to her misery."

"Oui," I sighed, "but she is correct. Perhaps... there could be freedom in bondage in this instance, much as what we offer Agnes."

I joined the girls in the surf. "Christine?"

She looked at me sharply and then slowly smiled.

"I apologize for my outburst," she said and pawed the tears from her eyes. "It is another weakness of my sex; I cannot seem to become engaged in any discourse that holds meaning for me without bursting into tears."

I remembered her complaining of that when first I met her: I felt I had greater understanding of it now. "There is no need to apologize. And if I were in your situation, I would probably take my life."

She snorted with amusement. "Thank you for that, I guess."

"I would never bar a wife from pursuing anything she wished, such as she was able within the damned confines of society," I said.

"I thought that might be a possibility," she said with a small smile. "And that is why I sought you out."

She studied the surf, her arms tightly crossed. "Since I must marry, I, like you, would rather it be someone of my choosing."

"I will need an heir, and then I care not what else you do. I would have you be happy. And even if we are not to marry, I would have you be happy."

She nodded. "Would you allow me to travel? Can you afford to have the proper nanny and governess? Would we live in that house, or would you build one elsewhere? Will you teach me to fence and shoot?"

I grinned. "Aye, you may travel, by which I assume you mean returning to Christendom. Hell, you can go anywhere you can book passage and be reasonably assured of surviving unharmed. With or without my father, we can afford to have a full compliment of servants; you need not care for the child. I will receive a plantation upon the deliverance of an heir, and that is not my only source of funds. I have been granted a plot in town to build a fine house. I will gladly teach you to fence and shoot, and even sail. And Gaston can even instruct you in medicine, if you are so inclined."

She smiled, and then her gaze flicked between Gaston and myself and she sobered. "I would suppose you would share my bed only as necessary to produce a child."

"Aye," I said solemnly. "In my heart, Gaston will always be first, and I will share his bed in my house."

"I take no issue with that," she said tightly, but she kept her eyes on the sea.

"Likewise," I said gently, "if you find someone you love, it need be unrequited only in the manner of marriage."

She nodded. "I cannot think of what else to ask for."

"If there is a thing forgotten in this negotiation," I said, "let us agree to consider it without prejudice in the future, and augment our agreement as necessary."

She chuckled. "Then I will accept your offer of marriage."

"I am honored."

Despite our fine words, she appeared as uneasy as I felt. I supposed it was to be expected. We were not simple people, and therefore we did not lead simple lives. The Gods knew nothing we did would ever be easy.

Thirty-Two

Wherein We Gaze Upon Trouble

We walked another mile up the beach. During that time, we determined that I should speak to Sir Christopher when he returned to town the day after next. Tomorrow, we would see to matters with Agnes' father. The gangly girl was greatly enthused that she would be sharing a house with Christine. Oddly, this seemed to annoy her friend.

At last we found a suitable place, and bade the girls sit and watch. I settled into *en garde* with relief. Thankfully, the girls held their applause and comments, and thus I was able to forget they were there. For the next hour or so, there was only my matelot, steel, and sand. It was joyous.

When we had enough, I toppled Gaston to the sand for a lengthy kiss. He enjoyed it, and was beginning to tug at my tunic when his eyes shot wide.

"The girls," he hissed.

"Oh bloody Hell."

I hoped they would not insist on tagging along every day we remained in port.

Agnes clapped enthusiastically as we approached. Animated so, she was even gawkier than she was while timid. I wondered if she would grow out of it someday.

Christine watched us with a somber mien.

"Physical exertion is a balm for the soul," I told her. "Did you observe anything, or have you been mired in thought?"

She gave a guilty shake of her head. "Somewhat mired, I fear. And I

have seen men spar before, and you both seem to be excellent at it, but there is so much movement I become lost. I know there are positions and movements..."

"And you shall learn the basic ones today."

She stood eagerly. I handed her my rapier, and she promptly frowned at the weight. I suppressed a sigh. She could not run a league; she surely could not fence for any duration.

I began to take her through the various stances, but by the second it was obvious she could not maintain form with the weight of the rapier. She could not hold it at arm's length. Gaston had perceived the problem as well, and handed her a dagger.

"Come now, I wish to learn the sword," she protested.

"If you can learn with a dagger, you will do well with a sword," I assured her. "But Lady, you see you cannot practice with a sword. If you truly wish to fence, your first order of business will be strengthening yourself."

"We will go over calisthenics after this," Gaston added.

This disheartened her greatly.

"Christine," I chided gently. "A woman need not be weak in body, though I doubt any woman can be as strong as a man... of comparable build. However, you have never had account to exercise a muscle – other than riding, I would imagine."

"And that not enough or lately," she muttered. "I am a fool."

I grinned. "Do not chastise yourself. If you wish to run with the wolves, then you need to act like one. You possess an ambition; spend every waking moment achieving it."

She was slow to smile, but when it came, it was predatory. "You are correct."

With that, she threw herself into diligently learning the proper stances with a dagger, and then in practicing all the calisthenics Gaston showed her.

As the sun reached its zenith, we decided to return to Port Royal, and retreated farther into the shade of the brush and palms to make our way there. This proved too rough on the girls' bare feet, so we returned to the surf. The beach of the Palisadoes is pebbly, and does not possess the soft sand of the beach at Negril or the lovely strand on the larger Cayman isle. Still, it was far softer than stepping on all manner of burrs and other things that the brush offered.

I began to think the girls would not wish to go anywhere on the morrow. Their legs and arms were quite red, burned bright by the sun. Gaston would have to give them a salve. And they limped. I briefly considered carrying them, but that would not do if any saw us. Of course it would not matter if Christine collapsed, which was likely: she was nearly too exhausted to walk. I knew she would ache in every muscle once she stopped moving.

"I think you should stay abed and rest on the morrow," I told her. "I fear you will not wish ought else."

"Nay," she said with gritted teeth. "I must do it all again."

I snorted. "Nay, you must rest. We were cruel to ask so much of you this day."

"Do not coddle me," she chided. "What would you say to me if I were a lad who wished to become a buccaneer?"

"I would call you a fool and tell you to go back to your mother. And *that* if you could run three leagues and lift me."

"Why?" she asked with more curiosity than challenge.

"It is not a pleasant life, and it is fraught with danger."

"Then why do you do it?" she asked.

Gaston was chuckling quietly beside us.

I sighed. "It has its charm if... you are a man who does not favor the trappings of civilization. It truly has an allure if you favor men."

"Hmm," she sighed. "Then it may not be for me. I do not know if I favor men."

We all regarded her curiously, even Agnes, who appeared quite surprised.

"Do you favor women?" I asked.

"Nay, not particularly," she said.

This admission caused her already rosy cheeks to flush, and she gave Agnes a quick glance. The other girl was blushing too. I recalled Agnes' lovely portraiture of Christine, and a suspicion flared to life. Agnes either favored women in general, or Christine in specific.

"You experience no interest or arousal upon considering either men or women?" I asked.

Gaston grinned at the horizon. Of course I had once asked him a similar set of questions.

Christine was glaring at me. "I do not choose to."

I wondered if there were horrors lurking in her history. "Why?"

"Because if I surrender to lust or love, I am surely lost. My girlish heart will likely lead me to the altar, or worse, like a lamb to slaughter."

"Ah." I was relieved. It was merely her earlier concerns.

"Well, now that that aspect has been resolved," I teased, "you are free to explore the other."

She snorted. "I suppose so. Your friend Peter Wolf is very handsome."

Gaston and I laughed.

"Is he the one you told me of?" she asked. "You said that Striker had a matelot that must be seen."

"Aye, Pete is the one," I said with a grin. "And he does not favor women in the least."

"Pity," she said with feigned arrogance. She sighed. "In truth, I do favor men. I find you handsome."

She threw a guilty look toward Gaston and Agnes.

My matelot was thoughtful. Agnes was timid and withdrawn again.

"Let us teach you to shoot," Gaston said to Agnes.

"Now?" she squeaked, and cast a frantic look to Christine.

"Now," he said, and got a good grip on her wrist and towed her into the woods.

"I wish he had not done that," Christine said.

"This taking of a wife is a new and uncomfortable concept for us."

She screwed her eyes closed and gave an exasperated sigh. "It is so unfair. To all of us."

"Aye," I sighed. "I have considered abandoning my title many times."

"Then why do you not?" she asked.

"Gaston finds merit in it, and the idea of children, and... there is thought that I can do good with it."

She nodded. "I can see where that would be true. Power is power."

"As we all have aims that can be met by this, let us make the best of it. I do not mean to tease you about men. I wish you to know that I am skilled with women, and I will make what we must do as pleasant as it can be without love. Not that I do not have respect and admiration for you, but obviously we do not love one another, and... never mind. I hope you understand."

"I understand," she said thoughtfully. "Would you do me a favor this minute? Since we are alone. Please kiss me. I have been kissed before and found it unpleasant."

I lifted her chin with a finger, and gently lowered my mouth to hers. I had forgotten how soft a woman's skin and lips are. She pressed back with endearing and naïve earnestness. I slipped an arm around her waist, and asked for a little more, and she soon parted her teeth. She initially recoiled at the feel of my tongue, but I quickly seduced hers into playing. And then she was clinging to me with sweet sighs. I caressed her, even brushing over her bound breasts with stiff fingers until I found her nipples. She squirmed in my arms with little sounds, and sucked my kiss even deeper. I had not expected her to rise to passion so quickly, and my manhood strained to see this new playmate.

I finally decided I must stop; else I would throw her to the sand and take what should be saved until after the ceremony. Once released, she pulled away with shame-filled eyes and flaming cheeks.

"Well, I see our wedding night will be enjoyable for both of us," I said gently.

"Apparently," she said tightly. "As I seem to be quite wanton."

"Oh, hush," I chided. "Men enjoy sex. If you want what men have, you should surely claim that pleasure as well."

This thankfully brought a small smile. "I suppose so." She took a deep breath, and finally met my gaze with a curious frown. "Do you find me as arousing as I apparently find you?"

"Aye." I snatched her hand and pressed it to my crotch.

She gasped and pulled away. Then with arms tightly crossed, she asked, "May I see it?"

With a chuckle, I freed my manhood from my breeches.

She regarded it for a time with impassive features, and then shook her head. "I do not see how it shall fit inside me."

I laughed. "Lady, I have never understood how your sex gives birth. My cock is quite a bit smaller than a baby."

She laughed with me. "True."

I tucked my disappointed member away.

She was searching my face. "I am scared. Not of that... but..."

"You should be. Marriage has serious consequences, and especially considering your reservations on the matter, I would think you a fool if you did not face it with some trepidation."

"Thank you," she said. "So, the day after tomorrow you will speak to my father. I would imagine we could be married a day or two after, and then... we shall consummate the marriage, and then you will sail."

"Aye. I imagine your life will be much as it was before my arrival, with the exception that you will have daily calisthenics to perform and the building of a house to design and oversee."

"I would be allowed to do that?" she asked enthusiastically.

"I do not see why not. It will be your house," I said.

"And you will live in it when you are in port?" she asked with guarded eyes.

"Aye."

"With Gaston?" Her tone was quite careful.

"Aye." I frowned. "Truly, do you take issue with that?"

"Nay, why should I?" she said quickly.

She would not look at me. We were now within sight of Fort Rupert, and there were others about. I did not feel I could press her on it. Gaston and Agnes joined us. He would not look at me either. I wondered what he had seen.

"Gaston said I might actually be able to injure someone," Agnes said with pride, and brandished one of my matelot's pistols.

"If she does not close her eyes while firing," Gaston added with good humor. "We should go by Massey's and find a smaller piece for her."

"Can it wait until tomorrow?" I asked. "They should rest their feet."

"Nay, let us do it today," Christine said brightly. "I have never been to a gunsmith's."

And so we trudged to Massey's and introduced the "lads". He did indeed have smaller bored pistols with petite grips. They were pieces designed to be easily secreted under a man's coat or in a boot. Gaston purchased two for each of them, and the necessary shot and powder.

Once outside, Agnes asked that we keep hers until the matter of her living arrangements could be resolved. I assured her we would see her on the morrow.

We parted company at the corner of Queen and Lime, and the girls hurried away to secretly change clothes in a back room of the Vines' warehouse before dragging themselves home.

Gaston and I were at last alone.

"Did you assuage her fears?" Gaston asked.

"Oui. I kiss..."

His fingers were on my lips. "I do not wish to know."

I nodded, and pulled him to me on the busy street to kiss him thoroughly. As most around us were buccaneers, no one made comment.

Gaston had responded well enough, but he was somber when I released him. "Let us go to Theodore's."

"And then what?" I teased.

"We have matters of our regimen to attend to."

"I will always much prefer that over what I found necessary to do earlier," I assured him.

He frowned, and adopted the look of annoyed wonder I find so endearing.

We stopped by the house and found Striker, Pete, Cudro, Liam and Otter in the afternoon shade of the yard.

"I have located a housekeeper," I announced.

They all cheered and toasted.

"Her name is Agnes," I continued, "and she is quite young, and not experienced. But I feel she will be able to keep the place from burning down, and the dogs fed while we rove. She promises to learn to bake pies and cake."

This brightened Pete, but he was still leery. "SheBeMean? SheLikeDahgs? SheKnowTheyLiveInThaHouse?"

"Nay, aye, and aye," I said quickly. "She is truly a timid little thing, not at all like Mistress Theodore."

"ThenIBeNice."

I smiled. "That would be appreciated."

I wanted to add that she was an artist and might wish to draw him, but that would tip our hand that she had seen him before. I decided that could reveal itself in time, as could our other news of the day. I realized I did not wish to tell them I was to marry.

"We all went by Theodore's and signed the papers," Cudro said. "And I have petitioned for citizenship as well." He sounded no more pleased with that than Gaston had.

"Gaston did not wish to," I told him, "because he felt he might be compelled to wear wool and be steadfast."

I looked to Otter, as he was also Dutch.

"I am already an English citizen," he said quietly.

"An' we were granted land near the Yallahs, fur comin' 'ere with those idiots, Penn an' Venables," Liam added. "But we seen it only the once. We not be the farmin' kind. Theodore said we could 'ave new with all o' ya, an' still keep tha other, an' it be likely none be the wiser."

Striker sighed and took another pull on the bottle before speaking. "We're becoming civilized, Will. But I do not think it will be a bother just yet. Theodore suggested that all of us with matelots have proper testaments drawn up, so that our matelots inherit within the law if it comes to that."

I nodded. "Aye, Gaston and I have done so."

"It will not all be resolved before we sail," Striker said.

"No matter, as of yet." That was a lie. If I was to be married before we sailed, it mattered quite a bit.

We sat with them and shared the rest of the bottle, talking of pleasant things. Then we made our way to Theodore's at dusk.

I gave our good friend the news of my impending nuptials at dinner, and he crowed appreciatively.

"Oh, Will, I am quite pleased," Theodore said. "In what little I have seen of her, I think she is a fine choice. I am sure her father will be amenable. I am sure yours will, too, once the deed is done and he is informed of it."

I snorted. "I actually think he will be rather angry that I thwarted him, and will ask you directly if she is indeed a real person and a woman."

He waved me off. "Be that as it may, I am sure all will be well, or at least better than the alternative."

"There is another matter. I have located a housekeeper." I explained Agnes' plight and our wish to purchase her.

"So I will need a bondsman contract drawn up so that I can present it to her father," I concluded.

"Nay, you will not," Theodore said with a grin. "From what you have said, it is likely you will wish to burn the man's house down, or worse, in the name of justice. I will negotiate with her father and see to it. It is only proper that a Lord send a barrister to do such a thing."

I was amused. "Ah, of course. I will leave it in your hands, then. Will you speak for me to Sir Christopher as well?"

"Nay," he said flatly, and returned to cutting his meat.

An hour later, we were finally able to retreat behind a closed door. Gaston had been quiet and withdrawn while at our house and at dinner. I embraced him from behind as he turned up the lamp.

"If you, at any time, say you do not wish for me to pursue this, it will stop," I murmured.

He sighed, and lolled his head back upon my shoulder.

"Non. I am not against it," he said.

I kissed the bruise I had made on his neck. With a start, I remembered that I was similarly marked. I wondered if I should attempt to hide it from Sir Christopher, I had surely not thought to hide it from his daughter. I was amazed Theodore had not chided me for it. Of course, when I met with my future father-in-law, I would be expected to dress like a gentleman, and that might serve to disguise it.

I found myself cursing, and I left Gaston and doffed my weapons to hurl them onto the trunk.

"Will?"

"I swore I would not do this," I growled. "I do not wish to live a lie. I am yours. Why is that not enough?"

"I will not force you," Gaston said guiltily.

I sighed, and tried to calm myself. "I am not angry with you. I am... I saw your mark, and realized I must hide mine before seeing her damn

father, and it..."

He nodded. "She does not seem pleased with the prospect, either. But as with all of us, her protestations relate to the unfairness of how we are expected to be a thing we are not. I feel it may still be best that the three of us are united in this, because of that common injustice. She is like us, a creature that has become something she was not born to be."

I found that curious. "Do you feel she is a fellow centaur?"

He shrugged and doffed his weapons. "Perhaps not, but some mythic thing, as she is not wolf or sheep."

"An Amazon perhaps," I sighed.

He smiled, but quickly grew thoughtful again. "I pity her. I have not known enough women to consider how poor their lot in life is."

"I have known many women, and not looked at it through the eyes of one who was dissatisfied with it before. Most are happy being sheep, or cows perhaps."

"Well, we will liberate this one, as best we can," he said resolutely.

"Oui," I sighed. "I suppose that will be the good of it. That is what I considered when I resolved to ask for her hand this day. I will endeavor to remember it when I speak to her father, while pretending to be a thing that I am not."

He grinned. "Oui, you must don your wolf's clothing once again. I would now like to see you as a naked centaur. We have things to do this night."

"Do we?" I teased.

"Oui, we still have our regimen to attend to."

"Ah, and nothing more?"

"After that," he said seriously, "I wish for you to make it all go away, as you always do."

I nodded and stripped. He did likewise. He retrieved the sack with the whip and set it on the bed between us. I almost asked him if he was sure he wished to do that this night, but I saw the determination in his eyes, and held my tongue.

"Should I reveal it?" I asked.

"Please."

I was not eager. The last time he saw a whip of this type in my presence I ended up with a knife in my belly.

I upended the sack, and the coiled whip dropped onto the bed linen. He stared at it. I watched him. He did not seem prone to a fit of madness. I offered him my hand and he took it. Several minutes passed.

"Should I speak?" I asked.

"Please."

"Is it the type that struck you?"

He nodded. "I have been struck by many things, but this is like the one my father used."

"What else have you been struck with?" I asked.

He considered the question seriously. "One headmaster was fond

of a paddle, another a belt. With that one I forgot that sitting did not involve discomfort after the first month. I was always tender. I have been struck by birch rods, quirts, and a turnip in a stocking."

I sighed. Once again I knew I would be plagued by visions of his hellish childhood.

"I have been beaten with a strap and a birch rod," I offered.

"When was the last time?" he asked.

"When I was ten."

He nodded. "I was not beaten while I was with the monks. And I have not been beaten since coming here, unless I was mad and..." He sighed.

"Were you afraid of whips, or perhaps being struck, prior to that night?" I asked.

"Oui. As I have said Will, not all things are tied to that night, it was merely the culmination of years of... pain."

"I wish to hurt everyone who ever hurt you," I said.

He smiled sadly. "I find comfort in that. I did hurt some of them, Will, but it only made things worse. They were always bigger, or there were more of them."

He touched the whip with his fingertip: a quick poke. This was followed by a longer contact. Then he brushed a section of the braided length, and then stroked the handle.

"I have never touched one," he sighed. "And I don't recall seeing my father's whip. It was rarely in my sight. I remember the sounds it made, though, vividly. It hissed across the floor as he pulled it back, and then there was roar as it came toward me, and... At first I could not hear the sound it made when it hit. I was screaming, and there was so much pain. But, as it continued, the pain receded until I was numb, and everything seemed very distant, as if I were floating in the sea. I could not scream anymore, or beg. And he did not stop. It went on and on: the hiss of it on the stone, the whirl as it came to me again, and then the wet smacking sound when it struck. Then there was the spatter of the blood on the walls and floor. I could hear him panting. He got slower and slower. I would pass into unconsciousness only to return at another blow. Finally I woke in a carriage. And that was more pain; each jostle was as if he struck me anew. And then there was the laudanum, and I floated in the sea once again."

His words tore at my heart, and I could envision it all clearly.

"Thank you for telling me of it," I whispered.

His eyes met mine. "Have I not before?"

"Non."

He frowned. "You are so much a part of my life now; I sometimes think you were there with me. It is odd how my mind works. Just as I know this is just a thing, yet gazing upon it, I feel as if a blow will come at any time. I am listening for it. That is what drives the Horse wild."

"You do not seem distraught at this moment," I noted with curiosity.

If anything, he seemed unnaturally calm.

“Oui, because it is as I hoped,” he said with a small smile. “You are here, and you are my touchstone for reality.”

I kissed his hand. “I am pleased. I am relieved I can be of service to you in this. I am relieved it appears to be easy as compared to my issue... I suppose it is because flogging you is a thing neither of us will ever do, whereas, what you must inure me to is...” I realized what I was saying in light of our morning conversation and I froze.

“I am sorry, Will,” he whispered. “I am not your touchstone, am I? I am the flint and tinder that brings all of your painful memories to light.”

I wished to refute him. “It is not... It has little to do with either of us. The things done to you were not things that should ever be done to another, whereas, the thing done to me was a perversion of a thing that should be done lovingly to another.”

He smiled. “You never cease to amaze me. You constantly spew forth balms to ease my wounds.”

I smiled. “That is not a pleasing image, but I am pleased you find solace in my sophistic meanderings.”

“It is only sophism if it has no practical application,” he chided. “You make me saner than I can recall ever being. That is of more use to me than mathematics.”

“I am relieved,” I sighed. “I remember none of the theorems I was taught.”

He darted in to kiss me. His eyes sparkled with mirth.

“We can put it away now,” he said.

I noticed he was no longer allowing himself to look at the whip. I quickly returned it to its bag, and dropped it off the bed.

Once we were free of its presence, he pounced upon me. We wrestled about until I submitted to being beneath him on my belly. He anointed me with oil and gentle kisses until I lay quiet and still without the tightness of fear in my muscles, and then he covered me with his body, so that no part of me was free of his weight.

We had done this before. It was not a thing Shane had ever done. And it was different than Gaston’s fingering me. That was a battle against old wounds; this was a battle against old fears. I thought it likely my dismay at his covering me thus was much like his agitation upon seeing a whip. It was not the thing, or the act, itself, but the phantoms engendered in our minds. I fantasized that Shane was the one pinning me down.

“Speak to me,” I whispered.

When he had done this on the beach in the morning, he had whispered sweet praise and endearments. Tonight, his tone was different: darker and huskier.

“You are mine, Will. I want you. I love you. I need you. I will possess you, so that you never remember another.”

My manhood was hard and dissatisfied with being trapped between my belly and the bed linen. I squirmed in little movements beneath him, and he shifted incrementally to keep me covered as he slid on my oiled

skin. His fingers twined with mine. His breath was in my ear. I expected to feel pressure between my buttocks. My Horse stood with ears pricked and one hoof raised, ready to run, listening to the whispers from the darkened forest beyond the paddock, from the wild Horse that had come to find me again.

"Gaston," I said nervously.

"Trust me," he murmured. It was equally appeal and admonishment.

"Make love to me," I breathed.

He stilled above me.

"Oh, Will," he sighed. "I want to. I feel on the precipice, but it will not rise."

I hurt to hear the sadness in his voice. I wanted him in ways I had never conceived of before, and could not even name or grasp.

"It will come, my love," I assured him. "If not tonight, then someday soon. I want you. I am an aching pit of need that only you can fill, and I have faith you will fill me someday."

"Thank you," he said raggedly. "I am sorry to disappoint you tonight."

"I am filled with wonder and pleasure that you appear to be as disappointed as I."

He pushed up and off me and I rolled over beneath him. I found him smiling sadly. I clasped his shoulders and attempted to pull him down upon me. He resisted. I gave him a questioning look.

His smile became grim. "I wish to consummate our love before... you marry. And I cannot do the deed."

"You do not have to..."

The patience in his gaze silenced me faster than any reproach could have. We did have to, and he was willing.

"You are not the only one empty with need," he said reverently.

My breath caught. I nodded mutely.

He lay beside me, and I rolled to face him.

"I am yours," he murmured.

"Then you are the most cherished possession I could ever imagine owning. We will go very slowly, as we have not been inuring you this last week."

He nodded. "I trust you."

His eyes held all the love I ever wished to see.

I trimmed and smoothed my fingernails and all the surrounding skin. Then I found a cloth and a jar of hogs' fat to add to the oil already on the bed. I planned how I wished to proceed, and what position we would use, as I settled in beside him.

Ironically, I was so involved in the preparation that my erection dimmed considerably. As I have never doubted my ability to rise, I ignored it for the time being.

His eyes were closed. I kissed his temple and began to coat him in oil. I massaged every inch of skin until he glistened and I felt no tension in anything I touched. He was now on his belly. I rolled him partially

onto his side with his leg cocked beneath him. He let me pose him, as if only I had control of his limbs. Finally, I knelt behind him. My manhood had returned to its full glory, yet my heart ached tenfold more.

I caressed his opening with a tentative finger, and he smiled. I coated my entire hand in hogs' fat. I slipped a finger inside, and he blinked at the sensation. I found him truly as relaxed as he appeared. As a second digit joined the first, his gaze and breathing did not waver, but his smile tightened until it was nearly a grimace. I played with him for a while until he relaxed again. When I added the third, he shifted his leg a little to open himself more. I slowed my gentle manipulations further still. His eyes had narrowed and his breathing slowed. He reached for me and I leaned forward to kiss his fingers. Then his eyes closed again and he rolled his shoulders away from me. He sighed and any tension remaining in him departed with the air.

I coated my member with my left hand. I put a fourth finger in. His breathing was shallow. I shifted my position. I rooted the head of my manhood in the palm of my busy hand. As I withdrew fingers I entered him.

Pleasure blossomed inside me such that I felt I might come at that moment. I could not remember it feeling that wondrous. I knew all of the canvases of my memory relating to this act had now been painted over. There was only Gaston.

We exhaled, and I smiled. I had not realized we were holding our breath. I pushed all the way in, and eased myself down to lie beside and partially atop him. Then I did not move. There was a moment when he lost his concentration, and he contracted spasmodically around me. I held him and waited. He calmed himself, and slowly relaxed to accommodate me once again.

"Are you in pain?" I breathed.

"Non." He took a deep breath. "There is discomfort, but it is not unpleasant."

I smiled and nuzzled his shoulder. "That is good."

"Do you need to move?" he asked.

"Not immediately, and when I do, I will come very quickly. It is... very good to be within you. Words are inadequate."

"I know," he breathed. "Do not move for a time. I wish to feel this for a while longer."

He reached back to caress my face, and I kissed his fingers again.

"I understand now," he whispered.

"What?" I asked.

"When you described why you enjoy receiving."

"Ah."

"I am at peace," he murmured.

"I love you."

I could hold still no more. Either my heart or my cock would explode, and as one was designed to and not the other, I began to rock against him. As I predicted, it did not take me long at all. I throbbed

inside him for a time, and when finally empty, my cock was still reluctant to leave but I pulled free anyway.

I crawled over him so that we could lie face to face. He was crying. "What is wrong?" I asked.

He embraced me. "I am sorry. I am not distraught over this. Non. This was quite wonderful. Non. It came to me how horrible it would be to be hurt as you were."

"Hush, hush," I murmured. "Tonight wiped away all memories I have ever had of bestowing upon another. I am quite sure that, once you are able to take me, all of the ugly memories will be reduced to ghostly things, and robbed of their ability to do me harm."

He smiled. "That is my hope."

I held him and we slept.

I woke to weight on my back, and fingers about my hard cock. It was as it had been during the storm. Except this time, the world was quiet and peaceful and morning light flooded through the lace curtains.

"Gaston?"

"Hush," he hissed.

He shifted, one hand going between my shoulder blades to keep me pinned, the other moving to toy with my opening.

"Gaston, let me up for a moment," I said as calmly as I could manage.

"Non. Trust me. I will be nice," he whispered. There was menace in his tone.

A finger slipped inside me.

Fear knotted my bowels.

"Gaston, how are we?"

"I am fine," he said with annoyance. "I will not have you marry that bitch until I have had you first. You want me. I want you. Let me do this as I must."

My Horse was running, with terror in its eyes and the demons of fear and need spurring it on. I hung on. This was not how it should be, but perhaps it was the only way it could be. I wanted him. He wanted me. Could I not just submit? Might this allow him to do it as himself?

Another finger had joined the first, and I was not relaxed. I squirmed with the discomfort and in anticipation of the pain.

"Be still," he said huskily. "Relax. You want this."

You want this. The world exploded, and Shane's ugly words were echoed a million times, to slash me like shards of glass.

"NON!"

I rolled under him, and found a knife at my throat. I was not deterred.

"Damn you!" I roared. "You will never say that to me! Never! I do not care how mad you are. You will not say that."

His eyes were wild, like those of a cornered animal. I felt the fingers of his other hand at my throat, beneath the knife.

I did not stop. "And you will not do this. You know damn well you

court disaster. I will not let you destroy us out of fear and..."

He hit me. I saw stars, and then nothing.

When I came to, he was gone. I dove from the bed and cast about. He had left all of his weapons, but his clothes were gone. I quickly threw my breeches on and ran for the door. I could not know how much of a head start he had. I also could not know where he was going.

I found a surprised Theodore and Hannah in the dining room.

"Did you see him?" I yelled.

They nodded and pointed toward the front door. I left them.

Once on the street, I did not know which way to go. He could be heading to the Palisadoes. There were people across the way, and they were looking and gesturing toward Lime Street.

"Did you see a red-headed man?" I called to them.

They nodded and pointed in the direction they had before. I cursed. He was going toward people, not away.

"Will! What is going on?" Theodore yelled from his doorway.

"Go to my house!" I called back over my shoulder as I ran. "Get Striker and Pete! Gaston has gone mad!"

I ran toward Lime. At that corner I found others who had seen him. He was not heading toward the Hole. He was heading up toward the taverns and shops. I was soon able to follow the surprised and curious faces of everyone he had passed. Then I heard the ruckus in a tavern.

I charged inside and found him taking on nearly all of the occupants. I was damn glad it was morning and not midnight: the place was mostly empty. Still, there were surely a dozen of them. He was fighting unarmed, and I had a scant second to thank the Gods for it, as men surely would have died otherwise. As it was, he was a whirling fury, and they could not take him. I screamed his name and he paused to glare at me. In that moment, the barkeep hit him from behind with a club. I had almost reached him. I threw myself atop him as he went down under a hail of blows. I could do nothing but curse and gasp. Then they realized there were two of us beneath their fists and feet and they backed away.

"He is mad. He is mad," I gasped over and over again, once I thought they might hear me.

Gaston was stiff with rage beneath me. His eyes were hard and glittering, but he did not fight me.

"I love you, even now," I whispered.

And then familiar hands and faces were on us and about us. My vision was blurred and the room spun as Striker pulled me to my feet. Theodore was panting and asking me if I was well. They held me away from the scuffle that ensued as Cudro and Pete bound Gaston. And then I was suspended between Theodore and Striker and out in the street. I kept passing into blackness, and in my lucid moments I was minded of our escape from Doucette's. Pete was even carrying Gaston again. Of course, this time Gaston was hurling French curses at the world.

We reached our room at Theodore's, and they bound Gaston to

the bed. Striker and Theodore were discussing which surgeon to send for. Gaston was growling that he would not have me treated by some ignorant fool.

I was dizzy and the ability to speak seemed distant. I finally managed to grab Cudro and get him to kneel beside me on the floor. "How badly injured am I?"

He shook his head with a sad smile. "Will, you got a gash on your head that will need sewing, your lip is split, your right eye is swelling closed, and you seem to be somewhat addled. Your matelot's in better condition, but he has a nasty cut on the back of his head, too."

"Will!" Gaston hissed.

I crawled to the head of the bed.

"You have taken a blow to the head," Gaston said. "Do not sleep. Do not let them put us to sleep."

"No sleep. I understand," Cudro said from behind me.

"I love you," I whispered to Gaston.

He cursed and pulled at the ropes binding his wrists to the headboard. "Will, you damn fool. Why did you let them hurt you?"

"I was trying to protect you."

Gaston gave a ragged sob, and then he snarled in English. "Someone put pressure on the gash on his head."

"We're going to try and find a surgeon," Striker said.

"Release me, and I will tend him," Gaston said.

"Like Hell," Striker replied.

Gaston returned to swearing in French.

I turned until I could see Striker speaking with Theodore at the door.

"He can tend me," I called.

"Will," Striker said with exasperation. "He's raving mad."

"Aye," I sighed, "but he is a fine physician nonetheless. He will tend me. He is always able to control himself to do so."

Cudro cut Gaston's bonds. This set Striker and Pete to swearing.

"He's lucid enough," Cudro said. "I speak French. He's not raving, just swearing."

"Thank you," I managed to say before Gaston was upon me.

"And what about the gash on your own damn fool head?" Striker yelled.

"I will instruct someone on what to do," Gaston snarled. "Get boiled water from Sam, and rum." He glared at them. "You may bind me again after I finish."

Pete dropped into my view. "Will?"

"He will care for me," I said doggedly. "Please help him."

Pete nodded.

Sometime later, we were both stitched to Gaston's satisfaction, and Pete was rebinding him to the bed. Cudro was gathering up the needles and soiled bandages. He had been the one to work on Gaston's wound. I slowly went to lie on the bed next to Gaston. My sides ached from the kicks they took, but Gaston had pronounced my ribs sound. They did

not feel so at the moment. I wanted something for the pain, but my matelot said I could have nothing until my head cleared. I could not understand how that was going to happen when it ached so.

Theodore leaned over me. "Is there anything that needed your attention today?"

I struggled to remember. Something of import had occurred yesterday. Then I remembered. I chuckled ruefully. Thank the Gods I wasn't to see Sir Christopher until tomorrow. But there was something on the agenda for today. "Agnes."

"Oh, the girl, will she be at the Vines?"

"I would imagine so," I gasped.

"What should I tell people?" Theodore asked.

"They got into a brawl in a tavern," Striker said with a tired sigh.

"That will not reflect badly upon their character amongst gentlefolk?" Theodore asked with bemusement.

"Oh Hell," Striker chuckled. "Is there anything that can be said about these two that will not?"

"Go to the Devil," I sighed.

He chuckled. "Tell them some of the crew was involved in a brawl last night, and they waded in to sort through the matter. That shouldn't sound too bad."

"I think that will do," Theodore said. "Should they be left alone?"

"Aye," I said. "Please."

I could not see them, but I well knew they were exchanging looks. Pete leaned over me. "DoNaCut'ImLose."

"I will not. I promise," I whispered.

"I do not want him to," Gaston said.

"YaBeMad. YaGetNoSay."

That was not the wisest thing for him to say. I could feel Gaston tense beside me.

I patted his thigh, and spoke in French. "All will be well. Let them leave us for a time."

They finally left. I stared at the ceiling. Death seemed a promising option.

"You will not marry that bitch," Gaston growled. "She is jealous of me. She wants you to herself."

I did not know if that were fact of fancy, but I did not care to argue about it.

"What of children?" I asked.

"I do not know," he said tightly. "We will find a wife who despises you."

"Thank you. What else troubled you?" I asked.

"I will not receive you again."

"Ah," I sighed. "I surely will not bestow upon you again, if this be the outcome."

Though I knew it was not the sole reason for this morning's bout. His inability to perform as he wished last night, coupled with his need to

possess me because of Christine, had led to it as well.

"Why did you instigate the fight in the tavern?" I asked.

His anger was gone. "I sought chastisement. I sought pain. And now I have caused you further pain."

I snorted. "And there is your punishment for running off and inducing people to hurt you; you must lie there and know I am in pain." I meant it to be a jest, somewhat, but my delivery was quite flat.

He took a long ragged breath and began to sob. I cursed quietly and turned my head toward him. I was facing his armpit. With a pained sigh, I tried to roll toward him.

"Non," he hissed. "Stay still."

I returned to staring at the ceiling. I reached up and found his arm, and ran my hand along it until I found his bound wrist.

"Will," he said raggedly. "Don't."

"I am not going to set you free," I said tiredly. I slipped my fingers between his. "In any fashion. You will not succeed, no matter how you might try to drive me away."

He squeezed my hand. I heard him sniff and wipe his nose on the shoulder of his tunic.

"I feel trapped," he whispered.

I silently cursed my prior choice of words. "If you wish for me to leave, I will."

"Non. I cannot live without you."

"So you were seeking death this morning?" I asked.

He snorted. "Oui. You should not love me. If you love me, then I am worthy of love, and all the evils done to me have been unwarranted."

"I understand," I said. "I have had similar thoughts. You are correct. Either we do not love one another, or evil has consistently been visited upon our undeserving persons."

"I love you," he said.

"Then the world has been very cruel, or perhaps the Gods."

"My father did not love my mother," he said.

"What?"

"If he loved her," he said fiercely, "he would have done much for her, as you do for me. He would not have locked her away."

I was surprised. "Did you think they loved one another? I have never assumed my parents shared anything other than respect."

"He said he loved her. He said he loved me."

I puzzled over that. "Do you wish he had loved you when he nearly flogged you to death in a fit of anger, or when he sent you away to those schools where you were so poorly used? That is not love. I have always wanted love. I have never had it until now. All before have hurt me."

"I hurt you," he said.

I sighed with exasperation. My aching body made me regret such a show of drama.

"Oui," I said quietly. "But you seek to castigate yourself for it. I am sure they congratulated themselves for harming me, if they noticed what

they had wrought at all.”

He sighed. “I think my father feels he loves me.”

It brought to mind a number of things. “You might be correct, and mine might believe he loves me. For all the damn good it has done us. And that may be all the love they are capable of, but damn it, it is not good enough by half. It is merely tragic they think that love; it is not forgivable.”

He was silent for a while, and then he said softly, “Please bind me so that I can hold you, or at least touch you.”

“Gladly,” I sighed. “But if I am to move, I want to accomplish all things I might need to move for this day, at one time. Would it be permissible for me to have some laudanum now?”

“Oui. You seem quite lucid. I wish to see your eyes when you turn over, though.”

I slowly rolled off the bed to my knees. The room did not reel.

“What do my eyes have to do with laudanum?” I asked when I could finally turn to him.

I found him teary-eyed.

“Oh, stop,” I chided.

He smiled weakly. “You fool. You are bruised all over.”

“Aye, well, as we have discussed, I am very much your fool. And if you looked as I do now, I would be suffering as much pain as you feel at the sight of me. I could not let them hurt you. Now what is this damn fascination with my eyes?”

He nodded. “If the pupils, the black parts, are not the same size, it indicates damage to the brain. There is an ancient medical remedy involving drilling a hole in the skull to relieve the pressure, but even Doucette had not seen it practiced.” He snorted. “From Striker’s description of speaking to Doucette after Pierrot beat him, I think it likely Doucette suffered from that type of damage. I wonder if he has recovered, or if he is permanently impaired?”

“I hope he is miserable either way,” I sighed. “I suppose I am able to have laudanum only if my eyes do not appear to be strange sizes.”

“Oui. It can be dangerous for a man to sleep if he has suffered a wound of that type. You do not appear to.”

I peered at the black part of his eyes. They were the same size. “Neither have you.”

He nodded. “Then we may both sleep the day away.”

I untied him. I was strangely afraid Pete would burst into the room to scold me.

Thankfully, once I had his wrists free, Gaston could tend to his own ankles. I lay down again while he retrieved the laudanum and water. He quickly dosed both of us. I felt I was drifting in a dream, even before the substance had time to work its magic. We had done all of this before, after Tortuga. How many more times would we do this in our lives? How many more wounds could I take?

When he handed me the rope, I asked, “Is this truly necessary, or

are you trying to punish yourself further? How riled is your Horse? And how much laudanum did you take?"

He tossed the rope on the floor, and curled beside me with his leg over mine and our fingers entwined. He kissed my cheek.

The laudanum took hold and I began to drift toward the Heavens. I thought this convenient, as I wished to say a thing or two to the Gods.

Thirty-Three

Wherein Some Flee and Others Fight

I heard breathing other than my own, and laughter, and assorted small sounds. I smelled tobacco smoke and wine. Gaston's head was heavy on my shoulder. Lamplight flickered on the ceiling. I could not see out of my right eye. I turned my head, and found Striker's back. Beyond him, I saw Pete, Theodore, and Cudro around a table that had been fitted into the room. They were playing cards.

"What the Devil is going on?" I asked.

My voice had been unsteady and quiet, and I was not sure if they heard me, but then Striker turned to peer down at me.

"How much damn laudanum did you two fools take?" he asked. "It is near midnight and we have been here since sunset, and you have not moved. Theodore had Sam here all day watching you, and he swears you didn't move then, either."

I listened: Gaston was definitely breathing; but had he taken so much he would not wake? I shook him, and patted his cheek. He murmured at me sleepily, and batted my hand away. I sighed with relief.

"Well, I will move now," I told Striker. "I need to piss."

"Don't trouble yourself overmuch." He handed me the chamber pot.

I thought that absurd, and then I tensed my muscles to move and found I would truly rather not. I carefully relieved myself in the chamber pot.

Striker took it and emptied it out the window. Then he sat on the edge of the bed.

"What the Devil happened?" he asked.

I was trying to remember that, myself. I slowly recalled events I knew I could not tell them, and parsed them into ones I could.

"He woke in the grips of madness," I said. "We argued somewhat, as I was not fully awake. He became distraught, and wished to... fight. So he went to the first tavern he found."

"He didn't want to fight you?" Striker asked.

"Nay. He was distraught because he had angered me."

Striker did not seem fully satisfied with this explanation, but he nodded.

"He used to not recover for days," he said.

"Aye, that was before me," I said.

He sighed.

"Thank you," I said, "all of you, for all of your assistance and concern. I am sorry we are such a bother."

"It is all over town, Will," Striker said. "Pierrot came and asked me of it. There has been talk among the French of his madness, even before this."

I frowned. "All who have sailed with him have known him mad."

Striker shrugged. "Aye, and that was before Doucette was shot and beaten in his house."

I swore. "Oh bloody Hell. They are not speaking of witchcraft, are they?"

"Nay, but the gossip is that he stabbed his matelot," Striker said.

"Well, he did."

"Aye, but who knew of it, Will?" he asked.

"Madame Doucette, the priests..."

"Young Tom," he spat.

"Oh Christ...." I sighed. "Dickey said he arrived with the French."

Striker nodded grimly. "And there is more. Many of the French believe Gaston shot Doucette. Some of the French wish to hang him; others think he's too mad to be trusted in battle."

"Should we sail?" I asked.

"I want you to sail," Striker sighed. "We need to speak to Pierrot and the *Belle Mer's* captain, Savant."

"May I understand what this is about?" Theodore asked.

I could not remember all I had told him in October, only what I had not. So I now told him of what had occurred on the galleon, and of the charges of witchcraft the next time we sailed, and how someone had murdered Michaels.

I was not precisely sure when, but I became aware that Gaston was awake. He did not move. I squeezed his fingers and he returned it.

"You say Gaston showed them...?" Theodore was asking.

I motioned him over, and raised Gaston's tunic enough to show the scars upon his lower back. Gaston did not stop me. Theodore's eyes widened considerably. He returned to his seat, shaking his head with sympathy.

"May I ask how that occurred?" he asked.

I sighed. Gaston had told Striker that his father had flogged him, but no other. I imagined Pete knew. I thought it best Cudro and Theodore did as well. Gaston rubbed my finger. I took the gesture for reassurance.

"His father did this, and then sent him away," I said.

"Can you divulge why?" Theodore asked like a true barrister.

That I did not need guidance on, but I expected Gaston to signal me again. He did nothing.

"Nay," I said. "Other than that it occurred in a fit of rage his father apparently rues enough to send his son a great deal of money."

"You know why," Theodore said. It was not a question.

"Aye."

"Is it related to his madness?" he asked.

"Aye."

"May I ask who his father is?" Cudro rumbled quietly.

"Le Marquis de Tervent."

Cudro whistled appreciatively. "I always guessed he was of noble birth."

"Tell Theodore What Doucette Did," Pete said.

I nodded. "Gaston's bouts can be triggered by the sight of a whip. Doucette thought Gaston should become injured to them, so that they would no longer affect him. He strapped Gaston to a chair in a room full of whips, and used little hooks upon his eyelids to hold his eyes open."

"Oh bloody... No wonder all Hell broke loose," Theodore sighed.

"Did you think I lacked good reason?" I chided.

He smiled. "Nay, nay... And he has been mad since?"

"He has always been mad," I sighed. "His ability to control his madness was affected, though. In time, that will pass. And we are working toward allaying his issue with whips and other triggers ourselves, by far gentler means. And as you saw today, the time it takes him to recover from a bout has been greatly diminished. And we know he finds life aboard a ship calming and orderly. It enhances his control."

They were all thoughtful. Gaston caressed my fingers.

"I will vouch for him," Striker sighed and studied the floor. "I would have, anyhow; but now I will do so with confidence."

I smiled. "Thank you. For that, and for being willing to vouch for him without confidence."

He smiled sadly and shook his head. "God knows I am fond of the both of you."

There was something haunting his eyes. I wondered at his thoughts.

"I hope you already know it is mutual," I said.

"Aye." His smile quickly sobered. "Will, he cannot be starting fights, or arranging bodies, or anything else."

"Nay, or speaking in tongues," I said. "I know. I know. He did not start the fight today to... cause trouble. He wanted to lose. He wanted them to beat him as soundly as they beat me."

"He's done that before," Cudro said. "When he goes, he'll battle anyone in his path."

"Aye," I sighed. "Pierrot actually warned me of it, but today was the first I have seen of it."

"So he does that to lose?" Striker asked.

"Aye," I sighed. "Not every time, but when he instigates a fight with more men than he can handle."

"Why?" Striker asked.

Gaston's fingers were tight about mine.

"I do not feel I can discuss that with you," I said quickly. "I do not fully understand it myself. And it is a thing I would not tell the other captains; well, perhaps Pierrot, but only if Gaston permits it."

My matelot rubbed my fingers. I was not sure how I could relay that to Striker.

"I understand," Striker sighed in response to the words he had heard. "It would sure mitigate the hard feelings, though."

I could see where it would. Gaston squeezed my fingers.

"I feel you can tell Pierrot, but no other," I said. "How were things left with the tavern?"

They all waved me off and made disparaging noises.

"I talked to the men involved," Striker said. "That is how I heard of the French gossip."

"Lovely," I muttered. "Anything else I should know of?"

"We... you have a housekeeper," Striker said. "And you're right; she's a mousey little thing. We got her situated with a bed and the like."

"SheLikesDahgs. WeCanKeep'Er."

I smiled. "Thank you." I looked to Theodore. "I take it all went well with her stepfather."

"Aye," he sighed. "He thinks thirty pounds makes him wealthy, and he is pleased to be rid of her. The contract is seven years, and she is fourteen, so he does not expect to ever see her again."

I nodded. "Good. If I ever meet him, I will most likely kill him."

Theodore sighed loudly, but when I looked to him, I found him chuckling.

Striker was studying Gaston with concern. I wondered if Gaston had betrayed himself in some fashion.

"Will you be well if we leave?" Striker asked with a smile.

I nodded.

He did a curious thing: he leaned over and kissed my forehead, and then Gaston's temple.

"Don't worry me so," he whispered.

I was sure the admonishment was to both of us.

Striker left with Cudro and Pete. I thanked them yet again.

Theodore came around the table to sit on the side of the bed where Striker had. I wondered if he would kiss me too. He bore the same mien of concern.

"None of them mentioned your potential nuptials, so I did not either," he said.

I watched Theodore carefully. Other than an anxious glance at

Gaston's head on my shoulder, he was ignoring my matelot and talking only to me. I judged he did not realize Gaston was awake.

I sighed. "I have not told them, yet. I..."

Theodore shook his head. "No need to explain, they are buccaneers, they will likely consider it treachery against your matelot."

I grinned. "Pete will."

He sobered. "I, however, would like to know if that matter had a thing to do with Gaston's loss of control."

"Aye and nay," I answered

Gaston squeezed my fingers.

I shook my head. "Aye, it did... have much to do with it, such that the wedding will not occur. I am sorry, but..."

"I understand," he said with a dismissive wave. "I know you will surrender your title for him. I hold no judgment over that. And with all you have said tonight concerning his madness... I see where... My Lord, Will, however will you... survive?"

His words caught my breath. Gaston's fingers did not move.

I chuckled. "I wonder that myself. I hope, in time, I can help him. He truly wanted this. He tried very hard. He puts great store in my title. He puts store in children, which I do not. He was truly not opposed to my marrying. But, Miss Vines is... quite the opponent, and it... tore at the fabric of our partnership."

"What will you do when the bride your father will send arrives?" he asked.

I shrugged such as I was able. "I will not know until we meet her."

"So there is still the possibility that you will proceed with what must be done to inherit?"

"Aye."

Theodore considered that with a grave frown. "I am both relieved and concerned. I would ask you this: Is it possible he will pose a threat to any bride?"

I had not considered that. I was not sure if Gaston had, either, but the mention of it caused him to start ever so slightly. Thankfully, Theodore was intent upon my reaction alone.

"I do not know," I said soberly.

Theodore lowered his voice, though I knew not who else would hear. "Will, the Brethren are by necessity tolerant of all manner of things, and resolve matters among themselves. It appears that you have already dealt with that once, and now you will have to dispel this issue of the French gossip in some fashion. English law is not so tolerant. Gaston has been protected from much of the effects of his madness by living exclusively among the Brethren. Now, with you, he hangs between two sets of laws. If he harms someone other than a buccaneer, your father's name will not protect him, and he no longer has his father's title either. He is a commoner, and will be treated as such by the law."

I was stunned. Gaston had often harmed someone while mad, but unless it was the Spanish, it had always been a member of the Brethren

and always because he was provoked, and it had never caused a death. But Theodore was correct: all of that would be perceived very differently if Gaston attacked a planter or, far more likely, any bride I took.

For his part, my matelot was rubbing my fingers in a frantic manner.

"Thank you," I said seriously. "I had not thought of any of that. Now I shall have night terrors." I smiled weakly.

Theodore smiled sadly and patted my shoulder. "I do not know what advice to give you, other than it is probably safest if you rove, provided the buccaneers don't maroon you someplace."

I nodded. "We have thought much the same, but not for that reason."

"Rest now, and heal," he admonished.

"I will try. I feel I will spend some goodly time composing what I will say to Miss Vines and Sir Christopher."

He sighed heavily. "Perhaps we can concoct some plausible excuse for your change of heart that will not make them your enemies."

I smiled. "The truth would probably leave them relieved."

Theodore chuckled.

"Sleep," he said, and left us.

Gaston moved as soon as the door closed. He rose above me, and supported himself on one arm, so that I need not strain to see him. He appeared to be himself, and I found myself gazing into a pair of calm but intense emerald eyes.

"I would not harm any bride of yours," he said quickly.

I was thankful my right eye was injured and not my left, as my left eyebrow is always the one I raise in query. I did so now.

He shook his head regretfully. "You are correct. I can guarantee nothing."

I smiled. "Non, I feel you cannot at this juncture, but I trust you still, and I do not wish to dwell on that now. Were you awake through the entirety of it?"

"I began to wake when you slapped me."

"I was afraid you had taken far too much laudanum. We have apparently not moved all day. Are you angry with me over anything I said or... revealed?" I asked cautiously.

He shook his head and smiled. "Non. You were quite... adroit in interpreting my signals and answering so that you said all that was needed and little else. And they are our friends; they need to know." Then he gave me a mock-angry glare and his hand went playfully about my throat. "And how can you worry over my feelings on the matter after all I have done? I swear, there are times I would strangle you."

With alarm, I recalled the last time he had gone for my neck. I kept my tone amused. "This morning was apparently nearly one of them."

His hand was quickly away, and his pretense at anger replaced by sincere guilt.

"There are times I could strangle you," I said gently. "And this

morning was one of them.”

“You should have.” He smiled sadly. “You were very angry. You surprised me. I am proud of you. I thought we would fight.”

I shook my head. “If you had not said what you did to make me angry... my Horse was truly intent on running off the cliff and convincing me the fall would not be so very bad. So I would say, never ever say that to me again, but in this case, it served an unplanned purpose.”

“What exactly can I not say?” he asked sincerely.

“That I want it,” I said calmly.

He frowned. “I am not to tell you that you want it?”

I shook my head somberly. “Not in that situation, non. It is a thing Shane said. He would admonish me with it to stifle my protests while he took me. And it was a thing Alonso even said on occasion. He was kinder, in that he would use the phrase to cajole me.”

“I feel you have told me that before,” Gaston said sadly.

“I may have, I do not remember. You were very odd this morning.” I snorted at the absurdity of my statement. “Of course you were, but I mean, you were... I do not know if your intent was to hurt me, so much as it was to take what you wanted, and you knew I wanted. And then you said that, which if I have told you that, was a very cruel thing to say. I am torn as to whether or not you were truly trying to drive me away.”

He looked away and his voice was thick. “I was testing you. I cannot believe you love me so.”

I understood; and though it stirred the embers of a deep anger, they did not kindle. “Ah, you said something similar in the aftermath. That if I truly love you, then...”

“I am worthy of it, and that must change my perspective on all else done to me.” He shook his head guiltily. “I look upon you now, and I do not feel very worthy of love.”

His gaze was on my swollen eye.

I smiled weakly. “Do I look as I feel?”

“Do you feel as if you were trampled by a bull?” He smiled with guilt.

“Oui, I do.” I chuckled. My ribs complained, and I grimaced.

“Do not make me laugh, you bastard.” I grinned.

He closed his eyes with pain. “I am sorry, Will. I cause nothing but trouble.”

I remembered making a similar statement, and his response. “Tell me of it, I married you.”

He looked hurt.

This amused me even more. “Non, my love, I will not gainsay you on it. You require far more effort than any other thing I have ever attempted.”

He caressed my undamaged cheek. “I am trying very hard.”

“I know,” I said kindly. “And I love you for it even more.”

He nodded. “What will we do, now that I have made a mockery of

our plans and no one wishes to sail with me?"

"That is not true."

He sighed. "You are correct. We have true friends. I do not feel I am worthy of them, either."

"You must learn to become inured to that, though I am equally unaccustomed to it and grateful for it." I grinned. "Theodore actually ran to fetch Pete and Striker. I cannot imagine him running."

He smiled, but further thoughts of Theodore apparently sobered him. "He is correct. I will hang if I kill someone. It has not been a danger before, because I have been amongst the Brethren."

"All right, we will dwell upon it a little. Would you wish to harm Miss Vines while mad?"

He nodded sadly. "The guilty looks she gave me after you kissed her raised my hackles."

That was interesting. One missed so much only having one pair of eyes. "You truly feel she wants me, such that she would be jealous of you?" I recalled all that had been said to the best of my ability and realized I had seen hint of it too. "I feel you are correct."

"No matter what potential good the situation might present," he said, "I feel no good can come of it. I am sorry, as I am the one who put you to it."

I shook my head and attempted to shrug again. "Non, non, it was ill-fated all around. I will tell them something, and we will be done with it."

He gave a rueful smile. "Perhaps you should tell them the truth. That you have cast your lot with a madman."

Sadly, I did not think that would mitigate Sir Christopher's dislike of me when he learned I had trifled with his daughter. I thought it likely he would be angry that I had a matelot at all.

"I think it likely Christine will be relieved," I sighed.

"I hope she does not hate us." He shook his head. "And as for the other, I do not know how I will be if the bride arrives."

"Please do not take offense, my love, but I think it likely I shall never marry and we shall be forced to steal children from tinkers."

He chuckled, and climbed gingerly over me and off the bed.

"Do you require anything?" he asked as he availed himself of the chamber pot.

I had to think on it, as the answer was not immediate. I hurt so much that the normal functions of my body were very distant things. "I am thirsty."

He fetched a bottle of water and cradled my head so that I could drink. I felt like a babe in his arms. It was comforting.

"Might I have more laudanum?" I asked when he set the bottle down.

He prepared a dose in a vial.

"How does your head feel?" I asked.

He smiled weakly. "As if I was struck."

I smiled as well. "That is probably good."

"Sleep now," he whispered, as I drank.

"Do not leave me."

"I cannot."

"Because we are chained together?" I asked sadly.

He frowned in thought. "Non, I feel it is because we are chained to something else?"

"What, a rock?" I asked with amusement.

"Non, a cart."

"So we are two centaurs chained to a cart? What is in the cart?"

"Love," he said soberly. "I think the cart is our partnership."

I tried to envision it as the laudanum took hold: two centaurs, one white, the other black, hauling an ancient two-wheeled cart down a forest path. Our cart was very full. I wondered if that made it heavier.

I woke to him gently shaking my head and softly calling my name. Despite his gentleness, my head throbbed, and I moaned in protest.

"I am sorry," he whispered. "You must wake."

"Why?" I moaned.

Bright light stabbed through my good eye and deep into my skull. I cursed and covered my face with my hands. That only served to make me acutely aware of my other bruises.

"Sir Christopher is here," he whispered.

"Oh no..."

"I know, Will, I would shoot him to spare you this if it would not cause more trouble. Perhaps I should speak to him. Theodore says he is quite agitated."

I sighed. "Damn it all, you shall come with me then."

Gaston helped me rise and don a clean tunic. Then we made our slow way downstairs with my arm about his shoulder.

Sir Christopher Vines was quite perplexed at my appearance. "Good Lord, my Lord, you have been in a bit of a brawl, I daresay. And here I bring bitter news to add to your troubles."

I blinked at him in surprise as Gaston helped me into the chair Theodore was proffering. I glanced at Theodore, and received a small shake of his head to indicate he did not know what the man spoke of, either.

"He is distraught," Theodore mouthed.

I could see that. Sir Christopher was a large and heavy man, and dressed as a good English gentleman should, which is to say he would have been warm on an October day in London. Yet a case of high humor and not the heat surely accounted for the copious perspiring he was doing, such that he was constantly mopping his brow with an already-damp kerchief while pacing about.

"Please, my good man, what is troubling you?" I asked. "I planned to meet with you this day..."

"I know, I know," he wailed. "It is all my fault. I had no son. And I loved her mother beyond all good sense. I fear I have spoiled the girl. I have nurtured her headstrong ways."

"Sir Christopher, I... find her spirited nature quite endearing," I said

carefully.

"Truly? Well, you might not now," he said bitterly.

"Why?" I asked.

"She has fled!"

I was alarmed. "Truly? Where?"

"I know not. She left me a letter. A letter! Her own father. She says she does not wish to marry, and she is sorry for the trouble she knows this will cause, but she has decided to return to her Aunt's in Vienna. I am damned, my Lord, if I know how. I inquired about, and no young lady has booked passage. A ship did sail on the evening winds yesterday, but their agent did not book a young lady passage and vowed they never would without her father's consent. I have men scouring the town for her. And I have sent to all the plantations with which we have acquaintance."

I wondered if I should tell him he should be inquiring about a boy with very red legs. I was torn between my concern over the danger she had undertaken, and allowing her to escape, both for my ends and her own. I saw my thoughts mirrored on Gaston's face.

"I am quite surprised," I managed to say.

Sir Christopher handed me a sealed letter. It was addressed to me.

"I hope that will shed light on the matter, my Lord," he said.

I read her tight script as fast as my aching head would allow. It was as I might have expected. After giving it great and serious thought, she knew she did not wish to marry, even me, even with the offer we presented her. She apologized and wished us well.

I handed the letter to Gaston.

Her father was watching me with pleading eyes.

"I feel I am to blame, Sir Christopher," I said carefully.

I could see the threads of the fabric I must weave, but I feared I would be thick-fingered in the execution of the design. I forged ahead anyway.

"My courtship of your lovely daughter was quite hurried. This is due to my father's wishing that I marry as soon as possible. To which end, he is sending a bride for me. I am somewhat strong-willed and headstrong too, thus my admiration of those qualities in your daughter. And... I wished to choose my own bride. And I was quite taken with Miss Vines when we met last year. I decided to woo her, such that I could be married to a young lady of my own choosing prior to the arrival of the other. And... well, apparently, she is not ready to wed. And... she wishes to marry for love, as you did, good sir. My hasty courtship did not give time for that to develop before a decision had to be made. And so she has bolted like a skittish filly."

I looked back on my handiwork, and thought it a pretty thing: there was surely enough truth woven in to it for it to stand the test of time.

Thankfully, it seemed to calm him somewhat, and he sat heavily in a chair. He contemplated the floor with a thoughtful expression for a time.

"I am sorry, sir," I added. "That... this has led to her leaving you as

well. And I pray to God it has not caused her to do anything so rash as to put herself in harm's way."

He dabbed at his eyes with the kerchief. "That is my concern as well."

"Well," I said carefully, "we may take some small comfort in that she is an intelligent and resourceful young lady, and accustomed to travel."

He shook his head. "Aye, my Lord, but I almost wish she has taken up with some rake and brought herself to ruin. At least then someone would be there to keep her from harm."

"Truly, good sir, I would wish that as well," I sighed. "And that may well be the case, and the good words she left with us, merely platitudes to assuage us."

He studied me. "When I first heard of all of this, and Mister Theodore said you had been in an altercation, I wondered if perhaps you had fought someone over her."

I shook my head quickly and regretted it. "Nay, sir, I know no more than I have told you."

He nodded. "I am sorry for thinking such a thing. I... well, my Lord, thank you for considering her. I would have been honored to call you son, and not merely because of your title, but because you truly seem to be a gentleman who would have... appreciated my daughter."

His words saddened me greatly and I spoke with sincerity. "Aye, sir. And thank you. And I would have been pleased and honored to have you as my father-in-law, as you too seem to be a man who cares more for his kin than for wealth or propriety. I think that truly admirable. And I do truly think you have a fine daughter."

"Thank you, my Lord," he said with a grave nod. "I will leave you, then. I must continue to search."

"We will contact all we know and do likewise," I assured him.

He stood and bowed, and with Gaston's help, I did likewise.

I sagged back into the chair as he left. Theodore was studying the corner of the ceiling from behind steepled fingers. I knew he was hiding a smile. Gaston was bemused at my side.

"God loves you," Theodore said.

"Someone must," I agreed. "However, we must search for her. She will be dressed as a boy."

"What?" Theodore asked.

"The lads that came calling the day before last were Miss Vines and Agnes."

He was appalled. "You jest."

I grinned. "Nay. We must speak to Agnes and see what she knows."

"Sir Christopher did," Theodore sighed. "He said he took her a letter as well, and the girl was quite beside herself."

"Damn," I sighed, "I had hoped... well, we must ask about the ship that left last night, if they booked passage for a lad."

"We must do nothing if it includes you," Gaston said. "You will return to bed. Theodore and I will see to this."

I looked to Theodore as Gaston helped me stand again. I found him giving my matelot a troubled look. We did not need any of that.

"He is well," I said.

Gaston looked at Theodore sharply.

"I am sorry," Theodore told him. "I am not... familiar with madness. I know not what to expect from you."

Gaston sighed. "Expect me to care for Will, when I am not deranged such that I cause him harm."

He got me upstairs again and we discovered the bed linen had been changed. I supposed we owed Mistress Theodore a new set, as we had bled all over the last. The table had also been removed, and fresh water put by the door. We owed Sam a "thank you" and a coin as well.

Mistress Theodore appeared in the doorway. "Will he eat?" she asked Gaston as he maneuvered me onto the bed.

I considered it. I realized I was a bit hungry.

Gaston asked that I be brought broth and a little bread. I protested, as I had not been stabbed in the gut this time. He took up the silver mirror from his medicine chest and raised my tunic to show me the livid bruise the size of my hand on my lower back and side.

"Oh damn," I sighed.

I wondered what else I could not see, and then decided I felt my wounds well enough that I truly did not wish to know their nature.

"I am worried you have suffered internal damage to your organs," Gaston said. "You will lie still. You will have a little broth, and then a little laudanum, and then you will sleep."

And that is what happened.

It was dusk when I woke again. There was a quiet scratching sound, and a bright lamp on the nightstand, despite the dim golden light from the windows. I looked about curiously and found Agnes sitting beside the bed. She had her feet propped on the side of the mattress, and her sketchbook on her upraised knees. She appeared to be deep at work, sketching me.

She started when she looked up and saw my eye was open. "You moved."

"I am sorry," I chuckled. "I did not know I was modeling."

She smiled. "The bruises and the swelling are... interesting."

"I would like you to do a portrait of Gaston someday."

She nodded. "Why?"

"He is scarred. You might find interest in the textures, and I wish to have a lovely portrait of him."

She seemed truly intrigued. "He is scarred? Hmmm... I will do that."

"Where is Gaston?" I asked.

"I believe he said he was going to go run along the beach," she said distractedly, her eyes once more upon her paper. "He left me here to watch you and tend to you if you should wake before he returned."

"Good," I sighed. I was damn glad he was tiring his Horse.

"Has there been any word of Christine?" I asked.

"Nay," she said sadly.

"Did you know she would leave?"

"Nay, truly," she sniffled. "I... it is my fault."

"Truly? And how is that?"

She fidgeted with the binding of her book and chewed her lip.

"You can tell me, Agnes. I will not judge you harshly. You see, I feel it is my fault she left. I feel she felt trapped by my need to marry so quickly. And she did not want to bear children right away."

"I suppose there was that, too," she sighed. "But still, I should have kept my mouth shut. I should not have told her. It made her so angry. She said she felt betrayed. But I could not have her marry you without telling her."

I guessed. "That you loved her?"

She nodded with a ragged sob.

"She is a fine woman and very deserving of love and admiration," I said softly.

"I did not love her in a Godly way," she whispered.

I nodded sagely. Agnes' drawings of her friend had indeed spoken volumes.

"Did you wish to touch her?" I asked.

Agnes nodded and the tears flowed down her bony cheeks.

I regarded her with sympathy. "There is nothing wrong with that. I will not say there is another like her, but perhaps you will meet someone someday who will accept your love."

"I do not think so," she said quickly. "I do not want anyone else. There is only Christine."

I could not gainsay her. I know damn well that at fourteen, once the heart becomes fixated, there is no other. Only time would ease her wound.

"I am sorry," I said softly. "When I was your age, I loved another as you do, a young boy."

This brought her eyes to mine.

I smiled. "He did not return my affection, either. And it all went very poorly as a result. My heart was broken for a very long time, until I met Gaston."

She nodded and wiped at her tears with her long charcoal smudged fingers. It left black streaks about her eyes, much like Gaston's mask. It was actually quite fetching.

"She said..." She glanced at me guiltily and then frowned at her book again. "She said that she could love you, but she could never have you, and that made her angry."

"Oh, damn," I sighed.

Gaston had been right. I should not have kissed her; of course, if I had not, then we might have married and everything would be a million times more complicated.

"When did you know you liked boys and not girls?" she asked. Her teeth were worrying her lip again.

I smiled. "When I was twelve or so, and all the other boys began to talk about girls and I realized I wanted to talk about them. Do you favor girls, or just Christine?"

"Girls. They are beautiful. Well, all things can be beautiful, but... I want to touch girls," she finished with a whisper. "And hold them." She looked up at me with earnest curiosity again. "I do not know what girls can do with one another, though, since neither has a cock."

I remembered it would hurt to even chuckle. "Well... women can experience a great deal of pleasure. Do you touch yourself?"

She shook her head in a little emphatic spasm.

I suppressed both a sigh and a grin. "There is nothing wrong with it; unless you truly believe the Church on the matter, and if you do, you will most likely never be happy... Touch yourself, find what brings you pleasure, and then someday, when you meet a girl who wishes to be touched, you will know what to do."

She was deep in thought. "Where should I touch myself?"

I was going to pain myself by trying not to laugh. "Everywhere, but you will find some areas are more sensitive than others, such as your bosom, or between your legs."

For the first time in our conversation, she flushed.

I wondered what she would look like with little charcoal smears all about her privates and breasts. Then I wondered what Gaston would look like with the same. Perhaps we should play with the paint he used about his eyes. But, I had discovered by accident that it did not taste very good. A strange thought came to me. What if I coated him in chocolate?

The pain of laughter took the breath from my breast, but did not succeed in sobering me.

"Please get me some water," I gasped when I could. "I feel a coughing spell coming on."

She hurried to comply, and awkwardly helped me drink it. Then I sent her to inquire if there was any more broth or bread.

When Gaston returned a short time later, I enthusiastically told him, "I want to coat you in chocolate and lick it off. Everywhere, including your member."

He was appalled. "Will, I do not know whether I should give you more laudanum or not."

"Please."

He shook his head and regarded me skeptically. Then he glanced toward my crotch.

I grinned. "Ah hah, see, you think it an interesting idea too."

"Have you done such a thing?" he asked with jealous curiosity.

"Never. I have considered it only once, and then with you."

He shook his head. "You are a fool. It reeks and it is unclean."

"It reeks because it is not clean. Perhaps if we bathed them rigorously."

"And why chocolate?" he asked.

"It tastes good."

He fought smiling. I renewed my pain with more mirth.

"Would you like to know what we have learned?" he asked as he prepared the laudanum.

"Oui, oui."

He sat beside me on the bed and helped me with the draught as he explained. "Martin Gershing, a planter's son, booked passage on the ship that sailed yesterday. Gershing has five boys. They travel to England every year for school. One of them was ill last year and remained here this autumn. The agent did not question the boy being sent to England now that he was healthy. And as it is the cane harvest, the man was also not concerned that none were there to see the boy leave."

I smiled. "I would suppose that Martin Gershing is still on his father's plantation, and they are well-acquainted with the Vines."

"They are neighbors," Gaston said with a grin.

"Well," I sighed. "We may assume she is somewhat safe. Has her father been told?"

"Theodore is there now," he said with a look that conveyed his relief he was not the one bearing those tidings.

"There is one that will nearly miss her as much as her father," I said.

Gaston regarded me sharply.

I grinned. "Agnes." I told him of my conversation with her.

He shook his head. "The Brisket's Horse bolted."

"Oui, though, judging by the sound management of her escape, she may have been planning this for a time."

"Oui," he sighed. "We will never know. I doubt we will ever see her again." He shrugged. "As for sailing, though, I encountered Striker today. He wished to know if you could sail two days hence."

"So soon?"

He nodded. "I will purchase bedding for our table."

"Ah, good, and a large piece of canvas to cover it so we may have privacy," I added.

"Good." He smiled.

"So will I be ready to sail? I cannot see why I cannot lie around on a ship."

"It will depend," he said seriously.

"On what?" I asked.

"On whether I have bound you to bed and coated you with chocolate or not."

I marveled at his lack of expression.

"You tease me," I gasped.

He finally grinned.

"You mock me," I added.

He kissed me gently. "I love you. Now drink this, and go to sleep."

The next day, Gaston went about purchasing the few things we would need to rove, and insuring that Agnes had all she needed to live

in our absence. He established a house account with Theodore, and instructed him to order whatever art supplies she might request.

I was tasked with writing my father and all others I had received letters from – with the exception of Alonso, of course. I made short work of writing Rucker and Sarah, as it would be more important for me to respond in detail to the letters they would send after receiving my longer missive from September. I thought it likely their replies to those other letters would arrive in January. In Sarah's letter, I did express my concern over Shane's anger, and warned her to be careful. I considered asking her if she was unhappy as a woman, but I quickly realized that posing the question was more of an undertaking than I had time or spirit for.

As for my father, I told him I understood his desire that I marry and produce an heir, and that I would be happy to consider any prospect he might send. The words, once written, did not sit well with me, but I knew not what else I could say if we were to continue the ruse of compliance.

So to amuse myself, I wrote another letter to him in which I spoke my mind on the matter. I immediately burned it, but I felt the better for committing the words to paper and thus releasing them from where they smoldered in my heart.

Gaston returned that evening with Striker, Pete, and to my pleasant surprise, Pierrot. The last I had seen the French captain had been in Doucette's torture chamber. I could vividly recall him pinning Doucette to the wall by his throat. Today, the man seemed as jovial as he had when first I met him. His expressive face contorted into a comical grimace at the sight of me.

"My friend, you look horrible," he said in French.

I grinned. "You look well."

"I feel well," he nodded in agreement with a thoughtful mien, as if it were a matter of great reflection.

Gaston helped me sit, and then joined me on the bed. The others sat every which way in chairs. Pete hugged the back of his; Striker sprawled, with his leg crossed and his buttocks and shoulders only barely connected with the wood beneath him; Pierrot sat on his sideways, so that he could rest his left arm on the back. They all looked far more comfortable than I felt. And despite the casualness of their seats, I felt we were up before a tribunal. Gaston appeared very somber, and had barely spoken to me in greeting. I took his hand. He squeezed mine in return.

"I feel this is not exactly a social visit," I said in English.

Pete sighed. Striker nodded reluctantly. Pierrot shrugged.

The Frenchman smiled when he spoke, and though his English was rough, it was understandable. "I hear you have taken good care of him."

"I have done my best," I said. "I hear there is a great deal of gossip about us among the French, about what occurred with Doucette."

"Oui, oui," Pierrot sighed. "It is sad. I am to blame, as much as

anyone.”

“For?” I asked.

“The damn man’s wounds.” He shrugged.

Gaston spoke quickly in French. “Doucette never recovered. He is an imbecile now.”

Pierrot nodded sadly. “I hit him,” he nodded and shrugged again, “many times.”

“Damn,” I sighed. That robbed us of all hope of a meaningful revenge.

“So Île de la Tortue lost its beloved physician, and the Brethren are angry,” I said. “And we are blamed. I mean no offense, but how is it that you are not?”

Pierrot sighed heavily. “My... part was not a thing I told in the taverns. I am sorry for that. But even those who stood there with us ask why. And I could not answer them. I could not say why Doucette did as he did. I could not say why Gaston hates whips. All I could say is that Gaston is mad. They understand that he is mad. Many hate him anyway. They feel he is like a wild dog that should be shot before he bites. It was best to let it lie. And even those who saw events that day can no longer see truth from fancy. I tell people what happened and they do not believe me. They say I lie to protect Gaston. And then we come here. And I hear Savant’s men talking of Gaston. They wish to seek him here, to make him pay for Doucette. And then the matter of the other morning.” He gave another eloquent shrug.

“Oh bloody Hell,” I said. “I am thankful we have not been in town long. So what should be done? Apparently we should not sail.”

Striker shook his head. “It is not just this time, Will. You will not be welcome the next time, either. In time, you may not be welcome on Jamaica.”

So we could not hide from it. “So we must combat this.”

And then I knew I had fought battles like it dozens of times before. I had been paid to do so. I simply needed to view the matter from the proper perspective. I pushed the pain away and with relief realized I might have slept long enough, as the pain did indeed recede enough for me to think clearly.

“It will not be like it was when we careened,” Striker was saying.

“Nay, it will not,” I said confidently. “This does not involve superstition. This is a war that can be won, but there will be casualties.” They were all regarding me quizzically, even Gaston.

“Gentlemen, I once did this to earn my keep.” I spoke slowly, thinking over each sentence before I uttered it. “This is no different from any noble court. Public opinion, the mob, as it were, will rule the day. One must sway them. In many situations, such as ours, it cannot be done with truth. The truth is meaningless. There is now one story being spread that is partial truth and partial lie. We must circulate another one, in such a way that all question the first. It is much as Cudro did when Gaston was accused of witchcraft, by telling all that Michaels

might have been a witch. You saw how quickly that divided them. And then, Gaston gave them a moment of pageantry that corrected the matter, in that he gave them a truth they could see. The lie was based upon a thing intangible, witchcraft, which cannot be proven or disproved. Gaston gave them his madness and a partial reason for it, which he showed them and thus stirred their hearts. People will believe a thing seen over a thing heard."

I had been speaking in English, and Pierrot looked greatly confused, as his English was not sufficient despite the pedestrian speed of my delivery. Gaston was frowning, but he translated my words to French, which only left Pierrot looking as confused as Pete and Striker.

"What the Hell are you talking about?" Striker finally said.

I sighed and continued. "I was not playing a proper game of chess when Gaston was accused of witchcraft, and I was unsure of the board, as it were, and the pieces. And, he was accused of a thing that there is no way to prove or disprove. Thus we were able to defeat it with truth. This matter we now face is different. We must defeat it with a lie.

"In this matter, we have the following facts from the public perspective: Doucette is much beloved, Gaston is mad, Gaston arrived on Tortuga, and something happened involving Doucette and Gaston that left Doucette maimed. We all know the truth. The lie has been allowed to spread because we did not wish to share the truth, as it was inconvenient and compromising, and that is often the way of it. But it is no matter. What we must do is cobble together another half-truth and spread that amongst them, so that doubt is sown. And then, we must have a scapegoat, much as poor Michaels ended up being. Truly, I have orchestrated the like before."

"We blame someone else for what happened to Doucette?" Pierrot asked when Gaston finished translating for him.

"Nay, non," I said quickly. "Someone must be blamed for spreading the lie."

"Which lie?" Striker asked with a little annoyance. "You said we would have one too."

I sighed again. Though I knew what must be done, I thought it likely explaining it would make my head ache anew.

"The first lie," I said patiently, "the one we wish to defeat. Someone must be its champion."

"Do you think someone will volunteer?" Striker asked with amusement.

I shrugged stiffly. "Sometimes they do, or they are obvious. And sometimes they must be chosen. Either way, they will become the font of it, and we will challenge it, and to resolve the matter I will duel with them. The winner is the champion of truth, by right of the Gods, or God. That is the purpose behind duels. But first, we must choose our lie and let it muddy the waters."

"You are saying you will kill someone, or die trying, to lay this to rest?" Striker asked.

I frowned at him. "They are threatening my matelot's life, and our existence here. You are damn right I will kill someone."

"Non," Gaston said. "I will kill him."

I did not like the sound of that. His gaze was quite stern, though. I wished to protest that I knew far more of the matter of dueling than he did, but it was his battle by all rights, and I knew him to be competent. I shrugged painfully.

Meanwhile, the others were chuckling.

"If it's to be done soon, I feel that's more likely," Striker said with amusement. "Tell us what to do before we get to dueling, Will."

Pierrot smiled. "I will help select a scapegoat."

"Actually, I do not feel that is necessary," I said sadly. "I feel in this instance we might have a volunteer."

"Hastings is not involved, yet," Striker said.

"Nay, though I fear we will still be forced to deal with him in time," I sighed. "Nay, our scapegoat is Tom Eaton."

"Who?" Pierrot asked.

Striker and Pete grinned appreciatively. Gaston regarded me with surprise.

"He is the young man who was with us at Doucette's," I said. "All who sailed with us know that he betrayed Gaston and me, in that he took Doucette's side against us. Striker did not let him return with us. In effect, he was marooned on Île de la Tortue, and therefore has reason to dislike us. Even though he has sailed here on the *Belle Mer*, the French cannot really know him. He despised the concept of matelotage, and he spoke no French, and he is a very handsome lad. And he is damn arrogant. And we have already assumed him to be the progenitor of the tales."

I sighed and added, "I intended to either duel with him or beat him soundly over the matter, anyway. So, for all intents, he is already a dead man."

Pierrot chuckled at my supposed hubris. I wished it were arrogance on my part.

"So we have a scapegoat to be killed," Gaston said. "What is the lie?"

"Hold, let me mutter a moment," I said.

Thoughts had been flopping about in my mind like landed fish. There was always a crux. I kept thinking Pierrot had spoken of it, but I could not recall precisely what had made me think that. I did indeed begin to mutter to myself. "The truth does not matter. The truth is that Doucette got what he deserved. But no one believes he deserved anything. They all feel he was a saint and they wonder... why... That is it."

I looked at them each in turn. "We must give Doucette an evil, yet plausible, motivation. We must give him a reason for harming Gaston, one that will make your average buccaneer believe it was necessary for Gaston and me to fight him."

"Will, Doucette believed he was trying to help Gaston," Striker said.

"And I know, that does not matter, but I can think of..."

"The money," Gaston said. "Because it is truth in part. I arrived on Île de la Tortue with a matelot and asked for what was mine. Doucette disapproved of matelotage, and did not wish to surrender my money, or me. And though it was not a matter of the loins in that regard, it can be said he was jealous."

I grinned. It was perfect, as there was so very much truth in it.

Pierrot nodded. "Oui, all know he did not approve of matelotage, but, many spoke of his affection for Gaston and assumed they were lovers." He spread his hands wide and shrugged eloquently. "But what money?"

"Over twenty thousand pounds," I said.

Pierrot blinked in surprise.

"Gaston's father had been sending Doucette money to care for him for years," I said. "In addition to money he sent here with Gaston. Doucette lived very well." A thing occurred to me and I smiled. "And I would wager he is considered so saintly because he never charged for his services."

"Exactly," Gaston said. "It is now apparent he lived off the money my father gave him."

"Damn," Striker said with bemusement. "That is so believable I feel it might actually be the truth."

"YaBeMean," Pete said, as if it reflected well upon my character.

"Thank you, in this matter I feel it is warranted. So, this tale must be spread about. It can be leavened with further truths. Such as, because Gaston is mad, Doucette seized upon the scheme to lock him away and treat him so that I could not leave with him, or the money. And that I was stabbed in an altercation between the two of them about the matter. And that I was forced to rescue Gaston from his clutches, and in that debacle, Doucette was wounded such as he is. Additionally, all must be pointed toward the scapegoat as the source of the other information. The French must understand that he betrayed us."

Striker frowned. "Though marriage and matelotage are separate things in the eyes of the Brethren, still, Doucette did not condone matelotage and he did have a wife. Some may question his having feelings for Gaston."

"He is married to a scarred, former whore he took in out of pity, as she reminded him of Gaston," I said.

"You have thought of everything." Striker grinned. "All right, we will spread this new truth. And I suppose Gaston will duel with Tom on Cow Island."

In truth, I still hoped I would be the one to duel Tom. "Aye, if Tom makes himself available. If not, at least we will have set the stage."

Pierrot was smiling. "I never wish to be your enemy, my friend."

"I do not think that likely. Thank you for your assistance in this."

"As I said, I am to blame as well. This may not relieve my conscience, but it will clear my name." He stood. "I would embrace you, but..."

I chuckled and grimaced at doing so. They left us.

Gaston and I sat quietly.

"I feel much better," I said.

"You are indeed a formidable opponent. I am truly impressed." His nod was somber.

"Thank you. It is a shame about Doucette, though," I sighed.

He frowned. "How so? I am pleased his name will be sullied."

I shook my head. "Not that, non, that he is an imbecile we may never get proper revenge upon. It is truly disappointing. The bastard will go to his grave thinking he was in the right."

"And that bothers you more than his being reduced to a fool who mumbles about his house and tries to grow plants upside down, as Pierrot says he does now?" Gaston asked with amusement.

"Is he aware of all that he has lost?"

"I do not know," he said soberly.

"Well if he is, and he rues it, then justice was served."

Gaston was regarding me with bemusement. "It is good to know that you are not as saintly as you appear to me."

"I appear saintly to you?"

"You are an angel," he said seriously.

"Then why would my not being one please you?" I asked with amusement.

"I have felt I could not equal you in goodness, that I am a dark and shadowed thing in comparison. But non, I think I only see your pure side. You have shadows too."

"I am sure I have as many dark thoughts as you claim to harbor," I said seriously.

"Do you harbor fantasies of flogging me?" he asked.

"Non," I sighed.

"Then, non."

I nodded. "You are correct, all that is light and goodness in my heart shines upon you."

He shook his head slowly. "Non. You are still a better person than I."

"Why must one of us be better than the other?" I asked with a little annoyance.

He smiled with his familiar annoyed wonderment. "Will, not even the Gods could love as you do."

I thought the Gods did love as I did, and that made Them very human.

Conv Island

December, 1667
-January, 1668



III

Thirty-Four

Wherein We Talk of Battles

It was with great relief that we said our farewells to Theodore and Agnes and boarded the *Virgin Queen* the next day. My relief soured somewhat when I felt the questioning gazes upon us as we came over the gunwale. The deck was full of men: some I recognized; some I did not; all seemed to take great interest in us. I wished we had chosen to slip aboard that night, when darkness and revelry would have disguised my wounds, or at least concealed their stares. Thankfully, we were greeted warmly by our friends, even if they did look askance at Gaston and my bruises.

My matelot did little to assuage their fears. I knew well their curious eyes stabbed him like sticks poking at an angry boar in a cage. I expected that he would never be able to placate them in the aftermath of a bout. He could not simply throw it off and affix a happy meaningless smile to his lips to plead the case of sanity. He would always feel guilt over whatever madness-induced incident might have occurred, and it would far outweigh any curious observer's concern-borne censure of his behavior. Thus he would ever glower and withdraw, ironically reinforcing their opinion of the poor quality of his sanity. And so, I smiled and stayed with Striker to make greeting and feign nothing was amiss, while Pete, Cudro, and Gaston took our things to the cabin.

"How are you?" the Bard asked quietly.

Dickey, Liam, Otter, Davey, and Julio were quiet, listening for my response, as were a half-dozen other men within earshot.

I grinned as I was able around my damaged lip. "Much as I look, yet

I am in fine spirits now that we will be sailing."

"Iffn ya feel up ta it," Liam said.

At the number of nods and glances toward the cabin door, I surmised it was a common sentiment.

"We," I said firmly, "will be better off at sea."

"Amongst friends," Liam added emphatically.

This brought chuckles from the rest of our cabal.

"Aye, I feel it will be safer here, for a multitude of reasons," I said.

The Bard frowned. "Can you speak of it? We've been hearing a number of things."

"Aye," Striker interjected, and then spoke quietly to me. "You may as well now. Look at the others."

I had seen the gazes still upon us from the men outside our cabal. Now that I was standing on the deck and willing to meet them, I found that not all of them were merely curious; some appeared hostile. The sooner we told our friends what to tell the crew, the better. Of course, that meant I needed to explain to Dickey how I planned to kill his childhood friend.

"Aye," I sighed. "Let us retire to the cabin, as I need to sit; and I will tell you of it, and other things you might find of interest."

Striker remained on deck, with Pete and Cudro, who had long since departed the cabin. The rest of our cabal joined Gaston in the small room. We found my matelot under the table arranging our gear. I gingerly lowered myself to join him. I wanted to lie on the mattress he had stuffed between the table legs, but I knew I must sit a while longer.

Gaston raised a curious eyebrow as everyone found places to sit on the room's few chairs or the hammocks, or space to lean against the bulkhead.

"We need to tell them of the plan," I said quietly in French.

He sighed uncomfortably.

I took his hand and turned my attention to the others.

"We have heard a number of things ourselves," I said.

"What 'appened ta ya?" Liam asked. "We heard the pair o' ya took on a tavern, an' then Striker says Gaston had a bout o' his and took on the tavern and ya got in the middle o' it."

"That is what happened," Gaston said with a guilty mien before I could speak.

I looked up at the room of curious and concerned faces. These were our friends. We had to have faith in that.

"My father wishes for me to marry," I said.

Gaston rubbed his fingers reassuringly and I was relieved. We had not discussed what we would say.

Curiosity among our audience was quickly replaced by frowns, and then gazes darted between Gaston and me.

"That is... Let me finish," I added quickly. "He is sending a bride. We want none of it. We decided to choose our own. I could simply abandon my inheritance, but... there may yet be some value to it. So, I must

marry to appease my father; so, we endeavored to court. Worry not, it all came to naught, but during the entirety of it we found ourselves quite vexed, and..."

"I lost my way," Gaston said. "I quarreled with Will, and... I felt great guilt over it and wished to punish myself, so I... angered the men in the tavern. It is a thing I have done before during bouts: knowing they will beat me into a stupor. But this time, Will got in the middle of it, as the damn fool would not see me hurt."

Gaston had kept his gaze steadfastly on the floor as he spoke. I had not, thus I had witnessed bemusement and sympathy wash over our audience.

The Bard was grinning. "Well ain't you two the pair. You can't even fight like normal men."

I was appalled at that perception of events. I wished to argue that it was not as if we had fought and I had lost and Gaston had beaten me soundly in a fit of temper, but perhaps it was that way after a fashion: the end result was the same. Whenever Gaston lost his temper, I lost blood. I found the concept disturbing.

"Well ya seen 'em sparrin'," Liam added with his own smile. "They canna' be fightin' one anuther proper. That would be a right mess."

This brought amusement all around, even from Davey.

I was surprised that Liam's words cleared the clouds that had gathered in my heart as well. The Bard was correct in another way: Gaston and I were not ordinary men. If we were, we would have killed each other months ago.

"So where da things stand o'er this wife matter?" Liam asked soberly.

I smiled. "Well, she did not wish to marry us anymore than we truly wished to marry her, so she fled. Now I do not know what we shall do if and when the bride my father has promised arrives. He very much desires that I produce an heir, especially since I am engaged in such dangerous pursuits."

Liam and the Bard were amused, but Otter, Dickey and Julio appeared somber and thoughtful. I wondered at that.

"I have never wished for children," I said carefully.

There were several sighs. Otter was studying the floor and not his matelot, who in turn appeared uncomfortable.

"Children would be nice," Julio said seriously, and then glanced about as if he had admitted some terrible thing.

Davey frowned at his matelot as if poor Julio had grown two heads. It was much as I must have looked at Gaston when first he told me of his desire for puppies.

"I want children," Gaston said. "And I dare not sire my own. They would be as mad as I."

This elicited even more sober contemplation of the woodwork from all present.

"It is a thing we canna' do fur one anuther," Liam said sadly. "We 'ad us a wife once. An Indian girl. We wanted one an' we traded 'er father

a fine musket for 'er. We left 'er in this village on the Haiti with other Brethren wives an' children an' some men that 'ad turned to plantin'. The damn Spanish raided it. She's gone. We don' know what became o' 'er. She was with child. Don' know whose it were. Some that were there say she died. So we didna' go an' look fer 'er. We didna' 'ave the heart ta find another."

I could see scars between them in the way that Liam rubbed his matelot's thigh in a gesture of both placation and reassurance, and Otter stared at the floor with guilt and old anger. I wondered how long ago the loss of the woman and child had wounded them. I was honored they had spoken of it at all. I did not feel I could ask any questions.

"I am sorry," I said.

"We may well do it again," Otter said softly. "We are getting too old to rove."

Liam appeared to have doubt over that, but he schooled his face before Otter looked his way.

Davey was still studying Julio with consternation, and I thought they would have much to discuss later, or perhaps they would not discuss it at all, as some men are not wont to speak of such things. The Gods knew I had spent months with this lot and this was the first time children had been mentioned.

"We can't rove forever," the Bard said thoughtfully. He looked up at all of us. "We've been... I have long thought that I waste a goodly amount of time waiting to go out and raid again and... There's good money to be made sailing between here and the northern colonies and England. And..."

"Ya talkin' 'bout sailin' with cargo?" Liam asked incredulously.

"Odd as that may be," the Bard countered and grinned.

The pall gripping the room was torn free, and we all expressed more amusement at the jest than it deserved.

"Well, thank you for telling us the truth of that matter," the Bard said. "We will tell any who ask about your condition that it is a thing between matelots and not their concern."

There, he had gone and implied that disturbing concept again.

I snorted. "Thank you, but then, unless they heard of the altercation in the tavern, they will assume my matelot beat me. But I suppose there is no helping it."

"Nay," Liam said. "All 'ave 'eard what went on in the tavern. Not proper, but they 'ave 'eard o' it." He regarded us seriously. "There be a good deal o' talk 'bout Gaston."

"So we have heard," I said solemnly. "And we have concocted an answer to it that we wish to share with you."

I looked to Dickey and found him gazing back, consternation contorting his features.

"It is Tom," he blurted.

"We have guessed as much," I said.

"I have seen him," Dickey continued in a rush. "We spoke, or rather,

quarreled. He is quite put out over the matter of being left behind on Tortuga. He feels he has been terribly wronged and does not see how he has any blame in the matter. He says he has heard many a tale from the French about Gaston, and that he feels strongly that Gaston is a menace and whatever Mister Doucette was about was in the best interests of all."

"Dickey, we must kill Tom," I said sadly.

"Will," Dickey sighed. "I have known that in my heart since he left you tied to that bed and went to get the priests. I think the only person who knows what all occurred that day, and who does not understand you will eventually find him and duel with him, is Tom. He says he cares not for either of your wrath, and that his new French companions are all in agreement, and that Gaston and you are the ones in danger."

"The French be truly riled o'er the matter o' Doucette bein' maimed such as 'e is," Liam added.

"We know," I said. "And in order to counter that, we will need all of your assistance, though it is not your concern, as it only truly affects Gaston and me."

"I cannot speak for all here," the Bard said with a lazy smile, "but I feel concern over the matter."

There were nods all around.

"Then I thank you all. I am honored that we have been blessed with such true friends."

Liam made a rude noise. "What would ya 'ave o' us?"

"We have brewed an antidote for the poison being spread about. Some may find it bitter." I told them of our lie.

The Bard and Julio whistled appreciatively when I finished. Davey appeared confused. Otter and Dickey were thoughtful. Liam was grinning like a fox.

"Sounds likely ta me," Liam said. "Ya sure it ain't true?"

I grinned in return. "I leave the dissemination of it to your able hands."

Otter snorted and his quiet words were flush with amusement and adoration for his matelot. "Will, you best concoct a tale of how he learned of it now, as all who know of him will not believe he has kept it to his breast."

Liam snorted with mock umbrage.

"That's easy enough," the Bard said. "It was a thing between matelots until now, when Gaston's life has been threatened. We can say we asked of it today, because of the matter at the tavern, and you told us the whole of it for the first time, which is true enough. The tale will be spread over this ship, and when we reach Cow Island, our men will spread it among the French."

"That is our hope," I said. "Then Gaston will challenge Tom's perception of events, and prove him in the wrong by right of a duel."

"It will take time to spread it among the French," the Bard asked. "Not much time, but some. It would be best if all have heard the tale

before any dueling is done.”

“Aye, we should keep ya from the others at first,” Liam added. He looked to Gaston and grinned. “Ya think ’e can hunt bulls?”

Gaston smirked. “If they are dead, or in some way incapacitated.”

“I feel I shall be quite right within a week,” I protested. “I have been pummeled before.”

“You should heal,” Gaston replied. “But you will not be well for a time. Before then, you will be useless for hunting, but you should be able to follow about.”

I sighed. I knew I should not bridle over it, but it pained me.

Dickey had been thoughtful; he finally spoke. “Tom is scared of both of you. He is in awe of what he has witnessed of your prowess in regards to swords; however, he feels he is quite talented with pistols. He will do all he can to have the choice of weapons if the duel is arranged in the traditional way. He will think he can take you with a pistol.”

I smiled. “Then he is dead man.”

The Bard snorted. “I do not doubt Gaston’s ability, but provided both can shoot, and have dry powder, dueling with pistols is like rolling dice.”

“Only to the uninitiated.” I grinned at them. “How are duels conducted here? I have only seen the one involving cutlasses.”

“Well iffn it be swords, it be like ya saw,” Liam said. “Men circle round an’ the two strip down to all but swords an’ go at it. Iffn it be muskets, the other men dona’ stand about in a circle, they form two lines. An’ the two men stand at thirty paces or so with loaded pieces held at their side. They aim and fire when they be signaled. Iffn it be pistols to start, the two men either stand at twenty paces like they do with muskets, only closer, or they stand back-to-back an’ walk out ten paces and turn an’ fire when signaled.”

“Good, the latter method is the best.”

“It is what Tom will expect,” Dickey said. “I have seen him practice when we were still in England. He would place a bottle on a post and walk out and turn and fire when I signaled him. He is quite good at hitting his target.”

My smile widened. “Good. That is excellent. I find it very easy to kill men who practice with posts, and I am sure Gaston has found it likewise. And even if they should be forced to stand and fire, I do not believe young Tom has faced another so. Bravado, such as Tom is fond of showing, will fail him. Unless a piece does not fire, or one of the combatants cannot aim, the match will go to whoever feels no fear and has the greater confidence. And truly, in the twenty times I have faced another such, I have only had a pistol flash in the pan once.”

“What happened?” the Bard asked.

“My opponent was scared to begin with, and thus hesitant. I lack no qualms about killing another, and I am quite practiced, so I fired first. He flinched when he realized I would. And then when there was no discharge, he thought he had won and hesitated for the joy of that. I threw my pistol at him. He ducked and discharged his piece without

aim and missed me. In the next exchange, I shot him in the eye before he aimed."

They were all amused, even Davey. Gaston was frowning at the floor. I squeezed his hand. He sighed, but did not turn to look at me.

I turned back to the others before the sudden spark of concern could light my features.

"So, if we sail tomorrow, how long before we reach Cow Island?" I asked. "Depending on the winds, of course."

"Usually five days," the Bard said with a shrug. "You'll have plenty of time to rest up. I don't expect you to take a watch."

"I can sit about on deck when Gaston does just as well as I can lie here."

Gaston glared at me.

The Bard chuckled. "Not if your matelot says otherwise."

"Will you allow me to be first officer?" I asked.

"Only if Gaston says it's all right," the Bard said.

They all found amusement in my consternation, even Gaston. Then, thankfully, they all left us alone. Liam appeared quite gleeful to get to his task. Julio leaned down and clasped my shoulder and Davey grinned at me. Dickey muttered that he wished to speak to me later.

Finally, the door closed and I could ask quietly in French. "Have you duelled with pistols before?"

Gaston shook his head. His gaze held both guilt and admonishment when he turned to me. "Before crossing the Line, I never engaged in a formal duel; children do not do such things. And here, I have duelled several times with swords and fists, much as I fought Cudro, but never pistols. Most of my battles with another have been under the aegis of my madness or a rage that leads to it. They have not been civilized matters."

"It will be no matter," I said with forced confidence for both of us. "I know you have no qualms over killing; you will not hesitate to fire. And you are skilled with pistols: you will hit him. And there are tricks I can teach you. We can practice them while we hunt, or rather you tow me about like a sack of turnips while you perform a productive task."

"You have duelled twenty times?" he asked.

I shrugged a little. "With pistols, far more than that with swords, and fewer with dirks. Usually a match with pistols is to first blood. Not all of my opponents died. Two I wounded so superficially that the match advanced to swords."

"And you have never lost." He did not pose it as a question.

"Not... unless it was part of a grander scheme. The hardest thing I feel I ever did in that arena was allowing some damn fool to cut me because it would not have done for me to win in that instance. And in my last duel, I received a wicked gash on my arm because I succeeded in my objective, which was killing a bystander, and had to leave my damn fool opponent thrashing about with a blade. I was forced to block with my arm."

Gaston smiled. "You must teach me."

"It is a matter of standing upon the subtle line between not being a post, and not appearing cowardly by dodging. It has to do with stance, and how one turns, and how one walks to the place where one will turn. And of course, one must fire first. You will make fine work of it, I am sure."

"I am torn," he sighed. "It is my battle, as it is my name that is tainted; but I feel I must win, and in order to do that I should use my best weapon, which is you. Yet, the concept of having to stand by and watch you duel is not pleasant. But I suppose it is much like battle and I should not harbor such foolish concerns."

I shook my head. "I understand. I do not wish to watch you do the same, especially with this new knowledge. It is not like battle. I have not been in any true battles beyond taking the ships, but I have witnessed several and I have been embroiled in conflicts with multiple opponents before. In all of those cases, there is much chaos and one's goal is to survive it and accomplish some goal, such as removing as many of your opponents from the combat as possible. In a duel, there is only the one combatant, and there is no chaos. One has entirely too much time to think. And though both matters ultimately rest in the hands of the fickle Gods, I feel the odds are much in a man's favor in a battle. In a duel, one man or the other must win, and each combatant only has one target. And, in a pistol duel, you are not allowed to take cover or run about and thus make yourself more difficult to strike."

He nodded solemnly. "You will instruct me, and I will follow whatever decision you might make concerning my readiness."

"Truly?"

"Oui. On the condition that you allow me to be the final arbiter of whether or not you are fit to duel if for whatever reason it comes to you and not to me."

"I could take him now in a pistol duel." I grinned. "But I will accept your condition."

"That is wise," he admonished. "Now you must rest."

"Only if you remain with me," I whispered.

He had run along the Palisadoes beach before we left to board the ship, but I knew that exercise would do little to settle his Horse in the face of the crowded decks.

His gaze went to the door and the thunder of feet and voices from the ceiling above. "I feel no need to leave the safety of this table or your side."

I kissed the back of his hand. He moved so that I could lie down, which I did. Then he kissed me, thoroughly, such that I wished I was not injured.

Despite all the noise, and the looming threats of dueling and cattle, I slept like a babe in his arms.

I was woken by the sound of trysting. It was dark except for small patches of water-reflected light that had stolen through the gallery windows to dapple the ceiling. They illuminated nothing but the

presence of the beams. Gaston was already awake, still lying beside me, but propped on his elbow with his back to the room. Judging from the stiffness of his posture, he had been so for some time. With all the sounds of a party reverberating through the wood from the quarterdeck above, the music and festivity ringing through the open door from the main deck, and the raucous sounds coming through the windows, it was as if we were under siege; and I wondered how I had slept at all with no laudanum in my belly. And whoever was having sex on Cudro's hammock was going at it with great abandon.

I caressed Gaston's face in the dark and breathed in French, "How are we?"

He kissed my fingertips. "You are my reason for being," he said huskily.

I surmised we were not doing well. All the people and the noise had to be making his Horse very skittish. I moved so that I could place a palm over each of his ears, and pulled his mouth to mine. He kissed me urgently and I bore it despite the pain in my lip. Then I pressed his head to my chest and held it there with a hand still over his upper ear. He gripped my shoulders tightly, but he did not attempt to pull away.

"I am sorry I am such trouble," he whispered.

I rubbed his back and spoke lightly. "I fear I shall never suffer boredom in your presence."

He took a long shuddering breath. "Do you wish for boredom?"

"Non. Never." I kissed the top of his head. "What can I do to aid you?"

"You have already guessed at the root of it. The sound troubles me: the unpredictability of it. When I am inured to so many it becomes a distant roar, much like the surf, and I do not feel it so. But tonight, I hear every word, and sometimes I think I hear my name and that sets the Horse racing."

The men trysting in Cudro's hammock, an arm's length from us, finished with harmonious grunts and moans.

We held still and silent, and I could hear, or rather not hear, them doing the same. I guessed that, upon returning from their trip to Heaven's bowers, they now sought to ascertain if they had actually heard us and if we were awake. So we all lay there like mice who have dropped crumbs in earshot of a cat.

This was interrupted by the clatter of two men staggering into the room, shedding weapons, and slamming the door in their wake.

"Let me find the lamp," Striker gasped.

"Don'NeedIt. KnowThisArseInTheDark," Pete said drunkenly.

"This arse best be the only one you know in the dark," Striker chided with amusement.

There was a muffled "ow" from Cudro's bunk.

"I just kicked someone," Striker said with a laugh.

"Don'Care."

"We just be leavin'." I did not recognize the voice.

There were sounds of people moving about. In the dim illumination I saw bits and pieces of faces and shoulders as they donned clothing and left us.

"Now," Striker said, "let me go. Need the damn lamp." He was laughing quietly and there were sounds of struggle from the shadows near the forward wall. "I am too drunk to climb to ours in the dark."

"Don'NeedTheDamnHammock. Table."

"Nay. Will and Gaston," Striker gasped, but he was laughing again when he fell onto the table above us.

"Don'Care."

"I will spend myself, you bastard, and I will not do it atop them," Striker said firmly.

"Floor," Pete snapped.

"Wait," Striker called. He slapped the table hard. "Are you bastards awake?"

"How could we not be?" I assured them.

"Why the Devil did you not tell us of this marriage twaddle?" Striker roared.

"Oh Gods," I sighed.

"LeaveIt! FuckNow! FightLater!"

Striker found this all very funny. He collapsed to the floor next to me.

I shook my head, though no one could see my gesture. It would not be the first time we had lain beside them while they coupled. Thankfully, Gaston did not seem as tense as he had before. I could feel the rumble of his amusement through my sore ribs.

We could hear clothes being shed.

"DamnItAll! Where'sThePot?"

Striker laughed harder. "On our hammock, you bastard."

Gaston reached above my head and retrieved ours. I heard him open it, and then felt him thrust it toward the pair. This was rewarded by a muffled "ow" from Striker.

"ThankYa!" Pete was chuckling now. "HoldStill!"

"It's your own damn cock," Striker said.

"ShutYourHole!" Pete muttered with amusement.

"That's the last thing you want," his matelot retorted.

Gaston and I were chuckling now. Then Pete apparently got his member where he needed and Striker's chortling was arrested with a groan I felt in my bowels. We fell silent again, listening to the wet sounds and heavy breathing of their trysting.

Aroused by this activity and Gaston's presence, and no longer cowed by my aches and pains, my cock stirred steadily toward its full glory until it found itself trapped in a fold of my breeches. I eased a hand between Gaston and me to allow it freedom.

Gaston rumbled anew with amusement and rose on his elbows above me. He commenced to slowly press his groin along my member until I gasped and dug my fingers in his shoulders.

"Roll over," he hissed in my ear. "If you feel you are able."

"I feel it will be worth the trouble," I gasped.

I ignored the complaints of my aching muscles and complied with delicious anticipation. He pushed our breeches down and I felt the hair of his pubis against my bare buttocks. His member tickled me as well, but even my arse could tell it was flaccid. Still, the sensation was intriguing and my cock tightened further still. Then he urged me to rise a little, and bracing himself on one elbow behind me, slid a greased hand beneath me and around my member. I squirmed about. The pain became not just a series of twitches as I moved, but a solid ache; and then suddenly it receded, growing more and more distant as my lust eclipsed all. I experienced nothing but need and pleasure when at last we were braced as was needed for him to hump my rear such that it drove my cock into his palm.

The old fears had disappeared along with the pain. I knew with every fiber of my being that the man upon me in the dark was Gaston. And if he had been erect, I would have opened for him without reservation – nay, I would have sucked him inside with abandon.

In my clawing about, I encountered the table leg, and Striker's hand upon it, gripping as tightly as I wished to do. My initial reaction was to pull away and find another handhold for leverage, but he released the leg and caught my hand before I could withdraw. Our fingers quickly twined together, and we used one another for the leverage we sought: he pushing up, and I pushing down. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Pete in the patchwork light, his intense face framed by Striker's feet: as if perhaps he lay on the floor with Striker above him.

I grinned. I felt peace and love folded about me like a good blanket on a cold night. Our grunts and sounds were a lullaby for my soul, and they drowned out all others from the ship. I found myself flowing, rowed ever faster with each spasm of pleasure from my member, toward an oblivion peopled by those I loved and was loved by in return. For a giddy moment, I wondered if somehow Gaston had dosed me with laudanum. But nay, he had dosed me with something else, and my heart ached to breaking with how much I loved the man that was providing me such pleasure this moment in exchange for none of his own.

Striker came first, with a sound that spoke of seeing great beauty and a grip that nearly broke my fingers. At this, I christened our new mattress as the room was illuminated in the white light of Heaven behind my closed eyes. I saw us all clearly, standing there before the gates of rapture. I fell to earth and our bed, my cock still twitching fitfully in Gaston's now trapped hand, and it was my turn to laugh.

My love fell atop me, panting and chuckling on my shoulder. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to kiss all of them, but Striker and Pete were too far away. I squirmed mightily under Gaston until he moved so that I could roll over onto my back once more. His mouth was upon mine before I could ask.

We held each other and savored languid kisses until the now

discordant noises our companions were making brought forth seemingly brilliant lamplight. I closed my eyes and cringed. I did not welcome it: I had seen all I needed to see this night. Then I peeked, and found Gaston's amused emerald orbs gazing upon me with adoration. I realized I did need to see the real world, as I could never capture with my memory how very much I enjoyed gazing upon him.

He moved to accept a bottle and took a long swig. Then he swiftly descended on me, and I opened wide to gulp the mix of fruit juice and rum he emptied from his mouth to mine. I gasped in the aftermath and he licked the escaped dribbles from my cheeks.

"I am loved," I whispered in French when his gaze returned to mine.

"Oui," he breathed on my lips.

"You are loved."

He smiled. "Oui."

There was a heavy sigh from beyond the table, followed by a chuckle from the room's fourth inhabitant. We looked out to find Pete had moved to sit with his back to the windows next to my head, and Striker—apparently after lighting the lamp now swinging from the beam overhead—had sagged onto a chair to sit as he often did, with only his shoulder and the edge of his buttocks in contact with the wood. His long legs stretched out like a bridge to his matelot, and his heels rested between Pete's legs. They were naked still, and watching us with amusement.

"Sometimes I wonder how long you two will remain so in love that you adore cooing at one another," Striker drawled with a grin.

I awarded him my middle finger. "I hope for all eternity." Then I grinned. "Are you implying that it is a thing that will fade? Is it a thing you two once engaged in that has since faded?"

Striker made a disparaging noise and Pete laughed.

"Never," Striker scoffed. "The most romantic thing Pete does is let me make his arse sore for a change."

The adoration in his eyes as he regarded his matelot belied his words somewhat.

"So there were no halcyon days of your courtship where you sat about and whispered endearments to one another?" I teased.

Pete groaned. "Nay! 'EKnowsILove'Im. NoNeedTaSayIt."

I frowned at that.

Gaston answered. "It is good to hear. I know Will desires me, yet I enjoy seeing his cock hard at the sight of me."

"Aye," Striker said admonishingly to his matelot.

Pete regarded all of us with narrowed eyes and then stubbornly crossed his arms.

Striker chuckled. "Well, I love you, you bastard."

"NotMyWay," Pete said. "An'YaBeMadAtThem."

"Ooohh," I said. "Such a feint!"

Striker laughed. "He's right. What's all this marriage twaddle? Are we such good friends I must hear these things from Julio?"

I was amused. "I see why you are riled now. Would you have been

less troubled if you had heard them from Liam or the Bard?"

He grinned. "A little."

I laughed. "I am sorry. We did not intend to tell them of it, but... events, or rather the conversation, this afternoon took such turns as revealed all. If we had set out to inform people of that in particular, rest assured, we would have made mention of it to the two of you first."

"Pretty words," Striker said with mock disdain. "And the deed is done. Now what of it?"

"As a Lord, I am expected to produce a legal heir. To that end, my father is sending me a bride. I want nothing of it."

"I want puppies," Gaston said, taking the blame for the matter yet again.

Pete frowned. "WeGotPuppies. WeLeft'EmWithThatGirl."

"Children," Gaston clarified.

"WhatTheDevilFor? PuppiesBeCuter."

I chuckled. "Those are my sentiments."

"I'll say," Striker said thoughtfully. "There are few things as ugly as an infant. When my son was to be born, my uncle warned me of such, and then he hauled me away to the tavern because the womenfolk would not let a man be about. Finally they sent someone round to fetch me. I ran back to the rooms, and this midwife tells me it was a boy, and hands me this tiny bundle of blanket." He indicated the size with his hands. "And I set it on a table and opened it up. And there was this wrinkled, red, offal-smearing, screaming..." he frowned in memory and shook his head, "babe. I nearly fainted. I could not imagine how such a thing could have issued from my dear wife, as she was quite lovely."

"Later, he became pinker and rounder. Yet he still didn't look right: his head was too large for his body." Striker considered his crotch, and fingered his flaccid member in drunken thought. He grinned. "They are rather like a prick. They must grow into their head and wrinkled skin. Same color too."

"Striker, you possess a poet's soul," I said.

He snorted and sighed. "I suppose he looked fine... later."

At Striker's change in tone, Pete stilled. I remembered that Striker's son and wife had died while he was at sea.

"Would you want another one?" I asked carefully.

Striker smiled sadly. "I suppose. As I said, they don't stay ugly. I would see one grow into a lad." He looked to Pete with guilty eyes and looked away.

"Children seem to be an issue that haunts all matelots," I said.

"Aye," Striker sighed. "One man always wants them, and the other does not. So you will marry this bride?"

"I do not know," I said truthfully, and looked to my matelot.

Gaston sighed with a rueful smile. "We tried to find a bride we could favor. It brought me to madness and caused her to flee."

Striker laughed, and then sobered to ask kindly, "Because of your madness?"

"Nay," I answered for him. "The matters were coincidental and not necessarily related. We do not know what this bride my father sends will bring us to, though. I may abandon my title entirely."

"Not for me," Gaston said quietly.

"Nay," I chided, "for my own self-serving reasons of wishing to spend my life with you as opposed to living under the aegis of a thing I have never placed much value on."

Gaston slumped to the floor beside me, to lie staring up at the bottom of the table.

"All matelots have some battle that can never be won," Striker said quietly into the silence.

"IfThey'reTaStayMatelots," Pete added.

I hoped that was not the way of it. I felt that there was some threshold we would cross in the near future that would be the final arbiter of such matters. I did not know what it would be, though. I surely knew I did not wish to dwell in limbo over the matter until such time as my father might pass away.

In the morning, we were woken by Cudro's booming voice. I looked about blearily and was thankful we were under the table. The cabin was now full of men. Striker and Pete had gained their hammock overhead, but the other two berths, the floor, and even the top of our table were filled with men. Besides the wolves, I recognized only two of them.

With a scowl, Cudro went about prodding and kicking until all filed out the door save the wolves and Gaston and me. Then he sagged onto his hammock and swore quietly in Dutch before groaning, "God damn rum," in English.

"Amen," Striker intoned from the ceiling.

"Drink water," Gaston said.

"Do not know if I could keep it down," Cudro sighed.

"Are we ready for the day's business?" Striker asked.

"We are underway with the morning wind, though the Bard is in quite the snit," Cudro said.

"How so?" Striker asked.

"He counts ninety-two men on deck, and I just chased another ten out of here."

"Gods!" I exclaimed. "We only sailed with eighty-five on the *Mayflower*, and she was larger by a quarter."

"I expected as much," Striker said, and his head emerged over the edge of their hammock.

I wasn't pleased to be beneath him, as I was concerned he might retch.

"Pierrot said the French are packed just as much," Striker said. "All the men are bored and broke and we're the first to sail. Damned idiot Morgan won't sail until after the New Year. So everyone is looking to escape the ports with us so they can sit about on Cow Island and eat free beef and drink free water."

"I hope they are not looking for free rum," I jested.

This brought a chortle from Striker. "Aye and nay. Some men with money still bought a number of barrels of that and wine and asked if they could bring it on for all. As we can use the barrels for beef when they're empty, the Bard and I agreed to it."

"Is there any food aboard?" I asked.

Even Gaston laughed at this.

"As usual, only what any man brought," Striker said, and began to slowly ease his way out of the hammock.

As usual, my matelot had practiced excellent forethought, and we were well-stocked with boucan. In addition to Gaston's medicine chest, we had brought aboard a small sea chest stocked with all manner of things including food and wine. I knew the rest of our cabal were likewise supplied. Of course, if some horror befell the ship and we did not reach a place with food inside a week, we would all be honor-bound to share what we had.

Once he was on the floor, Striker smacked the bottom of their hammock a few times, until Pete cursed at him. Then he accepted Gaston's proffered bottle of water and drank a goodly amount before passing it to Cudro, who did likewise.

Meanwhile, I worked on easing my aching body to a sitting position. I had not felt last night's lustful exertions as they occurred; however, this morning it seemed my muscles and bones chose to practice usury on me for my prior forfeiture of attention.

Gaston slipped to the door and peered out. He returned to me with grim features.

"I would rather climb out the gallery windows to reach the quarterdeck," he said. "But you cannot. We will have to battle to the steps and up them."

"Let us prepare to go in the others' wake then," I sighed.

He sorted our weapons, and passed me my baldric and brace of pistols. Then he donned his personal armor by painting the mask about his eyes.

I touched his hand when he finished and pointed at my face. With a smile, he daubed the substance around my un-bruised eye and grinned at the result.

"We don't have to board our own damn ship," Striker said with amusement.

"Speak for yourself," I said. "Remember, there are rumors about us." Striker cursed quietly.

"Liam has been hard at work, though," Cudro said with a chuckle.

"I am of two minds on that," I said with amusement. "The first being that we have truly fine friends, the second, that only the Gods know what they now think."

Pete dropped to the floor. "TheyBloodyBestBeThinkin'Na'TaMakeUs Angry."

He pissed out the gallery window, and we followed suit. It afforded us our last view of Port Royal, as the town slipped away in our larboard

quarter as we sailed east.

I felt relief that we had at last escaped civilization once again.

With Pete and Cudro in the lead, we made our way to the quarterdeck. Once there, Gaston maneuvered us into the fore larboard corner, where we found Dickey.

"Were you able to sleep on deck with so many?" I asked.

I looked about from the vantage point the quarterdeck provided. I could not see the planks of the deck for bleary-eyed and rum-cursed men. Where we stood was no better, and Gaston had placed himself between me and the rail so that I would not be jostled, and then wrapped his arms around me protectively from behind. I was touched, as always, by his concern, but despite my aches and bruises, I did not feel so very fragile that it was warranted. Then I stupidly realized that, judging from the tension in his arms, his gesture of support and security was more for his well-being than mine. I rubbed his arms reassuringly.

Unfortunately, our stance, or perhaps our mere existence whether we embraced or not, caught the wandering gaze of many of the barely-sober men squinting about in the morning light. They would look and then whisper to their companions, who would then look. I dearly wished to know what they said, but I did not wish to disengage from my matelot's embrace to go and confront them. The Devil with the lot of them.

"Nay, no sleep at all," Dickey was saying. "It was more from so many men being drunk than from so many men." He rubbed his eyes. "And Francis is in quite the mood."

I frowned at the name, and then remembered it was the Bard's given one. I suppose his matelot could not be expected to call him the Bard. I looked to where our Master of Sail stood in the middle of the fore quarterdeck rail, with his arms crossed, his shoulders hunched, and his eyes on the sails. He appeared to be brooding and not watching the wind as he rocked back and forth with the ship.

"Beyond today, how goes that?" I asked Dickey cheerfully.

This brought a smile from the young man. "Well, I feel. It is... different from all I have experienced." He shrugged sheepishly. "And it is different than what I expected of such things, though not necessarily in a manner that is worse than those expectations. In some ways it exceeds my humble thoughts on the matter entirely."

"But in others?" I asked with amusement. I was fighting hard not to break forth with mirth at his ruminations.

"Well..." Dickey said solemnly, "We talk a great deal about the future. He is quite concerned."

I lost my battle and laughed, startling him, and thus was quickly forced to explain. "Nay, nay, I do not find amusement at your expense, rather in sympathy. So, you might have tried to envision the squeaking, but not the astounding amount of words that need be said."

"Precisely," he smiled.

"Well, if it is any consolation, the talking is not a thing men engage in often, at least not of that nature. I have never spoken of the matters I do with Gaston with any of my prior lovers. I simply left them when it became obvious things were no longer going to proceed as I wished. The talking is good. It is proof of commitment to the endeavor."

"Thank you for putting it in such a manner," Dickey said. "It is just... I thought love would simply... conquer all."

"It can." I grinned. "But only if you take the time to develop a plan for the battles it must face."

"He is concerned that I will wish for children," Dickey sighed. "He avers that he does not, and that I am too young to know my heart on the matter. He often feels I am too young to know my heart on the matter of many things."

I sighed. "Dickey, I am very fond of that man, so do not take what I will say next as mean-spirited. I feel that he speaks of his cynicism and not your youth. Sometimes the years bring fear more than wisdom. And I will cite a variation of a passage from his book: If he were not so very smitten with you, he would not be so very concerned about losing you."

He nodded soberly. "What can I do to assure him of the truth of my intentions?"

"Do not release him," Gaston said. He had to strain to be heard over the breeze and constant murmur.

Dickey nodded again and smiled. "I understand."

Striker had finally gathered his wits sufficiently to address the men. We made short work of the elections and articles, there being no elections save carpenter and cook; and we were not sailing for the purposes of roving, so the articles were reduced to a mere reciting and ratification of the rules of life aboard ship or shore, and not divisions of any booty. The ship's surgeon would be the young man Striker had mentioned at Negril: Farley. He seemed a pleasant enough man: thin, with an open countenance and dark brown eyes and hair. But he did look young indeed. He listed an English college of medicine as his credentials for the job, and all seemed pleased with that – save my matelot, of course.

As I was named First Officer, and I had fairly legible handwriting, the job of recording the articles and witnessing signatures fell to me. So despite the lack of argument and the relative brevity of the entire process, the sun was very high in the sky when Gaston and I were at last able to retreat to the relative sanctuary of the cabin. We were dismayed to find it full of men. There was even a man sprawled under our table. As I now knew without doubt, having seen them all sign, that there were one hundred and four men aboard, I suppose I should not be surprised that a good ten of them had settled into the cabin to seek shade. They had every right to be in the cabin; but, as we were owners of the vessel, I felt we were entitled to other rights even amongst the democracy of the Brethren.

"That is our space," I said pleasantly.

"Well, have ya a seat," the man said and made to sit up without turning to regard us. One of his friends shook his head quickly and pointed. The man under our table looked up, and beholding us, frowned. Then he began to move quickly until he was standing almost chest to chest with us in the small space. Gaston inserted his shoulder between this trespasser and my person.

Once upright, the man spoke diffidently; and if he had worn a hat I was sure it would have been clutched to his breast. "Beggin' yur pardon, me Lord."

"Nay," I said firmly. "You may beg it for that last bit, as I am not a Lord here, but not for the use of our bed. We are all rather like too many sheep in a pen, wherein if one wishes to move, others must move into the space the first occupied to make room for the maneuver."

This brought a number of chuckles from those perched on the hammocks.

Our trespasser was still standing before us, appearing quite trapped between the table and my matelot.

Gaston was very tense, and all eyes were upon him. I snaked an arm about his waist and rubbed his belly reassuringly.

"I do not believe we have met," I told the trespasser cheerily and extended my other hand. "I am Will, this is my matelot, Gaston."

"We know who ya be," the man said.

He would not look directly at Gaston, seeming to prefer to keep his gaze on me.

"I can only imagine what you have heard," I sighed. "What is your name? If it pleases you to give it."

"Ingram, my... si..."

"Will," I prompted.

"Will," he said.

"He be new to the Ways o' the Coast," a man sitting on Cudro's hammock said. "Came from the navy."

"Ah," I said with a nod. "You will overcome that in time."

This brought forth more amusement from our audience.

Every muscle on Gaston's body was taut. I could not see precisely what he gazed upon, but it appeared to be the windows and not any man present. I needed to get him safely tucked away.

"Now, my good Ingram, if you will perhaps step there." I indicated a place, and another man moved to make the necessary space. "And then I will step there, and so on, until you are where we stand, and we are under the table. Then perhaps you could tell us of your escape from the navy."

And so we moved as required, and I soon had Gaston safely in the corner beneath the table. He would not meet my gaze, though, and his overall demeanor was distant and hued with danger. With dismay, I realized we would not be practicing our morning regimen anytime soon, at least not until we reached Cow Island.

The orange rays of the setting sun were glaring through the gallery

windows when at last we obtained enough relative privacy in a room full of men for me to turn my back on the rest, without appearing rude, and ask Gaston, "How are we?" in whispered French.

"I will endure," he sighed.

"Could they leave us on Cow Island?"

"I will not give them cause," he said sadly.

"Non, non, by our own volition. I cannot see sailing about for months under these conditions. *I shall go mad.*"

He shook his head. "It will not be as it was when we sought the fleets. In raiding, we sail to a place and then we disembark. One must only endure reaching the destination."

He met my concerned gaze again and sighed, though it did little to relieve the tension across his shoulders.

"I will endure, Will, truly."

I nodded. "As always, let me know what I must do to aid you."

He smiled weakly. "Continue befriending them, as you are so adroit at doing; and continue holding me, as you so inexplicably seem wont to do."

I grinned. "I am heartened that you can still make jest."

He shook his head. "The time will soon come when I cannot. It is like an approaching storm. It will not pass until it has spent itself in some fashion. I have been considering it these last hours. In the past I have simply... withdrawn. I have hidden within myself and not spoken or reacted to them except to urge that they leave me alone. It is a course of action that saved me, and the lives of those around me, on many a voyage. But now I see where it was folly, as that, in addition to my bouts, is what has left me with my current reputation and few friends beyond those you have made for us."

I acknowledged the truth of his words with a sad smile. "You have me now. I will be your bulwark."

He nodded. "But still, the damage has been done, and no amount of clever lies or cheerful salve will heal it. And perhaps it should not. I should be viewed as a dangerous man."

I could not gainsay him. I thought on all he had said.

"So, the Horse must have time to run on Cow Island. I am sure we can obtain that," I said at last.

"Run wild, Will. It will not be enough to exercise it. It will run with no thought as to its direction."

I frowned. "So you feel a bout of madness is pending and cannot be avoided? It is like a storm we must weather?"

He nodded. "It has been a season of storms since Île de la Tortue. It was fantasy to think they could be controlled as we planned. I am sorry, Will: I have misled you. I wished to rove so that I might rage against an enemy I could kill without censure. My words about it being safer for me to spend myself on the enemy were only a partial truth. I relish it."

"If I had not wished to rove?" I asked.

He sighed. "I would have stayed with you: at great peril to us both.

Instead, I have chosen to bring greater peril upon us with this course.”

I did not feel surprise, or even that I had been misled; however, this revelation did cast a new light on matters. It was rather like a vase with a pretty pattern upon it: turned one way, a man saw leaves; another, he saw branches; but it was still the same vase.

“Well, damn you,” I said with a smile and kissed his cheek.

He recoiled, his eyes wide with wonder. “You are mad.”

“Precisely. We have been viewing this from the wrong angle. I am the madman; you are actually quite sane.”

He shook his head in wonder. “You are as stubborn as a tick.”

“Thank you, though, I would prefer a more pleasing comparison. Would you prefer a less stubborn tick?” I teased.

He awarded me an incredulous shake of his head. “Non. You have burrowed deep.”

“So, we will reach Cow Island and run wild until your storm has passed,” I said. “Then we will get on with the other business of clearing your name, such as it is. Running wild might work to our advantage: we need to stay well clear of the others until all of our information has had time to be properly disseminated among the French.”

“I might harm you,” he said solemnly.

I shook my head. “Non, I feel I am as much a tick on your big black Horse haunch as I am on your human heart.”

His eyes narrowed in thought and he slowly smiled. “Oui. We will run together.”

I wondered what that might entail. I also wondered how I would keep the pace, both literally and figuratively, in my present condition.

Sometime in the night, I woke to find myself alone. That is to say, Gaston was not beside me, though the cabin was filled with snores, some of them familiar. I waved an arm and a leg about and did not encounter him. The mattress was still warm and hollow where he had been, and sweat was drying where he had been in contact with me. His departure must have woken me. Dim light flickered on the ceiling. I could not see Gaston. There was very little space he could occupy if he were still in the room.

I was up and moving before the concern clutching my heart had time to grip my head. I did not think he had left me to go to the poop rails. He never felt that need at night. Fear-born intuition pointed my feet to the quarterdeck and not the bow. As soon as I ascended the steps I saw his back at the aft rail in the dim lantern light. He was standing oddly, but I could not name the how of it.

I made haste threading through the sleeping men between us, and kicked and trod upon several in the process. Thus he heard me coming by their sleepy curses. He sagged to his knees gripping the rail. Then I knew what I had seen before: his weight had been upon his hands, as if he meant to climb over.

I threw myself upon his back and my arms around him. He did not flinch or struggle.

"I do not wish to die flailing about in the water waiting for the sharks to have their due," I said, when my breathing had slowed sufficiently for me to speak. "So, whatever you plan to do, I ask that you make it painless and without much terror, as I will follow you. In truth, perhaps I might prefer that you surprise me and send me on before you. Provided there is no pain. I have had more than enough of that. For me, it signals life and not death."

He did not move, but his breathing was ragged.

"Or," I continued, "you could do as you have done this night as a form of suicide: because I surely wish to strangle you at the moment."

"Please," he whispered. "I cause nothing but trouble."

"Damn you," I sighed. "I know that. But by the Gods, it is my right to decide whether I wish to bring it upon myself or not. How dare you attempt to rid me of it?"

He struggled a bit in my arms and I let him move. I was relieved when he turned to face me and embrace me in return. I could not read his face in the moonlight. I could not fathom what had brought this on. It was madness.

I barked with pained amusement. How many damn times must I be told?

"I feel we should return to binding you," I whispered gently.

He nodded into my shoulder.

"Until this storm season passes," I added.

He shook his head and whispered huskily. "I feel it will never pass. I will never be as I was. I will descend further and further into madness. I will drag you with me."

"Then you shall spend the rest of your days bound to me," I said firmly. "Your only escape will be found in killing me."

He pulled back to regard me with wonder and tears. "You *are* a mad tick."

I smiled. "Oui."

In the morning, I woke to Striker dropping to the floor next to us. I closed my eyes again and considered going back to sleep. Then the shadows changed across my face. I looked, and found Striker kneeling beside me, peering under the table with concern.

"I was wondering why your weapons were atop the table... but I see now," he said, and pointed at the rope binding my wrist to Gaston's.

"Aye, we are having some difficulty," I said lightly.

Striker shook his head and sighed. "I thought this might happen... again."

I knew not what to say. Gaston and I had spent the first days of our return from Île de la Tortue last year bound together as we were now. Striker had been disturbed by it.

"He will not harm me," I said as I had said then. "And nay, the rope is no proof against his escaping me, but it serves to remind him that he is bound to me when he loses his way. He finds comfort in it. And it is enough to alert me if... some need overtakes him in his madness."

"I know," Striker said kindly. "But you cannot be armed lest he cut the rope in his madness, aye? And you can't sleep. And..." His words trailed off with an annoyed sigh. "We all discussed this before we left. We thought..." He sighed again and went to their sea chest. He returned with a kerchief-wrapped bundle.

I worked my way to sitting, waking Gaston in the process. He had been sleeping like the dead, as he was wont to do after having a bout.

Striker opened the bundle. It contained soft leather strips and a pair of iron manacles.

I sighed at the sight of them as cold congealed in my empty belly. Rope was one thing, it had warmth and could easily be shed; chains were another thing altogether. But I could see Striker's reasoning. Gaston could not cut chain.

Gaston's hand darted to the manacles to touch them tentatively. I glanced down, and found the wide-eyed mien of a child. This was a thing that must be done. He was storm-tossed and I his only anchor.

"These were the lightest and smoothest we could find," Striker said. "Still, you will want to wrap your wrists first, so that they do not abrade them. I still have thick skin from the scars about my wrists from being chained."

He gave me a guilty look. "Sorry, I don't mean to..."

I shook my head. "Thank you for being so thoughtful."

Striker and I untied the rope about my left wrist. Then he cleverly wrapped the strip of leather from the heel of my hand up to the middle of my forearm, leaving the ends free to tie it closed at the top. Then we did the same with Gaston's right wrist. Then Striker closed the metal about us. The key was on a braided chain of leather that he put around his neck.

Gaston tested the weight on his wrist happily. There was a good foot of chain between the bracelets, but I still felt his every move. I was not sure why it troubled me so as compared to the rope. I supposed it was due to bad memories. Iron about my wrists spoke of helplessness and heralded death.

Striker saw something of my concern and his features coalesced into doubt. "We thought you might be able to get some sleep this way. And... I would rather have you armed. Not that I don't trust the men, but there are so many we don't know these days and... Hell, we could run afoul of the Spanish and..."

I cut him off with quick words and a reassuring smile. "I have been in chains twice. Both times I had been arrested for some crime I had truly committed, and if not for the intervention of others I would have been hanged."

My smile widened to genuine amusement at the irony that now the intervention of friends was what put me in chains.

"I truly feel it is a fine solution," I assured him.

"Glad to hear it," Striker said.

Gaston made a happy humming sound, and looped his chained arm

about me and kissed my neck.

Striker seemed to find grim amusement in this. "How does he appear so cute when he's thus? I swear I couldn't see him so, unless I had seen him..."

I felt Gaston's head shift and heard a low growl. Striker raised an eyebrow at whatever look Gaston cast upon him.

"He is quite volatile when he is thus," I said.

"Aye," Striker said, sober now. "I will not call him cute again."

He left us. Gaston continued to lick my neck: quite pleasurably, actually. I turned my wrist to and fro, testing the feel of the band. Only the Gods knew whether these chains represented a death sentence, one which I had gladly given myself.

Thirty-Five

Wherein We Battle Horses, Bulls, and Dogs

We sailed on to Cow Island. I quickly discovered that the manacles freed Gaston from everything but his madness. He surrendered to his Horse and abandoned all pretenses of holding the reins and wearing his mask. He became exceedingly mercurial: at times railing one second and giggling the next. When he was sad, he curled into a ball and cried. When he was angry, he expressed his discontent without real threat or malice. Though I was initially alarmed, I soon learned he was not possessed by the Devil so much, but rather by some faerie sprite of whimsy. He spent an entire afternoon daubing his eye paint upon our chests, so that we appeared to have the spots he remembered from some great cat in a menagerie. He carved the word “endure” onto my cuff, and the word “conquer” onto his. Yet, even without the mask of reason, he still saw to our well-being, and was quite concerned with what I ate and how my bruises were healing. He finally decided that our wounds were healed such that the stitches could be removed, and instructed me quite earnestly on cutting his. All of this was done with the earnestness of a child.

I stopped fearing him in any capacity. Every time he came at me with carnal intent, I prayed with great fervor he would find his rise, but he did not. Instead, he pleased me greatly on several occasions. He found great amusement in bringing me to cries of such volume that I woke our sleeping associates.

I worried that his overt demonstrations of madness would further harm our standing with the crew, and was pleased to discover this was

not the case at all. Many of the men were relieved that my matelot now appeared as mad as they knew him to be. A rational-appearing man who could not be trusted in his sanity was cause for alarm; but an obvious madman could apparently be seen and accepted for what he was.

As for our friends, those who could not tolerate this new Gaston the Horse – as I coined him, not they – gave us wide berth. Thus we did not spend much time with Julio or Davey, or even the Bard. Pete, Liam, and Cudro, however, became fascinated by my matelot's antics, as if he were the most interesting thing on the voyage, which I suppose he was.

Striker was amused and concerned. One afternoon he joined us in the cabin. We had been surprisingly alone. He watched Gaston carve little animals on the side of the table with a dirk and asked me, "How are you?"

To which Gaston replied, "We are fine, because Will has the reins." And then he threw the dirk into the center of a target he had made on the far wall, wriggled himself into my lap, and pulled my free hand to his head to scratch his scalp; which I did rigorously so that he arched his back and made a happy sound.

"I am fine," I assured Striker. "I have always enjoyed riding spirited creatures."

But not for days at a time; and Gaston gave me no time to rest.

Striker nodded to my words, and I did not know if he guessed at my thoughts.

"When we reach Cow Island," I said, "We will need to be set free to run about in the woods."

From my lap, Gaston was regarding me with narrowed eyes. He rolled to look at Striker.

"I fear for your safety," Striker said thoughtfully.

"I will not harm Will," Gaston growled.

Striker met his gaze without rancor. "That's not the intent of my concern. I am worried for your safety, you rat. There are French men who wish *you* dead, not Will."

Gaston sat, and the weight of reason settled over him, so that his shoulders slumped from the burden. I saw the mask slip into place.

"We should be away from the others until they know the tale," Gaston said. "We will go far from the beach and stay hidden for a week."

"Until we send for you," Striker amended.

Gaston nodded. "I will let nothing harm us."

Striker snorted with amusement. "We will send someone to warn you if the French assemble an army to root you out."

"There will be no need in that event," Gaston replied with little humor. "Armies do not move quietly."

"Nay." Striker grinned. "I will free you to scare the cattle and any fool stupid enough to seek you out."

He left us. I clutched Gaston's shoulder before he could turn to me.

"Please," I said in French. "I love your Horse, I truly do, but could you please remain as you are, as in possession of the reins, for a small

time? Three days of not knowing how you will behave from moment to moment has worn me quite thin."

When he turned to me he was still Gaston the Man. I sighed with relief.

He smiled. "I am surprised you have not beaten me senseless before now. You have been very patient."

"You have not behaved so very badly as that. How are we?"

He frowned thoughtfully. "I am at ease for the time being. I feel well, but I do not think it will last."

I considered my heart on the matter. "It need not last. It just need return from time to time."

He moved to sit beside me. "Do you wish to attach me to some object and be free of me for a time?"

"Non. We have been side by side for months before now. I am well enough with that. Though... even if this metal does not chafe the skin, it does chafe the spirit a bit. I am weary of finding my movements restricted, even by you."

He fingered his cuff. "I know. I still find comfort in it, though. Much as I feel the invisible chains of love binding us sometimes chafe, and yet you find them reassuring."

I grinned. "As always, my life is steeped in irony."

"I find great comfort in your being willing to be chained to me," he said solemnly. His gaze was earnest when it met mine.

I sobered, and thought on it. I could see where he would find it a proof of my love, just as I found his trust of me to be proof of his. It was as if we were the inverse of one another in the matter. It was not irony; it was that we complemented one another. Our differences fit together rather than holding us apart.

"I must learn to become the centaur," he said. "Not to be either Horse or man."

"As must I," I said. "And then we must learn to pull as a team."

He smiled. "I feel we are doing well so far. We have not lost the cart yet, but I feel that is because you stand so very strong when I fall."

"I have faith that someday you will support me in the same fashion. You are doing so now. You are allowing me to rest and gather my spirit."

He snorted disparagingly. "Because you have allowed me to roll about in the mud of the road for days now."

I laughed, as I could picture it quite clearly: me standing there, stolid in the traces, while he frolicked in a meadow next to the road.

He pulled me into his arms, and I let the tension drain from my soul. All would be well.

That night, he was something of a centaur, in that the Horse was not running amuck, but the Man was not totally in control, either. I felt restored, and was not troubled by whatever he might do. We slipped up to the quarterdeck to join our companions in the moonlight as we had almost every night since sailing.

"We might see Cow Island tomorrow," the Bard said quietly as we

joined them.

"That is lovely to hear," I said.

"It would be good if the two of you could help us with a task," Cudro rumbled. "But it can wait until after you've run about a bit, as Striker says you'll be doing."

"What task?" I asked.

"Teaching men to fight and shoot," he said with a snort.

"There be too many of 'em," Liam said. "We be needin' ta conduct drills, like we're the damn army."

"So many of the men have not roved before?" I asked.

"Some of them don't even have proper weapons," Cudro added.

"They're all bondsmen or sailors, not buccaneers."

"Well, with a few exceptions, did not all buccaneers start in the same fashion?" I asked.

"Aye," Cudro said. "But a few at a time. And they ran to the Haiti first, and got taken in by men who would train them. A hunting party might have had a new man every month or so. Now, these fools don't know where the Haiti is. They hear tell that the buccaneers are getting rich in Port Royal, and so they run here."

"Not all of us went to the Haiti first," Striker said. "But Cudro is correct. When Pete and I arrived in Port Royal ten years ago, there were more veterans than recruits."

"An' when we arrived afore that, afore they 'ad even named Port Royal proper," Liam said, "those o' us that wanted to make a good go o' it went ta the Haiti ta learn 'ow ta hunt and rove proper. Then we came back and taught those that stayed. These new ones 'aven't even seasoned. A good number o' 'em are goin' ta sicken on Cow Island, and then we'll likely be a pitchin' bodies o'er the side all the way ta the rendezvous with Morgan."

"There is that." Striker sighed. "The matter is that there are more new men arriving in the West Indies every week, and many think they'll join us and become rich. Five years ago, being a buccaneer was a thing only the desperate men wished to escape to. Most men that ran wanted to become free men on a colony and have land. Now they all wish to be pirates. It'll only get worse."

"Until the Crown stops granting marques and we do become pirates," the Bard drawled with a grin.

"Would you want to go on account?" Striker asked him.

"Nay," the Bard said with a shrug. "If we can't sail against the Spanish, there's more money to be made off the merchants in Port Royal by carrying cargo for them. Hell, that may even be true now."

"Aye, I know," Striker sighed. "I don't wish to become a damn planter, but I could see having a small fleet of merchant vessels. In time, there'll be great money to be made on account, though, taking ships from all those merchantmen." He grinned.

All their words reminded me of a thing my matelot had said when he first explained why some were buccaneers and others were not. I looked

to Gaston, who sat with one leg around my back and another across my lap. He was studying the stars. He felt my gaze, though, and met it with sad amusement.

"The buccaneers are dying out," I said quietly.

"Aye," Cudro snapped.

"Another ten years, an' ya won't be able ta find a man who can make boucan," Liam spat. "They na' be understandin' the Way o' the Coast. Some o' them ain't even willin' to learn. They see no need o' it."

"They seem to take to the articles well enough," Striker said. "But aye, they think like the soldiers, farmers, and bondsmen they were."

I thought of meeting Ingram in the cabin the other day, and his un-buccaneer awe at my title. He had been with veteran Brethren, though. "Do you feel they will not learn in time?"

"Too many of them," Cudro said. "If we could assign each of them to an experienced man then they could be taught. But nay, they flock together and hold themselves separate from those who could teach them. And the Brethren don't know what to do with so many. It used to be that a new man would arrive and often get taken on as a matelot by someone who had lost his man to misfortune. Or maybe a pair would arrive together and be taken in by a larger party. Now they arrive in groups."

"And there is no chance for men to bond," I said. "I see. Let me guess, one of the Ways of the Coast they do not understand is matelotage."

There were chuckles all around.

"Aye," Cudro sighed. "They understand buggery well enough, but the idea of pairing with one man is foreign to them."

"They be thinkin' that matelots means all the Brethren, and they speak o' each o'er as *mateys*," Liam scoffed.

"How many?" I asked.

"Thirty-six who have never roved or raided," Cudro said. "Seven of them are among the Brethren and not of concern, but twenty-nine of them keep to themselves."

"Morgan is to blame," Striker said. "He wants an army for raiding, and he has sent men about to all of the colonies and offered the promise of riches to any who will sail with us."

"Ah, bloody Hell," I sighed.

"I would not be disparaging the admiral," the Bard teased. "They think he's a good man."

"So we are truly at the twilight of an era perhaps..." I knew why Gaston and I were about this business, but I wondered what motivated the others: habit alone? "Do any of you feel there are truly riches to be had, or do you merely wish not to be planters?"

"I don't wish to live on land," the Bard said, "and this has been lucrative. But things change, and I don't feel the need for adventure as I used to." He slipped his arm around Dickey, and the young man smiled.

"I know nothing else," Cudro said thoughtfully.

"I would be a planter," Julio said. "But I am a maroon."

"You are receiving a grant of land, are you not?" I asked. "Though, it is not arable..."

"Aye, Mister Theodore said I could even apply for a grant of land to plant, as long as I am never seen. If we do decide to stay on land, Davey will need to conduct our business."

I swore and Julio shrugged.

"I did na' mind livin' ashore these last months," Davey said with a surprisingly thoughtful frown. "Cept Julio won't be wanted an'... I don't know nuthin' else either."

"This be a good life!" Liam said defiantly at no one in particular.

Otter rubbed his back and studied the sea.

"You need not be here," the Bard teased and poked my arm.

I grinned. "I am here because I do not wish to be a planter, and my matelot wishes to kill people and they had best be Spaniards."

Gaston laughed and embraced me.

"Those would be my sentiments," Striker said with a chuckle.

Pete snorted. "Naw. WantTaKillMen, NaSpaniardsTho. JustBestBeSpaniards."

"What men do wish to kill?" I asked.

"FatOnes. FatMerchantBastardsAnNobles. MenWhoKissEachOther's Arse, AnThenStabSomePoorMan."

I smiled. "Ah, you want to kill wolves. I have no fondness for them, either."

"Actually he wishes to fleece them," Striker said with a grin. "And if they should get flayed while he's at it, he won't cry over it."

Pete chuckled.

Everyone now seemed to be in the clutches of contemplation. I pondered on wolves and sheep yet again. I no longer viewed the men around me in that manner. They were neither wolves nor sheep. Those classifications belonged to the Old World and those who would emulate it. The Brethren stood beyond it, or at least they had for a time. I made quiet note of this to my matelot in French.

He nuzzled my ear and sighed. "Perhaps we are the dogs the Spanish call us."

"We have teeth and hunt in packs?"

"Oui," he said, "and alone in the wild, we are as formidable as any pack of wolves, but around men we can be made to heel and fetch."

"Oui, sadly, I feel that is an accurate assessment," I sighed.

"You and I are still centaurs," he whispered seductively. "We are like no others."

I turned my head to him, and he kissed me deeply.

"Are there no others?" I teased against his lips when he released me.

"Oui," he said, "but I do not know them. For me, there is only you."

"Good God, there they go again," the Bard drawled.

There were chuckles all around. I sighed into Gaston's mouth and presented the lot of them with my extended middle finger.

We arrived at Cow Island late in the afternoon of the next day. It is a small island hanging off the southwest coast of Hispaniola, much as Tortuga hangs off the north. It is a good deal larger than Tortuga, though. Its coast presented enough breadth that if I had not been informed it was the island we sought, I would have thought it Hispaniola herself.

We carefully skirted a reef as we approached from the west, the Bard lecturing Dickey all the while about how the reef was not properly marked on any of the charts. This was apparently good, in that it kept all but the experienced of the buccaneer pilots away from the place. Though our ships in the bay behind the reef could obviously be seen with ease by any vessel passing close to the island from the west, they could not easily be approached, especially not within cannon range, unless the interlopers knew the island well. And if the guests approached from the east, the hillocks on the island would hide our ships, and our sentries upon those hills would see any impending trouble before it saw us.

The bay in which we anchored was good-sized and tucked away around the lee of the island. It bordered on a pleasant sandy beach, with a broad meadow behind it containing a freshwater lake. The island immediately lived up to its name, in that I could see a herd of grazing cattle as we prepared to go ashore. The swine we had stolen last summer had been large and unruly beasts, yet they had still maintained the vestiges of domestication and been accustomed to living in pens. These cattle I now gazed upon were great wild things with huge sweeping horns and a deer's fear of men. As I watched, the lead cow called to the others, all fat with calf, and led them up the hillside and inland. The bull, a magnificent thing I would not want to face with my ineptitude at reloading, pranced about and snorted – as defensive males of many kinds are wont to do – and finally followed his herd.

We prepared to disembark our restless men. Once all were ashore, decisions would be made as to who would man the sentry posts, command the hunting parties, and orchestrate the making of boucan, and what order the French ships would careen in. Since we had nearly three hundred men among the three vessels, any of these laborious endeavors was assured a quick completion.

Gaston and I were not to be part of any of it for a time, though. Striker unlocked the manacles and we stowed them in my bag in case we had need of them. We left the key behind. Then, with all of our weapons and our bags, we slipped over the side with the first boat ashore. By the time the French began to land, Gaston was leading me east, away from the sinking sun, as fast as my still-healing body could manage.

He went straight in and then angled us north, until at last he slipped over the steep embankment and down to the water. We traveled beneath the low cliff for a time, until he found a cove to his liking, with a small cave at its back. Apparently the hilly portions of the island's

shore were oft riddled with holes hollowed by the surf and wind, just as Jamaica's was. Once we stopped, I waded into the lightly-lapping surf to soak my battered feet.

"If we could hunt, we could kill a cow and make you boots," Gaston said as he joined me.

He had not spoken as we traveled, and now appeared invigorated and happy.

"Do you know some method of tanning leather inside a day?" I asked. "Much less fashioning a boot?"

"Non, hide boots, from the skin of their legs. You strip them off the cow intact, and then stick your foot in them and bind them at top and bottom. They will protect your feet and legs for a time."

I grimaced. "Do you turn the skin inside out first?"

"Non." He grinned. "The hide side is tougher. You want it outside."

"I will take your word on that. And why can we not hunt?"

He shook his head. "We cannot risk the sound of gunfire if we are being sought. It is a shame. Here we are with cattle and we cannot follow tradition and eat marrow to break the fast. Have you had marrow before?"

"Non," I said.

"It is somewhat like warm butter. Among the Brethren it is prized."

Fully armed, with musket in one hand, he was standing there watching the retreating water suck the sand around his ankles with boyish intensity, and then hopping to the side to observe the indentations left behind. It was good to see him at such ease. I did not feel I should comment on it, lest it break the spell of happiness.

"So we shall have no fire this night?" I asked.

"Non." He turned to frown at the slight cave behind us. "We could hide it somewhat, but if we have been followed they would look for it, or run along the edge up above and smell for it. Non, we shall not have one. We are well away from any bog, and the sea breeze should keep the insects away."

I shrugged. There would not be much of a moon, but I doubted we would need light for what I imagined we would soon be about.

As I had anticipated, he was upon me as soon as we had set our weapons aside and shared some of our water. I was, of course, not opposed to this in the least. We were quickly naked, with me lying on soft dry sand and him astride me. His mouth and fingers were working in deft concert to deprive me of all thought, but I clung steadfastly to a thing I had not been able to ask while we were with so many others these last days. I thrust a hand between us to gently cup his flaccid member. I was not surprised that it was so; however, I wished to know why.

He stilled, and I felt more than saw him regarding me in the dim light.

"You are under the sway of your Horse, non?" I panted. "Then why...?"

His fingers were on my lips. "Not like this," he said quickly.

"How do you mean? I feel no threat from you as you are now. You have been playful to the extreme these last days, and not..."

There was stirring beneath my fingers. I caressed him a little, and his hand clamped about my wrist.

"I do not want to take you as I am now," he said earnestly. "I wish it to be a thing of beauty, a solemn thing. I am not... ready. And not here, in the dirt. Not when I will not be able to see you. I am sorry."

He pulled my hand from his member.

I understood. "My love, it will be a thing of great beauty to me no matter where or when it occurs, but I will let you choose the time and place of it. Am I to understand that, as you are now, it is simply a matter of choice?"

"Oui," he breathed, and leaned down to kiss me.

I kissed him hungrily, my thoughts racing.

"Can we not give you pleasure then, without....?"

He had silenced me with another kiss. I heard him rummaging in his bag beside our heads, even over the pounding of my heart.

"I will think on it," he teased.

I reached for him, but he swatted my hand away. His hand closed over my member and I gasped at the coolness of the salve.

"But first, I wish for you to take me," he whispered.

I wanted that very much, and my cock swelled nearly to the point of pain as he lubricated me. And then I remembered why that was so very poor an idea.

"Non," I said firmly and gripped his hand. "I said never again. You took it poorly last time. I will not..."

"Trust me?" he snapped.

I winced. "My love..."

"I reacted as I did before because I was sane," he said fiercely.

"I made a decision to do a thing that the Horse did not want. Now I am mad, so it does not matter. This is a thing the Horse wants. It is different. I will not go mad and threaten you, because I am already there."

I wrestled with that and my words were slow in coming. "I see... a difference in the perception of the matter, oui. But, my love, I feel..."

He moved so very fast, and my hands were pinned on either side of my head.

"Do not," I breathed.

He shifted forward, and my greased cock slid happily under him and then rose to point up between his buttocks. He squirmed down.

I closed my eyes. "You are not prepared," I hissed.

Waves of desire radiated from my balls as my cock head brushed his opening. I did not think he could manage the angle, though, not while pinning me. Neither did he, apparently. He released my left wrist, and his hand darted to my cock.

I did not struggle. "It will hurt," I said calmly. "I would not have

you..."

"You are mine," he growled.

He sat, impaling himself fully upon me in one move. I groaned in pleasure and he in pain. Then all was still, save for our panting and the surf. I looked to the first stars beginning to glow above us.

"It will hurt no less to pull away," I said gently.

He spasmed so around my member that I felt it had been captured in a vice. I hung somewhere between misery and ecstasy. I rubbed his thigh and back with my free hand. He was rigid with discomfort.

"My love," I said lightly, "we must relax you, else I fear we will live thus the rest of our days; which will surely be numbered, as it will be difficult to find food this way."

He gave several small pained barks of amusement. "I did not think it would hurt so."

"You were relaxed and prepared before," I said with gentle amusement. "I would have spared you this."

"By denying me," he hissed. "I will prove you wrong. And do not say you are not enjoying this."

"I am not enjoying your pain in the least," I protested.

"Non," he grumbled, "your cock is enjoying my hole, as you are still as hard as when I took you in."

I sighed. "My love, you are gripped so tight about me I cannot remove myself, or likely spend myself for that matter. I can no more go limp than a hanged man can breathe. Now release my other hand and let me do what I might to calm you."

He did as I bade, and I located the salve where he had left it by my hip. I began to massage it into his thighs and belly. He held himself very still and straight, with his head thrown back such that he could gaze upon the heavens. I could not know if his eyes were open or not.

His grip upon me eased, and I sighed with pleasure and he with relief.

"How are you feeling now?" I asked.

"Very full of you," he said.

I was gladdened by the touch of amusement I heard. "You feel very good about me now," I said. "Very good indeed. Yet, if you wish to dismount and have me rub your back for a time, I will not begrudge you."

His head came forward, so that I knew he gazed at me. "And if I do not wish that?" His words were warm and seductive.

My breath caught. "Then I am at your mercy."

His fingers traced a path they always did: up my ribs to find and toy with my nipples. I let the desire I had been holding my head above pull me under. With a sigh, I squirmed beneath him and reached for his hips. He grabbed my wrists again, but this time he held my hands on his legs. He began to move, tentatively at first, and then with greater purpose; never in long strokes, but enough to tease and please me in increments. I had no control over the matter, and my only warning of

what he would do next came from the twitch and play of thigh muscles beneath my fingers.

I did not need to see him in the dark to know he was grinning down at me as he always did when teasing me so. And I was not so far lost to my pleasure that I did not hear when his breathing changed from slow and steady breaths of concentration to little pants of pleasure. When he began to shift his thrusts and steady his rhythm, I realized with wonder that it was not so much for my benefit as for his. I pulled my right hand free, and this time he did not swat me away as I reached for him. My greased fingers found his hard cock and I nearly came at the feel of it.

I tried to recall the names of stars as I stroked him. Only when he finally reached the brink and pumped in my hand with strangled cries of pleasure did I let myself follow him over the edge. I exploded as I fell, rushing up and out to Heaven and back again, and then I reached bottom and found a pool of delight that soaked my very soul in warmth and love.

He collapsed atop me, gasping. I laughed with the joy of it all. Then he was moving again, kissing me intensely and patting me over and over again, as if to assure himself of my existence. I bore it with a smile, but my ribs were quite relieved when he at last pulled away to stagger out into the surf and roar hoarsely at the stars.

It was now so dark I could not see him, yet I stumbled after, listening for sounds of his splashing until at last I tripped upon him where he knelt in the waves. He was sobbing. I sank into the shallow water with him, and pulled his head to my chest and held it there.

After a time, he squirmed about in my grasp until he could nuzzle my neck and chin. "Thank you," he whispered in my ear.

"I will bring you pleasure whenever you wish, my love," I said. "As you well know, we need not engage in sodomy to do so."

"I have not trusted myself."

Sadly, I thought I would not know how much I trusted him on the entire matter until I saw how he behaved when we rose on the morrow.

"It felt so very good," he murmured. "I know it felt much the same the other time you pleased me, but I was very far away that night.... It is as if it were a dream."

I smiled at the night. "Well, I believe it has been said that if we could remember pain in any exactitude, we would not move for fear of causing ourselves more; and if we could remember pleasure in all its glory, we would not find the need to move at all."

He chuckled. "I will be glad to let that pain pass from memory."

I held him tighter. "I know well how it felt."

I also knew what Shane had done to me had been somewhat worse: he had never greased himself at all, choosing instead to allow my blood to lubricate his thrusting.

Gaston stilled and then gasped, "Oh Will..."

"Non. Non," I said quickly. "Think not on it. I do not wish to. I apologize for saying anything at all."

"If I ever see the damn cousin, I shall rip his cock off," Gaston growled.

"I will help you. I have fantasized on such a thing myself."

"And what else will you do to him?" he asked.

I chuckled, and allowed myself to glance upon old memories of my imagined acts of revenge. "I would impale him upon a pole; though, I would not wish to sully my member, or the act, by using my own."

"I am sure some implement will be available," Gaston said. I saw the glint of teeth in the starlight.

I grinned in return.

He apparently sobered, as I could no longer see teeth, and he took to stroking my cheek gently. "I am pleased I know more of what happened to you. If I combine how I felt when I have been beaten, with how I felt upon impaling myself upon you, with the times I have felt humiliated, I think I might know how horrible it was for you. But you are correct; we cannot remember pain in such a way as to truly capture it. So I cannot feel as you did."

I found that both sweet and disturbing. "I suppose you could always flog me someday, so that I could understand what you felt." I realized he could not see my smile. "That is a jest. Not that I would not wish to understand what occurred with you, but that..." I sighed, even before his fingers found my lips to stop my words.

"Being flogged as I was is akin to being impaled over and over again. I never want you to understand that," he said earnestly.

"But now I do," I said somberly. Though I could not feel it, I could now imagine the ever-building pain he must have suffered. I felt a chill crawl up my spine from the water. I stood, and pulled him after me.

"Then I never wish for you to experience it," he said.

"And you must never suffer rape," I said a little more harshly than I intended. "We have suffered enough to know pain; we need not do more in the name of empathy. Though I know that is not truly what you meant to imply." I was not entirely sure why I had become so upset.

"Will?" he queried, and his arms stole about me before I could reach the dry sand.

I thought on how I would answer him, and a vision of the cause of my duress came to me. I saw Shane going at Gaston as he had gone at me: Gaston beaten bloody and dazed, face down over a bed, while Shane thrust away at him with a demonic snarl on his face. I gasped, and stared at the stars in the hopes of burning the image away.

"The idea of you suffering as I did disturbs me greatly," I told him. "I would rather suffer it again myself than see, or even know, that the same was done to you. I do not wish to discuss this anymore."

He did not release me. "I did not wish to taint so fine a night."

I turned in his embrace, and stole my arms around him to caress his buttocks. "It need not end on such a note. If I were to anoint you with oil, do you feel you could...?"

He silenced me with a kiss; and we found that, aye, indeed he could,

thrice more. It seemed he had years of penned jism just dying to escape him. And though none of it entered me, I did not care. I was so very pleased that at last he seemed free of his impotence.

Thus, I woke at dawn, tired yet sated, and felt all was truly fine with the world. I did not think the Titans could pull the smile from Gaston's face.

"It is light now, so you can see me, and we have this beautiful dawn to remember it by. My arse is yours," I teased.

He sighed happily and shook his head. "Non, not yet."

I heaved a sigh of mock exasperation and he chuckled.

"We must move now," he said.

He was preparing cartouches, and he handed me several. I stuffed them in slots in my bardiche. He did not make many, as we were not supposed to shoot, and the paper and powder would not remain fresh for more than a day in the humid air.

"I was thinking you could teach me to swim as you have promised," I said as he finished.

"Non, I will not have us about in the waves with no weapons," he said.

"Well then, speaking of the need for all of this defensiveness, we need to spend some of our time teaching you what I know of dueling."

"Oui," he sighed.

He tossed me a jar of hogs' fat, and we took turns applying it to one another, which nearly delayed our leaving. But all too soon, we were working our way inland.

As we forced through underbrush so thick we had to hack a path with cutlasses in places, I wondered how anyone could hunt cattle here; and then we broke through to the edge of another meadow, much like the one by the bay, but higher in the hills. This one also had less marsh grass and more clumps of brush here and there. I did not see any cattle.

Gaston was intent on studying the trees behind us. "Hush," he breathed. "Did you hear that?"

I listened to the omnipresent buzz of insects and the symphony of bird calls and thought that, if anything, I heard less than I had before. Then I knew that was precisely what he meant.

"Move," he whispered, and pointed across the field. "Stay low."

I understood his meaning, and despite the increased strain on my already-displeased body, I bent at the waist and kept myself below the tops of the grass and brush as best I could, while working my way along the line of a shallow roll of ground. And then the brush was gone, and there was just tall grass. I would have to crawl through it in order to avoid being seen from the trees. Thankfully, there was all the other brush between us and the side of the field we had entered. I waited for Gaston to join me, to see in which direction he wished to go.

And then I saw we had a larger problem. I do not know how the bull managed to see me prior to my realizing it was indeed a threat. I suppose it has much to do with my thinking of cattle as being generally

docile creatures one herded about and milked or slaughtered. This one was not interested in either activity. He was great red creature, with horns far wider than my arms could span. He pawed the dirt fifty or so yards from us. He was in motion before I brought my musket up.

Gaston appeared and dropped to his knees in front of me with a hissed, "Do not shoot the head." He fired before I did.

Then time slowed. The bull was charging straight on to us. Gaston's ball struck its withers and did not slow it. I had my musket up. All I could focus on was that massive head. I understood, though: the ball would not penetrate the skull. I was aware of Gaston reloading. I wanted to scream that he should run. It was too close. I dropped the muzzle of my musket down and to the right, to the fleshy fore-shoulder just visible beside the wagging head. I fired. The ball hit true and the animal staggered for a single stride. I already had a cartouche in hand and the musket down. Gaston fired. His ball hit the other fore-shoulder and the beast staggered for a single stride again. I was ramming the ball and patch home. I could not remember if I had added the powder. It did not matter. We would get one more shot. Somehow, there was powder in the pan and the musket was at my shoulder. I fired. I hit. The beast's left front leg gave way and it spilled into the dirt before us. And then I was thrown sideways as Gaston plowed me from the collapsing bull's path. Then he was upon it, cutlass in hand. Blood sprayed as I collapsed to my knees. The animal had landed where I had stood.

And then we were not alone with the dead beast.

"Gaston!" I cried, as I leapt to my feet and pulled both pistols.

But he had already seen the five men appearing out of the brush to surround us with aimed muskets. We stood back to back beside the bull. Gaston had a pistol in his left hand and a cutlass in his right. I eyed the two men I could see clearly on my side of the circle. I recognized neither of them. As they had not fired, I spared a glance over my shoulder to the other men. Two flanked Gaston as their comrades flanked me, and one man stood squarely before my matelot.

"Le Croix," Gaston growled.

"Gaston," a man said. I placed him as the one directly in front of Gaston.

"You will pay for what you did to our good surgeon," the man said in French. "We have no quarrel with your matelot. It is his sad fortune to pair with you; do not make it sadder still. If you wish him to live, tell him to drop his weapons and leave. If you move, I will fire and drive the ball through both of you."

I thought them fools. Primarily because they thought I would walk away, and secondly, because one should not bring a musket to a pistol fight. Muskets are weapons best used at range. All five men were very close.

"My love," I said in English. "Do you trust me?"

"In all things," Gaston replied.

One of the men to my right translated my words to French. I

thanked the Gods for this distraction, as I saw the two men before me glance to their companion as he spoke.

"Since we are men who must always be in the *right*," I said with emphasis on the last. "Down!"

I was moving as the word left my lips. I felt Gaston move behind me. I trusted him. I could do nothing else. I squatted, swung my right pistol up and around, as if it were a weight at the end of my arm, and I dropped my chest to lie atop my right thigh. When I saw the man who had addressed Gaston, I fired. At less than ten paces, the ball took no time to tear out his throat. He had fired into the air above me. Gaston was gone.

Then I was rolling forward, the left pistol tucked to my belly. When I saw the man closest to me, I snapped the piece up and placed a ball in his left shoulder before he could depress the muzzle of his long musket enough to reach me. He fired into the ground.

Another ball slammed into the ground near my hip, and I dove up and away from it to my feet. My rapier was drawn before I spied the other man who had shot at me. He was swinging his now-empty musket at me like a club. I thrust up and under, and ran him through. As I began to pull back, his head was severed from his shoulders by a cutlass swing.

I stood. Gaston was looking for more targets, now that he had decapitated my last one. Across the bull, there were two bodies in the grass.

"Thank you," I said. "I was slowed a bit by my injuries."

He snorted derisively and kissed me quickly. "Reload," he hissed, when he left my mouth.

I did as he bade. We spied other men approaching at a run as I reloaded my second pistol. Thankfully, they were friends and not foes.

Liam pulled up when he reached us and looked at the bull and surrounding carnage.

"An' 'ere we be, worried an' all!" he scoffed.

"Aye, we thought we might have to hunt for breakfast," Otter added.

I rolled my eyes and sat with great relief. Now that the danger was past, I was acutely aware of all the pain I had caused myself.

"Who was this Le Croix?" I asked Gaston when he handed me my musket, which he had thankfully loaded, as I was not sure of my ability to carry it at the moment.

"Doucette saved his life," he said tiredly.

"They took off after ya last evenin'," Liam said. "Striker sent us on along, an' Pierrot sent Tooco an' Crème here ta join us."

I looked at the men who had arrived with them. Both wore floppy leather hats like Liam's, and stained leather breeches and jerkins. They were not young; their weathered faces appeared older than the Scotsman's by a number of years.

To my surprise, Gaston nodded at them respectfully, and they returned it.

"You know them too?" I asked, as the four men turned to butchering the bull and moving the meat to the shade at the edge of the field.

"I know them from the Haiti," Gaston said. "They are good men. When I have roved with them they have been kind to me."

"It is good to know that you have not made enemies everywhere you have gone," I teased.

He smiled. "It is better to know I have married well."

"Ey," Liam called. "Four shots in this 'ere. Ya done good. I take it Will reloaded quick enough."

"Aye," Gaston said proudly. "He did."

"I do not remember much of loading the musket," I said.

This garnered great amusement from them, even the Frenchmen after Otter translated.

There was something odd about Otter translating, but I could not name it.

Gaston joined them, and hacked at the bull's right flank. He soon returned to me with the animal's thigh bone, and split it so that we could scoop out the marrow. It did indeed taste somewhat like butter, but I did not think I would ever consider it a delicacy.

Soon, we had moved to the shade along with the beef, and the Frenchmen had run off to fetch the captains and others to recover the bodies. Liam and Otter were roasting a nice piece of meat over a fire. Gaston joined me and handed me a water skin.

"That might not be the end of it," he said.

"I know," I sighed.

"That was an excellent shot."

"Perhaps I should have tried lower on the leg, or we should have signaled each other as to which to aim for so that we did not waste a ball on the opposite member," I muttered.

"I did not mean the bull, and you signaled me very well."

"Oh that." I chuckled. "That was a very aggressive dueling stance, and not one that will be accepted in a formal setting."

"I was not able to witness it, only the result," he said quietly.

"Ah, well, I will show you once I recover sufficiently. I hope someone has the good sense to bring a bottle."

He rummaged about in my bag and produced a flask I vaguely remembered placing there. I grinned and took a swig of rum.

"We were greatly aided by the fellow translating," I said as the burning spread out from my stomach.

Then I remembered what was odd about Otter translating. "I did not know Otter spoke French," I said.

"He always has," Gaston said with a shrug and a frown. "Liam does not."

"I find it odd," I said, as I thought back over the last year and my relationship with Otter and Liam. "Damn it, then why did he not appear to know what Cudro said that first day upon the *North Wind*?"

Gaston shrugged again. "Liam is the gossip; Otter is polite. I do not

believe he listens unless it involves them."

I snorted. "I have never mastered the art of not listening; unless, of course, I am distracted. Then I am daft as a cow. And you have been a constant distraction this last year."

He grinned. "At least I have not impaired your aim."

"Not when your life is at stake," I said soberly.

He regarded me with wonder, and I sensed a change in him. He appeared younger, in that strange way I could not attempt to explain to another, much less myself.

His eyes grew moist. "I am so filled with love for you, I do not know how to contain it."

I cursed my foolishness. He had appeared in control during the insanity about us, but as he had not been settled before the matter, he was now far more unsettled than I at the events. I was not sure how to calm him. I did know I must cast aside my troubled heart and frazzled temper in the aftermath and pick up the reins.

I said as lightly as I could manage, "I know, you did a poor job of containing it last night."

He shook his head and frowned at my jest. "Will, truly, it is a huge thing, and I do not know how to carry it."

"That is why we have a cart," I said gently. "And we pull it together. Because love is heavier than gold, and love such as ours is more than one man can bear, perhaps."

He studied the ground and wiped away the tears. His nod was thoughtful when it came; but he was still not himself, or quite as he had been the last few days, either. Though I supposed he was, and this was simply not a facet he had shown because there had not been the proper events to trigger this face of his madness. With dismay, I saw he was rocking back and forth in little movements.

I looked to Liam and Otter; they were not watching us. I wondered how long we had before the others arrived.

I took his hand, and spoke as I would to a child. "I have the reins."

He nodded and his gaze was earnest when it met mine. "I know. Thank you."

He stood and walked back into the field. I pushed to my feet and followed him. He went to the place where the bull had fallen and turned slowly about, regarding the bodies. I joined him and did the same. With surprise I saw that Le Croix only had one leg.

In an effort to keep Gaston talking, I asked, "Does his missing leg have something to do with how Doucette saved him?"

Gaston was rocking back and forth again. He nodded with great effort. His voice was very soft, as if he whispered out of respect for the dead, or fear that they would hear him. "He lost his foot to a shark. The leg putrefied before they could get him to Doucette. And he fevered."

Liam joined us. He was frowning at Gaston, and I supposed my matelot's state of mind was evident to any but the blind.

"He canna' be touchin' the bodies, Will," Liam said. "These men be

ours, na' the Spanish."

Belatedly, I remembered that Gaston was called *the Ghoul* for a reason. I had only seen him arrange bodies the one time on the galleon, but he had been behaving like he was now just before he did.

I put a light arm over his shoulder and spoke French. "Let us go back to the trees, my love."

His eyes were hard and dangerous when he turned on me; all vestiges of the childlike mien were gone.

I did not flinch. "Quit bucking about and help me pull," I said levelly.

He frowned, but the anger left him.

"I know you wish to honor them," I said gently. "I understand. But no one else will, and I cannot explain it to them."

Now he appeared perplexed.

I tentatively applied pressure across his shoulders, to steer him away to the trees. To my relief, he moved as I wished. When I had him back where we had sat before, I pushed him to sit. I knelt stiffly, and rummaged in my bag until I found the manacles.

He shook his head at the sight of them. There was no defiance in the gesture, just reluctance. "I will behave." Then the childlike mien returned and he appeared scared.

I hid the chains away and sat with him. Exhaustion swept over me, to such an extent that I felt despair. I cast about for anything to anchor myself before I drifted away into a sea of despondency.

"Are you always like this after a battle?" I asked. "You were thus on the galleon; before that, on the flute, you had me to tend to and that distracted you. Do you... suffer regret to this extent, or is there some...?"

His fingers were on my lips. "It is wrong to kill."

I gently pulled his hand away. "It is right to defend your matelot. It is right to defend yourself."

That seemed to please him, and he nodded with growing confidence. "Thank you for putting it so."

"You are welcome."

And then I could say no more, as the others were arriving and I could only pray to the Gods that Gaston stayed calm and quiet and they did not notice his state.

The three captains, and those who arrived with them, went to look at the dead men in the field. A lone figure broke from them: it was Dickey. He cast about until he spied us and then he ran to our side. He appeared distraught.

"We are well," I assured him as he approached.

He ignored my words. "Will, it has all gone awry," he hissed, as he collapsed to kneel with us on the ground.

"How so?"

"Tom, he said, oh damn, he... we quarreled. He challenged me to a duel and I accepted!"

I wondered how many shots I could get off if the Gods decided to charge me instead of merely throwing things.

Thirty-Six

Wherein Our Prayers Are Answered

The captains were approaching.

“Dickey, what is the gist of it?” I asked. “And speak quickly, because we are not long alone.” I smiled to soften the last.

He glanced over his shoulder at the other men and gave a short huffing sigh. When he spoke, it was a prolonged rush. “Tom feels I betrayed him. And truly, it was as if he had an agenda. Our quarrel was nonsensical, such that I did not feel anger so much as confusion. He even blamed Francis for seducing me into corruption. Then he said some nastiness about how he had always known I lusted for him, him being Tom that is. But it seemed to be all a show for his fellows who were gathered about. One of them translated the lot of it and they were quite amused. They goaded him on. I have seen similar things. But Tom... he did not look so very brave, or rather he looked as I have always known him to look when he was trying to be brave. But... I could say nothing under the circumstances to mitigate the matter. So, I expressed my outrage at his accusations, and he asked if we should settle the matter as gentlemen, and... I said aye.”

As he spoke, I glanced at Gaston. My matelot seemed composed, but I could tell he was still not himself.

I turned my attention back to Dickey, who was also eyeing Gaston with concern. “We are all a trifle unsettled.” I shrugged. “And, well, we knew someone has to kill Tom. I am sorry it is you, though.” I was especially sorry as I felt he lacked the conviction necessary. He did not truly view Tom as his enemy.

He chewed his lip. "I do not know if I can."

"We will address that before all else in my instruction. Weapons?"

"Pistols," he said glumly.

"I assume the place is the beach. When?" I asked.

"Dawn. On the morrow."

I nodded. "We have the rest of the day to instruct you, then. I feel confident in what I can teach you."

Then others were upon us and I could not finish all I wished to say.

Striker gave me a smile that said much of his sense of irony concerning events, and I returned it. Here we had made all our plans and Tom had gone off and challenged Dickey.

I looked over the assemblage: in addition to Striker there were Pete, of course; Pierrot; the *Belle Mer's* captain, Savant; Julio and Davey; and three men I did not know but assumed were French. Savant, who I had not met before, was a smallish man, with square shoulders and head, and a somewhat squat and bulbous nose, yet he was not ugly: there was a pleasing plainness to his countenance. At the moment, he appeared anything but pleased.

"Nice shooting," Pierrot said in English with a grin.

I snorted. "And you have not seen the bull carcass yet. Pete will be pleased to hear I managed a second shot."

Pete chuckled. "BullsDrunkOrScared."

I grinned. "The bull proved to be sufficient motivation. I do not remember powdering the pan."

This brought amusement for all except Dickey, who was distraught, and Savant and the other Frenchmen, as apparently they did not speak English. Savant did not appear to be in a fine enough humor to find amusement even if he had understood my jest. He was glaring at Gaston, who was looking at none of them. This was not missed by Pierrot and Striker, who appeared concerned, as always. I sighed.

"What occurred?" Savant asked in French.

"They were his men," Striker said quietly.

I spoke French. "We thought we might be pursued. Gaston heard someone in the woods behind us. We went into the field to avoid them. We came upon a bull. When we had taken the bull, we found ourselves surrounded by five men. One of them, a man my matelot recognized as Le Croix, said that they only wanted Gaston and that I could go. That was unacceptable, so we defended ourselves."

Savant turned to glare back at where the corpses lay in the field. Pierrot was smiling at the sky and worrying his lip with his thumb to disguise it. I took the opportunity to translate for the Englishmen in the audience. They found amusement in my account much as Pierrot did.

"There were five of them, and good men," Savant said accusingly.

"How do you mean that, sir?" I asked in French. "Do you mean they were good men, and therefore should have been allowed to take my matelot's life over a misunderstanding of past events, or do you mean they were superior combatants we should not have been able to fell?"

His gaze, and the flicked glance he spared Gaston, said he meant both; but he said, "They were experienced fighters, and you were only two."

I awarded him a grim smile. "They were not so experienced they did not make mistakes."

"How so?" he asked.

"They forgot they were not hunting cattle or befuddled Spaniards. Muskets are weapons of range: they came too close with them. They did not have other weapons drawn. They allowed themselves to become distracted by one of their number translating my words..."

"Why?" Savant snapped. "You speak French very well."

I awarded him a grim smile. "Oui. They allowed themselves to become distracted..."

This time he understood and gave a small hiss of annoyance.

"And," I added, "they should have brought more men. They should have learned from Doucette. No one takes my matelot from me. Not five. Not an army."

Some of the anger left him and he gave a prolonged sigh. He spoke with his gaze on the trees around us. "They were wrong to seek justice as they did."

"Especially when there was no justice in what they sought," I said firmly.

He looked at me sharply. "Your matelot is mad."

"That does not make him responsible for what occurred with Doucette," I said.

He snorted. "I'll allow that, but my men won't sail with him."

"I cannot address that," I sighed. "I can speak of events on Île de la Tortue, but I cannot change who or what my man is. Now if you will excuse me, I wish for my captain to know what has been said."

Savant turned away and led the other Frenchmen back to the bodies. Pierrot gave me a reassuring smile before following them. In their wake, Liam and Otter slipped over to join us.

I relayed all to our cabal. For the sake of the French, who would still have been in hearing of hearty laughter, our friends tried to suppress their amusement at my explanation of our attackers' failure.

Throughout this, Gaston had been sitting with his knees hugged to his chest. When I finished, he touched Dickey's arm and said earnestly, "Will shot a man behind him, a man with a musket aimed at me, before the man could fire. He will teach you, and you will win."

"Well," I added quickly, "it was aided greatly in that Gaston moved when I told him to."

"I believe you," Dickey told Gaston. "I merely hope that I am up to the task of benefiting from Will's instruction."

"Well," I said with a grin, "if I harbor any doubt as to your ability, we will enact a time-honored solution. One of us will challenge Tom to a duel set for this evening at sunset."

This brought great amusement from all but Gaston and Dickey.

Pete raised his hand. "ISawImFlirtin'WithStriker."

I laughed quietly. "We might have to do a bit better than that, but you understand the method."

At further mention of matelots, I remembered that Dickey had one. "Where is the Bard? Does he know of this?" I asked.

Dickey gave a guilty shake of his head. "Francis is on the *Queen* still, as always. I hope word has not spread to him yet. I wished... I was going to go straight out and tell him, and then the French returned with word of where you were and I thought it prudent to secure your aid first."

"You need not explain it to me," I said kindly and clapped his shoulder. "I feel that was indeed the prudent course of action, as I do not know that we intended to return to the ships. I am sure the Bard will find it wise once you explain it to him."

"You should stay with Will and Gaston and practice," Striker said. "Would you have me tell him of it, so that he hears of it, and your reasons for not being the one to tell him, from a friend instead of through gossip?"

"Would you please?" Dickey said gratefully.

"Aye. And you two," Striker addressed me, "should come in with him tonight."

"Aye, I agree," I said with a smile, "we need be there on the morrow to watch the duel. Then we can slip away again, not that we were so very successful this time."

"That is what concerns me." Striker shook his head. "Spend tonight on the ship. Then slip away after the duel if you must, but Will, only if you must. I feel you will be safer amongst us."

I nodded sadly. "It is that bad?"

He shrugged. "This," he indicated the bodies in the field, "won't make it better. I don't know if he speaks the truth for his men. We'll need time to discover that."

"I know," I sighed. "We will see where we are once we sail to join the others. If necessary, we might welcome being left in Port Royal."

"I would rather lose Savant and his men than the two of you, but that's a bit of foolishness," Striker said sadly.

"Thank you," I said, "at the least, it is a sentiment that will not be shared by Morgan."

"The Devil with Morgan," he sighed. He looked to Gaston and bit his lip. "How is he?"

Gaston had been scratching about in the dirt with a stick. He surprised me by meeting Striker's gaze and saying quietly, "This did not make things better."

Striker sucked air and gave a small grimace of embarrassment. "I did not mean..."

My matelot waved the words away and spoke irritably. "I cannot know if I am in my right mind from one minute to the next; why should I expect you to?" Then his tone softened, and his gaze returned to the

dirt. "I am sorry. You are a good friend. I am grateful for your concern. I do not know how I will be on the morrow. Much will depend on what occurs. If for some reason Dickey is wounded, I shall be very busy, and though it may seem odd to some, very sane."

This evinced a quiet gasp from Dickey, and he whispered, "Thank you."

Gaston sighed and looked at Dickey. "I doubt that will occur. Thus much will depend on... how much I feel of their hate and fear."

All were quiet and thoughtful.

"We can stay on the ship," I offered.

"Nay," Liam said. "We'll stay with ya iffn' ya need to come out here."

Behind him, Otter nodded.

"As will we," Julio added. "You shall not be alone."

Gaston took a ragged breath and muttered, "thank you," before standing and walking away.

I looked at the ring of thoughtful faces. "Aye, thank you all. I do not know what we have done to deserve all of you, but I am grateful, and I hope we might repay you all someday."

Pete snorted disparagingly. "FriendsAin'tOnAccount."

I grinned. "I believe it would only be on account if repayment were expected. I would not sully any of you by saying that you would expect such a thing in exchange for your kindness. I am merely hoping I have the opportunity to enhance the esteem of my soul by offering what aid I can to my fellows."

The Golden One frowned and then awarded me a crooked smile and looked away with mischief. "IfnItBeFurYurOwnGood ThenSoBelT."

Striker snorted. "Knowing Pete's and my luck, when we need you, you'll have all the chance you could ask to enhance your soul."

He looked the others over. "Liam? Otter?"

"We ain't leavin' 'im," Liam assured him, and then as if in opposition to his words, he and Otter returned to tending the meat at the fire.

Striker nodded and walked away to join the captains and their men, who were digging holes to bury the dead where they lay. "Will, make sure Dickey will win," he said over his shoulder.

"Aye, aye, captain," I called after him.

Pete cackled and followed his matelot, as did Julio after giving me a smile.

Davey lingered, though. He met my questioning gaze and surprised me greatly by saying, "I already owe ya more than I can repay. We'll stand by ya."

"Thank you," I managed to say.

He nodded curtly and went to join his matelot.

Still surprised, I looked to Dickey and found him frowning at Davey's retreating back.

"I did not expect that," Dickey said.

"Nor I." I chuckled, then sobered as I looked to Gaston. He was

leaning on a tree nearby, with his back to us and his arms crossed. "Before we begin your lessons..."

Dickey nodded and smiled and went to join Liam and Otter.

I found another tree to lean on a short distance away, so that I could regard Gaston in profile.

"Did you hear Davey?" I asked. "I might not have to shoot him. I have harbored a suspicion for some time that I might have to deal with him as we are dealing with Tom at some future date."

Gaston turned to gaze upon me with amused regard.

I grinned. "As I have oft said, I am by no means a man destined for sainthood. I perform good deeds, such as they are, to balance the atrocities I have committed."

"Balance," Gaston said thoughtfully. "That is it. I feel as if your Gods seek balance."

"My Gods?"

He smiled. "I have found I have more belief in your Gods than the idea of the one true God."

"I do not know how much actual faith I have in Them," I said thoughtfully.

He snorted. "You have great faith in Them."

"I suppose I do, though I know not precisely what I feel They are."

"Is it necessary?" he asked. "Is it not enough to feel Their effect?"

"Many would say the same for the one true God."

He shrugged. "I feel there is order to all that is. I do not care what provides it at the moment. I am only concerned with the end effect upon our lives."

"And you feel there is balance? Justice, perhaps?"

He grinned at me. "Perhaps." Then he sobered and spoke with increasing agitation. "I feel that I have never known love before as I have this last year, and I feel that is balanced by the amount of hate I now find directed at my person. And this has been true of every other time I have felt love, there has always been someone who hates me, as if the balance must be maintained, as if there is some giant scale where such things are weighed, and the more love I receive, the more hate I must receive in equal measure."

I sighed. "I have felt the same on occasion; however, what of the times we have experienced hatred with no love in sight?"

He frowned and shrugged. "I know not. You are correct. Perhaps hatred need not be balanced if it stands alone, or perhaps... it is balanced by indifference when it occurs without love."

He shrugged that thought away, and turned to me with an earnest mien. "All I know now is that I feel I must surely be hated by all the men on Île de la Tortue in order to balance the scales against the love I receive from you and our friends."

I smiled. "Well, my love, then gird yourself well, because you will surely gain the enmity of all who live, as I see no end in sight of my adoration of you."

He looked away and leaned his head against the tree. A smile played about his lips until it finally claimed his mouth. "Damn you."

I chuckled. "And the same to you, as you place me in the same situation." I went to kiss him, and he accepted it hungrily, his arms stealing about me to hold me fast.

When at last I felt I must leave his mouth before we delayed the duties of the day, I asked, "Do you feel you can assist with Dickey?"

His response was not immediate. "Oui," he said after careful thought. Then he sighed. "At least we are spared worrying about my sanity to duel with the man. Though I would..."

I put a finger to his lips. "Dickey will do well."

"See there, you have faith."

"Non." I shrugged. "Perhaps. Oui. I have faith in my ability to teach him. I have faith in my experience and skills. I have faith in my judgment of his character and talents. As for the Gods... They have smiled upon Dickey by placing him in the path of myself, a person who can impart the skills necessary to give him success. Now, of course, they might choose to frown upon him at dawn, and his pistol will misfire or some other misfortune may befall him; which, I suppose, is why I sometimes tell the Gods what I wish to hear and see of events. If you do not tell Them, how are they to know?"

"You do not fully trust Their omniscience?" he asked with both curiosity and amusement.

I frowned and thought of how I did perceive the matter. "Oui and non. I trust that They are like all thinking men, in that They possess Their own motivations. I feel I must make Them aware of mine. And then, even if events should not occur as I would wish, at least I will have pleaded my case; whereas, if I say nothing at all, then I only have myself to blame for not speaking up. If I do not have the conviction to wish for a thing, then why should the Gods grant it?"

He smiled. "But you did not ask for Dickey to do well: you stated it with conviction."

"Ah." I grinned sheepishly. "Perhaps that is hubris on my part and I would do better to ask." I looked to the heavens. "I wish for Dickey to win the duel with Tom. Please."

Gaston chuckled. "You pray poorly."

"My methods have succeeded in swaying them in some fashion so far," I chided. "I have you."

"You delude yourself and see that which you wish. You have the love and trouble of a madman. Perhaps if you had begged with reverence I would be sane," he teased

"Perhaps," I said with amusement. "That is more in keeping with your concept of balance than with any deficiency of prayer on my part. You are so wonderful that you had to be flawed in some fashion or else this would be Heaven and not mortal life."

I kissed his nose and pulled away from him with a grin.

He was deep in thought. He finally nodded soberly and said, "Ah,

then that is why you are a fool," as if it were some profundity.

I laughed. "If that is my only flaw in your eyes, we can surely add either blindness or a lack of judgment to the list of yours."

He gave no answer, and merely smiled at me such that my heart ached. I knew if I returned to his embrace, we would do poorly by dear Dickey; and so I led him back to the others, and we supped on our hard-earned roast beef, and I began to explain the finer points of dueling.

"The primary component in winning a duel of this type is speed," I told Dickey. "All other matters are secondary or related to speed. You must strive to fire first. You must strive to increase the likelihood of your opponent firing last. Duels are on occasion lost to misfires and other misfortune, but they are primarily lost due to hesitation."

"That is what I fear," Dickey said. "I am afraid I will see Tom there and I will not be able to fire."

"That too is my fear. As in all things, the mind is the first place that must be prepared for an endeavor. If you are to do this, you must not fight Tom tomorrow."

Everyone frowned at me.

I smiled. "You will be fighting a man who will kill you. When the order is given to turn, it does not matter who your opponent is. It could be anyone. The only matter of import at that moment is that there is a man with a pistol who will kill you if you do not kill him first. If you do not fire first, his shot will rip into your heart and end all of your dreams and leave the Bard alone and cold and the rest of us missing you terribly. You will discover whether you are destined for Heaven or Hell far before you will feel ready to do so. Or, if you do not die, you will most likely be maimed. And you know damn well how much a wound hurts. I daresay you do not wish to experience another. So, you must be of the mind that you will not even be facing a man tomorrow, but a bull, or boar, or some beast that is a force of nature and devoid of all reason and has but one intent: your demise. Thus, Tom must be dead to you, or at least a memory, perhaps a pleasant one, perhaps not. That is between you, and your heart and soul, and God. Tom must have died when the match was made."

Dickey awarded this sober contemplation. He picked at the hunk of beef in his hand and studied anything but me. Beyond him, Otter, Liam, and Gaston nodded their agreement at my words but remained silent.

"Have you ever had to duel with a friend?" Dickey asked.

"Nay," I said with conviction. "I have had to duel with former friends and acquaintances, and once with a former lover. But once the match was made, they were not my friends, if indeed they ever were. Because truly, why would events transpire such that you must duel for your honor with a friend? That is the antithesis of friendship, is it not?"

"Ah," he said. "It is just that I have known Tom so very long, it is more that we are brothers than friends. I have sometimes felt that we were not in one another's lives by choice, so much as by fate. If I weigh

the reasons I have for hating him against the reasons I have for loving him, the hate is far stronger.”

I was amused someone else spoke of it in terms of scales and balance. I looked to Gaston and he smiled sadly.

“Yet, I love him,” Dickey continued, “and I still have hope that things could be mended.”

I sighed. “I understand how you feel. I truly do. There was one in my past who I loved beyond reason and he betrayed me in the foulest way, and I could not kill him because of the hope that he would change. But he did not. And I know someday I will face him and it will either be very hard, because I will be battling all of those memories, or it will be easy, in that I am so familiar with his being a ghost in my mind that I will not see him as the man he is now. He will be as I am telling you Tom must be, simply an opponent, and all the battles I need fight with him will have been won in my heart prior to our facing one another. If it is hard, in that I do not have my heart in order before we meet, then it is likely he will kill me and it will be my own damn fault.”

Dickey flinched at this last.

I patted his shoulder. “Dickey, I can give you the skills to stand against any man, but I cannot solve this for you, and it must be solved. He is either dead to you, or you must withdraw from the duel, or die.” I snorted with amusement and shrugged. “Or Pete must accuse him of flirting with Striker. Or... I will challenge him on the grounds of cowardice and betrayal for what he did on Tortuga, as I have intended to do since that day. Or Gaston will challenge him. Truly, until you decide that you can face Tom with a clear conscience, it is not yet a matter of life and death, or even dishonor, in this instance. So, while I am making these dire pronouncements, you are actually in the enviable position of being able to escape this duel if you so choose. Or if I so choose, because as I said before, if I harbor any doubt as to your conviction in the matter, I will not see you face him.”

I looked to Gaston and grinned. “And that is another thing I am telling the Gods.”

He chuckled.

Dickey frowned at us.

I shrugged. “I was praying for you earlier in my own inimitable fashion. Gaston chided me on my technique. But truly my heart was behind the matter. I do not wish any harm to come to you, and I know this is not an easy thing and you did not choose it.”

“I have been viewing it wrongly,” Dickey said with a thoughtful frown. “Tom has never been my friend, not such as I find myself blessed with now. I have merely long held to the fantasy that he was my friend because I knew no better. The irony is that... When Tom got the young lady pregnant, he was alone in the matter and solely accused and blamed. He implicated Harry as his accomplice and then suggested that I somehow prompted the entire matter, and thus we were banished with him. He told us he did not wish to go alone; and I am sure that was

true, and that he had tangled us in the matter because this was our chance to leave there and seek adventure together. Harry and I believed that. And now Harry is dead. And... I am happier than I have ever been; and Tom's betrayal on that day in England has brought me to a place where I have true friends, and am able to understand... that I was in truth betrayed by one I called friend."

I chuckled. "Irony is truly the staff of life... or perhaps the chaff." I sobered. "I am pleased that you are our friend and hold us in such esteem."

"Tom is dead to me," Dickey said sadly. "I should mourn, but I do not believe we have the time today."

I saw the resolve I hoped for in his eyes. "Nay, not if you are to duel with your opponent at dawn," I said gently.

As I had expected, Dickey proved to be an apt pupil; and the next few hours were spent drilling him on how to turn and obtain the best stance with the least amount of wasted time or movement: much as the others had once instructed me on reloading my musket. Then I enlisted Gaston, Liam, and Otter to aid Dickey in practicing walking, turning, and locating his opponent. Only when I was satisfied with his progress to that point did we advance to his actually firing the pistol. And then I used a kerchief as a target and moved it from tree to tree so that it was always in a different location when he turned. He became quite proficient at not being where his opponent might expect and hitting his target wherever it might be in the shortest time possible.

It was late afternoon when I called a stop to it. I was sure he could defeat anyone inexperienced with dueling, and even have a very good chance with a veteran such as myself. We ate a little more beef and walked back through the hazy evening to the ships.

When we reached the camp, I became acutely aware of the eyes upon us. I wanted to pay them little heed, but I knew it would behoove me to gauge them, and so I met them as we passed. Some were merely curious, but many others were hostile. I could not know if this was because our tale had not had time to disseminate fully, or because of the morning's events. I hoped news of the reaction to that could soon be brought to me, so that I might concoct some remedy for it if necessary.

Gaston was, of course, as aware as I of all who stared. He was withdrawn on the boat ride out to the *Queen*, and threw himself into rowing. As my aching body precluded my rowing in anything short of an emergency, I sat behind him and rubbed his back reassuringly. I wondered what the morrow would bring. I thought the night would not be as I would have liked, which is to say it would not be a repeat of the prior night's antics: we would have little privacy, and I was sure that would be a deciding factor in Gaston's expressions of ardor.

The Bard was not apoplectic as I had feared. I was sure this was due to Striker telling him the news hours before. Whatever storm might have raged had passed, and now our Master of Sail seemed content to embrace Dickey and badger me regarding his matelot's ability to duel.

"He will do well," I assured him. "He possesses talent in matters of combat, and I am now assured he possesses the necessary skills as well. Of course, more days to drill would be better; but as that is not available, I will at least wish to drill him a little here on the ship before the sun rises. Tonight, he needs to sleep, and that will most likely be difficult for him, as you may well imagine. So distract and exhaust him."

Dickey flushed a little and sighed. "I am sure we will do our best."

"I will do my best," the Bard said. "There is a thing we have not done as of yet." He smiled at me. "So I would have us alone in the cabin."

I bowed and grinned. I had wondered how they had progressed on matters since the Bard told me his concerns a fortnight ago; now I knew either the Bard was making a great sacrifice in the name of love, or Dickey had taken to being trained on other matters as well he took to dueling drills. I hoped it was the latter and not the former. Though whichever way it was, it would serve our purposes this night.

Dickey was frowning at his matelot; and then understanding apparently dawned, and he flushed a brilliant crimson. His mouth opened and closed several times, and he followed an amused Bard into the cabin like a puppy on the scent of a bone. I was sure he would not have known who Tom was had I mentioned the name at that moment.

The ship was, thankfully, nearly empty, and Gaston and I were able to retreat to the relative privacy of the aft of the quarterdeck with a half bottle of Madeira. The sea was peaceful, and there was a pleasant breeze. I shed my weapons and lay on the deck, and at last the tension drained from my body. Gaston sat and pulled my head into the *v* of his crossed legs. I peered up at him curiously. He appeared calm and in control, his shoulders heavy with reason. We watched the sun finish setting in companionable silence.

"How are we now?" I asked in the grey twilight that followed.

He smiled. "You ride well. I have not thrown you yet."

"I am a tick, remember?"

"Non, I was mistaken. Ticks are ugly. You are not." He caressed my cheek and scratched the stubble of my jaw.

I hooked my arms around his knees to run my hands up his thighs on either side of my head. He caught my wrists.

"Non," he whispered. "Sleep. I will watch over us."

I sighed. "You know, you need but ask..."

He placed a gentle fingertip on my lips. "What would you tell the Gods you wish of this night?"

"A repeat of last night or..."

He shook his head regretfully. "I would tell them not yet."

"May I ask why?"

He sighed. "I am tired, and I do not feel safe here. It is not as I want it to be."

I stifled my disappointment, as it truly was foolishness. I too was exhausted: last night's exertions, this morning's battle, and then hours

of showing Dickey how to move had left me almost in as much pain as I had experienced after the beating over a week before. I nodded. "I love you."

"Sleep."

I kissed his finger and gingerly rolled onto my side, so that my head was still in his lap. He pushed my kerchief off, and I fell asleep to his caressing my scalp and shoulders.

I woke from a very pleasant dream to the same sensation, but now it was not soothing, but rather playful and possessed of purpose. He was lying behind me, and my head was upon his arm and my knee cocked beneath me. His free hand roved along the contours of my body. I had dreamed we were coupling.

"Will," he was whispering. "Wake now. There is no cause for alarm. I wish to speak with you."

I thought it likely he had been repeating the same message and caressing my body for a time as I rose from the depths of slumber. I discovered my manhood had risen before me, and not with piss. That knowledge roused me literally more than his words, but I still felt as if I dreamt.

"I am awake," I murmured. "Somewhat."

"Good. Some one has lit a lamp, and the Moon has risen. I would see more of you." His tone was seductive and he tugged at my tunic.

With a chuckle, I moved only so much as I needed to shed my clothing, first tunic and then breeches. Then I lay partially beneath him, both torpid and turgid, and reveled in the feel of him and his touch. He was likewise naked. His kisses were gentle upon my shoulder and neck, and his jaw rough. The combination was somewhat like being licked by a cat, and I stretched languorously.

"This is much as I dreamt," I sighed. "Am I still dreaming?"

"Perhaps. I have been thinking," he murmured in my ear. "The first time I take you I will not last long. I feel the pleasure of it will be so intense I will spend myself immediately. So I thought that perhaps it is a thing we should do as a necessity, so that we cross that threshold, so that I can pleasure you at length the second time and it will be beautiful. There is much that we both must become inured to, is there not, in order for us to truly enjoy it?"

His words tumbled through my sleep-mired thoughts and slowly took on meaning. I reached behind me to touch the one part of his body he was not pressing against me. He was resplendently hard beneath my fingers, and well-greased.

I want you," he whispered, and pulled me closer so that his manhood nestled between my buttocks. His hand stole to my member and he rocked against me.

I did not feel I had ever experienced such pleasure, of the body as well as the soul. It was as I had always fantasized it should be, and my heart swelled so that it leaked from my eyes.

"I am yours," I gasped. "I could deny you nothing. I have dreamed

of this... so many times. I want you." I grasped his wrist. "But do not concern yourself with that. I would feel your hand elsewhere. I think that I will not find my pleasure this first time, due to that intensity of sensation you speak of, and I will not have you troubled over it."

"Oui."

His greased fingers left my member and crossed the precipice of my hip to dip in my opening. I let the tension drain from my body. There was only the gentle rock of the ship, the dim flicker of lamplight, the warmth and weight of his body, and his touch as I opened for him. And then there was a greater pressure, and he slid within, and I found myself pierced to my very core with warmth and light and a discomfort that minded me of the swelling of my heart with love. Our mutual groans of pleasure and relief became a single harmonious note, small but resonant in the night. Then we were still and silent.

I felt we were two separate entities, connected only where he penetrated me. I knew he was far from me as he grappled his demons. I, in turn, found myself in the place where I had often battled the ghost of Shane. This time his shade did not mock me, though: it cowered in shame and regret. I felt no need to even kill him as I had once thought I would on this day. Instead, he merely faded away and I laughed and cried with the joy of it all.

Gaston moved to hold me tighter, and in doing so shifted within me. I returned to him and he came to me. With a hoarse cry he spent himself with little thrusts.

Then we were still again as he slowly shrank until at last he could not remain. I felt as if I had run leagues. I could not see for the tears in my eyes, and I heard his ragged breathing. I rolled beneath him and we held one another. I listened to the lap of the waves and the calls of night birds. The stars glistened eternally. All of my emotions ebbed until I was left with only peace, and I was not sure if it was an emotion, so much as a state of grace.

I remembered another night when I had held him and stared at the stars, that first night when he had told me he was impotent. I had sworn we would heal him, and we had. It was a great portent of things to come.

I woke to his tickling me.

"Wake up," he whispered with amusement. "It is near dawn."

I cursed lightly and pushed to my knees. I could barely see him in the dim grey light. The world looked as it had when I went to sleep. I was stiff... and a little sore.

I grinned and murmured. "I had the most delightful dream."

"Hmmm," he nodded sagely. "Did it involve bulls chasing you? Or perhaps dueling?"

"Non, I said delightful."

"Tell me of it," he whispered.

Even in the dim light, I could see his eyes sparkled with mischief and amusement.

I kissed his nose. "It is a dream I have cherished since I first discovered my member. In it, I wake from slumber to find the man I love is in great need of me, and he gently rouses me in both body and soul, and then fills me with his love until I explode in happiness."

He grinned. "That does sound pleasant. I am sorry I woke you."

I tickled him, and we rolled about giggling and wrestling like boys until we at last collapsed in a tangle of limbs and fine spirits.

"I would dream it again," I sighed.

"Perhaps when you sleep tonight," he teased.

"Non, I would have it in the light of day."

He sighed contentedly. "Perhaps after Dickey wins his duel."

"Oh damn," I groaned. "I suppose that should be counted as holding more import."

"I did not say that," Gaston said with a grin. "I can think of few things that would hold more import, but the duel is a thing that must be attended to."

"Oui." I kissed his nose.

He snaked an arm around my neck to pull me close and claim my mouth until warmth coiled in my groin. Then he pushed me away. "Go wake them."

"Damn you," I muttered with amusement as I stood and relieved myself over the rail. "And I think it likely we did with our rolling about."

Dickey opened the cabin door immediately after I knocked, so either we had woken them, or they had been awake prior to our play. Judging by how awake they were, I thought the latter likely. I studied Dickey's eyes for signs of fatigue or other impairment and found them clear and anxious. It was with relief I noted he did not appear as anxious as the Bard.

"You will be fine," I told Dickey solemnly.

"I will do everything we practiced, and... I am clear of heart," he said with equal gravity.

The Bard did not appear confident. His gaze stayed on me as Dickey gathered his weapons. "I don't know if I can watch," he said quietly. "I've never had to watch before. I've never dueled. My old matelot never dueled."

When Dickey turned to regard him, I saw doubt in the young man's eyes.

"You must watch," I told the Bard, "because surely you will not wish to wait here until someone tells you the results of the shots you will hear; but, you must stand so that Dickey cannot see you."

The Bard nodded, and Dickey appeared relieved.

"Will," Dickey said, "will you do me the honor of being my second? Francis and I discussed it and he thought it best if..."

I bowed. "I am at your service."

Both men appeared even more relieved, and so was I.

We found Gaston hanging over the side of the ship with his legs over the rail; he was slowly curling his body up until his elbows met

his knees. We left him at it. I proceeded to drill Dickey while the Bard lit the cook fire and prepared some hot chocolate and warm beef for us. To my relief, Dickey moved exactly as he had when practicing the day before. Reassured by this, we ate and shaved and in all ways prepared ourselves; Gaston even applied his mask about all our eyes. Dickey appeared quite the savage with the black paint on, and I thought that an improvement. We donned weapons, and the Bard assigned someone to watch the ship. The eastern horizon was glowing gold when the four of us climbed into a canoe and headed for shore.

Liam and Otter were waiting for us as we landed on a beach dotted by lumps. As usual, when there are a large number of buccaneers and sufficient rum, men were strewn upon the sand as if tossed there. Most were sleeping still, and thus the beach reverberated with snoring that drowned out the insects and early birds.

"Reminds me of seals," the Bard snorted as we pushed the canoe ashore.

"I have never seen seals," I said.

"Now you don't have to," he said.

"Nay," Liam scoffed. "Seals be fat."

The Bard awarded him a level stare and drawled, "Can you think of any other difference?"

Liam looked about and chuckled. "Nay. This lot all barks when they be awake, too."

He led us to the rest of our cabal. Julio was checking his weapons, Davey looked angry to be awake, Striker appeared tired but thankfully sober, and Pete was a boneless sleeping lump beside him. I spied Cudro little way up the beach, talking to two men. Another group of men stood a short distance beyond. I could not discern them; but I thought it likely one was Tom.

"Cudro is parleying with the other quartermasters," Striker said slowly. "Tom sailed on the *Belle Mer*."

"And yet another reason for Savant to dislike us," I sighed.

"We made it damn clear this has nothing to do with you two," Striker said. "But aye, he doesn't like you."

I shrugged. "Well, at least I can be thankful we make better friends than enemies."

He regarded me quizzically. "I think you make one Hell of an enemy."

I grinned. "I meant better for us, not others."

He chuckled and then eyed Dickey seriously. "Is he ready?"

"Aye. I have great faith in him."

This appeared to relieve Striker.

A man separated from the far cluster and started toward the quartermasters. It was not Tom; I supposed it was his second. I looked to Gaston and found him still calm and relaxed. I gave him a light kiss on the cheek and went to join the parley.

"Ah, here is Will," Cudro said happily in French as I approached

him and the other quartermasters. "Are you his second?"

"Oui. I have been so honored," I replied.

"This is Rizzo, quartermaster of the *Josephine*. He will preside, as neither man sailed with them," Cudro said.

I shook hands with Rizzo, a lanky Frenchman who seemed to share the Bard's sardonic mien and Pierrot's good nature. His sharp-boned and weathered face was well-creased with lines from laughter about his eyes and mouth. He looked me over with interest and no disdain.

"And this is Chat Noir, the *Belle Mer's* quartermaster," Cudro said.

Chat Noir was lithe and swarthy with hooded black eyes, such that I thought his name well-chosen, at least in likeness. His demeanor toward me was in opposition to Rizzo's. He did not take my proffered hand, preferring instead to make a great show of nodding greeting to the man arriving from Tom's party. In that, I thought he was aptly named as well.

The arriving man was a thing of beauty to rival even Pete. His eyes were azure, and he wore a huge mane of mahogany ringlets, a dusting of reddish stubble on a well-sculpted jaw, an ornate sword belt with a fine rapier, a pair of breeches slung low on his narrow hips, and nothing else. He appeared to be a well-sculpted piece dipped in copper, with not a scar upon him. I found my gaze traveling down his muscular chest, rippled belly, and the little line of hair escaping up to his navel from his breeches. Pete had the same feature, and I always thought of it as beckoning fingers enticing one to peek beneath his waistband.

"I am called Dieppe," the gorgeous young man announced.

I grinned. I could not resist. "I have seen that fine port, and you do not resemble it in the least."

Rizzo and Cudro snorted with amusement.

Dieppe's mouth tilted with an arrogant smile. "And you must be Lord Marsdale."

All three of the men about us winced and hissed a little at that.

"Not here, I am not," I said coldly. "You may call me Will, as that is my name among the Brethren."

"That is not a thing that is done," Chat Noir told Dieppe quietly.

Dieppe seemed annoyed at the reprimand.

"You are new the West Indies?" I asked, though there was little question in it.

"Oui, what of it?" Dieppe asked. "I am well-traveled, I would say as much as you from what my friend has told me."

"Ah, so you have been about in the world since you were...what, eight or perhaps nine years of age?" I teased.

This elicited a chuckle from Rizzo and Cudro, and even Chat Noir smirked.

I almost said that I was pleased I had not come to the New World when I was as young, arrogant and unwise as he; but then I realized I had never truly been as he was now. Shane had robbed me of that.

Instead I said, "Do not believe everything Tom tells you; or do, if

you are so inclined, but remember that others will not always hold his version of any event to be truth. And though others have surely told you this, you will feel much less of the heat if you shave your head; though it saddens me, as your hair is truly a gorgeous thing to behold.”

“You are truly such the sodomite,” Dieppe scoffed. “And yet I hear that the man you have chosen is so very flawed.”

I was actually more amused than angry. Chat Noir was cursing quietly, Rizzo’s mouth was agape, and Cudro was a mountain of anger at my side, but I chuckled.

“Dieppe, my boy, do you wish to die?” I asked with a grin. “Or is your mental ability truly of such deficiency? If you wish to duel with me, say so; do not waste words attempting to disparage my judgment or my *matelot*’s vanity. Do as the three men I killed yesterday morning did, and threaten my man’s life.”

This gave him pause, and set Rizzo and Cudro to snickering again.

“Come now,” I goaded further. “We can easily have two duels this morn. The Brethren will already be assembled. We can bury the both of you in the same shallow grave. And I would be on with it quickly. I would like to break the fast, as I do not know what the day will bring and who might attempt to kill us, much of which is due to your ... *friend*, I might add.”

“You are a liar, and he is not my *matelot*.” He spat the word.

“That is a shame, as you have so very much in common,” I sighed. “You are both arrogant fools. And now, as you are a well-traveled man, purportedly experienced with the ways of men in the world, and thus surely know that calling another man a liar has been the start of many a duel, what say you? Will you grant me satisfaction, or will you gracefully apologize and allow good Rizzo here to preside over what we must discuss?”

Dieppe glared at him, and then back at me. “Though I do not doubt my ability to best you, I do not wish to duel with you at this time,” he said with a less than humble tilt of his head.

“He’s not jesting about the apology,” Cudro rumbled before I could speak.

I smiled. “Non, I am not. I will have satisfaction one way or the other.”

His gaze did not leave mine. “I am sorry I named you a liar, my Lord.”

A number of men had risen near the place where we stood, and we now had an audience. I weighed the matter in my mind. I did not think I would gain much by killing him this morning, but I was not satisfied.

“Are you sorry for naming me one, or were you in error in doing so?” I asked.

Dieppe hissed very quietly, but his voice was level when he spoke. “I only know that what we hear of your version of events varies from what my friend says occurred on Île de la Tortue.”

I spoke with vigor, so that our audience missed none of it. “I will

accept your apology then, as you are merely speaking from loyalty to your friend. I would caution you, though. I was once his friend, and he betrayed me on Île de la Tortue. And we stand here now to discuss the terms of his dueling with a friend of his since boyhood, a man he goaded into a duel yesterday by casting aspersions against the man's matelot, much as you just attempted with me. So I will add this: if you do not approve of matelotage, perhaps you should return to Christendom."

As I expected, a number of our growing audience cheered at this. Dieppe looked about as if just realizing how many listened.

I smiled and returned my attention to Rizzo. "The terms I have heard are pistols."

"First blood?" Rizzo asked.

"In a manner of speaking." I shrugged. "I am not aware of either party stipulating the matter go until death, though death will most likely result."

Dieppe shrugged. "First blood is acceptable."

"If both men should wound the other and still be standing?" Rizzo asked.

"As they are former friends," I said, "I would not want them constrained by decisions we might make if that were to occur. Let us agree to parlay if there is no clear winner after the first round."

"I agree: as there will not be a second." Dieppe shrugged.

"As for form," I said, "we have thought it will be back-to-back, ten paces, and then turn upon a signal to fire."

"That is our thought on the matter," Dieppe concurred.

Rizzo shrugged. "I care not. Get your men. We will have the duel here." He indicated a corridor of level sand running so that neither man would have the sun behind him. "Bring their pieces to me before you load them."

"That is acceptable," I said.

Dieppe nodded his assent and picked his way through the assembling men toward Tom.

I was about to turn away when I saw Chat Noir regarding me. I raised an eyebrow, and he shrugged and gave me a respectful nod before he too turned away. I knew not what to make of it, but at least his gaze was no longer disdainful.

Cudro and I returned to our friends. Discussion of my words with Dieppe leaped from one clump of men to the next before us, until by the time we reached our cabal, they were all listening to Liam's version of events.

Gaston confronted me with folded arms and a teasing smile. "I cannot let you out of my sight."

I grinned. "You could see me well enough; it is your hearing you must keep me within."

"Why did you not duel with him?" Striker joined us to ask.

"I did not think killing two men would be in our favor this day." I shrugged. "And he provided me a better forum by his refusal. Though,

we shall see what comes of it. I will give you the details after this matter is resolved."

I looked about and spied Dickey with the Bard, well down the beach and in the surf. I was thankful he had not heard any of it. I went to join them.

"It is time," I told Dickey. "All is as we planned."

Dickey sighed with relief, but I noticed he was not as calm as he had been before. Fear lurked in his eyes.

I looked at the Bard. "You know I would never hurt him?"

The Bard nodded.

I slapped Dickey so that his head rocked around and I was sure he tasted blood. There was fire in his eyes when they met mine.

"What the Devil did you do that for?" he roared.

"That is better," I said.

The Bard was chuckling.

Dickey gave his matelot one last kiss on the cheek and allowed me to tow him away. Our cabal and many of the men from the *Virgin Queen* had gone to stand at the side of the dueling corridor. The Bard went to join them. Cudro and Gaston followed Dickey and me. They stopped at the edge of the audience, while Dickey and I walked into the center of the dueling space to meet Rizzo.

"Do not seek your opponent," I whispered to Dickey as we approached. "Nor should you look for the Bard. I want you to calmly watch birds wheeling overhead and think of how your body will move."

I presented Rizzo with Dickey's choice of pistol – one of mine – and he inspected it. Dieppe did the same, and then we watched one another load the weapons. Dieppe declined an exchange of them; and, satisfied, we handed the pieces to our respective combatants.

Only then did I spare a look at Dickey and Tom. Dickey was following my orders, his eyes on the distant horizon. Tom was glaring at me. He had taken to wearing a thin beard and a hat, but he was as handsome as ever.

"Are you satisfied?" he spat, loudly enough that I could not ignore him; though exchanging words in front of Dickey was not a thing I wanted.

"I feel I will be," I said calmly. "I am sorry it came to this."

"Aye," he said with vigor and volume, "that you should divide two friends so that I should have to kill poor Dickey."

I snorted and spoke to be heard as he had. "Tom, if Dickey does not kill you for his own reasons, you will have me to face on another morn for the injury you have done me and mine. I very much want you dead for your betrayal; it caused no end of hardship to others that might have been avoided. If you had not sided with Doucette against us, and left us at his mercy when we were injured, even Doucette's suffering might have been avoided. But nay, you turned your back on your Brethren."

Tom had no ready answer for that, and I did not wait for him to concoct one. There was a great deal of noise from the audience now, as

unlike my exchange with Dieppe, any who wished to hear this exchange needed a translation: Tom and I had spoken in English. It was either playing well for us, or against us. I vowed not to worry on it at the moment.

I stepped in front of Dickey to whisper, "You did not start this."

Dickey nodded with a sad smile. "I will not leave Francis alone, not for him."

"Good." I said with conviction, even though his words were not precisely what I wished to hear. They would have to do.

I went to join my matelot, and found him somber and trying very hard to ignore the men about him. I turned to watch the duel and stepped back so that my left shoulder pressed against his chest. I was relieved when he leaned into me, his arm stealing about my waist.

Rizzo put the two of them back to back. Tom appeared confident. Dickey appeared to be deep in thought. If I did not know the two of them as I did, I would have been concerned. The count began and they walked ten paces. Tom walked with precision, concentrating on maintaining a straight line in the sand. Dickey wavered on a few steps and ended up standing a good foot to the right of where he should have if he had gone straight. It appeared such an honest mistake I could not say if he had done so out of nervousness as it appeared, or whether he had actually been following my instructions. I smiled.

Rizzo shouted, "Fire!"

My eyes were on Tom. It all happened very fast, so fast it would be difficult to follow unless one had watched as many duels as I have. Tom turned smartly on his feet so that he was side on to the target as he raised his pistol. His eyes widened when Dickey was not where he expected. There was a long moment in which he had to locate and aim at Dickey. The retort from Dickey's pistol surprised him ever so slightly, and then the ball hit under his right arm and he was knocked back on his heels. His pistol discharged, not wildly, but while the muzzle was rising. Then the piece tumbled from his grasp as he crumpled to the ground.

Only then did I look at Dickey. My smile broadened. He was nearly in a fencing stance. He had dropped his right foot back and pivoted low as we had drilled. His pistol was tautly held at the end of its arm, where it had swung like a weight. I was sure he had stopped the swing and depressed the trigger the exact moment the muzzle crossed Tom. His opponent's shot had gone well over his head, while Dickey's had most probably been mortal.

Dickey's face was very sad to behold, though. It was frozen somewhere between triumph and guilt. I knew that look well, as I had felt it on my own face many times before.

Tom was not dead yet, but the ball was well up in his chest. Dieppe was already with him, and I was heartened that the man did appear to care for Tom. Rizzo declared the match, and two of the surgeons rushed to Tom as well.

The Bard and the rest of our cabal toppled Dickey with their elation. And then they were occluded from our view by other men surging into the area. To my dismay, some of those men were more interested in Gaston and me than the fate of the combatants. We were soon surrounded by angry Frenchmen, and I silently cursed our stupidity. I felt Gaston behind me at my left hip. I remembered Cudro being on my other side, and I was relieved when a glance over my right shoulder found him looming over us protectively.

The mood was angry all about us, and we were too tightly hemmed to draw swords. It was with great effort I did not pull my pistols. Though instinct dictated we must defend ourselves, I knew the act would merely provide them an excuse to bear us down, and we could not battle so many. I envisioned the scene from the tavern in Port Royal, only this time the fists and feet would not stop until the blackness took us both.

I prayed. I did not know what I could offer the Gods for Their beneficence, and so first I prayed They were not on account. Then I prayed that They would deliver us from this mob. That Their love required no balance: that last night's glory and wonder did not have to be paid for with our blood. Had we not paid enough already in our lives? If They were truly beneficial beings worthy of worship, could They not simply save us? Or barring that, deliver unto us the means to save ourselves?

And then there was no more time for it. We were being jostled all about, as if we were foxes in a cage before a pack of hounds. If I was afraid of the anger of the men about us, I was terrified of the mood of the one behind me. If he lost his temper now, we were done for. I extended a hand behind me and found Gaston's belly. To my relief, his hand was quickly in mine, squeezing tightly. It was the only gauge I had of his demeanor: I could not spare him a glance.

A blond man with a livid scar over one eye stepped before me.

"Doucette is a fine man," he snarled in French.

"I do not argue that," I growled back. "Yet he tried to take my matelot from me. I care not if he was Saint Paul."

"Your matelot is mad! He cannot be trusted!" the man before me raged.

Gaston's right hand had stolen around my right side again, and now he clung to me, his breath fast on my back, his forehead pressed into my shoulder.

"I've got his back," Cudro rumbled.

I heard Pete coming for us from off to my left. There was equal noise off to the right.

Somewhere in all the sound, I heard the tinkle of laughter, somewhat like Teresina's only infinitely more sublime. The Gods were laughing at me – again. They had already delivered unto me love and friendship; what more could I ask? What else should I have faith in?

I felt infused with power born of hope and faith.

I smiled and yelled back at the blond man. "My matelot is mad! But

at this moment he is sane enough to know he cannot take you all on as a madman would! I know many of you have seen him at his worst! He is better now that he is with me! Let us be! Let us see what the future holds!"

I saw gazes dart to Gaston, and there was still reason behind them. A man on my left spread his arms and then elbowed another man, who jostled him toward us. The blond man who had confronted me was frowning at Gaston, but more from curiosity and disapproval than the anger that had gripped him before.

"The boy said Doucette was trying to heal him," someone called out. It was echoed through the crowd.

"Doucette was torturing him!" Pierrot roared from somewhere to our right. "I saw it! I beat the bastard for it! If you have issue with him being stupid, you talk to me!"

"Is it true Doucette coveted him?" a voice asked to our right and somewhat behind us.

I looked, but could not see any who would meet my gaze and own the speaking of it. "My matelot brings out the best and the worst in many men," I told them all sincerely. "Doucette was angry my matelot arrived there with me."

There was muttering throughout the crowd now, but it was not the ugly and dangerous snarling it had been a minute before. Pete arrived at the vanguard of men from the *Queen*; Pierrot was coming closer, and I heard Savant's voice calling for all to back down.

"Gaston?" I hissed.

I felt his head rise, and then the blond man before me recoiled, along with several others. Even Pete frowned at what he saw in Gaston's eyes. I turned in my matelot's arms to see what they did and found his gaze glittering with danger and hatred such as I had rarely seen from him. As my stomach already contained a cannon ball, and my heart already thudded such that it felt ready to burst, there was little else I could do other than cup Gaston's chin and bring those horrible eyes to my own. His gaze softened when it met mine, and I felt as relieved as I had when his hand had crept into mine a minute ago. I had the reins. He was nearly running wild, but I was in control.

"Stay with me, my love," I breathed.

"Will..." It was more a pained moan than a word.

"I will get us out of here," I promised.

He nodded mutely. His gaze stayed on me and calmed somewhat.

"Pete, Cudro, please, we must get out of this mob," I said calmly in English. "The sea or land, it matters not."

Cudro's hand was on my shoulder, pushing me toward Pete. I went, hauling Gaston with me.

"Close your eyes," I whispered to Gaston.

He did as I bade, and we were pulled into the wedge in the crowd that was the *Virgin Queen's* crew, and thus ushered off of the beach and into the edge of the woods. Once there, I sank to the ground and pulled

him with me. He crawled into my lap as best he could; and I ignored the entire world, and murmured soothing things and caressed his back and shoulders. In time he stopped trembling.

When I at last felt I could spare my attention elsewhere, I looked up and found the captains and their quartermasters speaking nearby in hushed tones. Striker felt my gaze and turned to me. His smile was reassuring. Beside him, Pierrot appeared relieved. Then I found myself under Savant's scrutiny.

He approached and squatted a short distance away. His coming down to my level was polite, but I was not sure if the distance he chose to maintain was also borne of politeness or whether he thought it put him safely beyond my matelot's reach.

"You can control him," Savant said quietly.

"Most of the time," I whispered.

"Some of my men were in that tavern," he said.

I sighed. "He went in there unarmed and expecting to lose, as that is what he wished. If he had wanted them dead, many would be in their graves."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I see that." He sighed and smiled grimly. "Doucette always was arrogant: thought he knew best for everyone."

"Oui. Though," I said carefully, "there was much between him and my matelot that is no one's business but theirs. It should not be judged by a crowd of men who know nothing of it."

"I'll do what I can," he said sincerely.

"Thank you. That is all we can ask," I said. "We wish to rove. It is truly best that we rove, and that he spends the violence that plagues him against our enemies."

"I know no man can guarantee another's actions..." he said slowly.

"I can assure you I will do everything in my power to prevent him from spending himself against our allies," I said.

This was apparently what he had sought, and he nodded with conviction. "I'll let your friends know if I have any I can't reason with." I thanked him, and he left us alone again. Only we were not so very alone. We had one another and that far outweighed all else that could be stacked against us. And we had our friends. And in all ways, we seemed to have the support and guidance of the Gods.

Thirty-Seven

Wherein We Put the Cart Before the Horse

We continued to sit there after Savant left. Gaston was curled about me so that I could not see his face. I ran a tentative fingertip over his features and found his eyes tightly closed. That hand was then captured in one of his, as if he had snatched up a spider crawling across his skin.

"I am sorry," I whispered. "I was trying to determine if you were awake or..."

"I am here." His hushed tone was sad.

"I am proud of you. And... relieved. I felt fear there for a moment; and I prayed, properly after a fashion, perhaps. I do not know. I felt the Gods laughed at me: much like the matter with Dickey, all we needed had already been delivered unto us. You possessed the control and trust to hand me the reins, and we have our friends."

He kissed my captured fingers. "I prayed, too," he said huskily, "as you do. I told the Gods I would have the control, because I knew if I lashed out they would hurt you too. It was the only way I could protect you. And you did as you always do. You stood there and held the cart steady while I slipped and fell; but this time I clung to you and made you support even that."

Concerned, I prodded him about until I could gaze down upon his face. He appeared angry and tired. His mask was smudged all about his eyes like bruises, and reminded me uncomfortably of what Doucette had done to him.

He put a finger to my lips before I could speak.

"You need not comfort me further," he said with a rueful smile. "I

have been... examining the cart. I have found it well constructed. Such that I know I can rely on it, as long as I do nothing to wreck it. I have also decided I am not evil; if I were, you would not love me so. I am merely... ungraceful. I slip on... everything. Rocky ground... blood... battles, lust... And I shy at all manner of things: whips, loud noises, angry gazes... You are very sure-footed, though. You never fall."

I felt he was granting himself some form of absolution in this, and I was very pleased to hear it, yet... I pulled his fingers away.

"I can fall," I whispered, "Or rather, if melancholy grips me, I will want to lie down and not rise... for a time... I am not so prone to it with you in my life, though."

He nodded. "I will stand and hold the cart when you cannot. We might not move for a time, though. Unlike you, I do not believe I can haul the cart and you. That too, will cause me to lose my footing."

"As long as the cart does not roll away and smash somewhere at those times, I do not care if we move or not," I said.

I saw the love I felt in his eyes.

"Thank you for saying that," I whispered. "I needed to hear it. And, if I am the stolid member of the team, which is a thing I would have scarce believed of myself in any pairing a year ago..."

He chuckled. "When you teamed with those more sure-footed than yourself, without a cart."

"Oui." I chuckled. At Gaston's curious frown, I said, "I can envision Alonso as a wolf, sitting in the traces before some ramshackle vehicle that would have rattled apart if we attempted to move it, as indeed it did. And he is holding the bridge of his snout in consternation with one paw. It is a thing he did when he was displeased with me." I demonstrated Alonso's gesture and expression and Gaston grinned. "And I am standing there arguing with him, a centaur with a wolf pelt draped over my back, as if that will disguise me. And we argue about some matter such as our not being able to move until he appreciates the sunset." I sighed.

Gaston shared my amusement, and then he caressed my cheek. "I no longer feel jealous of the Damn Spaniard."

"Good," I said. "We are a team, a well-matched team. And, as I was saying, if I am the stolid one, then you are the one who leads and sets our pace."

Tears welled in his eyes and he clutched at me and looked away. "I am sorry. I am... It is as it always is when I am thus. Everything is so loud and bright, and I feel things so intensely."

"You need not apologize," I murmured. "You are still caught in the storm that overtook you in Port Royal, are you not?"

"Oui. If I concentrate on you, I am well, but it is as if we stand in a blizzard, pressed shoulder to shoulder. I do not feel I can walk for fear of falling again."

I grinned. "I wish I could toss you in the cart and haul you along."

He sighed. "I feel that is what occurred as we sailed here."

"Do you wish to use the manacles again?" I asked carefully. He shook his head. "I am reluctant."

"Then what can I do to offer you comfort? You have done well, alone with me." I chuckled. "I would say we have done very well indeed while alone."

He gave a shuddering sigh, but he smiled. "Oui."

"Should we slip away again? I feel we have won much this day, Savant at least. And though there was danger of it, they did not rip us apart like a pack of hounds. Let us take our things and go for a few days as we planned."

"Oui," he at last sighed with relief. His gaze met mine. "Let us hide away somewhere and make love. That is an intensity of emotion and sensation I will gladly feel again."

My breath caught. "Thank the Gods," I sighed happily. He grinned.

We gathered our weapons and bags and went to find the others and tell them of our intentions. Gaston transferred his musket to his left hand, and his right stole into mine. I knew I would not be releasing it until we were well away from the sounds and sights of other men.

A cannon was being hoisted over the side of the *Belle Mer*, and I assumed she would be careened first. Up the beach, where the meadow intercepted the sand, men were working on boucan pits. A number of men had apparently left to hunt after the morning's events, as there were fewer on the beach than before. Still, there were some men clumped about, not engaged in any useful activity.

We spied Striker and Pete talking with Cudro and some of the men from the *Queen*. I wondered where the rest of our cabal were.

Striker eyed us speculatively, and Pete and he came to meet us as we approached.

"Young Tom died," Striker said quietly. "Dickey and the Bard would speak with you. The Bard feels you walk on water."

"Well, assure him I do not," I chided. "I do not even splash about on its surface."

"Cudro wishes to start schooling men. Are you available?" Striker looked at Gaston curiously.

"Nay," I said quickly. "Our time to... run about... was curtailed, and we have decided we are still in need of it."

Striker did not appear to like that idea. "There are hunting parties all through the woods now."

"Then we will stay on the beaches," I said. "And avoid cattle."

"AvoidLookin'LikeACow," Pete said.

"Can you not stay on the ship?" Striker asked quietly.

I looked to Gaston. He was looking at the sky, but his hand squeezed mine painfully.

"Nay," I sighed. "We must take our chances in the wilds."

"I would rather you didn't," Striker said.

"Is that an order?" I asked.

He snorted. "Could I give you one?"

I winced, and we immediately looked about to see if anyone else had witnessed that unfortunate exchange. I was damned if I would be seen as challenging Striker's leadership. Thankfully, there were only the four of us. No one else seemed to be paying us much heed, or close enough to overhear if they were looking our way. As for us, Gaston was not pleased; Pete was not either. They were staring at the horizon as if it annoyed them. Striker's gaze met mine again.

"You are captain," I said quietly.

He swore as quietly and looked away.

"Though I would rather not test that on this matter," I added.

He nodded with a snort of amusement. "Nor would I." He met my gaze again. "You truly cannot?"

"We will be very careful," I assured him. "Just for a few days. Please."

"Do not beg him for me," Gaston spat, and then he addressed Striker earnestly. "I am not well. I am more of a threat to us, you included, here, now, than anyone else on this island will be a threat to us out there unless they are as many as they are on this beach. Out there, we take them if necessary. Here, there will just be trouble."

"HeBeRight," Pete said quietly. "HeBeNoGoodHere. WillBeCarin' Fur'ImAnNothin'Else. WeAllBeWatchin'AnWorryin'BoutTheBothO'Em. ThenYaGotTheFrenchiesTalkin'Bout That. Let'EmGo."

Striker swore and glared at Gaston and me. "I don't want to lose either of you. I won't forgive the damn bastards if something were to happen. And I don't know what I would do then."

I wanted to embrace him, but I had a musket in one hand and Gaston in the other. With a sigh, I thrust the musket at Pete, who thankfully had the good sense to take it. Then I embraced Striker with my free arm. He returned it.

"You are quite the mother hen," I whispered. "And I love you as a brother for it."

"I wouldn't cluck so much if I didn't have such unruly chicks," he chided as he released me. "Now get out of here."

"We will return in two days," Gaston said.

Striker sighed. "Can you guarantee that you will be able to in two days?"

Gaston studied the ground. "If the storm gripping me now has not passed, Will can chain me to a tree when we return."

"ThatAin'tGonnaHappen," Pete said.

Striker met my gaze and we smiled.

"Nay, it's not," Striker said.

I shook my head. "We will return and let you know we are well, in two days at the latest."

"I will hold you to that," Striker said. "Now leave."

Pete handed me my musket and embraced me warmly. He looked to do the same to Gaston and thought better of it.

We slipped away among the wind-blown trees along the shore. We made our way around the northern side of the island for a few hours, until Gaston at last found a cove sheltered by a little thrust of land. It was a lovely place. Due to the sand banks, there was a lagoon, and the water by the beach was quite tame and devoid of surf.

We had not heard the musket fire of hunters for a while. Still, we sat in the shadows of the trees in silence, and listened until the birds became accustomed to our presence, and the ones we had passed earlier had forgotten us and heralded no one else.

"Now what shall we do?" I teased when at last he seemed to relax.

He grinned. "I shall teach you to swim."

I stood and eyed the clear waters of the lagoon with trepidation. I could see fish swimming about. "I do not suppose we could find a body of water with nothing living in it?"

"I cannot teach you to swim in a cistern." He grinned.

He was shedding his weapons and arranging them carefully along the shore. I understood his reasoning and did likewise. When we finished, we could leave the lagoon from any side and find a loaded piece and a blade.

Then we doffed our clothing. He smeared his pale shoulders with fat.

"The sun is very bright upon the water, and I am not brown as you are," he explained. "I burned my skin when first I learned to swim."

"Will the fat help?"

"It will not hurt," he said flatly.

"Who taught you to swim?" I asked.

"I taught myself."

"Here?"

He snorted. "Will, the water in much of France is not much warmer than England's. It is why no one in Christendom learns to swim unless they know the waters of the Mediterranean."

He waded into the water. I followed. It felt luxurious on my tired body. Gaston took my hand and led me out until we were chest deep.

"Beyond bathing – which some have said I have an unhealthy fascination with – and our occasional splashing about in the surf, I have been fully immersed in water only twice," I said. "Both times it was cold and decidedly unpleasant. This is not, but still..."

Gaston beckoned me closer and gently commanded, "Hold your nose and kneel down so that you are completely immersed."

I did as he bade. It was no colder on my head than it had been elsewhere. I surfaced and found him grinning when I opened my eyes.

"Now, do it again with your eyes open," he said.

I reluctantly complied, and was surprised to be able to see things. And my eyes did not sting as I had expected.

He began to teach me how to exhale under water, so that I need not hold my nose; and how to move about.

"I thought swimming involved staying above the water," I said the fourth time I came to the surface.

"People who only wish to stay on top of the water are afraid of it. I will teach you how to cover distance on top of it, but first you need to lose your fear."

"I feel I am conquering that fear," I said.

He was grinning at me. "Do you think you will sink?"

I nodded. "If the water is deep enough."

He shook his head and beckoned. "Do you trust me?"

"In all ways," I said solemnly.

"You must trust me about water. You will not sink. The body floats."

I snorted. "I know they float when dead."

He kicked up from the bottom and spread himself atop the water for a moment, and then as I expected, he began to sink – but to my surprise, only so far; and then it was obvious he was floating with no conscious effort.

"All right, you can indeed float," I said. "You even make it look quite relaxing."

He bent at the waist and put his feet back under him. "Your turn. And it is relaxing, but it is like another thing you must relax to enjoy." He grinned.

It took several tries, all of which failed because I panicked when I thought I sank too deep, or because I stiffened my body and somehow drove myself under. Gaston was patient, and when at last I floated there, staring up at the sky with the lightest reassuring touch of his fingers on my back, I wondered at how his madness truly worked upon him, in that he could be so calm here and now and so distraught only hours before. Did it have a thing to do with how relaxed he felt with his Horse? Was he a man trying to keep himself above water?

"Are you afraid of your madness?" I asked the sky, as I was still somewhat unsure of turning my head toward him while floating.

He moved closer to peer down at me with a frown. "Oui."

"Perhaps you need to float on it."

His frown deepened in thought and then slowly transmuted to a smile. "There are times when I am comfortably immersed in it."

"As you were when we sailed here," I said.

"Oui. And other times I hold myself above it, as when I wear the mask of reason." He sighed. "Thank you for giving me another way to interpret it."

"We will find the perfect metaphor yet, my love."

He shook his head. "Non, Will, they are all excellent. They all provide perspective. They all... Before you, I had no one to discuss my madness with. It was a thing, an indescribable thing that overtook me. Now that I have someone to speak with about it, I must contain it within words and ideas that can be conveyed. It has given me power over it."

I closed my eyes and floated, thinking on words and power. There was something just beyond my ken on the matter, some half-remembered myth or memory.

Gaston's hand covered my member.

I looked at him with alarm. "I do not feel so steady..."

He grinned. "I am not playing. When first I learned to float I burned there. I would save you that."

I winced and laughed. "Please do."

"Though..." His grin widened. "I might as well." His fingers began to move upon me. "Float, Will. Relax all except this."

I knew I would not drown if I rolled away from him and got my feet under me; still, I felt defenseless. I squinted up at his shadowed face as my member rose to his challenge. His eyes were slightly narrowed, and though not hard and dangerous, there was a glint of something more sinister than mischief to them. Whatever that look might be named, my Horse found interest in it, and rose to that challenge as well.

"You enjoy my being helpless, do you not?" I murmured.

"You enjoy being helpless, do you not?" he asked huskily.

"Only at your hand."

"My hand?" He grinned anew. "And ought else?"

"I surrender to every part of you."

His gaze sobered, and he appeared almost pained; and then he was upon me. His mouth covered mine as he drove me under with his weight. I struggled not to panic, and to determine how to hold my breath while he plundered my mouth. I thought I would drown. Then there was only him. I realized I might drown in him, as he was far more encompassing than the water. When he released me, I did not move; I hung in some place near the darkness of unconsciousness, bereft of my senses, feeling everything and nothing.

He pulled me to the surface and my body gasped air of its own accord. I clung to him. He was very somber and conciliatory, not in words, but in his touch, as he led me to shore. He would not allow me to collapse in the sand, however; choosing instead to haul me farther into the shade, pausing only to take up a pistol as he went. When finally he leaned me against a palm next to our clothes and bags, I had stopped coughing and gasping, and I had discovered his cock was quite erect.

"I am sorry..." he started to say.

I stopped him with my mouth. I did not want words.

He returned my kiss hungrily, and my manhood rose to match his in the ferocity of its tumescence.

"I thought to wait until the sunset," he whispered as his teeth explored my neck.

"Non," I said emphatically. I did not wish to explain how he would not deny me at this moment. It seemed a waste of precious breath.

We were as frantic and awkward as two lads. I turned and hugged the tree with one arm, sparing my manhood from the bark with the other. His greased fingers were soon upon me, and I squatted into them, willing myself to open and convince him I could take them all, or his whole damn hand if necessary, just to speed the process along.

He did not make me wait. He impaled me smoothly, in a long vertical thrust that pushed me up the trunk. My knees weakened at the feel

of it, and the tree felt as if it groaned inaudibly against my chest. The world spun and I closed my eyes. Partly to take him deeper, and partly because I was unsteady on my feet, I settled onto him and he pushed back, until we reached some balance of position. Then he held still. He was huge inside me, but I did not feel rent asunder so much as held from within and without, embraced in warmth that saturated my soul. I felt as I had under the water with his mouth upon me. I could not breathe. There was only Gaston. Somehow I needed to come up for air.

I gasped, little meaningless sounds. Words would not come, until finally, "fuck," escaped my lips in a short bark.

Thankfully he understood and began to move. He thrust upward, lifting me with every stroke. Though my chest was oblivious to the tree's rough caress, I was still somewhat mindful of my cock. Yet, I cared not if it felt pleasure. In fact, it did not. It nestled full but weak in my hand, and allowed all sensation to radiate from my arse. He seemed larger with every stroke, and I felt I was being pushed open by degrees, until at last he might crawl inside me, and I could hold him there forever and never be without him.

And then he came, with a growl and one last shove. I could feel him throb within me. I clenched; both to wring him dry and keep him. But alas, he eventually slid free despite my efforts.

We stood panting for a time: him holding me, and I the tree. And then he covered my shoulders with light kisses and licks.

"Are you well?" he murmured.

"Very," I said, wondering at his concern. "I could only be better if you were inside me once again."

He chuckled on my neck. "I suppose we need not wait until sunset. It is only a little after midday."

"Far too many hours to go without doing this again," I whispered. "I do not think I could bear it."

"Oui," he breathed.

"Please do that as many times as you are able." I remembered his impressive libido from the night before last, and laughed. I would not be able to walk in two days.

He gently urged me to turn until his mouth could cover mine.

"I was concerned," he whispered, when he released me.

"Why?"

"I did not plan to take you standing. I thought it was too near the angle the Damn Cousin used..." he trailed off with guilt.

I frowned, and then amusement suffused me; and greater than that, relief, a profound relief. "I did not think of the Damn Cousin even once. Not at all." I grinned.

He grinned in return. "Then we have truly conquered him."

"Oui, I believe so. Gods, how I love you."

We held each other and laughed. And the afternoon spun into evening in a slow tapestry of trysting and cuddling. When the sunset finally came, it found us on our knees with him deeply inside me once

again. This time, his hand was about my member and it sang along with his. I watched the pink and purple majesty of the sinking sun and wondered if the sky in Heaven was as beautiful as a sunset all of the time, as I had surely found its counterpart on earth.

Two days later, we sat in the shade while I rubbed salve onto his burned back. The time had passed much as the first day had, with swimming lessons and trysting. We had been naked the entirety of it, and thus his reddened hide. I, thankfully, was already browned over most of my body; unfortunately, the places where I had been pale had been exposed and in use of late. My buttocks were now as sore from the sun as my opening was from all of the unaccustomed activity. I could walk, but I could not do so without thinking heartily of him.

"You should allow yourself to brown," I said as I worked.

"Why?" he asked sleepily.

"Then you would be striped in color as well as texture."

He smiled lazily and turned so that he could gaze at me. "Would that please you?"

I thought of how he would appear with the pale scars outlined in strips of nutmeg. "It would make them more evident, but I feel it would be aesthetically interesting."

"Anything to please you," he murmured.

I grinned. "Non, I am pleased beyond all reckoning already."

He was thoughtful. "As am I. Truly. I am happy. I cannot recall feeling thus. With you before, there was always the feeling of incompleteness, but now that is gone. I am content."

I knew how he felt. I shared it in full measure. Yet there were ugly and disquieting thoughts lurking about my head. I had been able to push them away, thinking so little of them I could not name them, but I knew I would lose the bliss of ignorance once we returned to the others.

"Let us stay here," I whispered.

"Could we?" It was challenge and not request, yet his tone was resigned and devoid of mockery.

I sighed. "Men being inconstant creatures such as we are... I will never tire of you, but I can well imagine even this growing tiresome. It is a miserable thing: that we cannot be content to wallow in contentment."

"Let us escape as we are able," he said solemnly. "Not because... I require it, but because we do."

"Oui," I sighed. "I feel we should do this again while we are all still here. They will surely frown on us for fucking continuously on the beach there."

"They should not risk my wrath," he said.

We were smiling, and though the thing we had not spoken of for two days had drifted in to cover our thoughts, it was not dark or menacing.

"Do you feel you are ready to return?" I asked. "Or will I need to chain you to a tree?"

He grinned. "The fucking calms the Horse."

"Well then, they will just have to frown upon us for ministering to it

often,” I said with glee.

We finally packed our things and made our way back to the ships and the beach full of men. Striker greeted us with a hearty embrace and relieved eyes. He regarded Gaston speculatively; as much to my amazement as Striker’s, my matelot grinned at him.

“We are well,” I assured him. “I feel we will slip away again, but for now we will pull our weight. What would you have of us? And how welcome will we be among the French?”

“There are some who would still see you hang,” Striker said, “but most have taken well to the tale we have spun. I do not fear for your safety as I did before. You need not do much among the French, though. We have a score of fine fools for you to help train. Cudro and Pete have them up yonder on the beach.”

We went to deposit our things at the camp Striker and our cabal had made, high up the beach around a fire pit.

Striker called out in our wake. “I would say don’t fence in front of them, but a few of them think they know a great deal, and perhaps you should knock the wind from their sails – but you’ll just scare the rest.”

“We will be judicious in displaying our prowess,” I assured him.

We found Pete, Cudro, Julio, Davey, Liam, and Otter with the new men. Our friends were pleased to see us. As was his wont, Pete embraced us so that our ribs creaked. To my amusement, Cudro did likewise.

Liam appeared ready to do the same, but after seeing me grunt in Cudro’s arms, he stopped and grinned. “Ya be worn out now. I’ll leave ya be. Na’ that I could be ‘armin’ ya much.”

I embraced him anyway.

I looked over the assembled men. They were standing about in loose clumps, among which Pete and Julio had been circulating. Whatever training they had been about had stopped at our appearance, as the trainees seemed disinclined to continue when our friends came to greet us. They all looked much as the bondsmen had on the *King’s Hope*: a mix of boys and men, some browned by the sun, some pale, some in buccaneer garb or canvas, others still in wool. There were twenty-six of them.

I spoke to Cudro quietly. “I believe you mentioned twenty-nine in need of training when we sailed here.”

He grunted. “Not seasoned. One died, one’s sick. And the third found a matelot.” He shrugged at this last.

“Oh, well, good for him. So what do we have here? Striker said some feel they know a thing or two.”

Cudro snorted and then chuckled. “Aye, we’ll give you two that lot. They fancy themselves to be gentle-born.”

He gestured without actually pointing, and I let my gaze drift to the men in question. They stood somewhat apart from the others. There were five of them, and they appeared rather better dressed than the rest of the lot, and young. All were armed. They minded me of Tom, Dickey

and Harry when first I saw them; though, none of these boys radiated Harry's good-natured innocence, or Dickey's effeminacy. In the way a few of them stood and spoke to one another, I saw Tom's arrogance, though.

"Non," I told Cudro. "They must learn they are no different than the others. Sending them off with us will just reinforce their assumption of superiority."

"Ah," he said, and scratched his beard thoughtfully. "I had not viewed it so, but I see your point. I was just thinking to afflict you with the troublemakers."

"They be right full o' themselves," Liam added quietly. "But ya be right. Some 'ave heard ya be a Lord."

I swore.

Liam shrugged. "Na' from me. An'," he stepped closer and lowered his voice, "they been curious 'bout yur matelot, an' not in a nice way."

"All the more reason to keep them from us, then," I sighed.

Gaston shrugged.

"What were you all about before we arrived?" I asked.

"Fightin'InTheMornin'. MusketsAfterNoon," Pete said around a piece of fruit.

I looked to the sky. "Is it not noon?"

"Fightin'Not..." Pete trailed off in an indecipherable grumble, and gestured angrily with the fruit.

"The fighting instruction is not going well," Julio said.

"Some are military men, and some are tavern fighters," Cudro sighed. "But most have never killed a man. And we can't give them weapons to practice with; they would kill each other by accident. So we're trying to teach them to fight each other with their fists. Gaston could show them a thing or two, but... well, he may not be the best teacher for them. And they don't think they need to learn to fight. They think they just need to learn to shoot a musket. The army ones know nothing else. We tell them that in taking a ship or a town, they'll be fighting hand to hand, but it means nothing to them. Or they think they know how well enough. So they play at this and learn nothing."

I thought of Striker's words on men in battle. "They are not desperate." And then I thought of all the boys I had seen in practice yards. "They have no need at the moment. There is no danger, and they do not wish to hurt their opponents."

"Aye," Cudro rumbled. "So we have been having them wrestle one another. We thought they might at least be competitive. And some are, and they possess a talent for it; but then there are those who aren't, and they just let the other man run them down."

Gaston nudged me, and I looked around and found we had been approached by the group of supposed gentlemen. When my eye fell upon them, a sallow youth with a beak for a nose stepped forward from their number and removed his feathered hat with a flourish.

"Excuse me, good sir," he addressed me. "I have heard it said that

you are a Lord.”

“People say the damndest things,” I drawled loudly enough to be heard by the others. “I have heard that Pete here is a Greek God of old. And there are some who claim that my matelot is sane.”

Gaston laughed and Pete spit his fruit.

Liam regarded Gaston with surprise. “Do tell?”

“Aye,” I added. “And I have even heard some say that Liam here is a man of quiet discretion.”

“Ya been listenin’ ta fools,” Liam grinned, but there was something in his eyes that made me regret my jest.

I decided I should speak with him later.

I turned back to the sallow and beaked young man. He was smiling with feigned good nature.

“So you say it is not true?” he asked.

“I can do little about the circumstances of my birth,” I said with a shrug, “but here I am no different than any other. I am one of the Brethren of the Coast, as presumably you have also chosen to become.”

“I am here to kill Spaniards for gold, sir,” the youth said proudly.

All that we had discussed while sailing here was encompassed in those words. He felt no kinship to the men around him. If all of the newcomers thought as he did, the Brethren would cease to exist inside a few years.

“Nay, you are here,” I pointed at the sand between us, “to learn how to kill Spaniards as a member of the Brethren of the Coast; because the Brethren are the ones who will sail against the Main this spring. And unless our quartermaster feels you are competent, you will not sail on the *Virgin Queen* with us.”

His smile did not desert him. “I am well-versed in combat, sir, I assure you. I do not see where any here, except perhaps another gentleman, might be able to judge my competence with a blade.”

I drew my rapier. He stepped back in surprise. I grinned and tossed my weapon hilt-first to Pete. The Golden One caught it and grinned around another bite of fruit.

Pete stepped forward, only to pause and consider the juicy object of his repast. He glared at the youth. “YaGetSandOnIt YaDie.”

The sallow youth looked at me questioningly. “What did he say?”

“Oh, you probably will not die.” I shrugged.

The trainees and our cabal formed a loose circle around the combatants. Pete dropped into *en garde*, holding his fruit high in his left hand. The sallow youth drew his blade with annoyance.

Pete removed the boy’s feathered hat on the first rush, slashed his brocade jerkin on the second, and marked him on his cheek on the third. Sadly, the boy seemed to possess good form; he simply was no match for the Golden One in speed or aggression.

The youth threw his weapon down and backed away. “You are... an excellent combatant, sir,” he stammered.

“ThankYa.” Pete shrugged and took the last bite of his fruit. He

tossed the pit away and then my blade back to me. "NowWeSeeIffn'YaCa
nFight. 'CauseYaNa'BeDuelin'Spaniards."

At which point Pete chased the lad down and trounced him soundly, so that many winced in sympathy. The boy had no knack or training for pugilism, apparently. Not that it would have mattered a great deal: Pete had longer and stronger arms, and a determination to achieve his goal that few could match. He left the youth bloodied, and Gaston was moved to go and set the lad's beak straight.

"HeCanna'FightGoodEnoughTaTakeAShip," Pete roared at the rest of them. "YaNeedLearnin'."

The rest of the trainees appeared somewhat cowed. The sallow youth's friends appeared to want to slink away into the forest. I did not blame them.

"Perhaps I should let Pete trounce the lot of them," Cudro said. "That might make them want to fight."

"It might make them wish to desert," I said. "And I feel, though I know not how it will be achieved, that we must endeavor to bring them together as a fighting force, rather than pit them against one another."

He gave an agreeable grunt and a nod.

"Perhaps we should move on to musket practice," I said.

"Aye," Liam sighed.

I went to join my matelot and the youth. The poor boy was as battered as I had been after the tavern. I grimaced in sympathy. Much of the wind was out of his sails, as he was allowing Gaston to tend him readily enough.

"How are you called?" I asked.

He regarded me and considered his words. Perhaps there was hope for him.

"Ash," he finally muttered.

"Among the Brethren, one does not often inquire of another's origins: it is considered rude. So if you do not wish to answer, tell me so. But I am driven to inquire how you came to be here. And your age."

"May I ask the same of you?" he asked with a trace of challenge.

I shrugged acquiescence.

"I have eighteen years," Ash said. "My father is a planter on Barbados. We came to that island when I was ten years of age. I am the third son. I am to go to England and study the law. It is not a thing I wish to do."

I smiled. "Well, perhaps you are far more sensible than I first thought. It takes a certain type of man to apply himself to law, and in general I find that type of man disagreeable; though, I thankfully have been surprised to find one who did not meet my expectations of a barrister in the least. But he is only one man among many of that profession. The rest I have met I would gladly run through."

"As for me," I continued, "I am twenty-seven years old. I first left my father's home at sixteen; I then traveled most of Christendom. When I returned to my father's house, he knew not what to make of me, and

sent me here to establish a plantation in order to be rid of me for a time."

"Are you as good as they say?" he asked.

"Well, that would depend upon the endeavor in question." I grinned. Gaston chuckled.

Ash's gaze darted between us, and he appeared uncomfortable.

"Dueling," he said quickly.

"Ah, well, that would depend on how good they say I am, but I will own that I am very well-versed indeed."

I wished to spar with you," he said sadly. "And make your acquaintance on the voyage here, but..." His gaze went to Gaston and he colored a little with embarrassment.

Gaston ignored him.

"But I was otherwise engaged caring for my matelot. I understand," I said. "Well, I might be able to defeat Pete. I trained him, but he is a genius at all forms of combat, and he possesses an uncanny talent for blades. You should not feel unduly inadequate. Pete could truly take any man I have ever fought."

"I did not think that he could be so talented at such a pursuit," Ash said with a frown.

"Why, because he is not a gentleman by birth?" I chided.

"Nay, because he is the captain's paramour; and in my experience, men of that nature never handle blades well."

Gaston and I exchanged a look and a grin which quickly devolved to laughter.

I finally addressed the boy's confusion. "Ash, you must never use that term here to describe... Let us say, your interpretation of it in this instance is inaccurate to say the least, from several angles. And to clarify, exactly what type of man are we discussing?"

"Sodomites," he said solemnly. "The buccaneers seem rife with them, and they are odd in my experience."

He had indeed led quite the sheltered life. "Did you spend your youth with other planters' sons practicing with swords and pistols and chasing the eligible young ladies? And did you avoid spending time with your father's servants and bondsmen?"

"Aye," he said, as if he wondered what else he could have possibly done.

I settled more comfortably into the sand and explained what a matelot was and why buccaneers had them. I finished with, "So you see, Pete is not a paramour, in that he is not something as trivial as a lover, he is Striker's partner."

Ash's eyes were very wide. "So all here are...? Nay,... all here practice sodomy, whether they favor men or not?"

"They are not forced to, but aye, that is generally the way of it."

"Will I be expected to...?" he asked with grave concern.

"Nay," I sighed with a reassuring smile, "but if you are to do well amongst the Brethren, it would behoove you to acquire a matelot, at

least for the security of having a man to watch your back in battle, or even in taverns.”

“Many live without one,” Gaston said quietly. “But it is a hard and lonely life.”

Something stirred in my thoughts in the wake of my pronouncement and his. I needed to mull on it, and speak with Liam, and I supposed the Bard and Dickey, as we had not seen them since the duel. But first, I thought we should assist in the training. So we left young Ash to contemplating his future and went to make ourselves useful.

When the sun began to drift to the horizon, all twenty-five men left standing had sore shoulders, my ears rang from the constant din of gunfire, and I had an idea concerning how to train them better. I had added Striker and Cudro to the list of men I needed to speak with. At least all I needed to converse with would presumably be at our cabal’s camp that night.

As we all walked down the beach, I slipped my hand in Gaston’s, and maneuvered us a little away.

“Buccaneers do things in pairs,” I said. “They are all hitched to carts in teams. Though I feel few have a cart as magnificent as ours. We are much like the vast cavalry of an ancient army: teams drawing chariots. Teams of wolves, goats, dogs, sheep, sometimes mismatched, but in pairs. That is how we move through life and fight.”

He studied me with amusement and curiosity in the golden light of the sunset. It burnished the stubble on his jaw a brilliant red and sparkled on his left earring. I pushed off his kerchief to see his hair in that light. Standing every which way, as it was so wont to do, it looked like flames burning all about his head.

I answered the question dancing in his emerald eyes. “Your hair is very red in this light, like flames.”

He pushed my kerchief off, his hand lingering over the stubble of my hair. “A golden halo again,” he murmured.

“As always, I wish I had some talent for painting,” I sighed. “Or that there was some method of capturing an image in time. Memory is such an imperfect thing.”

He was frowning. “I have envisioned our cart as this large cumbersome conveyance, suitable for hauling lumber or hay. You see it as a chariot?”

“Not until now. You first said cart, and I thought of a thing one would haul goods in as well. I did not envision a carriage or anything of the like. But perhaps chariot is...”

“It is a more pleasing image.” He smiled happily. He moved closer, his fingers playing over the wall of my belly and his breath tickling my ear and neck. “It is a sleek thing, with great wheels, and it is adorned with wings of gold and set with gems. And yet it is sturdy. It can weather any battle.”

I was no longer thinking of chariots, or how they had been mentioned in the first place. I let him maneuver me into the edge of the

woods.

Our lovemaking was not languorous, but it was as sweet as it was fast. Any cuddling we might have done in the aftermath was rendered impossible by the stinging of insects, and we were quickly driven back into the ocean breezes of the beach. We hurried toward the camp, threading our way among clumps of men. I was relieved to find all our friends around a single fire, including the Bard and Dickey: they leapt to their feet at our arrival, and we were soon embraced in welcome.

The four of us walked a short way from the others to speak. The Bard whispered a hearty *thank you* in my ear before giving Gaston an inquisitive glance. Though he initially appeared pleased to greet us, Dickey seemed increasingly uncomfortable in our presence. However, he was not looking askance at my matelot, but at me.

"I am sorry I was unable to congratulate you properly," I told him.

"I am likewise sorry I was unable to thank you properly," he replied with a slight frown.

I took his shoulders gently, and he met my gaze. His eyes searched mine, and I knew what he sought: absolution.

"You are troubled?" I asked kindly.

He nodded with relief. "I am on occasion overcome with guilt."

"I do not know if I can relieve you of it."

"I do not know if you should," he sighed.

"Good," I said.

His frown deepened. "Is it always so?"

"Nay, but I feel it should be," I sighed. "You have taken the life of a man you once called friend; whether he truly was or not is of no consequence in the aftermath. What kind of man would you be, if you felt nothing over such a thing? A heartless man may kill without remorse, but he would never kill a former friend, because a heartless man would never make one."

"It is said that the deeper we love, the deeper we hate," Dickey said. "But Will, I did not hate him, even when... I beheld him bleeding in the sand. I did as you advised prior to that, and did not think of him as Tom at all. I let no happy memory stay my hand. And yet, after... all I could remember was the good..."

I shook my head sadly. I knew well how he felt. Just as I knew only time would heal it. Still, there were some things I could say.

"I do not give argument to pardon what you feel," I said, "but... did Tom not kill the good between you first?"

"Aye," he sighed. "Or perhaps it was never there. But nay, that would be a lie. There was much good between us once, when we were young. We merely grew into very different men than those boys we once were."

His words mirrored my own oft-harbored thoughts about Shane, and I was struck silent.

Dickey was nodding his head emphatically. "I am glad I won, though. There is no doubt in my mind about that. I do not regret

winning, only his losing, or rather it being him I fought at all. Rest assured, that if another such matter rises, I will attempt to handle it with the same faith and adherence to your teaching.”

“I am pleased to hear it,” I said solemnly. “I would hope that this incident would not so rattle you as to put another’s life before your own.”

“Amen,” the Bard said quietly.

“Nay, nay,” Dickey said with a small smile. “And even if I were to do so, I would still place Francis’ life above theirs. I will always intend to prevail in combat of any type.”

I smiled. “Good man. I am proud of you.”

They returned to the fire, and I paused before following them into the warm circle of light. I still thought of Dickey’s words. “*We merely grew into very different men than those boys we once were.*” But ascribing all of my troubles with Shane to that would be as much of a lie as saying there was never any good between us. I do not think we changed much between youth and man. He was always as he became: ill-tempered, angry, prone to abuse another to lighten his mood; I had merely been blind to it in childhood, or if not blind, then innocent of any ill consequence his poor behavior and spirit would ever spawn.

“Do you ever think of the good you once experienced with the Damn Cousin?” Gaston asked curiously in French.

I turned to him. He was a darker patch of night at my side.

“You know me well.” I smiled sadly. “I think of the good even now, on occasion, while he yet lives; but it is the rare glimmer of coin in a fouled fountain. It surprises me, and I think that it must be a trick of the light, or rather memory. I am often prone to seeing that which I desire, even when it does not exist.”

I shrugged and began walking to join the others: Striker was beckoning with a bottle, and I very much wanted a good pull on it. Gaston’s hand clasped my shoulder.

“With me?” he asked.

I turned back to him swiftly. “Non. There is much good, more than I ever could have envisioned.”

His eyes searched mine, and as with Dickey, I knew precisely what he sought: truth.

“When there is bad,” I said, “I see it for what it is. But I choose to focus on the good.”

He frowned thoughtfully, and then kissed my cheek sweetly and took my hand to lead me into the light.

Gaston eschewed the bottle, but I happily took a good swig. We settled into the sand, with Gaston wrapped about my back. I smiled contentedly and remembered what I wished to tell them. I looked at the pairs of men arrayed around the blaze, with Cudro the sad, lone exception, and I grinned.

“Buccaneers fight in pairs,” I pronounced. They all regarded me much as young Ash had when I questioned the way in which he whiled

away his youth.

"When they're able," Cudro grumbled.

"Aye," I said, "and I wish you could remedy that for yourself, my friend. But I do not say this to rub salt in a wound. The new men, we must teach them to fight in pairs."

"They will na' pair up," Liam snorted.

"We must show them the value of it," I said.

"I'm not fucking in front of them," Striker said with a grin.

I chuckled at the thought of poor Ash turning pale at the sight. "Not that value, though I am sure they would do well by instruction on that as well. Nay, the value of a matelot in combat. And, we must teach them to work with one another in a larger group as well. We must provide them a common enemy."

"The Spanish?" Striker asked sarcastically.

I laughed. "Before that. Us. I propose a child's game. Did you ever play king of the hill as a child?"

"It was more captain of the quarterdeck," Striker said, "but I understand the game."

"Will you join us tomorrow?" I asked him.

He grinned. "And do what?"

"I propose that Pete and you, Julio and Davey, and Gaston and I, hold a hill while they attempt to take it."

"All of 'em?" Liam squawked.

"Aye."

"There be no fairness in that at'all," he said.

"Well then, Otter and you may join us," I said.

"That will na' help the balance o' it," he said with even more incredulity.

I laughed. "Join them?"

He swore and grinned. "Sad as I be ta say it, that will na' do much for the matter, either."

Most were laughing, but Julio was thoughtful.

"They are not all poor in skill or talent," he said.

"I would hope not," I said, "lest we be in quite the pickle when we face Spaniards. Nay, the question is, will the ones with skill or talent band with others of their like?"

Julio shook his head. "They will act alone."

"Then we will win." I said.

"We'llWin!" Pete roared. "EvenIfTheLotOfEmBeMatelots."

"Quiet," Striker snapped. "I would not have an audience in the morning."

"Why? YaThinkWeLose?" Pete chided.

"Nay!" Striker snapped. "I think it will cow the lot of them to have a beach full of men laughing at them when they lose."

This mollified Pete.

The bottle was passed around again, and they told us of what little we had missed in two days. As night waxed about us, Gaston and

I slipped away into the shadows, warm sand, and steady rumble of waves.

This time, our tryst was slow and thorough. Gaston brought me to begging with teasing prods of his member, and I brought him to groans I was sure would be heard above the surf. I was pleased in this, as I wanted the Gods to hear him.

Thirty-Eight

Wherein We Explore Matelotage

The morning light was harsh, and I swore at the rum on my breath. Gaston greeted the dawn with the enthusiasm of a sober man, and I received my first taste of him pounding away at me while my blood pounded away behind my eyes. I found that, though it was not as pleasant as I might have wanted, it was not without its pleasures, despite my aching head. He felt good inside me, and it was wonderful to know I was desired so. Yet, I vowed not to drink that eve, and wondered how Striker could drink night after night, as he often did when ashore.

We joined the others, and as I had suspected, any enthusiasm Striker might have been said to muster in the night for the morning's agenda was not in evidence now. Most of our cabal was like-minded. As I wanted nothing more than water and a place to sleep in the shade, I concurred with all of them. Gaston alone was in fine spirits; but he would not have been sufficient to move us to our task had not Pete decided that beating on a few fools might lessen the aching in his own skull. I pitied the fools.

As we walked to the training area we spied his prior victim, Ash, sitting well up the beach watching the other men. Gaston went to check on him and pronounced him unfit to participate this day. The boy seemed quite relieved.

"Gather round," Striker called to the others.

The twenty-five men who would participate in the exercise complied with curiosity and a seeming eagerness to please him. I was bothered by this, in that I heard one remark to his compatriots, "Come now, the

captain is calling,” and another say, “Now we’ll get some trainin’ iff’n the Captain is overseenin’ it.” I felt as if Striker had been robbed of the admirable aspects of his person, the things that made him a man worth rallying about, because they perceived him as a figurehead, a title, and not a man. But perhaps I was merely indulging in fantasy yet again, spying the worst in things benign, as I am so wont to do with men I dislike. And then I found it very sad that I had already decided to dislike these men.

The thought echoed words from the night before, and I pondered how much of my life I have spent seeing phantoms of my own heart in situations devoid of any meaning save what I ascribed to them, whether it be love from those I was enamored with, or hate from those I found displeasure in. In some ways, I truly might have been as mad as my matelot; I was ever at the mercy of my errant thoughts: they galloped to and fro, and shied like colts at every rustle in a hedge.

Striker was explaining the morning’s training.

“No weapons, sir?” one man asked diffidently.

“No weapons save our fists and feet,” Striker assured him, and then doffed his baldric and belt.

The men chuckled amongst themselves.

“Will there be a flag, or some such thing we must capture?” one of Ash’s purportedly gentle-born young companions asked.

Striker looked to me.

I sighed. I supposed that was a question of merit. I had rarely had opportunity to play the game, as it was a common thing and not one I was welcomed to in my childhood; and later, the noble sons I spent time with in my adolescence engaged in other forms of competition. But I remembered watching the game. The object had always been that one boy stay atop the hill or hay; and if he was dislodged, he tried to claw his way back into position again. This morning there would be eight of us. They could likely dislodge several. In the childhood version, the object had been to prove who was the most tenacious, wily, or strong. Today, we were here to teach them to fight in units, or as a unit. Thus, the prize could not be a thing one could win alone, nor could it be won by disposing of only one opponent. And, the landscape around us was devoid of anything that could be considered a true hill.

“You must dislodge all eight of us from a circle in the sand, and replace us with eight of your own,” I said. “And there must be some limit to the duration, but I leave that to Cudro to call.”

Striker and Cudro nodded.

“It starts and stops at Cudro’s command,” Striker said.

Several men shrugged, and the rest seemed to think even less of the task. Liam and Otter appeared resigned. Pete was grinning like a fiend. Gaston stretched languidly like a cat, his smile surely as feral. I pondered pity yet again.

We shed our weapons and walked out onto the firmer wet sand. The eight of us – Davey, Julio, Liam, Otter, Striker, Pete, Gaston and I

– formed a loose ring. I chuckled as I saw how we positioned ourselves without word or signal to one another. Liam and Otter were our weakest pair, so Pete and Gaston, our best pugilists, put the musketeers between them. Striker and I took our places next to our matelots, and Davey and Julio stood between us. Cudro instructed the men to dig a trench in a large and rough circle around us.

As they dug, Gaston looked to me.

I grinned and whispered, “I will let no one behind you.”

He snorted, as if I said an obvious thing. “And watch to see where we are needed. I sometimes become distracted in battle.”

“You must not kill them,” I teased.

He hummed and studied the horizon quite seriously, as if my admonition were a sobering impediment to his plan.

I glanced around, and saw Striker checking all our positions. I grinned at him, and he sighed and shook his head with a lazy smile of his own.

The circle finally became a trench deep enough that over fifty scuffling feet could not easily erase it. Cudro stood a short distance away. As we waited for the signal, I dropped into a fighting stance slightly behind and to Gaston’s left, and eyed the men arrayed before me. Some hunkered down ready to charge, with mischief in their eyes. Others seemed to think it still something of a lark.

Then Cudro bellowed. The new men did not rush us as one solid wave: they trickled in, though they did move a bit faster and more purposefully, as the battle wore on, and tempers flared, and men became desperate. Time did not slow as it oft did when I was in mortal combat; but it did seem to flow a little sluggishly, as the moments became a seemingly endless procession of punches, blocks, trips, kicks, sand flying about, torn clothing, rabid grimaces, grunts, wild eyes, the often dull and occasionally sharp sound of flesh striking flesh, sprayed blood, curses, scrabbling, bellows, and the momentarily stunning sensation of taking a bad blow myself. I had much to focus on: Gaston was a blur of violence. I had not the time to see if the men he felled rose again, as I was often trying not to trip upon them while their fellows attempted to rush in around us. I kept all from Gaston’s rear, and occasionally redirected him toward assisting Liam and Otter or Julio and Davey. The musketeers were often judged to be the best targets by the canniest of our foes; but thankfully, our attackers never mounted a concerted effort against us. I did begin to notice them working in pairs or trios on occasion, though.

We fought intensely, and I was not aware of how much time had passed until the fighting stopped; and then I wondered if Cudro had called a halt and I had not heard him above the blood in my ears. None attacked us any longer. The eight of our cabal were still within the circle, though not all of us were standing. The new men were strewn all about: some in the circle, some without. The closer ones were not moving, and the ones farther away seemed to be in the act of moving

farther still. Then I heard the deep rumble of Cudro's laughter, and realized he had not called it at all. The whole matter had ground to a halt of its own volition. The new men had withdrawn.

Gaston and I were far from unmarred. I knew I would be stiff later, and by the morrow I might feel nearly as bad as I had after taking the beating in the tavern. As my flesh had not yet fully recovered from that debacle, it was not pleased with me in the least. Thankfully, I had only taken a few blows to the face, and none severe. Gaston now had a split lip and a blackened eye, though. He smiled at me happily as we checked one another over; then judging me not in imminent danger of expiring, he turned to the others.

Julio and Otter had been harmed so that they either could not stand, or were not willing to. Pete was crowing in victory. Striker was leaning over with his hands on his knees, panting, with a wry smile twisting his battered lips.

"Well, that was exhilarating," I told him.

He swore, but his smile widened. "If you have any other stupid ideas, we must discuss them while sober. By God, I hope they learned something."

I laughed and threw an arm around his shoulders. "They had best, or we will be repeating the lesson."

"Na' all o' us," Liam snapped from behind me.

We turned, and found Gaston tending to a gash on Otter's head. The Dutchman was also cradling his arm to his chest.

"How is he?" Striker asked.

"I will live," Otter said.

Gaston awarded us a compressed smile. "He is correct. His wrist is wrenched and I must sew this cut. I have not examined Julio, but he says his ankle is likewise wrenched."

We looked to Julio and found him giving a thin grin and terse nod in agreement. He sat with his right leg carefully extended. Davey and he looked as bad as Gaston and I.

"How are the rest of us?" Striker asked.

Pete walked up and popped one of his fingers into proper alignment with the rest. I winced more than he at the sight of it. He pulled his kerchief off and wrapped it about the wounded digit and its neighbors. His nose looked bloodied and askew, and I thought it likely his golden skin would soon be purple in many a place.

"IBeFine," Pete said. He squatted next to Otter. "BastardTha'HitYaBe Lyin'OverThar."

We looked. The man he pointed to was one of six I saw who were not rousing themselves from the sand with groans and curses, as so many of their compatriots were. Gaston went to him and examined him gently, before pronouncing him alive and realigning his head into a more comfortable position before moving on to the next man. Thankfully, none of the six who did not rise were dead; though Gaston expressed concern over two of them and wanted them carried carefully to the

camps on the beach. The others he assigned men to watch.

The new men not engaged in helping the wounded were coming back toward us, slowly. They were all quite serious now.

Cudro had sobered sufficiently to join us. He looked about, and his excellent voice boomed across the beach. "What happened to the lot of ya?" he harangued the men.

"They be good," one man yelled back. "Damn good. We can't fight like that."

"Bullocks!" Striker countered loudly, surprising the men. "We're not all that good. Two of our number are excellent at this form of combat; the rest of us aren't."

"Aye," Cudro boomed. He turned on me. "Will, what were you doing?"

"Watching my matelot's back, and seeing where we might be needed," I said for all to hear.

"And you?" Cudro asked of Striker.

"The same," Striker said.

"And you?" the Dutchman asked of Liam.

"Tryin' ta help me matelot, an' not get in the way o' the others," the Scotsman said with some frustration.

Cudro continued to call on each of us in the circle in turn.

"Helpin' Julio," Davey said indignantly.

"Trying to keep Liam and me from being dragged away," Otter said. "So that we did not lose because of us."

"Disabling as many opponents as I could reach," Gaston said, and sighed as he examined another injured man. "And preventing any of our number from being dragged away."

"What'E Said," Pete bellowed. "SoThereBeLessO'ThemTaFightAnWe Win."

"You?" Cudro bellowed at a hapless man beyond the circle. "What were you doing?"

"I w-w-were t-t-tryin' ta grab one o' 'em," the man said.

Cudro pointed at another man, one of Ash's young gentleman associates.

The boy pointed at a downed older man at his feet. "This man thought the thin blond man was a good target," he said defiantly. "I agreed. So I was attempting to assist him. And then the large blond man stopped us."

"Good!" Cudro boomed. "You did well. You were working with another."

The youth blinked. "Oh."

"That's right!" Striker yelled at them. "Buccaneers fight in pairs. We work together. You saw that today. Eight men working together can defeat three times their number."

"Sir? Can we try it again?" someone asked.

This was greeted by a great many curses from his comrades and laughter from Striker.

"Not bloody likely," Striker said. "I will not be willing to face you boys again if you learned anything from this day."

This seemed to amuse them.

"I want the lot of you to pair up," Striker said. "You need not lie with one another, but you must find a man to stand at your side in battle. Nor need it be a man among your own number. There are men amongst the Brethren who have lost their matelots and seek another. Find someone to stand with. Now, help get the wounded back to the camps. We've all had enough for today."

The men eyed one another with a new intent. I would have felt victorious, if I had not spent the remainder of the day steeped in guilt as I assisted Gaston in caring for the injured. They had learned, but at the price of many a wrenched joint, broken bone, and blackened eye. But of course, that was better than their not learning, which would have had a higher cost indeed.

That evening, we ended our seeing to Gaston's patients where we had begun, with Liam and Otter, as they were at our fire. Otter appeared to be sleeping contentedly, but Liam did not look as if he would rest anytime soon. He was frowning at the waves and jabbing a knife repeatedly into the sand. In another, I would have attributed this behavior to agitation, but I had not seen Liam exhibit its like before. Belatedly, I recalled his reaction to other events and words, and that I had wished to speak with him.

I motioned Gaston away and, as he too was frowning at Liam's sand-stabbing. He gave a curt nod and went to sit where we would sleep.

"Are you well?" I asked Liam quietly.

He seemed surprised to be addressed. "I be fine."

I was heartened when he stopped stabbing the sand and seemed surprised he had been doing so. I sat next to him and pitched my voice for his ears alone.

"I am sorry Otter was so badly injured," I said. "I feel I should not have asked you to participate. You are musketeers, after all, and valued for your ability to shoot; which poor Otter cannot now do with his wrist as it is. I wish there had been another way to teach them, and perhaps there was and I was too stupid to see it. I feel guilt over the number of injured this night, especially when one is a friend and carries more value than the rest of them put together. I only hope the sacrifice of his well-being will save some of their lives."

Liam took a long breath and spoke sadly. "It na' be your fault. Ya' did well. Ya' be right, on all counts. They'll learn now, and live." Then he added vehemently, "And by God, Otter be ten times the man o' any o' 'em. It should 'ave been me. I'm worthless. The only things I be valued for is firin' somethin', whether it be me musket or me mouth."

"And you are valued highly for those things," I said lightly.

"Aye, am I now? Well the one, surely but the other? All know me as a gossip, and 'tis not a thing valued. I can keep a secret, though. I keep many secrets."

"Liam, at no point have I wished to impugn your honor. I daresay you are especially good at keeping secrets, mainly because few will expect that you hold any, as they feel you tell all. Your propensity for gossip could be considered a distraction for holding that which is most true far from prying eyes."

He frowned and sighed. "No man trusts me, even Otter at times... I said a thing too many once an' he has never forgiven me. He don't believe in tellin' no one nothin'. Not even..." He trailed off and shook his head with annoyance. "There I go again. 'Tis as if I canna' shut me mouth. The words just want ta be tumblin' out."

I endeavored to find the words to assuage his guilt. I did not feel he was a bad man for doing as he did. I had known others like him, men driven to confess all, to share all perhaps, with anyone who would listen. I was sometimes such a man.

"I often feel as you do," I said carefully. "I feel I cannot hold back the words. I find myself frustrated that others will not address things that must be spoken of. I feel compelled perhaps, to insure that all know whatever they might need to know of a situation, even, and sometimes especially, if another party does not wish it to be known for reasons which might be injurious to the party I tell. I do not believe secrets should be kept unless they have great import... and then, well, those secrets are my own: the ones so dark I cannot find the words to speak of them to any except..." I sighed.

I was not sure if that was what he needed to hear, and I felt that it was not a thing I wished to dwell on. He was frowning at the waves. I needed to take another tack.

"I trust you, Liam," I said. "I trust you not to betray a confidence for the sake of doing so. I feel that your curiosity about the business of others is motivated by a sincere interest in their well-being, and I feel your garrulity is motivated by love and friendship, a wish to share knowledge. And I believe mankind has always needed men who are willing to tell the tales and spread the news. In this latest matter with my matelot, you spread a lie for the sake of a friend. We trusted you to do so. You could have as easily spread the truth, which was that we wanted a lie spread. If I had thought for one second that you would do such a thing, I would not have involved you at all."

He turned to me with thoughtful surprise. "Aye, I suppose that be true. I had na' seen it as such. You all make jest of me, and I be thinkin'... Aye, I just didna' see it so."

I smiled with relief. I had found the words after all.

"Liam, you are an excellent shot, and I do not fear you will shoot a comrade, as long as you know where the man stands."

He grinned. "That be so. But iffn' a man don't tell me a thing be a secret..." he looked to his sleeping matelot and sighed.

"I hope you can resolve the matter with Otter someday."

"That wouldna' be the only thing we tussle o'er, but that be the way o' it," he said sadly.

"I believe so."

I left him smiling at the sea.

The next day, the men who could move were more amenable to training, but as all were bruised and sore, we did not seek to exert either them or ourselves. That evening, our cabal was followed back to our camp by a gaggle of seven of the new men, some still seeking instruction, but others seeking something else entirely. As we dropped into the places we had claimed in a rough circle in the smoke of our cook fire, they clustered awkwardly nearby. Striker invited them to sit with us, and soon he and Liam were telling tales; and roast beef and a bottle of wine were passed about.

Sallow-faced Ash was among them, and he had been followed by another young gentleman who went by the name of Nickel. This planter's son was pretty, with delicate features and fine blond hair that rivaled Liam's in its paleness. I had noticed him before, both because he was particularly beautiful, though not in a way I had ever favored, and also because Liam had taken a liking to him, as the boy had proven to be quite the marksman.

Another of the men who had shown promise in that area was also among our guests. He was a tall, thin, lanky man everyone called Bones. This was due to there seeming to be little betwixt his skin and skeleton. Despite its crags, his bony face was amiable enough: he had a wide toothy grin that went from ear to ear. He appeared well-seasoned to either the tropics or the sea. His hide was tanned brown and weathered, and he kept his dark hair shorter than his well-trimmed beard. I had not heard if he learned to shoot in the navy or army, but there was a manner about him that made me suspect a stint in the military; yet he did not bow or scrape or treat any of us like officers.

He stood in contrast to another of our guests, Burroughs. He had obviously spent a number of years in the army, and he was having great difficulty freeing himself from those habits. He was a big, burly man: not fat, but wide across the shoulder, with arms nearly as big as my thighs. He was balding early, so that he appeared older than he probably was; and he had a nasty scar across his right eye and cheekbone, though the eye beneath was miraculously intact. He had not proven to have much of a gift for muskets; but he had taken to the cutlass well, and was one of the few who had given us a bit of trouble in the game the day before. Cudro thought he would be a fine boarder.

All the new men with us were enthralled by Liam's and Striker's tales in their own ways: some listened with quiet amusement, and others asked questions here and there.

When Striker finished telling of our gold-laden galleon sinking in the storm, Ash asked, "I understand how that gold is lost, but I do not understand how you are all so poor if you have been at this for so long. I was told there were riches to be plundered from the Spanish."

This elicited laughter all around.

"You'll not get rich at this," Striker said.

"An' who says we be poor?" Liam added.

"Aye," Cudro rumbled, "some of us have land, six of us own that ship, and several of us have money hidden away."

"You do not live like rich men," Ash said.

I shook my head. "While it is probably true that none here possesses the money your father has, or mine – well, actually, one among us does, and I still might inherit – but we are well enough for men who hardly work and spend many of our days lazing about in paradise with no one to give us orders."

All of our cabal cheered. As I looked about I realized another aspect of the matter.

"And," I continued, "I cannot speak for all, but I do not believe any of us came to the Brethren to seek our fortunes. I came for adventure and romance, and to escape my father's plans."

"I was exiled," Gaston added.

"Pete and I were shipped here as slaves," Striker said.

"Otter and I got conscripted into the roundhead army," Liam said.

"I escaped slavery," Julio said.

"So did I, but on a ship," Davey said.

"I came here looking for work as a pilot," the Bard said.

"I was exiled somewhat, and then conscripted," Dickey said after some consideration.

This brought amusement to all who knew him, as Dickey was the only one among us who had been forced – though kindly – to join the Brethren and had not sought them as a means of escape.

At this, the new men began to speak.

"I'm escapin' my old life," Bones said with a lethargic mien. "An' even if I must be poor here, it's a helluva a lot better than where I was."

"Amen," Burroughs said with a grin.

"My father wanted me to join the clergy," Nickel said quietly.

I looked to Ash. "You must decide if you seek adventure or gold. If you truly seek gold, go and study the law."

Ash sighed heavily. "I just heard so many tales."

"And what would you do if you became rich beyond imaging?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Not study the law, and lie around on beaches drinking."

"I'mStartin'TaLike'Im," Pete said with a loud guffaw.

"I had another question," Nickel said when the laughter ebbed.

"How is it that you all came to choose the matelots you did? I wish to understand the criteria for making such a decision."

This was initially met with quiet amusement until Liam addressed it.

"We na' be askin' ya ta choose a matelot, we be askin' ya ta pair up for fightin'. A matelot be different. Matelotage be a matter of great import amongst the Brethren. A matelot be a man's partner. Matelots share everything they 'ave. If a man canna' speak for 'isself, 'is matelot can speak for 'im. They need na be buggerin' one another, but more often

than na' it comes ta that in the end. "

"It is akin to marriage," I added, and Liam nodded agreement.

"Aye," Striker said. "You may pair with a man for fighting and then decide to become matelots later if it is amenable to both of you, and that is often the way of it; but we are not asking you to choose a man to make that sort of commitment with."

This led to a good deal of thoughtful nodding by our guests.

"Then I will rephrase my question," Nickel said. "How is it you came to pair with the men you did who you later became matelots with?"

This led to more chuckling and laughter among our cabal.

"Well," Striker sighed, "Davey and Julio were the only ones of us who started in that fashion. Davey was new to us and needed a man to board with. Julio had no matelot. They agreed to pair." He shrugged. "They became matelots within the week. The rest of us... Pete and I met in Newgate and we were chained together for the voyage here, sold as bondsmen together, and escaped together. After all of that, we just stayed together."

"Aye, that often be the way o' it," Liam said. "Otter an' me both came by accident ta join Cromwell's forces. As we were both good with a musket, we ended up in the same unit on the march to take Saint Jago. Most of the men died, but we were lucky and lived ta come ta Jamaica. By then we 'ad gotten ta know one another, an' since men be dyin' on Jamaica, Otter wanted ta go to try 'is luck with the Brethren, though we knew little o' 'em. I decided ta go with 'im. We been together since."

"What of you, L... Will?" Ash asked.

This brought even more amusement from our friends.

"There was little practical consideration and a great deal of assumption in our partnering," I said. "We met on a street in Port Royal one day; by that night we were committing piracy together; by the next day we decided to sail on the *North Wind*; the morning after that, I entered into a discussion concerning matelotage during the articles, and someone," I pointed at Cudro, "asked if I had a matelot, and thus grounds to have the position I did on that matter – and a chorus of fools on the quarterdeck," I flung the empty bottle at Striker, who ducked with a laugh, "confirmed for all that, aye, indeed I did."

"It's not our fault you two were so bloody in love with each other you were blind to the circumstances," Striker countered.

As Gaston was sitting behind me and I was leaning on him, I could not well see his face to gauge his response, but he hugged me reassuringly and kissed my ear.

"So ya did na know the other could even fight?" Burroughs asked.

"Nay," I said quickly. "I knew he was a swordsman the moment we met, by his stance and the weapons he carried. I did not know how good of a swordsman, but when he said he had lived here ten years, I thought it likely he was competent."

"So none of you chose your partners, or matelots, so much for reasons of fighting," Nickel said.

"Nay, we did not," I said. "You have that option now, though fate and chance have limited the men you might choose to the ones on this ship."

"Sure as the Devil not be the French," Burroughs said, and then glanced at Gaston and added, "I mean no offense. I just... fought the French in the war."

Gaston shrugged, and I noted another old habit Burroughs would need be broken of.

"Choose a man with skills like your own," Liam was saying. "Some men be boarders, and some men be musketeers, an' even though we be raidin' towns this spring, an' it not matter quite the same, it be best if ya pair with a man as if it would, that way there be less ta sort out later if we do be rovin'. 'Cause it na be good iffn one man be a boarder an' the other a musketeer who don't board, 'cause then ya get ta worryin' about the other and neither of ya be much good."

There was an underlying assumption in Liam's suggestion that they would care about the man they chose.

"Unless you already have a man you do care about," Striker added quickly, "either a lover or a fine friend that you would rather be partnered with. If that's the case, and you have differing skills, we'll decide which team to assign the both of you to."

And it was also in Striker's words. We all knew the real strength of matelotage in battle was not that we were simply pairs of men strewn about a battle field, but that we were pairs of men who would die for one another and cared more for our partners than ourselves. I realized that this was not the thing we had imparted to these men as of yet, though. In telling them they need only pair for fighting, and not for sex or love, we were denying them the real strength of matelotage. Yet, judging from the history of the rest of our cabal, I thought it likely they simply assumed that the love would follow. Perhaps, in their experience, it always did. I wished to be alone with my friends to ask of it but we still had seven interlopers to contend with.

And those seven were appearing greatly confused.

"First," I said, "determine if there is a man among you who you care enough for that you wish to be at their side in any battle to insure no harm comes to them. If no such man exists here for you, then choose a man you get on well with who possesses skills like your own."

"Aye, what Will said," Striker said with a grin.

This seemed to help them: I received thoughtful nods and not confused stares.

They began to eye one another. It was likely we should be thankful love was not involved in this undertaking: if they were making decisions with their heads, and not their heart or pricks, there would not be any dueling or other battles.

The next fortnight passed in healing bodies, training, and frolicking. Gaston and I assisted in teaching better fighting methods during the days, and discovered new ways to amuse one another during the nights. The new men applied themselves diligently to pairing up, though not to

everyone's satisfaction, and sometimes the fledgling pairs changed daily, if not hourly. There were no duels; however, Liam and Cudro almost came to blows one afternoon over something. I felt compelled to go and discover what the matter was; but Gaston convinced me not to meddle, and that someone would come to me if they were injured in spirit.

One fine afternoon, Gaston and I swam out to a sand bar at the mouth of the bay with Pete and Striker, who I had been delighted to learn also knew how to swim. The hours were whiled away in idle chatter and horseplay. Striker was relieved to be free of his duties for a time. Pete was obsessed with wrestling a shark if he could catch one. Thankfully, the few small specimens we saw were apparently scared of Pete's gangly presence in their home, and could swim far faster than he could ever dream to.

Gaston had been as sane as I could remember for the past week. He had even taken to doffing his tunic when we were about our friends, and I was beginning to grow accustomed to seeing him cavorting with Pete while naked. I say accustomed, in that it no longer gave me immediate rise. All was very well with my world.

"I would spend my days like this if I could," I remarked to Striker as we lay in the surf with small waves lapping across our chests. We were watching what we could see of Gaston and Pete chasing sharks.

"Would you? This, and nothing else?" He sounded curious and not at all sarcastic.

"There is more?" I teased. "What else would you have of life?"

He shook his head sadly; and though I regarded him curiously, he would not turn to face me.

"Things I cannot have here," he said quietly.

I felt the fool, as I always do when I have been floating in a cloud of happiness with little thought for others. There was a pall of melancholy about him. It was subtle, as compared to my bouts of sorrow. As I thought on it, I realized Striker had been in the grips of it for days. I wondered what had brought it on.

"Children?" I asked gently, as it was the only thing I could think of that he could not have here that I had heard he might want.

"Aye," he sighed. "And... sometimes I think I would want a home that does not float. But it is mere foolishness," he added quickly. "I would become bored."

"I imagine Pete would," I said carefully.

He sighed again, and though Striker said nothing, I sensed Pete to be at the heart of the matter.

"Is there anything you would have that you can't have with Gaston?" Striker asked before I could pose a question.

"A consistency of sanity, perhaps."

He chuckled. "Well, I can see that. He seems to be doing well."

I accepted his change of the subject. "Aye."

"You two have been quite... amorous of late."

"Aye." I grinned.

"In ways you have not been before," he teased without looking at me.

"Aye..." I laughed. "As you know, Gaston does not favor men, but his cock has at last found great favor with me of late."

"Well God bless it," he crowed. "But could you do me a fine favor, and be more discreet? Pete has become a bit competitive of late."

I grinned. "And you take issue with that?"

"Four times a day. I'm captain, Will. I have duties."

His words were light, but he would still not meet my gaze.

We laughed, but I wondered a thing or two, and I did not know how to ask for the answers I sought.

The four of us returned to camp as the sun sank low. Cudro met us. I was surprised when he professed to want to speak to me and not Striker. Then he intimated he wished to speak to me alone. Gaston would have none of it, and so Cudro reluctantly strolled up the beach with the two of us.

"I have a matter I would seek your advice on," Cudro finally said in French when the three of us were relatively alone. He glanced at Gaston and sighed.

"A matter?" I queried.

"A matter involving matelotage," he said gruffly.

"I am flattered that men seem to feel I know much of the matter."

"Do they?" he asked.

I frowned. "Well, you are the second to approach me on such matters. And you did approach me, for some reason."

He ignored my comment and glanced about. "Who was the first?"

"Well, Dickey, and that was before we sailed here."

"So none here?" he asked.

"Non."

He appeared relieved. Gaston and I exchanged a quizzical look.

"I have been approached concerning the matter," Cudro said quietly.

"For advice?" I asked.

"Non, for... I have been asked to become a man's partner," he sighed.

"Ah! Well then... Who?" I asked.

"There have been two," he grumbled.

"Do tell. Famine or feast then," I teased.

He sighed irritably. "I wish for neither... of the men, boys... damn it."

I sobered. "Let me guess, the candidates are among the new men."

"Oui. Burroughs and that boy Ash."

"And you find favor with neither of them." I was not asking. Cudro had tastes in the matter as refined as mine, and if he had merely wished to have a partner it would have been easy for him to obtain one. Cudro was also as much of a romantic as I, in his own fashion.

"And furthermore," I added, "they did not seek you because they find favor in you, but because they are seeking a strategic partner as we instructed; and they felt the lone and experienced quartermaster would be an excellent choice."

"Precisely," he snorted.

I shrugged. "So... refuse them. Tell them you wish to pair for love."

He swore vehemently in Dutch at the sky. "I did refuse them, politely even, but not for that reason. I told Burroughs and Ash they lacked the experience to partner with a quartermaster; that my matelot might need to stand in my stead."

I shrugged again. "That is true, and probably left few hard feelings. So why then are we talking?"

He swore again. "There is a third. One I wish to approach."

"But you cannot because of the other two?" I guessed.

"Precisely," he snorted. "The third is young Nickel."

I laughed. I should have realized. Nickel of the fine features and build would have captured Cudro's eye.

"Oui, laugh," Cudro sighed.

I tried to contain myself. "I am sorry, my friend. So is that what you quarreled with Liam over?"

"Oui. I wished to have the boy as a boarder." He shook his head. "He is, of course, best suited to be a musketeer."

"And you cannot approach him now, anyway," I said, "as you rejected the other two for lack of experience, and the same would apply to him. You have fenced yourself into quite the corner. You should not have lied."

"Oui, I know that now. Thus we are talking," he said glumly. "I have made a tragedy of it, or perhaps a comedy. I always do. I am nearly never attracted to men who would do well as my equal partner among the Brethren, just as I am ever attracted to those who..." He gave a guilty glance toward Gaston.

"You prefer younger, handsome men," I said kindly, "such as Tom, or Dieppe, or even Gaston."

"Oui," he said quickly.

"Cudro, might I ask, how long has it been?"

"Years," he sighed. "There have been men, but not men I would want as matelots, or... not men I could take as matelot for battle. There have been men I wanted to lie with, and men I wanted to fight beside, but the two have not been the same. It's been... Damn it, Will, it's been so long that if I thought Burroughs was the least bit interested in me, I would take him on and close my eyes at night. But he is not; he said as much."

"Would Nickel find favor with you?" Gaston asked.

"Non," Cudro growled in anger, at himself, not my matelot. I was surprised he had managed such a sound with no *r*'s.

"I know well I am not your kind of man," Cudro added.

Gaston turned to look at him. "I did not wish to be anyone's boy."

Cudro nodded sadly. "That is the crux of it. No man worth having as a matelot in these West Indies would want to be someone's boy. And I want a boy. I want someone to take care of. It is a thing I do not understand, but the possibility of it is a thing that often drives me concerning love and lust."

I patted the big man's shoulder. "I have met young men who would

find great favor with both you and being cared for, but you are correct, they would make poor matelots. I see why you are alone, and I am sorry."

He shrugged. "It is the way of it. Or rather, it is my way."

"I know not what advice I might offer," I said.

"Non, neither do I. Perhaps I merely needed to speak of it," he sighed.

"Find a man who favors men as you do, and fights well, and make the best of it," Gaston said. His tone was not cold, but it was not kind either.

Cudro snorted. "You make it sound so easy."

"You make it sound impossible," Gaston replied. "If you can no longer tolerate being alone, you will find someone, and you will learn to love them." With that, he left us.

"Though his point is sharp and a bit harsh, it does pierce the truth, perhaps," I said.

"Oui," Cudro sighed. "I always wish to have what I cannot, and I never seem to take what I could have and enjoy it."

"Do you feel some great need to treat yourself so?"

He smiled sadly. "Perhaps I do. I will think on it."

"You are worthy of love," I hazarded.

He regarded me sharply. "How would you know?"

I sighed. "I do you no singular favor. No matter what sins they have committed, I feel all men are worthy of love by someone. I might not be the one to grant them that respect or devotion, but there is always someone who will, and if there is someone, then they can be loved. Yet, I know well it is a notion we find great difficulty placing faith in when it concerns ourselves."

Cudro smiled. "I will ponder it."

"Then I leave you to that."

I jogged down the beach until I caught up with Gaston. "I agree that he sets hurdles he cannot jump," I said as I fell into stride beside him. "And tell me: are you making the best of it?"

He sighed. "I feared you would interpret it in that manner."

I chuckled. "I say things I fear you will take poorly all the time."

"I am not making the best of it," he said. "This is the pinnacle. There is nothing for me to fabricate to convince myself it is such a thing. It is simply the best."

"But when we started?" I chided, and poked him in the ribs.

He turned to face me, his eyes earnest. "You were of enough interest, and I was lonely enough, that oui, I decided to make the best of it."

"Then it is not a bad thing at all," I said gently.

He showed me once again how little of a bad thing it was.

I was pleased we were well down the beach, so as not to arouse Pete yet again by our antics. Still, I noted that the Golden One eyed us curiously as we returned. Our friends were passing a bottle of Madeira, and Striker seemed to have had more than his share, though he was

not drunk. When Pete reached for him he did a surprising thing, and stood with a roar of annoyance. All about the fire regarded him with wonderment: most of all, Pete. It was the first time I had seen Striker at a loss for how to behave when he had all eyes upon him. He stalked off into the night. Then all attention turned to Pete.

To my further amazement, Pete did not follow his matelot. Instead, he looked to me and said, "SomeoneShouldWatchAfterIm."

The ancient Godlike mien had descended into Pete's eyes once again, but this time it was quite dark in character. Whatever was afoot, he knew the nature or it.

Gaston shrugged when I looked to him, and I turned and hurried in the direction Striker had gone. I found him standing in the surf. I joined him, studying what I could of his profile in the moonlight. His eyes were tightly closed.

"Do you wish for company?" I asked over the waves.

"What did Cudro want?" he asked without turning to me.

I decided responding to his ploy would not be a true breach of Cudro's confidence. "He wishes for a matelot, but he wants more than a partner in battle, and he does not want the men who want him, and the men he wants are not suitable as matelots."

Striker swore. "At least he..." The growl that followed was unintelligible, but I did not think it was meant to contain the words to finish his sentence.

"What is the matter?" I asked. "I would aid you if I could."

He shook his head. "I don't know if you would understand." He finally turned to me. "You want what you have."

"This concerns Pete," I said.

"Aye, it concerns Pete!"

He was furious, but I did not feel it was directed at my person.

"You once told me that though you do not favor men, you favor Pete a great deal. Has that changed?" I asked.

He looked away to kick at the waves in frustration and rail. "I love him. I cannot conceive of life without him. A man could not ask for a better matelot. There are times when my member finds great favor with him. And most times I enjoy his finding favor with me. But damn it, Will! The talk of marriage and babies set me thinking, and then he feels it is a threat to him, and then you two are going at it day and night. Now he will not leave me alone! I am so..."

He sat in the surf, and I was forced to drop to my knees beside him in order to hear his words.

"I dream of my wife... and other women, some I have known, others I merely fancied in my youth. I wake hard as iron with thoughts of breasts and the curve of a girlish arse. I want to fuck a woman. I want a frail body in my arms. I want to tongue a teat I could suffocate in. I want to smell the scent of her cunt on my fingers. I want to slide my prick deep inside her without the odor of hogs' fat or shit. I want to feel that when I spill my seed it might take root. I want..."

He shuddered with unshed tears and frustration. I put an arm about his shoulders. That closeness was what allowed me to hear what he said next.

"It makes Pete angry," he whispered. "He knows, and he feels I'll leave him, and so he tries to convince me no one will love me as he will, and... He hates them, Will, he truly does. I've suggested sharing a wife. I've suggested that I visit a whore on occasion. He'll have none of it. So I've slipped away to whores when I feel as I do now. He doesn't know. It eats me alive that I had to lie to him; that I'll do it again."

I truly knew not what to say. For a time I could only rub his back and contemplate the surf as thoughts tumbled through my head. There was a common weave to them, and I struggled to decipher the pattern until finally I thought that divulging them might help.

"You are correct," I said at last, "I do have that which I desire, but what you do not know is that has been a long and painful struggle to achieve."

"Will, I didn't mean..."

I shook my head. "Nay, hold, let me speak of this and ramble a bit about it. The topic might assist you in finding another way of viewing your own predicament, or it may not. At the least, you might find it a distraction."

He chuckled with little mirth. "Then I'll listen."

"Many assume that, as there was Adam and Eve, so there are all men and women; that a man is strong and manly and a woman soft and yielding; and that a man should hold only to women and vice versa, but we all know that is not always the way of it. I have oft been confronted by the notion that a man who favors other men is expected to be womanly in some fashion, that he must be womanly, else he would not favor other men."

"Aye," Striker said bitterly.

I thought it good he had been in the West Indies and not England with his predicament, as being branded a sodomite might have driven him mad. But of course, in England, where there were women, he would never have cleaved with Pete such as he had.

"I have met many men who favored men who were not the least bit womanly," I continued. "And a number of women who favored women who were not the least bit manly. The two things, whether one is masculine or feminine in nature, and who one favors, have little to do with one another. And by the same coin, men who favor other men sometimes favor masculine men, and sometimes feminine men, just as women who favor women sometimes favor masculine women, and sometimes feminine. They are all separate colors that weave the pattern of that individual, and every pattern is different."

Striker was frowning, but it was thoughtful frown and he turned to face me.

I continued. "I recently met a young woman who wishes to be manly in many ways. She wishes to embrace the role a man can have in this

world, in that she would learn to sail, fence, attend a university, and lead men. Yet, this young woman did not wish to be manly *per se* when it came to matters sexual. She wished to be with a man, not a woman. And I feel this dichotomy is very hard on her."

In fact, I realized it probably tore at her very soul, and I felt great sympathy for Christine.

"In other examples," I went on, "we both know a man, Cudro, who favors men, yet does not favor men who are as manly as himself. He is enamored of younger men, softer and more yielding men perhaps, who he can care for in ways that men usually care for women. Yet a man of that nature does not make a good matelot for a buccaneer, and so Cudro exists in a quandary over the matter. Sadly, he would do fine in the courts, where there are often young men of that nature in abundance."

"Where do you stand on these matters?" Striker asked.

I sighed and smiled grimly. "I favor men; I have done so since my youth. I favor manly men who I can yield to, though only now have I found a man I am willing to yield to. I have spent much of my life as a lover of men, bestowing – because I could not trust another in that way – and yearning to at last be able to receive, to yield. Yet, I do not perceive of myself as being womanly."

"I do not see you as being womanly," Striker said. "And Gaston, though he does not favor men, he finds favor with a masculine man?"

"Who yields. Aye, he wishes to bestow."

"Pete must bestow. And..." He reclined onto the stand to study the stars with a thoughtful mien. "In truth, I do not know if Pete favors men." He said it as if it were a curiosity to him.

"What?" I asked with surprise.

"Nay," he said with more conviction. "I feel it is more that he hates women so that he will not lie with one, and so he has only been with men. It was what he learned as a boy from other boys. And I feel that is what rankles me the most, that he wants me to be womanly after a fashion. He takes great pride in caring for me, and in how I care for him. It is... I don't know if I can explain it. You know he rarely receives me."

I nodded. "I have noticed, and you have made light of it."

"Aye, I jest about it, but truly I do not find it a jesting matter. He is ever quick to let me know how much his yielding to me is a gesture of his love. I feel it is a thing he has done with no other. He just..."

He was deep in thought and did not continue, and so I let him lie there and think while I dallied with my own thoughts.

I had met a woman once, a widowed baroness, who had been so abused by men she refused to lie with them. She turned to women instead, though she did not naturally find favor with them. She professed the needs of her body were such that she desired some form of human solace and pleasure, and since she could find no comfort with any man, she chose women. And I had known courtesans over the years who, though they did not eschew men entirely, did not take them

as lovers, but only as clients, preferring loving relationships with other women to provide them with companionship and delight, even though they did not prefer their own sex in the matter of sex.

So what Striker implied was conceivable to me: that Pete had simply turned from women out of pain and hatred. He chose men, and not feminine men, as that would probably remind him of women; yet, deep inside, he might long for a woman, or someone who behaved as one.

And Striker did care for him. Striker was always the one seeing that their needs were met: that they were fed, clothed, housed, and had money. Striker seemed to take to the role quite well, he made a good wife after a fashion, or perhaps a good mother in a certain sense. Their partnership worked well, in all but this matter of Striker's Horse being none too keen about being perceived as a thing it was not.

I returned my attention to Striker and found him still staring at the heavens.

"Would he yield regarding the matter of a woman if the alternative was not to have you?" I asked.

"He would rather kill me," Striker said dully.

"Truly?"

"Aye, I believe he would kill us both before losing me to a woman." He sat up and shrugged. "As it stands, he feels I am falling prey to the other captains; but I do not yearn to become a planter, or acceptable, or a gentleman, I just want a woman now and again, and children. Damn me, but I do want children."

"Has Pete ever expressed any interest in progeny?" I asked. "Gaston took me by surprise with his desire for them. I have never wished for any, but I know I am uncommon among men in that regard."

"I don't know," he sighed. "We cannot discuss it. Or rather, he will not discuss it."

"Not to give myself airs, but do you feel he might be willing to discuss it with another?"

Striker gestured toward the camp. "Please, I wish you success in the endeavor." Then he sobered. "Actually, he might speak with you."

"If the opportunity presents itself, I will do what I can, without divulging the specifics of what you have relayed, of course."

"As devious as you are, I believe that," he said with a smile.

I was taken aback. "Devious?"

"Clever?" he offered.

"I will take clever over devious, but truly I like neither."

"I meant no insult, Will."

"I realize that, I am just troubled to be viewed so." Though I supposed it was true and I was often viewed so.

"How would you name it?" he asked.

"Diplomatic, perhaps?" I tried.

He awarded me a lopsided grin.

I sighed. "Devious."

He threw his arm about my shoulder and pulled me close to kiss my

cheek. "I love you, Will, like a brother. Thank you. If ever I might repay the favor."

I embraced him in return. "We are well now, but I am sure I will need to avail myself of your offer at some future date."

Most of our cabal was sleeping by the time we returned, except for Gaston and Pete, of course; they sat a little beyond the others, talking. Their eyes were expectant as we approached.

Striker leaned over and kissed Pete deeply. In return, Pete made no move to grab him. When their lips parted, their eyes met, and in the flickering firelight I could see the bond between them. It was a thing to be reckoned with, and I felt that Striker misunderstood Pete's devotion. I thought it likely that Pete would indeed do anything Striker asked, as long as Striker asked for it in a way Pete would hear. But then I am a romantic, and Striker's revelations as to the flaws of their relationship had been disheartening, and I very much wanted to see some reassurance that all was not as bleak as he said.

Gaston and I moved away to the bowl of sand we had taken as our own. My matelot did not reach for me, either; instead we curled up nose to nose by mutual accord.

"Pete fears he is losing Striker to the forces of civilization," Gaston said.

"If he is not careful, he will lose Striker to the forces of Striker's Horse." I quickly relayed the gist of Striker's complaints and needs.

"They do not talk," Gaston said thoughtfully when I finished. "None of them talk: not as we do. That is why they make jest of us for doing so."

I nodded. "Oui, it is a thing unfamiliar to them."

"As we have discussed before, it is a thing of centaurs," he said.

"Oui," I sighed. "Do you feel Pete would yield on the matter, or do you feel he might actually harm Striker and himself? Is his Horse so very..."

"Will, Pete is his Horse, there is no man," Gaston said with conviction.

"I suppose that is true." I chuckled.

"We discussed the sharing of our matelots with women," he continued somberly. "It is different for each of us, though. You do not favor women, whereas Striker does. And Pete is aware of that. And he fears it, because it is a thing of such a fundamental nature that he knows neither he nor Striker can combat it. It is as if he views his eventual demise in Striker's life as inevitable because of it: he feels he fights a losing battle, yet, he knows of no other way to exist. He has battled much in his life, Will, as I have."

I kissed Gaston's nose. "I am not pleased as to the nature of this kinship, but I am pleased you have found one with Pete."

He nodded seriously. "I am surprised and pleased also. I feel as if I have made a new friend; though he was friend before, it was not to the degree I feel he is now."

"I feel the same concerning Striker now. He offered to allow me to unburden my soul upon him..."

Gaston nodded. "Please do not discuss events concerning my sister. All else..." He shrugged.

"Agreed," I said and kissed his nose. "And I likewise agree to your discussing anything you might need to with Pete."

"I have already told him of all that occurred with the Brisket, and my desire for children, and that they have a proper dam: one we would want issue from. He understands all of that; yet, he does not feel he could do the same. He cannot conceive of sharing Striker with a woman, because he does not trust that Striker will choose to remain with him under those circumstances. He feels it must be one way or the other."

"So, it is not so much that he hates women?" I asked hopefully.

"Non, it is. He feels the woman will do much to divide them, and Striker will fall prey to his desires and her wiles."

I cast about for a path through that thicket. "What if Striker was to marry some mousey thing, like Agnes? Someone who could not be considered an opponent in the least? How do you feel he would react?"

"I feel a situation of that nature could be suitable for both parties," Gaston said after some thought. "But would Striker find favor in a woman such as Agnes? And she is no woman, merely a girl, and she does not favor men."

"I did not mean her in specific. But, non, I do not see Striker finding favor in one such as her. What of you? Would your Horse consider one such as Agnes a formidable opponent?"

"Non." He frowned and considered me carefully. "Could you find favor with her?"

"Someone like her; or her specifically?" I asked.

"Agnes," he said.

I shrugged. "Perhaps, but I would have her age a little first. Why?"

"She is intelligent and talented," he said.

"I suppose so, yet..." I sighed. I remembered my interest at envisioning her with charcoal smudges all about, but that had been laudanum-induced fancy. Now I could not evince any interest on the part of my manhood by envisioning her with a womanly figure.

"We will see what the future holds," I said. "And in the matter of assuaging my father, she would not do at all."

"Oui. It was merely a thought," he said.

I thought it interesting that it was a thought he had entertained, but I was distracted from pursuing it. Trying to envision an adult Agnes had led to my envisioning things I could have and not merely fantasize about. I reached for him. I do not know what he had been thinking of, but his response was swift.

As my capacity for rational thought melted beneath his kiss like wax before a flame, I hoped the Gods took pity on the new men, and mitigated the curse we had laid upon them by instructing them to pair.

Port Royal

February
1668



IV

Thirty-Nine

Wherein We Are Snared By Civilization

We remained on Cow Island throughout January and the beginning of February of 1668, by either calendar. The French decided to sail directly to Morgan's February rendezvous in the cays south of Cuba. Striker wished to return to Port Royal briefly to determine who else had sailed, and perhaps offload some of our men to another ship in the name of giving all of us a little breathing room. The matter was put to a vote, and though many men did not wish to set foot on Jamaican soil due to debts, the motion was passed. All were assured they did not need to leave the vessel, and we would eat of the provisions aboard her, and thus not have to spend money in port.

Striker did not speak of frustration and women again as he had that night, but I felt he no longer needed to do so as much now that he had drained some of the poison gnawing at his heart. Gaston and I strove to be a bit more discreet; and, either Pete and Striker spoke some of the matter, or Pete had the good sense to back off, as they soon seemed at ease with one another again.

On other fronts, Cudro did not take a matelot. Dickey recovered from his guilt. The French stopped glaring at Gaston. The ships were careened. All three vessels were loaded with salted beef and boucan. Our new men became proficient at both buccaneer battle tactics and the skills necessary to exercise them. And everyone seemed loathe to leave the place.

As for my matelot and I, we could scarcely remember arriving there, chained together, over a month ago. Gaston's madness of that time now

seemed a distant thing, as did my fears of never having anyone as I had him.

Thus we sailed.

I was appalled anew at the size of the cabin, and the vessel for that matter. Spread along a beach, our number had not seemed so great. As we got underway, Gaston and I joined our cabal on the quarterdeck, and found that space crowded more than it had been: but not merely within my perception, but because our cabal had acquired four members over the course of our stay on Cow Island.

Ash, Nickel, Bones, and Burroughs were ever about these days, and though we had not truly accepted them into our cabal *per se*, we accepted their presence and did not seek to exclude them. And though they were four in number, they were not specifically two couples. Ash and Nickel were childhood friends, and Burroughs and Bones had much in common in history and age, but Ash and Burroughs would be considered boarders, and Bones and Nickel were musketeers. Things were further complicated by the fact that Ash and Burroughs shared a similar demeanor, as did Nickel and Bones, such that if they did pair, the former couple would be ever taking on the world with little to temper them, and the latter would seemingly retire from it. As of yet, no one had seen need to press the matter to see where they would end up, and they seemed reluctant to make any decisions of their own.

Gaston and I settled in, with our backs to the starboard rail, and watched the sails fill and Cow Island slide away behind us. The *Virgin Queen* raced with the evening wind into the setting sun, our bow aimed at the blazing orb as it sank from the orange sky. It looked as if we were sailing to the edge of the world, as sailors had once believed. My gaze traversed the ceiling of the heavens toward the azure sky of the east, and then down again to the slowly shrinking smudge of green in our wake. I was suddenly gripped by claws of anxiety, and I wondered if we could still swim back to the island.

"What?" Gaston asked.

"We should have stayed," I whispered.

He was not the only one who sensed my duress.

"Did ya ferget somethin'?" Liam asked from beside us.

"Nay, nay, I am just reluctant to return to Port Royal," I said.

"Me, too," Bones said.

"As am I," Ash said.

"You now enjoy the buccaneer life so much?" I teased. "Or are you poor?"

"Poor," Ash said quickly.

"Debts," Bones said the single word with deliberation.

"With taverns?" Striker asked.

Bones nodded slowly.

"Stay on the ship," Striker said with a grin. "They'll sell a man to the plantations, you know."

"I heard o' that," Bones said.

"Well, I for one am quite in anticipation of gaining news in Port Royal," Dickey said. "We shall learn if the stores for the haberdashery arrived." He paused and grinned. "And Belfry's bride."

"You will lose your bet," his matelot said.

This brought amusement to all who knew Belfry, but I was not party to it. My heart had skipped a beat at Dickey's last word. As Gaston held me a little tighter, I knew he too remembered what I did. Belfry's bride might not be the only one arriving from England. How could I have forgotten that?

"We should have stayed," I whispered again in French.

"Perhaps," he sighed in my ear. "It does not matter, though. We will endure and conquer, no matter what might arrive."

We sailed into the Chocolata Hole in the third week of February. Beyond the cay, we could see a great many sails in the harbor; however, there were only two vessels in the Hole: a sloop named the *Lilly* and the *Mayflower*. We slipped between them and dropped anchor.

Striker hailed the *Mayflower* and was told Bradley was not aboard, but they intended to sail in three days. Morgan would be sailing with them. Two sloops with around eighty men had already departed for the cays. As Striker was trying to determine how many men the *Mayflower* thought she would take, I was wondering if I wanted to wait until he had an answer or desert the crowded ship for a time, as many of our men – those that did not fear debt or the high price of revelry – were already doing.

"I suppose we should visit Theodore and Agnes," I said with some resignation.

"We need not go far for the one," Gaston said, and nudged my arm.

I looked to see where he pointed, and spied Theodore on shore. He was speaking with some of our men who had just rowed a canoe ashore. As we watched, he gingerly clambered inside it to kneel and begin the journey out to us.

"This is dire indeed," I remarked. I could guess at any number of things that would drive Theodore to meet us in the harbor: none of them were pleasant possibilities.

We met him at the rope ladder and helped pull him aboard.

"My dear Theodore, how are you?" I asked as we embraced.

"I am tolerably well, thank you," he said. "Will..."

"And how is Mistress Theodore?" I asked.

"She is fine and..." He sighed as he saw my smile. "The babe is expected late this spring."

"And Agnes?" I asked.

"And the dogs?" Gaston added.

He shook his head with a smile. "They are well, I assume. I have had no tragedy reported to me on their behalf. Agnes has ordered a great many things from London, expensive things, such that I am sending some payment in advance and a letter of credit to secure them, but as that is in keeping with your interests and instructions, I felt there was

no harm in it. Other than that, she seems to be a dormouse with few needs. The dogs eat a great deal, though."

"Lenses?" Gaston asked.

"Aye," Theodore said and opened his mouth to speak again.

"Ah, that is lovely," I interjected quickly. "And what of..."

He held up his hand; his voice was rich with resigned amusement. "Those on the plantation are as expected. They have planted a garden. I was able to secure a dozen Negroes from a recent ship, including a number of females. Belfry is well, quite well. The haberdashery goods have arrived, along with Belfry's bride. And yours." He said the last with determination, but his smile was kind. "Along with several unexpected travelers I feel you will wish to hear of."

"Truly?" I asked.

His smile was just on the friendly side of smug. I rolled my eyes and motioned for him to continue.

He made us wait a breath more before saying, "Your sister, your uncle, and a man named Rucker, or so they all claim. As they arrived with a letter from your father, and there is a family resemblance, I took them at their word."

I was understandably surprised. "That is unexpected but welcome news," I said. "They are the only three people in all of England I will be glad to see. I am quite pleased they accepted my invitation."

"I do not believe..." he sighed. "They left in haste, and I have the impression that their travel here was not due to invitation as much as necessity."

My elations dampened. "Shane," I whispered. "What have they said?"

"Who is Shane?" he asked. When I did not answer immediately, he continued. "They are not forthcoming with the details. Your uncle is a man of determined discretion, your sister does not trust me, and I have not been able to maneuver Mister Rucker away from them. They have been here but a week. They sailed south from Boston, after traversing the sea from England in late autumn. As only your bride arrived with the baggage and servants with which a young lady travels, I am led to believe your sister's leave-taking was in haste. They have also let it be known that they want no fuss made of their arrival. Your uncle had an emphatic discussion with the governor over the matter. The governor, by the way, has let them use the King's House for the time being. Your house was deemed unsuitable by your bride, much to young Agnes' relief."

"I must see my sister," I said.

Gaston was already securing places for us on the next boat ashore. Alerted by the urgency of his request, Striker joined us.

"What is amiss?" Striker asked.

"Members of my family have arrived unexpectedly, and..."

Theodore was still watching me curiously.

"Shane was... is my second cousin," I told him. "There is much bad blood between us. In demeanor, he is the son my father wished he had."

Shane wished to marry into my family through my sister, Sarah, and I thwarted it. My father said he would shelter her from Shane's wrath; and as my father is quite fond of Sarah, I believed him."

"Perhaps this is how he has chosen to protect her," Theodore said gently.

"Or she has already been harmed," Gaston said bitterly.

That was my fear, and I nodded resolutely.

"Oh Lord," Theodore sighed.

"Is this cousin here?" Striker asked.

"Nay," I said and prayed it was true. "My sister, my uncle, and a dear friend have arrived. They appear to have departed England abruptly, traveling to the northern colonies during the storm season, and then here."

"Can we assist?" Striker asked.

I thought of what I faced: a possibly wounded sister, my uncle defending my father, and the damn bride. I sighed. It would be good to have familiar and trustworthy faces about, yet Striker had his own agenda for our time here.

"You have things you must do," I said.

He shook his head. "Bradley and Morgan are on their plantations. They plan to sail in three days. They will arrive before then but not tonight."

"Do you plan to sail with them?" Theodore asked.

"Aye, I have poor men on board who dare not go ashore," Striker said.

Theodore regarded me. "Well, this will be three days then in which hasty but indelible decisions will surely be etched upon your life." He turned to climb down to the boat.

I looked to Striker. "Please come. I feel we might require all the assistance we can muster."

Pete joined us, and the five of us took the next boat to shore. Once there, I began to lead us in a hurried march toward the King's House.

"Hold," Theodore said. "They are unaccustomed to buccaneers. Perhaps...a change of attire..."

He looked pointedly at Pete, who, as was his wont, was clad only in breeches and weapons.

I swore, and we turned onto Lime Street to go to our house. Once there, we discovered that Agnes had cleverly gated the passage alongside the house so that the animals were fenced in the yard. They had free reign of the exterior and interior, though, and initially seemed determined that we would not, until the older beasts recognized Pete and Gaston and allowed us entry. Once inside, we found that Agnes was not home.

"She is most probably with your sister," Theodore remarked, as we ran upstairs to find suitable clothing. "Your sister took a liking to her."

I thought that a fine thing.

"Ask him of the bride?" Gaston asked quietly as we rummaged

through my trunks.

I had forgotten her. I cursed and sighed, and called down the stairs. "What of the bride?"

"She appears to like no one," Theodore said.

"Lovely," I muttered.

"Excuse me, what was that?" he called.

"Lovely!" I said from the doorway.

"Aye, she is," Theodore replied.

Striker chuckled from across the hall.

I stuck my head out the doorway and found Theodore peering up at me from the bottom of the stairs.

"It was not a question, but this is," I snapped. "Who the Bloody Hell am I dealing with?"

He grinned. "Miss Vivian Barclay, daughter to the Earl of Whitlock."

"Did my father send a letter with her as well?"

He nodded. "In short, you are expected to marry her: he will not suffer any excuse short of your death."

"How does she seem about the matter?" I asked.

"Extremely displeased to be here. She asked a great many questions about you, and... your living arrangements." There was warning in his tone.

"And what did you tell her?" I asked in a similar tone.

He sighed. "That like all buccaneers, you have a partner. Will, she knows you favor men; she was quite direct about the subject."

I wondered who had told her. "How is she with my sister?"

"They like each other not at all." He shrugged.

My father must have told her, then, or there was gossip about me all over London. I would not know until I spoke to Sarah. I would not know many things until then.

I returned to dressing. As Gaston was a bit shorter than I, though a little wider across the shoulders, my clothing fit him well enough if he did not attempt to duel or anything else that would require waving his arms about. I despaired when I realized we only had one pair of boots between us. I did not wish to don hose and shoes. But thankfully Gaston opened a small chest he had once stored at Massey's, and produced a pair of soft-soled hide boots. They looked quite comfortable, and I eyed them with envy as he laced them up his calves. I reluctantly crammed my feet into my stiff leather boots, knowing full well they would surely baste my legs in sweat as if my calves were chickens put to broil. When we were at last fully attired in shirts, jackets, proper wool breeches, and boots, I felt odd and he appeared it.

We regarded one another with dismay that turned to amusement. Then we embraced. In my arms, his chest solid against mine, he was the epitome of what I wished for in this life. I wanted dearly to make all the other concerns go away, but they would not. As I rubbed my stubbly cheek on his, I thought we must shave; but I did not wish to take the time to do so before I saw Sarah, or give the appearance of caring so

much what the damn bride might think. I sighed and held him tighter.

"I am well... enough," he murmured. "I will hold the cart."

"Thank you," I breathed.

I could see us standing there on a road. The way ahead was dark and shadowed, and somewhere behind us, wolves howled. We stood close together, and I leaned upon him. His four legs were braced firmly: the cart would not slip, though the road was steep.

"If I bolt," he continued, "I will drag you with me to safety."

I released him enough to regard his face and found him smiling. I kissed him.

We were interrupted by Striker's polite rap on the door frame.

Striker was wearing the clothes he had borrowed to attend the party at the Governor's. They had found a shirt for Pete, and boots. We were all vaguely presentable, and Theodore judged us so when we tromped down the stairs in our unfamiliar foot gear.

"What is your sister like?" Striker asked as we walked up Lime Street.

"She is the only member of my immediate family I care to own," I said. "She is intelligent, educated, opinionated, and she rides and shoots. However, I have only been in her presence for a mere month, and that a year ago. Prior to my return to England, I have vague memories of her as a quiet little child. She was ever in the nursery, or under the eye of the governess, and we never spoke."

"So she is a good deal younger than you?" he asked.

"Aye, nine years."

"NeverMetAMan'sSisterAfore," Pete said thoughtfully.

"I hope you will like her," I said. "She has much merit, and I would think she bears little resemblance to other women you have met and disliked in your life."

Pete frowned. "SheBeYourSister."

I was not precisely sure what he meant by that, but there was a great deal of traffic and other activity on Thames, and further conversation would have to be shouted. We hurried on in silence to the King's House.

A wigged and well-liveried older man answered the door. He gave Theodore a grudging nod and a polite, "Good day, sir," but gazed upon the rest of us with the open and righteous disdain of a servant who knows he never need bow to those beneath him.

Thus, I was mightily amused at the look upon his face when Theodore said, "Mister Coswold, is it? This is Lord Marsdale. Is your mistress in, and Miss Sarah, or Mister Williams or Mister Rucker?"

Coswold pulled his incredulous and appalled gaze from me with difficulty and addressed Theodore. "The ladies are here, sir, but Mister Williams and Mister Rucker are out. My mistress was not expecting... the Lord so soon. She is entertaining."

"Well," I said quickly, "we need not disturb her at this juncture. Though there is obviously much your mistress and I must discuss, for

the time being, I only wish to speak with my sister. Please inform her we are here."

"Aye... my Lord." He did not look at me as he turned and entered the house.

"How many attendants did she bring?" I asked.

"Four," Theodore sighed, and held up a hand to staunch my protest. "And they can stay here until a suitable dwelling is built; which your father sent additional funds to accomplish. I am having plans drawn up for the lot I procured for you in town..."

Sarah was hurtling through the door and into my arms before he could finish.

"Oh Marsdale, I am so pleased to see you at last," she said into my chest.

Due to some incomprehensible trick of my memory, I did not remember her as being so small. Perhaps it was because the only other young ladies I had been about in the last year, Miss Vines and Agnes, were fairly tall for their sex.

When Sarah released me, I held her at arm's length so that I could look upon her. Her grey-blue eyes were bright with happiness. I saw no taint of despair about her. Truly, she looked quite hale for someone who had traveled such an unaccustomed distance so recently. And I was pleased to note she was wearing a sensible, yet intricately stitched, light cotton dress.

"Here, I go by Will," I said. "And you look well. I am delighted to see you, but confounded and concerned as to the why of it."

"I know," she said with a nod. Her eyes flicked to my companions.

"Let me introduce you..." I began to say.

"There is no need. Hello, Gaston," she said and embraced my matelot as heartily as she had me.

He returned her embrace with sincere warmth, and smiled at me over her head. It struck me that perhaps meeting my sister might have been a disconcerting thing for him; but he showed none of the awe or confusion he had experienced when first meeting Miss Vines, and I was relieved I had not worried about such a thing before, and need not do so now.

She whispered something to him, and he whispered a reply.

"You are not drinking the water, are you?" he asked seriously when he released her.

She shook her head. "Nay, nay, Will explained of the little things swimming in it in his letter. I am quite fascinated. Agnes says she has ordered lenses so that we might observe them."

"So you received my second letter?" I asked.

"Aye, just before..." She smiled. "That is part of my tale. But first, I assume these are Pete and Striker." She turned and smiled at them.

The wolves froze in surprise, and I thought the pair of them might hurl themselves off the stoop were she to attempt to embrace them. Thankfully, she did not.

"You wrote of us?" Striker asked incredulously.

"What'JaSay?"

"He said you are two of the finest men he could ever hope to meet," Sarah said. "He lauded your friendship, loyalty, and expertise at all things buccaneer."

"Well, Lady, you know your brother suffers from delusions, don't you?" Striker said with a hesitant smile.

"I think not," Sarah said with a grin. "I think I shall take him at his word on this matter, and expect great things of you."

I was not so delusional I did not realize she was being flirtatious. It made me wonder how much she had understood of many things I said in my letter. But then again, Striker was a handsome man, and bore some resemblance in height, build, and face to Sarah's latest unfortunate love interest, Shane: I had noted the resemblance myself when first I met him.

I was not the only one to interpret her words so. Striker flushed a little, and Pete frowned. I would have to speak with her at length. As it was, putting her before Striker in his recent mood was like waving meat in front of a dog. I silently cursed myself for not thinking of anything but my own concerns.

"And I believe you have met Theodore," I said, before the pause after her words could become awkward.

She cooled quickly, and gave him a curt nod but did not meet his gaze. "We have met."

Theodore gave her a compressed smile and nod in return.

He had mentioned she was not trusting of him. I thought it might be due to a perception that he was our father's man. If true, this spoke much of her current opinion of our father.

"I did not write at length of Theodore in my letters," I said quietly, lest Coswold or others be listening beyond the door. I stepped over to put an arm around Theodore's shoulders. "But I feel I am as blessed to have his friendship as any other I have met on Jamaica. I did not write of him because he walks a fine path between the duties of his profession to our father, and his friendship with me, and I was not sure whose hands my letter might fall into."

Sarah's eyes widened at this new information and she nodded quickly. "Mister Theodore, I meant you no discourtesy..."

"Nay," he said quickly. "Your brother is too kind. And Striker is correct; your brother suffers from mental impairment."

"Aye, it is well known," Gaston said. "If his reasoning was not impaired, he would not love all of us as he does." He grinned at me.

I snorted my amusement and addressed Sarah. "I do not feel I am so poor a judge of character. Where should we speak? I believe you have a tale to tell."

"We cannot go in there," she said with a rueful grimace and gestured at the door behind her. "And I feel... I would like some wine for the telling of it."

"Do you wish to tell it before so many?" I asked, "or should we..."

"Nay, I feel I will be fine in the telling of it to others," she said quickly. "It is the remembering of it I seek fortification for."

I nodded, still not sure how concerned I should be. "Well, let us retire to our house. We can buy a barrel on the way."

Sarah's eyes shot wide and she muttered an unladylike thing under her breath. "I forgot Agnes. I must rescue her. Hold a moment." She slipped inside.

She returned a moment later with a very relieved girl in tow.

"Mister Will, Mister Gaston, how wonderful it is to see you," Agnes gushed. Then she quickly stepped very close to ask, "When you marry Miss Barclay, sir, will I have to serve her?"

"Nay," I assured her quickly. "Do not trouble yourself."

A great sigh of relief escaped the girl. I thought it likely my bride was an unholy terror.

As we began walking, Sarah muttered apologies for abandoning Agnes in the King's House; and Agnes looked as if she would forgive my sister anything, including being left alone in a room of plantation wives. I sighed to myself. The poor girl was dooming herself to another disappointment of the heart.

As we continued to the house, Sarah asked Striker of our time on Cow Island. Truly, Sarah's gaze did not leave him any more than Agnes' gaze left her. I was glad we would be sailing soon, and I had not even met the damn bride yet. I was seeing enough trouble brewing with the women I liked.

While I bought wine, Striker told the tale of Gaston and me being charged by the bull. As always, he was the consummate storyteller, and this for an event he only witnessed in the aftermath. Sarah was a most attentive listener.

I watched Pete. Thankfully, the Golden One seemed far more concerned with determining the similarities between Sarah's features and my own than about how her gaze traveled over his matelot. He would look at me, and then her, and then frown and look at me again, and mutter, "TheEyes, WrongColorThough," and other such comparisons.

As we finished the last leg of our short journey through Port Royal, I pulled Gaston aside. "We must keep a modest distance between Sarah and Striker."

He sighed. "I was hoping you had seen. Oui, before Pete sees it."

"I will speak with her as soon as I can get her alone," I said.

"It may do little good," he said. "Even I, who have seldom witnessed courtship between men and women, can see they are enamored of one another."

I sighed. "If Pete were not involved, I would be delighted."

"You are mad," Gaston teased.

"Non," I said, "Striker is no longer the boy he once was. I feel he would do well by any woman he was to marry."

“Oui, but Will, he is a commoner. Your father would never allow it.”

“Damn that,” I said. It had not occurred to me. “Well,” I added, “it may be that my father’s opinion upon the matter no longer has consequence or meaning.”

“Will,” Gaston said firmly, “your sister is a formidable opponent.”

“I suppose she is.” And I knew Pete’s opinion would carry great consequence.

We were soon all seated around the dining table in the front room, with cups of wine in hand, and young dogs running about our feet. I seated Sarah at the end of the table, with me on one side of her and Agnes on the other.

“Well, would you like the short version or the long version?” Sarah asked.

“I believe I would like the entirety of the tale,” I said, “but perhaps you could start with the most pertinent details. Have you been harmed in any way?”

“Nay, not as you might think,” she said quickly, and patted my arm in reassurance. “Though I would have been, if I had not taken to sleeping with a pistol. I shot him, Will. Yet he is not dead, or at least was not when I left England.”

The air was driven from my lungs without sound. It was simply gone; and I found myself taking a long breath to keep from becoming lightheaded. The implications were staggering.

“Where?” Gaston asked.

Her gaze shifted to him. “Here.” She pointed to her right shoulder. “He was as far from me as you are now. However, my pistol was a piece designed for a lady’s hand. It shoots a small ball, and I had been careful not to use too much powder, though perhaps I did not use enough. He was drunk, though, and it made him drop a lamp and a bottle, and in the resulting chaos I was able to escape him. So it served my purpose.” She looked to me again. “He is now burned as well, along with part of the new London house.”

“We’re talking about this cousin of yours, correct?” Striker asked.

I found my voice. “Aye, our second cousin, Shane.”

Remorse settled over me. I told Sarah, “I should not have left you. I should have killed him. I should...”

A strong arm came around my shoulders and familiar fingers were on my lips. I turned and found myself trapped by intense green eyes.

“Stop,” Gaston whispered in French. “She is here. You are here. And it is selfish of me, but if you had killed him, we would never have met. Thus I am very pleased that you did not.”

His words tore the thickening mantle of melancholy asunder, and I felt caressed by a reassuring breeze. I kissed his fingertips and gently pulled them away. “Thank you.”

“He is correct,” Sarah said in French. “There is no need to have regret over what cannot be changed.”

Gaston stiffened as he realized –as I did – that she spoke French.

"I know," I said in English. "Yet I fear that one day we will truly rue that he did not die at one of our hands. If he is now wounded and scarred, he is an angry boar and the future a dense thicket we may not see him charge out of until damage is done. What relief will his death bring then, if yet another has fallen to his tusks before he is brought down?"

"That is why he must not know that I am here," she said. "Father swore he would not tell him..."

"Father swore he would protect you," I said.

"Aye, I know it," she sighed. "Sometimes, Will, I fear they are a beast with two heads: what one knows, the other does shortly."

"What was our father's response to your having to shoot Shane?" I asked.

She considered the table and toyed with a grease smudge with shaking fingers. "His response was the reason I decided to flee."

I captured her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "You might as well tell it all now."

She nodded and smiled weakly before taking another gulp of wine and composing herself again. When she spoke, it was directly to me, and I felt she had rehearsed her tale often during her voyage.

"I believe I mentioned in my letter that Shane was none too pleased," she began. "I do not know what was said betwixt Father and him, but Father decided it was best if Shane remained in London and oversaw the rebuilding of the house there. Father spent a good deal of his time there as well, and all was as it had been in many ways, until Elizabeth's wedding in June. In the chaos involved in that event, Shane asked to speak with me, alone. I took my friend Mary and my maid, and we went for a walk with him in the garden. Shane was accompanied by an acquaintance of his and his manservant. In due course, Shane maneuvered to get me alone, and the women I was with were too silly to realize they should intervene."

I frowned.

She shook her head. "Do not regard me so. I was carrying a dagger. So we talked, or rather he did. He pledged his love to me and said Father had abused his intent. He said he was confused and hurt by my lack of faith in him. In return, I told him nothing of my conversations with you. I did not attempt to justify my change of heart in any manner. This frustrated him no small amount. I flatly stated that it was not meant to be and that it would be best if we went on with our lives as friends. At which point, he grabbed my shoulders and attempted to shake me. I put the knife to his ribs and called for Mary and my maid. The knife brought so much hatred to his eyes it verged on madness, and I felt terror to my very core."

"I know," I said quietly.

"Aye, you alone do. I related the event to Father and he..." She sighed and looked distant. When she spoke again her words snapped with anger. "He interpreted Shane's actions as lending veracity to

Shane's claims that he had truly loved me. He did not think harshly of Shane at all for the matter and, to my horror, I believe it mended things between them."

I swore. "How can he be such a fool?"

Some of the tension left her, to be replaced by resignation. "I thought long on that on the voyage here. I have come to believe that Shane represents something to Father. It is not Shane himself, it is some promise or perhaps memory that Shane holds."

I nodded. "I have always thought that Shane is the son I was to be."

She shook her head. "I feel that perhaps Shane reminds Father of Shane's father. They were quite close by all accounts. I have wondered if they were quite close indeed?"

Her eyes flicked to Gaston and then Striker and Pete. Almost as one we caught her meaning.

The idea surprised me. It had never crossed my mind that my father and Shane's father might have been lovers: it was completely foreign to me. There was much to consider if it were true.

"I need time to mull that over," I said.

"I have mulled it over," she said. "At one point in my ruminations I wondered if Shane were indeed our father's son, but that idea..."

I was suddenly overcome with nausea, and the room swam for a moment. "Nay," I said. "Nay, Father knew about..."

Gaston's arm steadied me, and Sarah shook her head quickly.

"Nay!" she said. "I do not believe it true, I am merely saying I wondered at it; but Father's behavior during the time you had trouble with Shane belies that. He obviously allowed it, and I cannot believe he would allow such as that."

I was acutely aware of four sets of eyes upon us. I did not wish to meet them, but I forced myself to gaze upon their concerned faces. I resolved I could tell them if I could tell anyone.

"Shane and I were lovers in our youth," I said before I could change my mind. "He became... abusive toward me in later years, and that is the reason I fled my father's home. My father knew of it. He told me he allowed it because he thought it might put me off men."

Gaston kissed my cheek.

"Oh good Lord," Theodore sighed and downed his cup. He refilled it as he said, "That does indeed lend a great deal of perspective to the matter, and all matters related to it."

Agnes appeared confused.

Striker met my gaze and nodded with silent understanding.

Pete asked the question I had always dreaded from others if the matter were exposed. "YaDidnaKill'Im?"

I shook my head sadly. "Nay, I loved him, and I hoped he would change. I had not yet killed a man when I left. I have rued that Shane was not my first every day since then. Out of all the men I have killed, he is by far the most deserving."

"SometimesYaCannaKillTheOnesThatDeserveItMost," he said sadly.

"Nay, we cannot," I sighed. "Even now. Though, apparently my sister has nearly done it for me."

She shook her head with a small smile. "These last weeks I have wished that I aimed better or used a larger piece, but..." She shook her head again and went on with her tale:

"After the incident at the wedding, and Father's reaction, I no longer felt any would protect me. I was very careful when Shane arrived for Mother's funeral a month later. I took to carrying a pistol in my handbag and sleeping with it near my pillow. I also took to blocking the door with a chair as you had done. I was quite careful not to allow him to catch me alone for the fortnight he was in residence. I took perverse pleasure in shadowing Father about and not leaving the two of them alone, as I knew Shane would dare not do anything in Father's presence. But, whenever Father's back was turned, Shane would look at me as if I were a mouse and he the cat. I saw lust and hatred and little else in his eyes. Our aunt even remarked upon it and suggested I stay with them for a time. So I did. Father returned to London with Shane and the house sat empty. I suppose the servants either rejoiced or mourned.

"So I stayed with our aunt for a month, and then returned home when I was sure Shane was safely in London. It was... strange. With mother gone, and Elizabeth, and their servants, I was expected to be the mistress of the house and it was... most uncomfortable. But that is another matter. Your letter arrived at the house in the middle of October, along with the letters to Father and Rucker. As I was bored, and could no longer stand the house, and your letter spurred me to seek adventure in some small way, I decided to take the barouche to deliver the letters myself.

"So I delivered Master Rucker's letter to him, and we spent a delightful evening discussing your tales and descriptions. To my maid's utter dismay, I even spent the night there at his sister's home.

"Then I took Father's letter to him at the new house in London. It was there that I learned of his arrangement with the Earl of Whitlock and your proposed marriage."

She paused and met my gaze with a wry smile. "I do not know how you will perceive the matter: hopefully with amusement. Miss Barclay was due to sail in December. There were concerns regarding her relationship with her former suitor. Rumor of impropriety had surfaced, and well, Father was livid. I feel he would have stopped the entire affair if events had not taken place with Shane as they did. And for that, Will, I am truly sorry. Not that Father's next choice might have been any better."

"Wonderful," I sighed. "How did...?"

"Shane was at the London house," she sighed. "He wished to know why I was there. I said nothing. I do not know what Father might have told him, but my maid complained of spending the night at Rucker's to the other servants, and this of course got all around the house to Shane, along with the knowledge that I had delivered letters from you.

And thus Shane was apprised for the first time of my friendship with you. He leapt to a number of accurate conclusions as to the reason I had put him off, and he confronted Father and me over the matter at dinner. Father suggested I let them talk, and I retired."

She took a deep breath. "There was no chair that could be easily moved to the door. So I sat with the pistol in my lap and waited for the house to quiet. I dozed. I woke to find Shane standing by the bed, reeking of wine."

I gasped, as I knew that image well. Gaston took my hand. I squeezed his in return, grateful again for his presence. Then I took Sarah's again, as I could see she was lost in what had occurred.

She looked up at me and smiled sadly. "So I shot him. I did not think. I did not wait for him to speak. His eyes said all that needed to be said. I will never forget how he looked at me in that moment. It will haunt me."

"I hit him in the shoulder, as I said," she continued with renewed calm. "He had a lamp in one hand and bottle in the other, and he dropped both and dove for me. I threw myself onto the floor. I was tangled in the sheets. By the time I freed myself and escaped out the door, the room was in flames and he was screaming.

"All was chaos for a time, as the fire was put out and a surgeon summoned and the like. My room was gutted. They had put Shane in Father's room. He was not burned as badly as I had thought from what I had seen as I ran. He will be scarred, though, if he still lives. Despite the bullet wound and the burns, the physician had high hopes. I realized that, as you have noted, if he had been mean before, he will be rabid now.

"Father was very distraught. When he at last caught sight of me, he grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me until I thought my neck would break, all the while yelling, "Why?" over and over again. When I was finally able to speak, I told him I had thought Shane would harm me. Father said that was a foolish notion that you had placed in my head. He was... not himself, or perhaps he was truly himself and this is the side of him I had not chosen to see."

She was weeping. I slid my chair closer and held her until the quiet sobs subsided.

Over her head, Gaston met my gaze with a grim smile of reassurance. Theodore was downing another cup of wine. Pete was frowning at Sarah, and Striker was studying the table with concern. Agnes was weeping in sympathy.

I released Sarah when her weeping stopped. She composed herself and pawed tears from her eyes before awarding us all a sad smile.

"That is the part of it that... hurt the most," she said.

I nodded. "The night I left, as I stood watching Goliath's body burn, I realized that if burning a horse in the yard beyond his study did not get his attention, nothing would. I knew then I would never be loved in that house. I think I always held out hope before. But all hope died for me

that night. I realized Shane would not change, and Father would never care, and Mother never had."

"I thought Father loved me," she said. "But he does not. Of all of us, Shane is the only one he has ever cared for: thus my ruminations on the cause of that."

She shook her head again and squared her shoulders. "I fled from him, and knowing not where else to go, I went to our uncle's, as it was closer than our aunt's. Uncle Cedric was quite distraught over events, in the proper fashion, as in he was very alarmed that I had been in danger. He went to speak with Father. They quarreled, apparently, and Uncle Cedric returned with a blackened eye and the news that he was going to see me off to safety. I told him I wished to come here and he readily agreed. And since there had been talk of arranging a proper escort for Miss Barclay, it was decided that all of us should travel together. I extended an invitation to Mister Rucker, and he accepted.

"So, we boarded a ship for the Massachusetts colony ten days later... And had a miserable crossing of the sea, and then another cold and stormy trip down the coast, until we at last reached the tropical region. Most of us spent the voyages in abject sea sickness. Rucker swears he will never board another vessel. Miss Barclay swears she will only board another to get home, which she wishes to do as soon as possible."

"And how is Miss Barclay?" I asked.

Sarah shook her head sadly. "Angry, Will. She is filled with such anger. She steams with it like a kettle. She snaps at everyone. She even strikes her maid, poor girl."

"Lovely," I sighed.

"Aye," Sarah said, "on a good day she would make our mother appear endearing in comparison."

Sarah laughed at the expression on my face.

"Must I marry her?" I asked.

She nodded sadly. "If you wish to retain any standing with Father whatsoever."

Theodore was studying his wine cup with grim regard and did not look up to meet my gaze.

Gaston was equally contemplative.

"YaDoNaNeedYurFather'sMoney." Pete said.

"Nay," I sighed, "but... there are other things held in the balance."

I turned back to Sarah. "I will at least meet the witch. Where are Uncle Cedric and Rucker?"

"They went to see a plantation today."

"Ithaca?" I asked.

She shook her head. "A planter offered them a tour of his fully developed one. Uncle has decided that he will remain here to care for me, as we were not sure when or if you would return. To that end, he has developed an interest in plantations."

"Do you feel you will be here for a long time?" I asked.

She nodded. "Do you see how I can return, without...?"

I could not, and wondered at my question. "Nay. So whatever shall you do?"

"I do not know," she said with a weary shrug. "Uncle speaks of my marrying, but I feel the eligible men I might be interested in will already be taken here."

I could see the effort she put into not glancing at Striker. I put effort into suppressing a sigh.

"Surely not all," Theodore said.

"Perhaps," she sighed. "Either way, I would do something useful. I have little interest in becoming a planter's wife if I am to live as the ones I have seen so far. Though, perhaps if I am married and have babies I will be pleased to spend my time speaking of trouble with my servants and what lovely damask I have endeavored to secure for curtains." She frowned. "That was actually one of the reasons I was keen to marry Shane. I felt that if I were his wife, he and Father would continue to include me in their business dealings."

I thought it likely they would have, and I sighed again.

"There is no rush for you to marry," I said. "I am sure you might do whatever you wish here. There is money to order books and... if you wished to engage in some enterprise, I am sure it could be arranged."

I looked to Theodore; and he frowned, first at me and then at Sarah before nodding thoughtfully. "Aye, I would be willing to front such a matter if it were necessary," he said.

"Truly, thank you," Sarah said brightly. Then she dimmed a little. "But I have no money, and yours stems from Father and..."

"You will have money," Gaston said quickly. "That need not be a concern."

"Thank you," she breathed. "Well, what business is lucrative here?" she asked. "Other than sugar, as from what I have seen that requires far too much capital for an uncertain profit. I would imagine shipping is very much in demand."

I happened to glance across the table and find Striker slack-jawed and staring at her. I smiled and turned back to Sarah.

"That and fleecing buccaneers," I said. "Several members of our cabal have suggested an interest in developing a shipping concern. Roving does not occupy the entire year, or hold the promise it once did. I am sure Theodore and Striker can give you copious information on what might be needed or desired. Perhaps you could even serve as our agent in town for such matters. And maybe those of us who own the *Virgin Queen* should form a company."

"That is an excellent idea," Theodore said.

"Aye," Striker said with awe. "That would meet many ends."

Gaston was nodding agreeably, but Pete was frowning and studying his wine cup.

"It would allow all of us to stay at sea," I added for his benefit.

Pete shrugged at that.

I looked to Agnes, who, though she was directly across the table

from me, I had forgotten was present. She was gazing at my sister with lovestruck eyes. I sighed.

"Might I live here?" Sarah said. "I do not wish to share a house with Miss Barclay."

"I would be well with that," I said. "However, I am not sure if I wish to share a dwelling with her either... if I do marry her."

"Oh Lord," Theodore sighed. "I should tell you now, I suppose. Miss Barclay has emphatically stated to me that she will not share a roof with Gaston, and that she expects you to live with her."

I shook my head.

Theodore rubbed his temples. "I know, I know..."

"We will build another house for all of us," Gaston said. "The Bride can live here until a suitable house can be built at Ithaca."

"She will not find that acceptable," Theodore said doggedly.

"Then I will not find her acceptable," I said.

"Will..." Sarah said with concern.

"I know what is at stake," I told her. "I will not live a lie."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"So," I said, "let us return to the King's House so that I might meet the woman and parley. I would know the result sooner rather than later."

"I suggest you meet with her alone," Theodore said. "Truly."

"I will wait outside," Gaston said and stood.

"Will you require us?" Striker asked.

"Nay, I think not, and as Theodore has already introduced me to her Cerberus, I feel I shall be able to enter the gates of Hell alone. Perhaps you should all discuss future plans."

Sarah stood and embraced me before we left.

"I never want to be our father," I whispered.

"It would be impossible," she whispered back.

"Be careful where you tread with Striker," I said even more quietly.

"Pete is a formidable opponent and will not take kindly to you."

She tensed in my arms. "I will remember that."

She was sober when I released her.

Gaston and I left them to discuss what they would. We were silent for a block.

"Do you wish to see her?" I asked.

He snorted. "From the description of others, non. Yet... If there is any chance of maintaining your inheritance, I would have you take it. There is a chance she will die here within the year. There is also a chance she will die in childbirth. And if she does not, we can send her back to England and keep any issue. But I will not ask you to do a thing you might be loathe to do."

"I will not share her bed for anything other than sowing my seed," I said. "I will not have you put out so that I must steal away at night to find you. I will not live in that manner."

"I do not wish that, either," he sighed. "And I will take no pleasure in

puppies if I am not allowed to hold them. I will honor whatever decision you feel you must make.”

My heart was racing and I felt my Horse ready to bolt, yet he was so very calm.

“Is that you talking, or your Horse?” I asked quietly.

He frowned. We had had little cause to speak of his Horse for weeks.

“My Horse insists we do not tell her not to drink the water, and that she definitely must live at the plantation and eat the food there.”

I chuckled. “I see.”

“You make a very good point, though,” he said solemnly. “I cannot guarantee how I will react if you marry her. I feel much calmer over this bride than I did about the Brisket, even sight unseen, because I know you will not favor her in any way, and she will not favor you. And, of course, now I know you to be truly mine and have no doubts over that matter.”

“Yet, there is still much that will be assumed and implied by others that we must face.”

“Oui,” he sighed, “For my Horse, it will be as if we wade through nettles.”

“I think it likely we will not,” I said carefully, “and how will your Horse feel on that?”

He considered me thoughtfully. “My Horse cares little for titles, other than it would see you have what is due you.”

I frowned. “You are not giving me any great incentive to say yes. I can sire puppies elsewhere.”

He stopped and faced me. His eyes were kind. “Your father thinks you will fail in this. It is likely he picked the most miserable harridan he could in order to insure it.”

My breath caught as I realized he was indeed correct. I swore.

He smiled sadly. “Marry her, and we will let the tropics kill her, and then we will find another bride.”

“All right, but it will be on my terms.”

He nodded somberly. “If it is not, she will probably anger the Horse such that I will kill her.”

“And we will no longer be welcome on English soil,” I said with a sad smile.

He shrugged. “Perhaps the Dutch will take us.”

“The Spanish surely will not,” I teased.

I kissed him deeply and he returned it in kind.

We said no more as we finished the distance to the King’s House. Gaston kissed me one last time and stayed across the street at the wherry landing. I walked to my supposed doom alone in body, but feeling well-loved in spirit. And I did not fear the outcome of whatever might occur.

Coswold was no more pleased to lay eyes on me this time than he had been before.

“I will meet with your mistress now, alone,” I told him.

"Very good, my Lord," he said with barely-disguised disdain. "Her guests have departed. If you will wait in the dining hall, I will announce you."

As he led me to the dining hall I wondered why I would not wait in the parlor, and then I saw that a maid was cleaning that room: clearing many little China cups and trays of sweetmeats. And so I waited in the dining room, peering out a window at a lovely little garden tucked in on the side of the house. It reminded me of the garden at Christine's, and here I was to meet another prospective bride, and yet this time I was locked away from the fragrance and beauty of it. I snorted with amusement at the turns my mind is prone to take.

I seemed to stand there for quite a time, and I thought it likely she was making me wait. Then at last the door opened and in she walked. We stared at one another with guarded curiosity.

She was indeed lovely: a fine figure nipped into the tight stays and bodice of a regal blue gown; voluminous coils of honey-brown hair pinned atop her head; hazel eyes behind long lashes; delicate though somewhat pinched features; and soft white skin gracing her long neck and arms.

She curtsied. "Lord Marsdale."

I bowed. "Miss Barclay."

"You are not as I expected," she said.

Her voice, though pitched a little high for my liking, would have been as melodious as her image if it had been devoid of anger. As it was, every word seemed a kitten's snarl.

"And what did you expect?" I asked with amusement.

"Someone less manly, perhaps," she said with challenge.

I smirked. "The lady is burdened by incorrect assumptions about sodomites. We are not all effete; you only see the ones who are."

She sniffed and tossed her head prettily. "I suppose."

"Shall we sit?" I pulled a chair from the table for her.

She gave a brief incline of her head and accepted the chair. As I pushed her chair in, I noted she had quite the inviting décolletage, and that she smelled faintly of rum along with powder and the usual feminine musk.

I sat opposite her. "I understand you are no more enamored of this marriage than I am. I wish to apologize for your having to sail halfway around the world to meet with me on the matter, and I am sincerely sorry that my family's recent troubles forced such a voyage upon you in haste."

She frowned, and I could tell that she did not know precisely of what I spoke.

"Your sister made mention of her having to leave in haste," she said carefully.

I smiled. "Aye, there was a bit of trouble involving our cousin."

"Mister Jacob Shane?" She appeared to throw the name out to see my reaction.

I gave her little. "That would be the one."

"I have met him," she said.

"Truly? I am sure he was charming," I said calmly.

Her eyes narrowed. "He spoke of you when he heard we were betrothed."

I wondered if he were the one who told her I was a sodomite.

I smirked. "I am sure he said nothing kind, and there is a great deal I could say of him in the same vein."

This did surprise her, but she recovered quickly.

"Why would he have anything to do with your sister's leaving England in such haste?" she asked.

"He endeavored to secure his place in my father's house by marrying her," I said drolly. "After learning more of his nature, she spurned him. He was quite put out, and he broke into her room while drunk with intent to harm her. She shot him. Unfortunately, he still lived when you sailed."

Her eyes had widened considerably. "That explains a great deal. If true."

I chuckled. "Ask my Uncle. But we digress. Let us now be succinct with our expectations and conditions, so that we might determine if this marriage will take place or not, and be done with it one way or another."

She snorted incredulously. "Or what? If we cannot reach an agreement, you will not marry me? Whatever will your father say?"

"If I choose not to marry you, I do not care what my father says."

"You think highly of your place in the order of things," she said with smug amusement.

"Nay, I know if I thwart my father on this, it is likely he will disinherit me. I care not. I would like to retain my title and eventually claim his, but not if it involves living in misery."

She was quite stunned. "You jest," she breathed.

"Nay, nor do I bluff. So let us see if we can reach agreeable terms. First, in the matter of offspring. Any children will remain with me on Jamaica and I shall be the sole arbiter of how they are raised and instructed. Once you have produced them – and by them, I shall assume that, unless your health dictates otherwise, we will aim for two males – once they are birthed, you are free to return to England, and I care not what you do or who you sleep with."

She flushed. "My Lord, you are direct."

"Would you prefer I were circumspect?"

"Nay." She shook her head, but would not meet my gaze.

"Do you take issue with my stipulation that the children shall remain in my keeping?" I asked.

"Nay," she said quietly. "I rather imagine they will be seen to by governesses no matter where they are. I do not have my heart set on coddling them or any such thing. If we are agreeing to terms, I will stipulate that you provide an adequate wet nurse."

I was not sure how that would be arranged on Jamaica when women

were in such short supply, but I was not going to allow it to slow the proceedings down.

"Agreed," I said. "Second, there will be a house built for you at the plantation, Ithaca."

She held up her hand. "I will not share it with your paramour."

It was my turn to snort. "Lady, I will not quibble with you over titles; you may call him what you like. But his name is Gaston, and I will reside with him. If you do not wish to share our house, then I will ensconce you someplace convenient enough for me to do my conjugal duties in the name of producing progeny. And rest assured, we will not be in port for most of the year."

She was livid. "Nay, sir, that is not acceptable."

I shrugged and stood. "Then we are done here. I will make arrangements for your return voyage."

The anger fled her and she regarded me with astonishment. "You would truly abandon your title over this?"

"Aye," I said amicably.

She took several deep breaths and seemed to have great difficulty deciding whether to continue staring at me or to pull her gaze away: her eyes jerked about in her sockets ever so slightly for a few moments. At last she did look at the table.

"Wait," she breathed.

I took some pity on her. "I do not stipulate that I will remain with him as an affront to you. It is simply that he is my partner and I love him dearly and I will not live without him. I put him before all things, including my title."

"So," she nearly whispered, "I might have my own home, and you will visit but live elsewhere with him while in port, or be at sea?"

"Aye."

"I can live with that," she said at last.

I returned to my seat.

She looked up to meet my gaze again. "I will not have him at my table, though, or about me in any fashion."

"He wants nothing to do with you, either," I said with some amusement.

She nodded. "Is this plantation far from town? I would like to be able to entertain on occasion."

I thought of all the little tea cups and the plantation wives with houses in town. I sighed.

"We will see that you have a proper house in town," I assured her. "It must be built, though."

She nodded. "Do you have other stipulations?"

I shrugged. "None that I can think of. If something else should arise, let us agree to discuss it before assuming the other party will not be cooperative."

"I will agree to that," she said with surprising sincerity. "When do you wish to marry?"

"I suppose... tomorrow."

Her eyes widened again, only to narrow quickly into a glare. "Why?"

"I sail in three days. I will be gone for several months."

She considered that with a speculative frown.

"It is unlikely I will become pregnant in a day or two," she said calmly. "Can you not wait to disappear until after we are sure I am with child: in order to avoid any wasted time in the endeavor?"

I had to admit she was correct, but I did not see how we could forestall sailing, unless we did not sail at all, and that was not wise; Gaston would probably kill her if seasoning did not. And then I had it.

"I agree with the point you are making; however, I was not sure when or if you would arrive, and I made prior commitments. Besides, many sicken upon coming to the tropics. It is considered wise for one to season for a time. It would be best if we were sure of your health before getting you with child. There is no reason for you to be doubly miserable, or dead."

"Oh," she sighed, "I had not thought of that, but aye, the other ladies mentioned it."

"We will consummate the marriage, and if the... if God should happen to find favor with us, then so be it."

She nodded, but there was a cunning glint in her eye for a moment. "Will you make the arrangements?"

"Aye."

"Then please send someone around to apprise me of the time, and I will see you on the morrow." She pushed her chair back and stood before I could assist her.

I nodded. "Aye."

And then she was gone in a swirl of blue satin.

I let myself out and went to find Gaston. He was standing near the place where we parted, watching the activity on the docks.

"I will wed her on the morrow," I said.

He blinked with surprise. "She is more agreeable than we were led to believe."

"Nay, but apparently she needs this marriage more than I do." I relayed all that had occurred as we walked to our house.

When I finished, Gaston said, "Let us hope the Gods are not mocking us."

Forty

Wherein Trouble Looms Before Us

Theodore was delighted at the news of the impending nuptials; everyone else was surprised. However, our barrister was the first to question it.

“Why, Will?” he asked. “Did you agree to her demands?”

“Nay, I made stipulations of my own: to wit, that any offspring produced will stay in my keeping, and secondly, that I will not share a house with her.”

“And she agreed to this?” he asked.

I smiled. “Aye, once I made it clear I would walk away from my title over the matter. Though she did not say so, I feel she has more to lose than I if the marriage does not take place.”

“Amazing,” Theodore sighed and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

I wondered if he had continued drinking wine in my absence at the same rate he had consumed it while Sarah told her tale.

“Will you be able to assist me in making the necessary arrangements at the church?” I asked. “I wish to be married on the morrow.”

“Of course, of course,” he said. “Let us bring the matter to conclusion. Will you accompany me there now? The clergy are most likely dining, but as a wedding brings coin, I am sure they will be happy to see us.”

Gaston chose to remain with Sarah, and as I did not want her to remain there with only Pete and Striker, I was pleased in this.

“I am honored by you,” Theodore said thoughtfully as we began our short journey to the church. “And I now understand your hatred of your

father.”

“Would you call it hatred?” I shrugged. “He avows he does not hate me, he has merely been disappointed in me and disliked my behavior: long before I grew old enough to know who or what I favored, by the way. The only time he ever showed any interest in me at all was when I returned home after ten years of proving I could do without him, his money, or his name. He seemed to think that proved something of my character, and I suppose it does.”

“This cousin of yours: he may not inherit the title... while you live,” Theodore sighed as he answered his own question. “You do believe your father sent you here to be rid of you.”

I thought on it. “I did not wish to at first, but as time has passed and I have viewed matters more clearly, or perhaps rather from a different perspective, what was once merely a cynical and passing thought has become a thing I put faith in, aye.”

“What brought about your change in perspective?” he asked.

“Experiencing love, or rather, experiencing being loved by another. It was a thing I thought I knew, but prior to Gaston I truly knew nothing of it.”

“You know you will never inherit,” he said sadly.

It was not a question, and yet I was compelled to consider an answer. He was correct: it was not a question, despite all hope Gaston might hold, it was a thing I had long known.

“Nay, I will not.”

“Then why...?” he asked.

“Because Gaston places value upon it, and because, as you have always been quick to note, my title and the promise of my future inheritance is coin in many realms. And in truth, there are times when I still hold some forlorn hope that... my damned father might find value in me someday.”

That last had been a thing it pained me to admit, and I found myself wrought with emotion. I stopped and turned to watch what I could see of the sunset over the buildings.

Theodore put a clumsy arm on my shoulder and patted me self-consciously. I chuckled mirthlessly.

“Might I ask, were you loved as a child?” I asked.

“Aye, I believe I was,” he said. “I am the oldest son of four children. My father was a banker, and he was very proud to send me to the university. My mother was loving, and though we had servants, she always cared for us. They are dead now, along with my brother. My sisters married well and have comfortable lives. I would not have remained here if my parents had not passed before I left England.”

“You are a very lucky man,” I said, “and a tribute to your parents.”

He smiled. “They would be pleased to hear you say so, as I am. Thank you. And aye, I know I have been blessed with good fortune. But I feel the most important lesson I learned from them was that one must work for anything one values.”

"Ah, I have learned that is very true," I sighed. "That is the problem with men such as my father; they truly need work at nothing to have more than almost all others. And then they have ambition which spurs them higher still, to stand upon the backs of others and scabble at one another. They are wolves: all hunger and teeth. I thank the Gods I am not like them; though, I labored from the misconception over much of my life that I should have been, that I was lacking in some capacity because I was not as they are. Gaston put that to rights, too."

"I see even more why you love him," he said thoughtfully. "You have a good soul, and someone must have done well with you in your youth, as you grew to be a good man despite your father," he said kindly.

"Aye, the Mister Rucker that arrived with my sister can be blamed for much of it. He was my tutor, and he filled my head with many a liberal thought. My father would have hanged him if he had known half of what Rucker taught me."

Theodore chuckled. "I will now regard the man in a different light."

A strange new thought occurred to me. "I will have him teach my children. They will not be raised by wolves. I would rather they were raised as you were."

He smiled. "I feel you will need to keep them from their dam if it is to be Miss Barclay."

"She vows she wants little to do with them and... Damn, she requested I provide a wet nurse. Is that possible here with women so scarce?"

"It can be arranged." He sighed and shrugged. "Many now turn to Negresses."

"I take no issue with that."

"I did not think you would." He smiled and began to steer me toward the church again.

The good pastor was indeed pleased to see us despite the hour. He expressed great honor in being able to perform my ceremony in the afternoon. I made the necessary donation, and then he expressed concern over not having met me before. Theodore explained that I was a buccaneer as well as a Lord, and the man quickly decided to keep the money and ask for nothing more.

I left Theodore at his home, and walked alone to mine. I was plagued by visions of little blond tots sitting at desks listening with rapt attention to Rucker's recounting of Aesop's fables.

Upon entering the house, I was greeted by the very real vision of Gaston sitting on one side of the table regarding Striker and Sarah with alarm. My friend and sister were writing on the wall with charcoal: lists and notes of cargos and costs and things I could not decipher. Agnes was sitting at the other end of the table sketching. Other than Gaston, none seemed to take note of my entrance.

I sat next to him at the table and poured myself a cup of wine.

"The wedding is set for tomorrow afternoon," I said quietly in French.

"Your sister is a wolf," Gaston whispered back.

"I am not surprised, or perhaps I am. How do you mean?" I asked.

"She is a kind soul; but to her, sheep are to be eaten, not shepherded."

"Ah," I sighed, "she did not receive Rucker's liberal instruction as I did, nor has she traveled and seen other than her own kind. She has learned at my father's knee."

I looked about. "Where is Pete?"

Gaston shook his head sadly. "He is displeased and playing with the dogs. I would be with him, but I thought it best not to leave them alone."

I watched Striker and Sarah argue over the costs associated with a voyage to Boston, Striker from the standpoint of pessimism and knowing how much free men required to make such a voyage, and Sarah from the cynical ground of profit verses unnecessary expense. Gaston was correct: Sarah was a wolf in that regard. But I found what I saw and not what I heard to be of far graver import. Despite arguing, or perhaps because of it, Striker and Sarah were deeply smitten with one another.

"This is a disaster in the making," I muttered.

"Oui," Gaston breathed.

He turned to me with a curious look. "Is this how we first appeared to others?"

A smile spread across my lips as I realized he was right. "Oui, I think so."

"Will, someone is going to be hurt," he said seriously.

That tore the smile away. I sighed. "Oui. We must mitigate what we can."

"I am going to play with puppies now," he said carefully.

"I am going to prize Sarah out of here and return her to the King's House."

"That would be wise." He slipped into the back room.

I cleared my throat loudly. When that did not get their attention, I flung my empty cup at Striker, who caught it.

"What?" he asked.

"I need to return Sarah to the King's House, and inform Miss Barclay's people as to the time of the ceremony tomorrow."

"Oh," Sarah said, and sighed heavily. She turned away and busied herself cleaning charcoal from her fingers.

Striker appeared crestfallen.

I mouthed to him, "Pete."

His eyes widened and he cast about.

I pointed at the next room.

He swore silently.

I mouthed, "I love you as a brother."

He frowned and turned to Sarah, who was now admiring Agnes' handiwork. "Excuse us, ladies," he said, and then he was hauling me to my feet and out the front door.

"Will..." he gasped once the door was closed behind us.

I chuckled. "I know. I am not blind. If another were not involved I would be pleased to have you court her, as I would be honored to have you as a brother-in-law if she would accept you."

He stared at me with incredulity and whispered with such force he might as well not have bothered trying to keep his voice down. "Truly. Will, I'm a pirate. She's an Earl's daughter."

I shook my head. "My father is a bastard by design and you are an honest man in your own way. I feel you could honor her intelligence and..."

"My God, Will, she is smart and she knows... and, and, she's bloody beautiful. Damn it, Will, and... And good God, Pete is going to fucking kill me."

He punched the wall with frustration.

I winced in sympathy. "He will if you do not deal with the matter now. Go and speak with him. Gaston and I will take Sarah to the King's House."

He grabbed my shoulders. "Truly, if she would have me I could marry her?"

"I do not see why not. I am sure my father would have much to say on the matter, but I do not know if she will put any stock in that. I will talk to her and determine her thoughts. Of course, if my father is totally displeased, he could try and have her widowed or force her to annul the marriage but..." I shrugged.

He had released me and was now staring at the door with his arms tightly crossed as if he embraced himself.

"I want this, Will," he whispered. "Pete has to understand."

"You will have to make him. Then he will have to choose between staying with you while you are married, or leaving you to her."

"I don't want to lose him," he whispered.

I shook my head. "Choose what is most important to you."

He stood there indecisively for a moment, and then turned and hopped over the gate beside the house to go to the back door.

I went in the front door. Sarah was alone in the room, perusing Agnes' sketchbook.

I heard Striker enter through the back door and saying cheerily, "Well, it looks like we might have an agent to put the Bard's plans into action while we rove."

Sarah looked up and met my gaze. Her smile was sad, and she turned Agnes' sketchbook toward me to display a number of quick sketches of herself.

I sighed and asked quietly, "Where is Agnes?"

"She went to fetch a few things," she whispered in return. "She wishes to spend the night at the King's House with me."

I shook my head. "You might not realize, but..."

She shook her head. "I am not blind. I will endeavor not to hurt her feelings. I am already causing enough trouble elsewhere."

She turned the page in the book to reveal a beautiful portrait of a

very pensive Pete.

"I am sorry," she said. "I did not mean... It is just... And I would not have thought he would be... as he is with me... but..."

"I know," I said. "He is as smitten with you as you appear to be with him."

Her breathe caught at that and hope suffused her features. "Truly?"

I sighed and was nearly overcome with the urge to pound my head against a wall.

"It is complicated," I said calmly. "There..."

Agnes came skipping down the stairs before I could say more. She paused upon seeing me.

"Are you ready?" I asked her pleasantly.

She nodded, and Sarah did as well.

I stepped past Agnes to the passage to the back room, and found the three of them silent and sitting with their backs to separate walls. Gaston looked up at me with a sad and resigned sigh and a large puppy cradled in his arms; Pete was a seething pool of anger surrounded by sleeping dogs; and Striker sat alone, staring at the ceiling with a pained and frustrated expression.

"I am going to escort the ladies to the King's House. Do you wish to accompany me?" I asked Gaston.

He nodded solemnly and deposited his burden near the others.

Neither Striker nor Pete looked at us as we left.

Sarah fell in step beside me, with Gaston and Agnes behind us. I was not sure what I would say to Sarah, but thankfully she relieved me of that concern as soon as we were past the front door.

"I did not mean for things to progress as they did," she said quickly, before continuing in a more thoughtful manner. "I do not know if I explained much of... It matters not. I will explain now. Prior to Shane's wooing me, I thought I would be a spinster. I felt I would be content with books and what little business Father allowed me to do. I would stay in the manor, and, as I thought it unlikely you would return alive, I was sure Father would one day pass, and Shane would be his heir perhaps and someday marry, and I would be this curious figure living in that house until I died. There were times when such thoughts made me quite sad, but for the most part, I did not choose to dwell upon them. I told myself I did not wish to marry, as I did not have any interest in living that sort of life. But in truth, it was merely because I felt no man would want me as I am, and I was determined I would not become that which they did want for a wife even if I could.

"And then Shane courted me and awakened all those womanly desires." She sighed.

She continued after a pause. "I have spent a great deal of my life ruminating on all manner of things; and as you well know, a sea voyage is a particularly fertile time for rumination. And so, in the figurative wake of the events of that night, I spent a great deal of our journey here watching the literal wake of our passing and thinking. I came to several

conclusions: the first being that Father's expectation would no longer be the arbiter of my fate; the second being that here, where women are somewhat rarer flowers, I might be a desirable bud and not just a pale bloom in a busy arrangement; and the third being that I should cease being a dormouse and have a little ambition about those things I desired."

She stopped and turned to me. "That is why I was initially flirtatious with Mister Striker. In truth, Will, based upon what you said in your letter I did not think he would respond as he did."

I chuckled sadly. "Striker has been with Pete for over ten years, but it is happenstance that drew them together, not mutual lust. Striker favors women quite heartily. He had a wife and child once when he was very young. They died before he came here. He wishes to have children again, now that he is a man and no longer a boy. For the most part he ignores such longings, I feel, because... Well because Pete hates women and Pete is an excellent matelot for a man with Striker's life, and because he loves Pete. But... Talk of my marrying and producing children has stirred such things within him again, and then you appeared..."

"Oh Lord," she sighed.

"Are you truly enamored with him, or is it just that he is an attractive man who showed you attention?"

This startled her. "Nay." She gave a sad little bark of laughter. "I am quite serious in my intentions, whatever they might be... Aye, I am drawn to dark-haired men and he is quite handsome. And aye, it is heady to have a man pay me heed. But... I became sincerely enamored with him when he expressed interest in my knowledge of business and was willing to discuss such things with me. And then, of course, there is the admiration you have shown him, that leads me to believe my consideration of him would be well-founded."

"It is," I said. "I would be proud to have him as a brother-in-law, truly; but there is the complication of Pete. If I had known you possessed such goals, and had the opportunity to give you counsel on the matter beforehand, I would have advised you to court Pete: not to woo him for love, but to woo him into giving his blessing to the other. As it stands now, Pete is already angry and I feel Striker will have to choose between his matelot and having a future he yearns for."

"It has all happened so fast," she said sadly. "I would not hurt anyone or divide them."

"Aye," I sighed, "but it has been long in the making. I love them as brothers, and I would have neither of them hurt, but I... feel strongly that a man, or a woman, should follow his or her heart. Striker must find his course, and you must find yours. I feel Pete already has his, but it is... damn. It leads another astray, perhaps, or keeps them from the path that might bring the most happiness."

I hazarded a look at Gaston, as my words had found guilt in my heart. He smiled reassuringly and it was as if he read my mind yet

again.

"I have found my course," he said quietly.

Sarah was regarding us curiously.

He looked to her. "I do not favor men, but as the sex of my lover is the least aspect of concern in my finding one who will accept me and who I can love, I am happy to take your brother in the form the Gods saw fit to deliver him in."

I kissed him lightly and whispered, "Thank you."

The shadow at his side made a small noise, and I realized we still had Agnes with us.

She pawed a tear from her eye and said, "That is so romantic." Then she glanced at my sister. "It all is."

"Agnes," I said kindly, "someday you will find the one you seek."

She nodded, but I did not think she believed me.

We finished our way to the King's House and bid the women goodnight. We learned Uncle Cedric and Rucker were staying at the plantation they had been invited to tour. I informed Coswold as to the time of the nuptials, and arranged that a messenger should be sent first thing in the morning to fetch my uncle.

Then Gaston and I were at last alone. We returned as we had come, avoiding the drunken buccaneers thronging Thames and silently slipping through alleys and side streets. I was pleased we were alone, yet I did not know what I wished to say. He seemed likewise intent on reaching our goal.

As we came in sight of the house, I put a hand on his shoulder and drew him into a shadow. He regarded me expectantly.

"I wanted a moment alone before we step into... whatever..." I sighed.

He embraced me and whispered, "I do not know what I wish to say, I only know what I wish to do."

He did not seem to be hard between us.

"And what is that?" I asked with sincere curiosity.

"Hold you. I am sure the other will occur too, but first I wish to hold you."

I was content with that, and so we stood for a time and listened to the city around us. There was gunfire on Thames which quickly became the sounds of a good-sized fight spilling from a tavern. In the house we leaned against, a woman was singing a lullaby.

"Is she lovely?" he asked.

"Who?" I murmured.

"The Bride," he said with amusement.

I frowned. "You would find her form pleasing, but there is little of merit within that vessel. But perhaps... She apparently heard much of me from Shane, and perhaps she was unfairly prejudiced against me. I would at least have an amicable truce with the woman. I feel I should strive for that, though little more."

"She has met the Damn Cousin?" he asked with a touch of anger.

I shrugged. "Aye, or so she claims."

"And you truly feel she needs the marriage such that she will not trouble us?"

I sighed. "I feel that is so, and of more import, I feel we have the high ground from which to negotiate. Though the end result might be that I never return to England, which is a thing I will not find sorrow in."

After a moment, Gaston said, "I do not feel Pete will attempt to harm either of them."

"That is good to hear. Why?" I asked.

"He is more sad than angry. He saw what we all did. He wishes for Striker to be happy."

"Perhaps something amicable can be achieved there as well," I said with hope.

"Perhaps," he sighed with little conviction. "I do not wish to meet the Bride, but I would at least see her from a distance."

"She does not wish to meet you, either." I held him tighter. "How are you feeling?"

"That this is a bothersome step in achieving a wanted goal." He sighed. "The Horse wishes to confront her and explain that you are mine and she is nothing. It does not wish to kill her, though. It just wishes for her to know her place."

"I find that understandable," I said. "It would bring an end to the affair, but it is understandable. Please assure the Horse I have done much to make her aware of her lack of importance and I will continue to do so."

He chuckled softly in my ear and then kissed me upon it.

"You were correct," he sighed. "It would have been best if you had been able to counsel your sister to court Pete first. I know I would like the Bride to acknowledge me."

"And Pete, being all Horse, oui..." I sighed. "Perhaps..."

He shook his head. "It is as you said, now too late. Striker must choose."

"I refuse to give up hope."

"That is one of the things I love about you," he sighed.

My manhood had been stirring at his proximity for a time, and at last I felt an answer in his. We reluctantly left our shadow and approached the house. To our surprise, we found it empty save for the dogs. Neither of us thought that a good thing. It would have been best if we had found our wolves here talking, but perhaps that was too much to hope for. I prayed they were both well and together.

And so we miraculously had all the privacy we could crave for this night before my wedding. We made good use of it, and wrung each other dry many times over. I did not complain when he left me well-marked. I did not care what she might think. I wanted every facet of his being to know that come what may, I was his.

We woke in the morning to a polite rapping on our door. Though we reached for weapons by reflex, neither of us was alarmed. It was

Agnes. She had arrived with my sister. We grudgingly climbed out of our hammock and into our clothes. As we walked downstairs, we were greeted by the somewhat heavenly morning odor of fried fish and plantains. Sarah and Agnes grinned at us from the table, which was set with plates and food.

I was about to offer them proper greeting when I saw a gruff-looking man of middle age. He studied me warily, his hand not far from the worn hilt of a rapier. It would have done him little good as, behind me, Gaston had drawn a pistol.

"Who is this?" I asked my sister.

"This is Mister Ashland," she said tiredly. "He is in the employ of Miss Barclay. He felt we should be escorted here."

I thought that absurd, and then realized she was a young lady.

"You should be escorted while you are about town," I said. "A sober buccaneer would not be so foolish as to accost you, but the drunken ones are another matter and they can be about at any hour. And of course, there are the bondsmen and planters and all other manner of men. It is probably not safe for an attractive young lady who is unknown to the general populace to be unescorted. Once it is known who you are, few would be foolish enough to harm you, but for now, you might be threatened. And either way, you should be armed at all times."

"I do not have a piece," she said. "But I have seen Agnes'. I would have one similar to it."

"We will go by the gunsmith's, then," I said.

I looked about, Ashland was still standing there with a furrowed brow.

"I appreciate your diligence, Mister Ashland, but you may go now," I told him.

"Mister Williams said his niece should not go about unescorted. I would know who you are, sir," he said with no deference.

I snorted. "I am Lord Marsdale, your mistress' betrothed. I am also Miss Williams' brother."

He frowned at that, but then the trace of a smile played about his thin lips. "My Lord," he said and bowed properly. "Coswold mentioned that you were not as he expected."

I smiled. "I am as few people expect, Mister Ashland."

This brought a true smile to his lips, and I decided I liked him better than Coswold.

"I'll leave her in your care then, my Lord," he said. He bowed again and left.

I turned to frown at Sarah. "Did you not tell him who you came to see?"

She rolled her eyes with annoyance. "He was angry because I slipped away from him yesterday. He caught us preparing to leave this morning and spoke to me as if I were a child. I was quite annoyed with him. I told him he was welcome to escort me, but where I chose to go was my business and not his."

"How does he get on with Miss Barclay?" I asked.

Sarah shrugged. "She hates him and I feel it is mutual."

"So I take it his being in her employ is not her doing?" I asked.

Sarah shook her head and then she sighed. "Nay, he is Whitlock's man. I think it likely he was assigned to guard her so that she might reach you intact, as it were. I should not be angry with him for treating me as he does her, but it does rankle that he seems to think all young ladies are wayward."

"Oh," I said with amusement. "This relates to the trouble involving another suitor you spoke of last night."

"Aye, truly Will, if the situation with Shane had not upset everything as it did, I feel Father would have canceled the engagement in the name of her behavior."

"So it is possible I will not be bedding a maid this night?" I asked with amusement.

"It is possible," she admitted.

"It is normally acceptable for a man to refuse a bride on those grounds," I noted.

She shrugged.

"I am confused," I said, and glanced to Gaston, who was frowning as I was. "What is Father's goal in this? He demands I marry the woman and threatens my inheritance, and then sends me a bride he was considering rejecting, and whom I have every right to reject."

"I do not know, Will," Sarah said with a frown. "But in looking at it as you are now, I see that there does seem to be something amiss."

"I still contend your father wishes for you to fail," Gaston said as he took a seat at the table.

"Elizabeth is with child, or was when I left England," Sarah said.

I had to think to recall who Elizabeth was and why that might be important.

"Elizabeth is our sister," I explained in response to Gaston's and Agnes' frowns. "If it is a male child, it would theoretically be next in line for the title if I were dead."

"Can he not adopt the Damn Cousin?" Gaston asked.

"I have often wondered why he has not," I sighed.

"He might if..." Sarah stopped her words with a sigh and bit her lip. I regarded her with curiosity. "If I were dead?"

"People have often asked if you still lived," she said with a perplexed mien. "And Father has sometimes said he did not know, but I remember one occasion where Uncle contradicted him in public and said he had received a letter from you. Father immediately spoke of how you were off studying art or some such thing."

"That is interesting," I said. "Uncle Cedric told me of Father saying such things, but he did not tell me the context, and he attempted to lead me to believe Father had high hopes I was doing well."

"Well, Father told that kind of tale often enough after that," she said. "People still asked of you on occasion. And... well, there were

rumors all about that you favored men. I believe Shane might have been responsible for most of them. So it is assumed by many – and I know this from speaking to a number of young women at various balls – that you were off in France or elsewhere living the life of a libertine and that you would return someday and settle down.”

It began to become clear for me. I began to pace as I followed the meandering path of my thoughts.

“So Father could not claim me dead and adopt Shane if I was still alive and others expected me to return. And as he did not know anything of my whereabouts, he could do little to mitigate the state of limbo I left him in. And then I returned, and others heard of it. And now he has a son he must discredit or... Or I must die, in order for him to achieve his goals. And Shane’s marrying you would not have accomplished all he sought, since you are the second daughter and not the first, and Elizabeth was due to wed when I arrived. Which means Shane was not privy to Father’s plan when he courted you. And now...”

I looked to Sarah again. “I assume many knew of Miss Barclay’s unacceptable behavior or wishes.”

She nodded.

“And that is why Father would have broken the betrothal,” I said.

She nodded again.

I nodded. “But his hand was rushed, and so he sent her anyway. And he wins however it turns out, as long as I refuse her. He expected me to refuse even an acceptable bride. Then in the court of public opinion he could claim any number of things about my not being suitable and disinherit me. But, in sending an unsuitable bride, he is assured that I will refuse, and yet he takes more of a gamble with public opinion over the matter, which is why he would have refused her if events had not occurred as they did. Perhaps in this case, if I refuse her I will merely buy myself time and he will send another, one that has an impeccable history. And in the meantime, Miss Barclay will return to England and tell quite the tale of my unrestrained hedonism and sodomy, and thus strengthen his eventual case – if not make it for him despite her ill repute.”

“I must admit that sounds plausible,” Sarah said.

“He loses when you marry her,” Gaston said fiercely.

“This gambit, aye,” I said with wonder.

I went to sit with him and give him a quick kiss.

“I hate your father more than I hate her,” Gaston growled.

I knew it was his Horse talking. I took his face in my hands and his hard green eyes softened when they met mine.

“We will win this battle and take what we wish from the field,” I assured him.

This seemed to calm him somewhat, and his reason, or perhaps more accurately, his control, returned.

I carefully chose my words and whispered, “Who would you like to stay with during the wedding, and after, until I can return to you?”

He gave a quiet sniff of sad amusement. "Not Pete."

I chuckled. "Oui, I do not see that as good choice either."

He shrugged. "Cudro, or Liam and Otter, or Dickey and the Bard."

"All right, then," I said. "We will locate them and arrange things. Others need to be told, as it is. And we should find Striker and Pete anyway, and see how they are."

I looked to the girls. "We will go by the gunsmith's, and then we must locate some of our companions." I tried to think of what else needed to be accomplished before the wedding.

"Was someone sent for our uncle and Rucker?" I asked.

"Aye," Sarah said. "We thought that we would also visit a milliner; we heard there was one in town. And perhaps you should visit your friends' haberdashery and see to your attire. There is obviously no time to get a new suit made, but perhaps you can have the one you have cleaned and mended if necessary and buy new accessories."

I swore quietly and she smiled.

"And you should probably bathe and shave," she added.

"My dear sister, many are appalled at how much I enjoy bathing."

"I do not care how often you do it," she said, "I am merely noting it is customary before you marry."

"Might I attend?" Agnes asked. "The ceremony," she added quickly, "not your bathing."

I grinned. "Please do. I suppose Theodore will attend, and our uncle and Rucker if they return in time, but I feel we will invite none of our other friends, as this is not an event I wish to share with them, much less have them stand witness to."

We ate the food they had brought, and shortly the four of us were at Massey's, where we procured a pistol and shot for Sarah. As we were leaving, we had a stroke of luck and encountered Cudro.

He regarded Sarah with a perplexed frown.

"Sarah, allow me to introduce our dear companion... Cudro." I did not know another name for him.

Then it was her turn to frown at me with confusion. I realized I had not been on good terms with Cudro when I had written her my letter.

"We have put any differences behind us," I added. "Cudro, this is my sister, Miss Sarah Williams."

He rumbled with amusement. "She the one you wrote the letter to?"

"Aye."

"Nice to meet you, Miss." He bowed politely.

She awarded him a gracious curtsy in return.

"I had heard another woman arrived," Cudro said to me.

"Aye," I sighed. "The bride my father sent has arrived. I am to marry her this afternoon."

"Truly?" he asked with concern.

"Truly," I said.

He glanced at Gaston.

"It is a thing I am in agreement on," Gaston said.

"Are you engaged in anything this evening?" I asked Cudro.

"I don't know if I want to attend a wedding, even yours," he said.

I grinned. "Nay, I do not want any of you to attend, not because I would not have you witness a momentous occasion in my life, but because I do not want this occasion marked as being momentous."

He rumbled with amusement. "What would you have of me?"

"Gaston would like to have some company this evening until I can return to him," I said quietly.

Cudro sobered and nodded.

"I feel I will be well," Gaston added, "but..."

"You need say no more," Cudro said softly. "I will stand by you."

"We were thinking if perhaps it was a small gathering: you and Liam, Otter, the Bard and Dickey perhaps."

"Julio and Davey?" he asked.

"I adore Julio, but Davey can be..."

"Annoying, I know." He waved me off and then frowned curiously.

"What of Pete and Striker?"

"Have you seen them?" I asked.

This only piqued his curiosity more. "Nay."

I sighed. "I feel I cannot explain... but they might not help Gaston's mood."

Cudro frowned. "All right, I will take your word for it. What shall I say if they hear of it and invite themselves?"

I shook my head. "Oh Hell, I do not know."

Gaston shrugged. "I doubt they will, but if they do, I will accept them."

"When?" Cudro asked.

"I will need to leave for the ceremony at three," I told him.

"I will be at your house then," he said and bowed.

We left him at Massey's and stepped into the street. Sarah was regarding me curiously. I had, of course, omitted mention of Gaston's madness from the letter. I did not know what I should tell her now. Gaston solved the problem for me in his fashion.

"I am mad," he stated flatly.

She frowned, looking from one of us to the other.

"Truly," he added. "I am prone to bouts of madness in which I lose my reason."

"Oh," she said, and it was apparent from her expression she did not truly understand.

"Tonight will be very trying for him," I said.

"I would imagine it would be upsetting for anyone under your circumstances," she said carefully.

"Aye," Gaston said bitterly, "but whereas most men would become drunk and weep, I might attempt to kill someone."

He turned away and began to lead us down the street.

Sarah looked to me with alarm.

I nodded and shrugged. "I will explain some other time."

We did not know where the haberdashery was, but thankfully we quickly spotted a sign for “Belfry and Benton: Fine Men’s Goods” next to the apothecary. I applauded the location they had obtained. The inside was bright and airy, with whitewashed walls. There were shelves of hats, wigs, gloves, and everything else a gentleman of means needs to look presentable.

Belfry did not look to be the buccaneer with whom I had sailed last summer, or the merchantman officer with whom I had arrived on Jamaica last spring: he appeared as a prosperous merchant should, in a fine coat, vest, breeches and a full complement of needed accessories from his own establishment, sans wig and hat. I was pleased to see he had chosen sensible cotton and not wool for his attire. Dressing as a buccaneer for several months had obviously taught him it was in his best interests to remain cooler in the tropics.

He was delighted to see us, and quickly ran up to embrace Gaston and me. He next gave Agnes a polite bow, but then seemed confused by my sister. I made the introduction and then he was in his realm once again, bowing quite nicely and giving compliments. Once this was completed, he looked as if he had forgotten something, and then ran off to the back room with great enthusiasm. A moment later, he emerged with a portly but pleasant-appearing little woman in tow.

“This, this, my good friends is my dear bride, Mistress Millicent Belfry. And this, my dear, is Lord Marsdale.”

Then it was our turn to bow and curtsy. She was initially surprised at my appearance, but she quickly warmed once my title was introduced.

“I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Mistress Belfry,” I said. “Your husband often regaled us with tales of you while...”

A panicked look had descended upon Belfry, and he was waving me off.

“...awaiting your arrival,” I amended, hoping that what he wished for me not to say was that we had roved together and not that he had spoken of her. This did indeed appear to relieve him.

“Oh, my Lord, I cannot imagine what he would say that would be of any interest to a nobleman such as yourself,” she said with reddened cheeks.

I considered attempting to quash her reference to my title and then thought better of it. I would not win that battle, and it would merely cause hardship and confusion to wage it.

She was also delighted to meet Miss Williams, as she had not had a chance to meet many ladies of my sister’s status before, and gushed about that a little too. My sister bore it well, but seemed as pained as I, which pleased me.

However, when Belfry next introduced Agnes as our bondswoman, and horrifically, Gaston as my friend, I knew I must set matters right. I endeavored to do so without causing him to lose dignity in the face of his wife.

"While our dear Miss..." I started to say.

"Agnes Chelsea," my sister said quickly.

As Agnes was staring at the floor in mortified embarrassment, I thought it good my sister supplied a surname for me, as I had just realized I did not remember the girl's; and perhaps I had never heard it. I had a friend named Chelsea once, in Paris, and I was sure I would have recalled that name.

I attempted to finish smoothly. "Aye, while Miss Chelsea did begin our acquaintance as a bondswoman due to unfortunate circumstances in her life, she is from a fine family and is a free woman and my sister's good friend."

This of course amended Mistress Belfry's earlier polite nod into a small curtsy and a "Delighted to make your acquaintance."

Agnes seemed pleased with this turn of events, though she did cast a curious glance at me. I supposed that was because she still was our bondswoman.

Then I was on to the more serious offense. "And though I am sure Mister Belfry's intent was to save having to explain some of the more curious customs of the buccaneers, I must insist that Mister Gaston Sable here is not my friend, but he should be properly known as my matelot."

Belfry winced, but he awarded us a sincere nod of apology from behind his wife's shoulder.

"Mate-lo?" Mistress Belfry said with confusion, and turned to regard her husband.

"It is a buccaneer term for a man's partner," I said.

"Oh," she nodded. "So you're partners in owning the ship Mister Belfrey mentioned."

"Nay, Mistress," I said carefully. "Among the Brethren of the Coast as the... older buccaneers refer to themselves, a matelot is a man's... husband, for lack of a better term."

"Oh," she breathed. She blanched and then flushed and her gaze darted from one to the other of us. "Oh," she said with more force. At which point she took a step back and I decided she was not so very pleasant after all.

"Sable?" Belfry asked in the awkward silence that followed. "I am sorry I did not know your surname," he told Gaston.

Gaston, who had been admirably stoic throughout, responded quietly. "It is my family name, but its use is a recent thing for me in the West Indies. Will has arranged for me to become an English citizen."

"Oh that is wonderful, what with..." Belfry trailed off quickly.

"Perhaps you can visit us some eve once we return from roving, and we can tell you all the tales," I said.

"I would like that," Belfry said. His eyes said he would like that very much. "Dickey said you would all be sailing very soon to raid with Morgan."

"Aye, we sail to the meeting in two days," I said.

"Well, I am pleased you stopped by to see the shop," he said.

"Actually, I came to make purchases. I am to be married this afternoon to a bride my father sent for me."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Mistress Belfry said, and then cast an angry glance at Gaston.

I was compelled to say, "I will not cease my wayward habits, I will merely be married in order to produce an heir. It is the way of the nobility. If fortune smiles upon me, I shall only see the woman for perhaps a month each year."

She was, of course, further appalled by my attitude about the matter, and quickly excused herself to the back of the shop; and we soon heard heavy steps above us, where I assumed their living quarters to be.

"She comes from a devout family," Belfry said apologetically in her wake.

"I guessed that," I said kindly. "Your happiness with her is all that matters."

"I am happy," he sighed, "but I feel I shall miss the sea. I envy Dickey."

"If you do... and this endeavor does not meet your liking in the long term, I believe there might be a plan afoot to enter into a shipping enterprise. My sister, who learned much of business from my father, was discussing that very thing last night with Theodore and Striker."

I turned to Sarah. "Mister Belfry was an officer on the ship on which I sailed here. I believe he has worked upon merchantmen for most of his life."

"I have indeed," he said quickly, and regarded my sister speculatively.

"Then perhaps I will consult with you as our plans develop," she said.

"I would be delighted, Miss Williams, to offer any assistance I can," he said happily.

I was amused, and thought it likely he would be at sea again within a year. Especially as, though he was quite good at complimenting and encouraging a client on the behalf of his shop, he had little aptitude for matters such as choosing the cravats or hats they would require. That had been Dickey's purview; and Dickey had, of course, deserted him for the sea.

Sarah was of much more use in the matter, as she had witnessed what fashionable young men in London were wearing this last year. However, she became exasperated when I could not describe the color of the coat I was to wear. Agnes could have, but she did not know which coat I spoke of. I was finally sent back to our house to fetch it.

When I returned, I found the shop filled with our cabal.

Liam caught me as I came in the door. He spoke quietly. "We be pleased to watch after yur matelot, since ya got ta go an' abandon 'im to do..." He trailed off with a disapproving frown.

I thought he would have been well paired in his judgmental nature with Mistress Belfry. The irony amused me, though his words did not.

"What I must do," I said firmly. "Liam, remember, he is in favor of my doing this thing."

"Then why we all be worried 'bout 'im goin' mad o'er it?" he asked.

I sighed. "Because, though he wants the outcome, mainly my inheriting and children, the actuality of what I must do, as in lying with the bitch, is irksome to him."

He grumbled but acquiesced and let me pass.

Julio was next in my limited choice of paths through the throng. "Do you want us about tonight?" he whispered.

"Julio, I trust your diplomacy as I do few others, but I would not have you both about if Davey will be prone to saying something... annoying."

As I said it, I thought it likely Liam would be a larger culprit in that matter.

"I will keep a tight leash on him and not let him trouble Gaston," Julio said with a smile.

"Thank you."

I finally worked my way to where I had last seen Sarah, and found only Dickey, Gaston, and Agnes.

Dickey snatched the coat from my hand and held it up to my face with an exasperated sigh. "Will, truly, you should have visited the tailor weeks ago." Then he was going through the haberdashery's stock with Belfry in his wake.

Knowing that matter was now in good hands, I asked, "Where is Sarah?"

"Striker wished to speak with her," Gaston said quietly and gestured toward the back room.

I looked about: Pete was not in evidence, but the Bard was eying me.

"What is going on?" the Bard asked.

I sighed. "I am marrying the damn bride my father sent. I would invite you all, but it is not a matter I wish to celebrate."

He frowned. "I am sorry to hear that, but nay, that wasn't my question. Pete and Striker are not speaking. And who is that woman?" He jerked a thumb at the back room door.

"She is my sister," I said quietly.

I looked about and saw Liam sigh. All eyes were upon us now: most filled with curiosity, especially those of the new members of our crew, Nickel, Ash, Burroughs and Bones.

I jumped up to sit on the counter and addressed them all. "In order to supposedly secure my inheritance, I am to marry a bride my father has sent. I am not inviting any of you to the ceremony, as it is not a matter I wish to celebrate. Please have a party in my absence and celebrate the fact that you are not me. As to other matters..." Inspiration came to me, and I thanked the Gods.

"The woman Striker is speaking with is my sister." I looked to the

Bard. "She knows a bit of business from my father and wishes to do something of import while we rove. To that end, she was discussing the start of a shipping concern with Striker and Theodore last night while I was involved with the other matter. Pete was disagreeable to the..." I sighed purposefully and regarded all of them again. "You all know Pete dislikes women, and he likes his matelot talking to one, for whatever reason, not at all." I shrugged. "They seemed ready to quarrel afterwards, and I have not seen them since."

This explanation appeared to assuage the lot of them.

"I am not used to doing business with women either," the Bard said.

"Well, if you want Gaston's money involved in the endeavor, you will overcome your objections," I said.

The Bard shrugged.

I glanced at my matelot, who was standing safely behind the counter with Agnes so that he was not crowded in the narrow store. He grinned. Then he snatched my tunic to pull me to him and whisper in French, "As usual, your tongue and wit are blessed by Mercury, but it might not be enough if they discover the truth of the matter."

"And what is that?" I asked. "Did Striker indicate he had made a choice?"

"I do not know," he sighed. "He came in with the others and spoke only to Sarah. I could not overhear his words, but they were quickly off together behind the closed door."

I swore quietly and he released me.

I looked to Agnes: she was standing with her back to the wall next to the door in question, with her head slightly cocked. I thought I should chide her for listening, but then she flushed and moved away from the wall quickly; and I was thankful someone had been in a position to learn things that need be known. Not that I truly wished to know what her actions seemed to imply.

I thought it likely I should strangle Striker.

Thankfully, Dickey was loudly explaining how a wig made a man appear dignified, while Liam argued that it was just foolish, and then donned one to everyone's amusement. Thus none had witnessed what I had, or were paying the matter of Striker's whereabouts much heed at the moment.

I looked to the Bard again and leaned to him to whisper, "Where is Pete?"

"On the ship," he said grimly. "He got good and drunk last night, by himself. Striker slept on the quarterdeck."

"Oh, Bloody Hell," I sighed.

"My sentiments exactly," the Bard whispered. "In your opinion, does Striker wish to marry?"

I considered my answer, and thought it permissible to say something to the Bard. "He does not wish to leave the sea and become a planter, but he does wish to have children."

"And if his matelot were any other than Pete, he would not have

much problem with the matter,” the Bard said astutely.

“Aye.”

“What of your sister?” he asked.

I did not choose to misinterpret his question. “They are enamored of one another.”

He grimaced. “Is she as smart as you?” he asked a moment later.

“Aye.”

He shrugged eloquently. “We’ll weather what comes of it, then. The two of them feudin’ all the way to Cuba and beyond is going to be a real pain in the arse, though.”

“Aye,” I sighed.

A woman’s very loud “OH!” cut through our ruminations and our friends’ revelry a moment later. Belfry rushed to the back door. As I could not ascertain whether the sound had issued from my sister or another, and thinking that I did not wish to view the aftermath of the matter that could have elicited such a sound if it were indeed her, I chose to stay where I was.

A red-faced Belfry stepped back through the door and announced awkwardly, “Mistress Belfry had a little stumble on the back stair. She is fine. Do not be alarmed.”

Agnes slipped through the door behind him, and he followed her.

The others returned to trying on wigs, except for Cudro, who was aware something else was amiss. I shrugged at him as he approached.

On one side of me, the Bard was chuckling mirthlessly; on the other, Gaston was livid.

I leaned to my matelot. “What is wrong?”

“What is wrong?” he hissed. “The bastard has likely deflowered your sister in the back room of a haberdashery. If he has made some decision, he could have at least waited until they were married.”

When I viewed the matter that way, my own ire rose. We were through the back door as one, leaving the Bard and Cudro to say what they would to one another.

We did not find Striker, but we did find Agnes helping my very flushed sister straighten her skirts and lace her stays. Belfry was arguing quietly with Mistress Belfry at the top of the stairs.

Sarah looked around and spied Gaston and me, and her hands came to her face with shame.

I crossed the space and pulled them away. “What happened? Not that I am blind, mind you, but...”

“I wanted to kiss him,” she said quietly. “And he me, and then... well it was... we began to touch, and then there was not enough touching in all the world to please us and... oh damn, Will, I feel so wanton.”

I was surprised at my anger even as it engulfed me. “I am going to...”

Gaston was already going to the back door with purpose in his stride.

Sarah threw herself before us and a hand was planted firmly on both our chests. Her grey eyes held storms. “You will do nothing! He is

as distraught as I. He wished to speak: to ask me of my feelings, nothing more. I am as responsible as he for what followed."

It took the wind from my unreasonable anger, and seemed to rob Gaston of his as well. Now my matelot appeared only troubled, and I could guess at much of that. It had a great deal to do with his sister.

I had to address the matter with Sarah first. "I am... I have no pulpit from which to preach on matters such as this. But you are my sister and..."

She smiled grimly, and then with increasing warmth. "Perhaps it is a thing of blood."

A door slammed upstairs, and we heard Belfry's heavy sigh on this side of it.

"Mistress Belfry probably thinks even more of our family now," she said with amusement.

"I hope it disabuses her of her worship of all things noble," I said.

Sarah giggled. She quickly clapped her hand over her mouth to hold it in, but it was to no avail. As I had seen this reaction to a stressful situation before, I stepped on her foot. She swore, but regained her composure.

"It was either that or slap you," I said with a grin.

"Step on my feet, please," she agreed.

"Gaston and I must find Striker," I said. "You should slip out the back. So perhaps we should escort you back to the King's House."

"I think that wise," Agnes said as she slipped in again from the front room carrying her bag and Sarah's. "They are speaking about what might have occurred. They even asked me what was amiss."

Belfry had appeared at the base of the stairs next to her. He would not look at my sister.

"I do not know what to tell them," I said. "If Pete gets wind of this, it will likely sunder them."

"Pete might become very dangerous," Gaston added.

"I will tell them Mistress Belfry twisted her ankle," Belfry offered.

"That will not be enough," I said. "I am..."

The door opened and Liam stood there, the personification of buccaneer wrath over the betrayal of a matelot. His angry pale blue eyes were on Sarah.

I pushed Sarah behind me.

"Where is Striker?" Cudro asked with amusement from behind the angry Scotsman.

"We were just going to go and search for him," I said.

"The Hell with that. What 'appened 'ere?" Liam demanded with annoyance.

Sarah stepped out, and with a jutting chin, said, "I wished to flirt with him. I lured him back here to determine how... much he was committed to his man. He became upset with me and left."

"As 'e should 'ave!" Liam snapped and stepped forward to meet her. "Listen Missy, I know ya be Will's sister an' all, but we na' need any

trouble o' yur kind right afore we sail."

"I will not make the same mistake twice," she spat.

"See that ya don't," he snapped back, and then became flustered at standing face to face with her. "It na' be that 'e... Well, 'e be a 'andsome man an' all, an I can understand a girl settin' eyes on 'im, but..."

"He has a matelot, aye, I know that now," she said in a calmer tone.

"All right then," Liam said, and backed away to the doorway. He belatedly doffed his hat and shuffled out.

Cudro leaned in so that he blocked the view from the shop of the back room. "I expect we'll be laughing about this around a fire someday soon..."

"Some year, perhaps," I said with a grim smile.

He swore in Dutch and shook his massive head. Then he closed the door.

Agnes and Belfry appeared greatly relieved. Gaston was still somewhat distraught and deep in thought. I was torn between the need to speak to him and the need to applaud my sister. I laughed.

Sarah stomped on my foot.

"You were magnificent," I gasped. "I wish you had not, though, as I feel in the end it will not be as you implied."

Tears welled in her eyes and her hand went to her mouth to hold the sobs in. "Oh Will, I hope you are correct. And not merely because I am now... compromised. As I said, Shane lit a fire in my heart, but Striker actually warms me."

Gaston embraced her, and she clung to him and cried.

I laid a hand on Gaston's cheek and he turned enough to kiss my palm. His eyes were troubled, but I did not see the Horse.

We apologized to Belfry for all the trouble, gave him money for whatever purchases Dickey deemed necessary, and asked him to send those things and my coat around to our house with Cudro or anyone else who would be coming there soon. Then the four of us slipped out the back. As we walked down the alley, I wondered if the Gods delighted in making love so very difficult, or if the difficulties were actually a test set before us to measure our resolve.

Forty-One

Wherein We Experience Trouble With Women

Gaston and I delivered the girls to the King's House to prepare. Coswold let us know that they had arranged for a reception to follow the ceremony, and that the governor would be in attendance. I was ill-pleased with that news, but supposed it could not be helped. We also learned that my uncle and Rucker had not yet returned. As it was the hour of noon, I wondered if they would arrive before the ceremony. I wondered if we would have time to locate Striker before it as well. To that end, we hurried from the place and made our way home to see if any had yet seen him. We found Cudro there upon our arrival. He reported that the others were scouring the town for Striker, and Pete was still upon the *Virgin Queen*, unconscious with drink. As all that could be done was being done, I was left with nothing to do except spend time with Gaston and prepare myself. I was pleased with the one, and dismayed by the other.

"How are we?" I asked Gaston when we were safely alone in our room. "I know events with my sister troubled you."

He shed his weapons and sat on the hammock with a heavy sigh.

"Does Striker have the key to our manacles?" he asked.

I knelt before him with a heavy sigh of my own and rested my elbows on his knees. "I believe so. You feel that will be necessary? I will not leave you chained to a post."

He shook his head sadly. "The Horse is not running yet, but I feel it is ready to bolt. It dances beneath me. Every thought, every event, gives it new reason to shy and threaten my seat. I find myself dwelling upon

the wiles of women: my sister, yours, the Brisket, or the Damn Bride. Whether it is intentional or not, they wreak havoc."

I wished to dispute him and say that women were merely creatures following their desires just as men were, and a man desiring them was what often wreaks the havoc; but from his perspective, I could see where the point was either moot or incorrect.

"They are a necessary evil for mankind to continue?" I offered. "And on occasion they can be delightful."

He smiled grimly. "I do not dislike your sister."

"I know. Neither do I, and still I wish she were not here now, or that I had left Striker and Pete upon the ship."

He shrugged. "They would have met eventually."

"But perhaps with a more controllable and less injurious result," I said.

"True," he sighed.

He rubbed the stubble upon my head and then my jaw and sighed again. "You must shave."

"I do not wish to shave my head if that is truly a wig I spy." I pointed at the bundle Cudro had given us from the store.

"I have never seen you in a wig," he said thoughtfully. "I can barely remember how you look with long hair."

"Neither can I," I sighed. "Before coming here, I was blessed with enough hair that wearing a wig was seldom necessary. I detest them. Have you ever worn a wig?"

He shook his head. "Non. Non, once, when I was young and there was an event at a school. They made us all wear wigs."

I retrieved the wig from the package and proffered it to him. With a snort, he took it, and after finding the front, placed it upon his head. I resisted chuckling at the result. Under the thick brown curls Dickey had chosen for me, Gaston appeared so alien I might not have recognized him.

"Where is the glass?" Gaston asked.

I dug about in one of my trunks and found a small mirror.

He snorted with amusement at his image. Then he frowned. "I look like my father."

"Truly? I have never felt I looked like mine, thank the Gods."

He pulled the wig off.

"Sarah has grey-blue eyes," he said. "They are not like yours."

"She has my father's eyes," I said. "My uncle has eyes like mine. My mother's eyes were hazel. Much like Miss Barclay's, I just realized. And there is a further similarity in the color of their hair. I wonder if that is coincidence or more of my father's strange thinking."

"Why would he choose a bride for you who looked like your mother?"

"She does not truly look like my mother," I said, thinking on it.

"There are differences in their features. Many English women have light brown or blonde hair."

He was deep in thought. I donned the wig and regarded my

reflection. I looked like someone I had once been. That thought was oddly comforting, in that the man I was now was not the one who would do this thing. This would be a costume I donned and a role I played. It made me anticipate dressing, as the more I changed my appearance, the less of me would be in attendance at the ceremony.

I called down to Cudro and asked if he could be troubled to put on a kettle, since I needed to bathe and shave. He agreed with good humor.

When I stepped back into the room, Gaston asked, "What did you look like as a child?"

"My hair was nearly as pale as Liam's, and I was small."

He smiled faintly. "The children from the Damn Bride will probably look the same."

I grinned. "I imagine they will. I actually envisioned them last night. I thought of little golden-haired tots listening to Rucker lecture them about fables and myths."

This seemed to please him, and he relaxed back onto the hammock.

"I do not wish for you to misinterpret it," I said, "but I am going to dress well for the event. I feel it is as if I don a costume. I want little of the man I am to be present there; I wish to be a character in some play."

He nodded. "I understand." Then he sat up. "But I wish to make love before you do."

I grinned. "I will deny you nothing."

We were not finished when Cudro knocked on the door to give us the kettle. We told him to leave it with hoarse voices and he laughed and left us. I ended up washing and shaving with tepid water; but it was no matter, as my heart was warm enough.

Gaston also seemed calmer in the aftermath, as he lay naked upon the hammock watching me dress. When I was perfumed and powdered and fully acquitted in hat, wig, fashionably-ruffled shirt, brocade vest, coat, breeches, hose, good leather shoes, and gloves, I turned to him and asked, "Well, do I look the part?"

"Lord Marsdale," he said with a trace of sadness. "You are not Will."

I was almost loathe to bridge the distance between one reality and the next by leaning down to kiss him before I left, but I could not leave without kissing him. He kissed me happily and then smoothed my powder to cover what he had mussed. There was a little still about his lips, and I brushed it off with a gloved finger.

"You should come see to your guests or they will worry," I said.

"Though I think I would rather you lay there naked awaiting my return. The thought of it will give me a happy thing to dwell upon until I do."

He shrugged and slowly sat. "Do not worry. Lord Marsdale is marrying her, not my matelot. I will be fine."

My appearance was greeted by our cabal with a number of confused stares – and then laughter, as they realized who I was. I finished strapping on my rapier and told them Gaston would be down shortly, and not to destroy the place because Agnes was not there.

Not wanting to risk the interminable business of escorting my bride

from the King's House, I went directly to the church.

Theodore was there ahead of me, speaking with the pastor. He gaped at my appearance once he recognized me.

"Well, my good Mister Theodore, you have not truly met Lord Marsdale," I said with good humor.

He bowed. "My Lord, I am pleased to make your acquaintance under these circumstances."

"And well you should not be at any other time," I chided with amusement.

"Nay, I think I will be happy to meet you only this once, perhaps," he said thoughtfully.

Further conversation was disrupted by the arrival of the party from the King's House – which to my delight, included my uncle and Rucker. They both appeared almost exactly as I had last seen them in England.

Uncle Cedric swept me into an embrace that reminded me I was indeed small compared to the other men of my relation.

"Marsy, you look well indeed," he said enthusiastically. "Here Rucker and your sister had me afraid you had taken to dressing like these mercenaries we have seen about town."

"Then I am sorry to inform you that they are indeed correct, and this attire is but an anomaly, donned only for the purpose of this ceremony. I count myself among those mercenaries, as you call them."

"Young men and their need for adventure," he sighed. "We have much to discuss," he added seriously.

"I know. Sarah has told me a great deal."

He frowned and nodded before stepping away to speak to Theodore.

I embraced Rucker, and he smiled at me from beneath dark and speculative eyes. I could see there was much on his mind.

"It is good to see you, old friend," I said. "We too have much to talk of, I feel, though I know not when. I sail the day after tomorrow. Unless you wish to accompany us," I teased.

He chuckled. "Unlike your uncle, I read your letter; and I think I shall pass," he said quietly.

"You have always been a wise man."

"I would speak to you..." he glanced at my uncle and dropped his voice lower still, "in private, perhaps, before you sail."

"I understand. I will seek you out."

He laid a hand on my arm, and this time his eyes darted toward my bride. "Is this a thing well done?" he whispered. "I know of its necessity, but..."

"I am not treading this path blindly," I assured him. "I was prepared to desert it, but the lady met my demands, as it seems she is more in need of this marriage than I."

He frowned. "Tell me you do not trust your father."

"Never," I hissed with a grin.

"Then I am relieved," he said solemnly.

"I also feel I will never inherit," I added soberly. "I am merely making

gestures to buy time."

He nodded with sad eyes. "You might not be wise, but you have never been a fool."

I smiled. "I wish to have children, and have you instruct them as you did me."

He grinned. "I am honored. I hope she will prove to be a suitable dam."

"If she does not, I will somehow find another."

"Spoken like a king," he said with a grin.

"One must know one's enemies," I said.

And then the pastor was clearing his throat and Rucker stepped away; and I was left staring at my bride. She was indeed lovely. She wore the blue gown in which I had seen her, with her hair demurely coiled and a lace veil. She appeared anxious, and her nod to me was curt but not disdainful.

We went to the altar, and Lord Marsdale said his lines and performed the necessary gestures. The pastor thought it necessary to give us his very best, and thus the ceremony was interminably long. I kept expecting my red-headed demon to burst into the church and lay the entire matter to waste; but he did not, and I knew not if I was disappointed. In the end, I was married in the eyes of English law, but I did not feel married, not as I had that morning upon the deck of the *North Wind*, when the chorus had confirmed my matelotage with Gaston. Then I had felt the weight of commitment settle about me. Today, I merely felt a liar and a fool.

We were received in the hall of the King's House by Governor Modyford, Morgan, Bradley, and a dozen other Jamaican notables. At the first expression of congratulations, I wished to smash the smiling face before me; by the third I wished to become raving drunk, but I did not: I would not find my way back to Gaston this night if I did, and I knew none here would help me.

I began to take great pleasure in that: the knowing that I would return to him, that I was not tamed as the surreptitiously sneering and smug faces seemed to think. I found it odd that the women, mainly my sister and bride, were the ones who truly knew how little had been gained this day in the name of supposedly holy matrimony. Whereas the men, especially the ones who had once had matelots, or at least understood the practice, seemed to think I had lost the most.

"The women, they always win out in the end," Bradley said with a toss of his glass.

"Not if one truly loves," I said quietly.

He winced at my jab, and I hoped Siegfried was pleased at that in Heaven; but perhaps he would be angry with me for poking at his former matelot, as I felt he had loved Bradley far more than was returned.

"But what is love?" Morgan asked as he joined us.

The so-called admiral of the buccaneers appeared comfortable and well-comported in his formal attire, whereas Bradley looked as

uncomfortable as I in his.

"I believe it is the ultimate emotion God granted us the pleasure to experience," I said. "I pity those who have not known it."

Morgan frowned and then met my gaze. "I have loved."

"A person who returns it in measure, or a thing?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed, but his smile was wide beneath his mustache. "I have been loved."

"I cannot gainsay you," I said with a shrug.

"But you would make the attempt if you felt you held the ground?" he asked.

"Aye, I would."

"Why do you dislike me?" Morgan asked with speculative eyes and a note of sincere curiosity.

"You are an ambitious man who has seized upon using the Brethren to further your own greed for glory and gold, or perhaps not gold in and of itself, but for power," I said honestly.

He bridled at this, yet he scratched his mustache calmly and said, "I am a leader of men; the Brethren needed a leader in order to achieve their goals of having enough to gold to keep themselves drunk through every storm season. I am not the first to organize them."

"Aye, and though I have heard good of Myngs and Mansfield, I think it likely I would not like them, either," I said with a shrug.

"You have not heard good of me?" he asked with feigned amusement.

I smirked. "Aye, I have heard much good of you, from sheep who are unwise in the ways of wolves."

He chuckled with true amusement. "And what are you, my friend?"

I shrugged. "Just a fool who cares about such things."

He considered me for a moment in silence, with a slight cock of his head. Beside him, Bradley appeared quite uncomfortable with the entire topic.

"Will you be sailing with us?" Morgan asked at last.

"Aye, my matelot and I will."

He snorted. "Why?"

"I have no reason to remain in port. Worry not; I am not a leader of men. I offer you no challenge," I assured him.

At first he snorted dismissively, but then he sobered and said with odd candor, "That is good to hear." With that he left me, an anxious Bradley in his wake.

I was thankfully next descended on by Sarah.

"We must speak," Sarah said as she towed me toward a corner where Rucker stood waiting. "Or rather, you must speak to another."

"After you have told me what to say?" I teased.

We reached the corner and she turned to me. "First, did you find Striker?"

"Nay," I said sadly. "I had not time to mount the search myself, and apparently the efforts of all others who sought him were in vain. Pete was drunk and unconscious upon our ship. So, as of when I left for the

ceremony, they had not spoken."

She sighed. "Well, I guess there is nothing to be done of that now. Now, you must speak to our uncle."

"He has become quite intent upon your sister marrying," Rucker said. "He is inviting suitors from the planters."

"He made it quite clear he expects me to entertain them," she said bitterly.

"That is quite annoying," I said.

"He also harbors many notions concerning the management of plantations which I hope are not in keeping with yours," Rucker added.

"Else you failed to raise me properly," I said with a smile. "I would imagine he does, being who and what he is: a product of his upbringing. He was indeed raised by wolves, as my father was and their father before them. I will do what I can to mitigate the matter of the plantation, but I can do little until such time as it is mine; and that will not occur, according to my father, until I produce an heir. And even then, I do not trust him not to delay it."

"Aye," Rucker said tiredly. "That is why it is all such a pity."

"I know," I sighed. "You kindled high hopes in me that day we spoke, when you reminded me I would inherit. I began to think I could do good with his title. But now... Now I am using my title as viscount to insure that the men I sail with are fairly granted land, and to battle that bastard Morgan where I can, to save what remains of the bondsmen I brought here from starvation and sickness, and to rescue the Negroes being purchased for Ithaca from abject slavery in the bargain. I strive to do what I can in the name of justice as opportunities present themselves. I should do more, but I know not how without devoting myself to an even more ruinous course that will lead to my misery, and I am afraid I lack the faith of a martyr."

Rucker smiled warmly. "If it is any consolation, I am proud of what small part I played in you becoming the man you have." He clapped my shoulder. "You will do well by those you can. No one can ask more."

"I can ask more," I said.

I looked about the room and spied Morgan and Modyford. I wanted to battle Morgan. I wanted to threaten his reign. I wanted to do a great many revolutionary things. But to do so would require sending Gaston and I and our precious chariot careening into battle. I did not know if we were that strong, yet.

"I would truly endeavor to do much more if I were the only one I need consider," I added.

"And that is why you are a good man," Sarah said with a kind smile.

As I gazed upon my bride, who stood pretending to be smiling and happy among our guests, I did not feel I was a good man. I was minded of the conversation Gaston and I had once had: no matter how often people say a thing, one will not hear it if it is not the thing one chooses to hear, often because of a feeling that they are misguided. I feel I am quite selfish. True, much of my life was devoted to another, but it was in

the name of my own happiness, as I knew I would be in misery without him. I was not sure how that made me a good man in the face of all mankind.

Sarah disrupted my ruminations with a disgruntled noise, and I returned my attention to her and Rucker. We were being joined by Uncle Cedric and two newly arrived guests: one old, the other young. As they bore a resemblance to one another, I assumed they were father and son.

"Ah, Mister Grisholm," my uncle was saying, "here is my fine nephew, the Viscount of Marsdale, and my niece, Miss Williams. Marsdale, Sarah, this is Mister Charles Grisholm. He owns a plantation in Clarendon. And this is his son, Mister John Grisholm. Mister Grisholm the younger is of your age, Sarah, and he wishes to speak with you."

Rucker slipped away before I could correct my uncle's omission and introduce him.

My sister smiled sweetly and curtsied properly for the Grisholm men.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, gentlemen," I said with my own pleasant smile. "However, if you will excuse me, I must speak with my uncle for a moment."

I grabbed my uncle by the elbow and steered him away. "Uncle, we obviously have not had a chance to speak as of yet, but I feel the need to inquire now as to why you are so quick to introduce Sarah to the somewhat-eligible young men. I have heard you seem set upon it."

He sighed heavily, and the public affability he had been maintaining for the last hour departed with the air from his lungs. "Marsy, she told you all? That she shot him and he was burned? Well, I heard from the surgeons that he would likely not die."

"Aye, and he will be meaner now than he ever was before," I said.

His deep blue eyes were serious. "I fear he will come here. I fear your father will do nothing."

"It is a fear I have as well," I sighed. It was a thing I had not chosen to give much thought to as of yet, with all else that had occurred since she told me her tale. "How injured was he? Could he be on your heels?" I asked.

"Nay, I think not," he said quickly and with assurance. "It should have been months before he could travel. And perhaps he will not seek her, or you, but..."

"If he is scarred he might well want vengeance. I know," I sighed. "He never had reason to seek me out, as he did me far more harm than I did him; but Sarah is another matter."

"I have spent several months sailing here thinking just that," he said. "I wish for her to be protected."

I frowned. "I will protect her."

Then I saw my words as foolish. I was going to sail off and leave them here. Once again, from being selfish, but I truly thought it best that Gaston did not remain here, not with the Damn Bride about and all

of that. I did not wish to remain here due to that.

"It was my understanding that you go adventuring..." my uncle was saying.

"I do," I said quickly. "I do, and I have commitments to that end. Something will have to be arranged..."

"That is why I wish for her to marry," he said urgently. "And truly, I feel her interest would be best served in the matter of Shane if you were not involved."

I met his gaze. "I will kill him, and here I feel it could be arranged so that I might not be in legal peril for it."

He shook his head. "I do not wish to see that day, Marsy. And... It might not just be your cousin that we face in the matter. If she is married, your father will not be able to so easily come to claim her himself."

I was aghast. "What?"

"He was overwrought when we left. Sarah did not see him the day I made the arrangements for us to travel. She has not seen him since the night of the incident. Your father is distraught; he feels he has driven her away."

"He has," I protested, "as he did me, over his love of Shane, who he seems Hell-bent on placing above his own children."

"I know, I know," my uncle said sadly. "I see that now. I will make no excuse for him on the matter. But I do know him somewhat, and I am afraid he will come here and attempt to make amends. If Sarah is married, and even more fortuitously, with child, I do not feel he will be such the fool as to attempt to bring her home to assuage his guilt."

I was incredulous, but I realized he spoke the truth of the matter. Still...

"He would not," I said. "I feel he would not be such the fool in the face of public inquiry as to why he angered another family. Yet, sadly, I feel there is no family of rank on Jamaica that could suitably ride to battle against him in such a matter."

He sighed. "We are not Papists, Marsy; she cannot join a convent somewhere in Christendom and thus be hidden away."

"Nay, but marrying her to some planter's son will not solve the problem. If marriage is the solution, she needs to be married to a man who would stand up to Father, even if it meant his ruin, and then be willing and able to shoot Shane should it be necessary." I laughed. "And I know just the man, but he must sail too."

And then the reason Striker must sail occurred to me.

"Come," I told my uncle, "let us find her protectors. You must trust me on this and not argue."

"But Marsy..." he said as I led him to Theodore, who was speaking to an older man I did not know.

"I am sorry to interrupt; will you accompany us, please?" I asked my friend.

Theodore excused himself and followed.

Modyford and Morgan were chatting by the liquor sideboard and seemed surprised at our abrupt appearance.

"Gentlemen," I said with a bow, "I have a matter I must discuss with you. For it, I request your discretion as gentlemen, as it involves my family."

The governor nodded with interest, but Morgan's mouth fell open.

"As you may have been apprised, my sister and bride, and my uncle here, left England rather quickly. The reason for this has much to do with my sister, but not for reasons one might assume involving a young lady; quite the contrary in fact. We have a second cousin on my father's side named Jacob Shane. He was orphaned as a boy, and my father, being his godfather, took him into our house and raised him as a son. However, Shane wishes to inherit, and while I live, that will not occur. To that end, he sought to marry my sister. She refused him due to information I provided her. Shane and I dislike each other intensely for reasons that are not germane to this matter, other than his being a violent and evil man who my father happens to be very fond of."

A small smile played about both of my listener's lips, and I thought whatever conclusions they might draw from that would be fine.

"Shane was extremely angry at my sister's refusal," I continued, "and he made to do her harm. She shot him, and in the resulting fight, he was badly burned from a falling lamp. He still lives, but we feel this has made him meaner than ever. That whole unfortunate incident is the reason for my sister's precipitous departure from England."

"Do you feel he will come here?" Modyford asked with sincere concern.

"We think it a likely eventuality, though not soon," I said.

"What of your father?" he asked.

"He is somewhat ... conflicted over the matter. He is far fonder of Shane than of me, and as I did not choose to live in my father's home for many years, my cousin is deeply involved in my father's business dealings, as I would have been if I had been his favored son."

"My Lord, my Lord," Modyford said thoughtfully. "What would you have of us?"

"As my cousin is a danger that may or may not arrive, and will affect few if he does – and Spain is a constant threat to us all, which must be taught that we are a force to be reckoned with in these West Indies..." In that I was using his own words. "I feel it is best if I sail, that I am of far more use to Jamaica using my sword against the Spanish than I would be sitting about here waiting for my cousin to arrive at some unknown future date."

Modyford nodded agreeably.

"And so," I continued, "since I will not be about, my uncle thought it best my sister be married into one of the families here on the island. I think that fine in concept; however, I do not feel that a young man who does not rove will have sufficient force of will to deal with a foe such as my cousin. So I would see her marry a man who does, and there is one

I know who would be willing to marry her, and who she would be willing to accept: Captain James Striker."

Morgan and Modyford grinned.

"Who?" my uncle asked.

"He is one of our captains who has shown great promise," Modyford said quickly. "He is intelligent and has a talent for leading men. He is also a ship owner, and I have just granted him a large parcel of land, and he could well ask for more."

I suppressed a smile that Modyford should so quickly ally with me in the cause.

"He has also approached me about the viability of starting a business venture, to secure more ships and begin shipping cargo," Theodore added.

"Even more wonderful," Modyford said.

"He sounds like a fine man," my uncle said with a shrug. "If you vouch for him, Marsdale, and you say Sarah will have him."

"She will," I said, "and I will be proud to have him as a brother-in-law."

"But... he is sailing with us, too," Morgan said.

"Aye, to that end, though it is unlikely my cousin will arrive this spring, I would like to know if Jamaica herself could offer some assistance in the matter of providing my sister sufficient protection – while her husband and brother go to make war with the Spanish in the name of our common defense."

Modyford was no fool. He chuckled heartily. "I am sure we can arrange something. Would she require anything else?"

"Striker should build a suitable dwelling for her," Theodore said. "He will need a plot of land in town."

"Let us look at the available plots tomorrow," Modyford said.

"Large enough to house men to watch over her, in addition to a growing family if they should be so blessed," I added.

"Of course," Modyford said. "Most of the land in town is owned, however."

"Money is not an issue when it comes to my sister's happiness," I said.

Theodore turned away with a fit of coughing.

I joined him to pat his back, and found him attempting to suppress laughter as I had suspected.

"You should watch how you swallow, good man," I said. "That rum punch is quite strong."

"Damn good thing you married well," he whispered.

"Damn good thing he lets me speak for him," I whispered back.

"Aye, but does Striker, or have things occurred that I do not know of?"

"Certain events occurred this morning that you are not aware of. Still, this will come as something of a surprise to him. And I feel Pete will likely try and kill me."

That last was a truer thought than I wished to face.

In time, I was at last able to deliver myself from Morgan and Modyford and their plans for a stronger Jamaica. Avoiding my bride, I worked my way back around the room to my sister and delivered her from several young male admirers. She was quite surprised when I told her the outcome of my maneuverings since last I stood at her side. As I recounted what I had accomplished, I was overcome once again with the unsettled feeling that I should not have meddled and all of my attempts at philanthropy were to be found ill-considered in hindsight.

"And Striker knows none of this?" she asked with dismay when I finished.

"Nay."

"And Uncle seems accepting?" she asked with wonder.

"Well, he has not met Striker yet," I sighed.

"And you did not see it necessary to consult me first?" This time there were the beginnings of anger in her tone and expression.

"Nay, I thought it what you wanted, and..." I sighed heavily. "In the future I shall, of course, consult you before making life-altering decisions on your behalf."

"I do not want this if he does not want it," she said adamantly. "I will not have my needs... such as they might be, foisted upon him. And if you feel I am in so much in danger, why will you not stay to care for me?"

And there it was. "Because... as Gaston told you, he is mad," I said carefully. "He should not remain in port... among civilized men. And though he wishes for me to marry, it is best he not remain about my Bride. It is best I not remain about her..."

This damped her anger, but fueled her curiosity.

"How is he mad?" she demanded quietly. "He said..."

"He is prone to losing control of his reason, or rather of losing the ability to have reason control the bestial side of his nature that all men contain. When he does lose that control, he poses a threat, both to himself and to those around him, especially if they are the object of his ire."

She was frowning. "I know nothing of madness. I do not understand how a man as composed and kind as you have portrayed Gaston to be, and as I have witnessed of him, could pose a threat to himself or others."

"I hope you shall never see it grip him such that you would understand," I said. "I would rather not divulge specific examples, but you may ask Striker, or Theodore even. For that matter, you can ask most about town. All will tell you they have heard of the madness of Gaston the Ghoul."

She shook her head. "I will take your word for it. I just do not understand how..."

I shook my head. "Sarah, you and I, and most men and women, are governed by our reason such that... When I arrived at this party, I was

angered by the smugness of some, such as Morgan and others, who would imply that I was... becoming a man, disavowing my boyish ways perhaps, in undertaking this marriage. That I was accepting what all men must, and my holding to my matelot was a foolish fancy that must pass from my life. Upon thinking that of their motivations, I wished to strike them. The thoughts I attributed to their half-smiles are ones that I feel our father holds about me, and... Thinking thusly produces great anger in me. Yet, I smiled politely and bowed and said nothing untoward to these men, because it was not in my interest to do so at the time. That is sanity. When Gaston is gripped by his madness, and he feels such things as I did this eve, he strikes the ones who arouse it. Reason ceases to reign. He acts on his heart's desire at the moment, with little care for the consequence. And his heart's desire is not tempered by rational thoughts, either; one angry thought leads to the next, until he is in a furor that cannot be damped.

"The more trying he finds the circumstances of his existence, the less control he is able to maintain. If he is living in a manner that is comfortable and safe to him, he maintains far more control. He feels safe while roving. Additionally, it offers him the opportunity to vent his violent nature upon a common enemy and not have to constantly rein it in about his allies. This marriage is very trying for him; and as you heard us arrange, tonight we have some of our friends watching him to insure that if his thoughts and emotions do begin to run wild, he will not arrive here with a blade in hand. He is an incredibly skilled combatant, and it takes several men to bring him down. I alone can... perhaps not control him, but assist him in maintaining and recovering control."

She had been staring across the room in contemplative silence. "So he is like a drunk man?"

"Somewhat."

"Has he ever threatened you?"

I sighed. "Aye."

When her gaze met mine, it was kind. "You love him so much that..."

"It is my madness," I said.

She nodded. "Thank you for explaining. I see why you place him above all others."

"Nay, I do not feel that you do. I do place him above all others, but not because he is mad. I cannot express how or why I love him as I do, merely that I love him enough to place him before all other considerations. He is the path I have chosen to walk in this life; and as he is mad, we must live such that we can mitigate the matter and... that chooses the course our path must take around tree and hill and other obstacles."

"Is love madness?" she asked.

"Perhaps."

"I do not feel I have experienced it such that I have been robbed of my sanity," she said slowly. "Even with Shane, even when I thought

to defy father over him, it was not a thing of madness, but calculated intent. And today... Well, I suppose today was madness, but I attribute that to lust and not love."

"Love must grow, Sarah."

She nodded. "I hope it grows with Striker, as I am to marry him." Then she met my gaze and smiled sadly. "I say that, yet love of that nature, the type that poets write of and great tales are told of, is not a madness I ever wished in my life. Yet now I wish for it. I suppose that is the kindling of the true mad love: to wish for madness..."

I smiled and kissed her temple. "You will discover your own path."

"It had best be with Striker," she said with sadness I found disturbing. She pushed away from the wall she had been leaning against and walked to the liquor board.

I was about to follow when I noticed a presence at my side. It was Coswold.

"Your... wife has retired to her chamber," he said discreetly.

"Ah, which chamber?"

"The last door on the right." He gestured toward the stairs.

"Thank you, my good man."

He awarded me a compressed smile and slipped away. I noticed the guests had dwindled, and those who remained were intoxicated. Theodore and Rucker were on a settee talking. Morgan was pontificating in a drunken fashion to anyone who would listen: much to Modyford's amusement, apparently.

I was painfully sober. I had spent so much of the evening talking I had not taken the time to drink. The liquor sideboard was surrounded by fools I would have to negotiate to locate a bottle. With a sigh, I squared my shoulders and made my way upstairs. I hoped the lack of alcohol would allow me to perform my duties without delay.

I knocked quietly on the last door on the right, and received a curt order to enter from her high and angry voice. She was sitting at the dressing table in a white linen gown that left everything feminine about her to the imagination, as there was naught visible beyond her hands, face, and hair. Even her feet were hidden by the abundant hem. With her back to me, and little else to view, I found myself mesmerized by her honey tresses. They had been released and flowed down her back, golden in the lamplight. I had not seen a woman's hair unbound in a very long time. The sheen of it was quite lovely, and I found I wished to touch it.

I joined her, and saw that she had an onion bottle sitting on the table. I smelled rum: so one of us was not sober.

"May I?" I asked, and touched the bottle.

She shrugged. She had not moved or spoken at my approach, and now I saw that her hands had the wood in a grip that left her knuckles white. In the mirror, I found her eyes tightly closed and her chin tucked. Instead of taking up the bottle, I laid a gentle palm on her soft hair, and she flinched so violently she set the toiletry vials and jars to shaking.

For the first time, I thought she might actually be a maid, and perhaps all of her vitriol was due more to fear than bile.

"You have lovely hair," I murmured, and slid my fingers along its length, reveling in the texture as it cascaded back to her shoulders.

"Thank you," she said tightly. "Must you touch it?"

"Lady," I said, not bothering to hide my amusement as I continued to stroke her locks. "I am your husband, a thing you seem to wish, and this night I will touch far more than your hair."

"I did not realize that playing with my hair was a necessary component of what we must accomplish this night," she said with the lazy enunciation of one intoxicated.

I awarded her an amused sigh, and retrieved another chair so that I could sit near her. I sat with my chest to its back and regarded her over crossed arms. The tension had not left her hands or neck, but her eyes were open.

I took up the bottle and found it contained the concoction of pineapple, coconut, and rum I had been drinking the day I met Gaston. I took a long pull, as the substance is very easy to drink. The warmth of the liquor was a relief in my empty belly.

"I am skilled at pleasing women," I said lightly after a second drink. "This need not be a thing of misery."

She glared at me. "I do not wish to be pleased."

"And that, my lady, is the reason some men take mistresses." I kept my tone light, but it was becoming harder to muster any sympathy in the face of her animosity.

She turned back to the mirror.

I continued. "Not that it will matter in this instance."

"Aye," she spat, "you already have a lover."

"I have heard that it is rumored you are no maid. Did you leave a lover behind, perhaps? One that you miss?"

She whirled on me with ferocity. "Who said that?"

I shrugged. "I care not if you are a maid. I am sorry if you loved another and were forced to leave them for this. I would hate all involved too, if that were the case."

"I did not lie with him, and I did not love him," she hissed. "But I liked him a Hell of a lot better than I like you."

"I understand," I said and took another drink.

She snatched the bottle back once it left my lips, and drained it defiantly.

"This damned place reeks of mold," she spat. "There are insects everywhere. It is filled with sodomites and pirates. There are no parties, no balls, no hunts, no theater, nothing of interest. I shall die of boredom waiting to whelp your brats. While you sail off and fuck your lover anytime you please. Every girl knows she will grow up one day and be forced to marry some damn arse, but at least in England I could have amused myself while he fucked about town."

"You are correct," I said sincerely. "Let us return you to England,

then. There are brides my father could have chosen who would have been happier here, perhaps; but as always, he cares not for the desires of others as long as they meet his ends. The Hell with him. I have already planned as much. I will not add another's misery to the accounting of it."

She shook her head. "Nay. I cannot go back. Not unwed. Not without having produced children."

She looked away bitterly and regarded her reflection. She slapped at the mirror so that it rotated up on its hinges; its bottom edge sent bottles flying. I caught a vial of perfume before it hit the floor.

"Will you tell me why?" I asked gently.

"My father... cares not for the desires of others, either. And he has debts."

"That my father will assist with?" I asked.

"There is some business involving my father voting on certain matters in the House of Lords. I do not know the details," she snapped.

I snorted. "It all becomes much clearer now."

Which was not true: her information muddled the waters yet again. I thought it best not to mention my suspicion that my father had sent her on the expectation I would reject her. Perhaps it was wrong.

"Well," I said at last, as she seemed disinclined to say more, "since we are both committed to this endeavor, let us do as we must. I will say again, I can make it pleasurable for you."

She snorted angrily. "And I say again, that is not a thing I want." She turned back to me. "Why add to my misery by making it pleasurable when it is a thing I might not have to amuse myself when I wish it?"

The lady had a point. I was a fool. Gaston would never bear for me to become involved emotionally or physically with her in such a way as would be required for it to be truly pleasurable.

"Then let us be perfunctory," I said.

"Please," she said with sarcasm.

She stood and went to the bed, to throw the covers back and lie upon it: on her back, with the gown covering her from neck to toe.

"Do as your duty to our damned fathers' commands," she said to the ceiling.

"You say you have not lain with the man people spoke of, yet I would know if you are a maid," I said carefully and added quickly, "I care not if I am the first. I merely wish to know if you will bleed and if I must exercise caution."

She sighed. "I should bleed, unless something happened that would change that, of which I am unaware." She chuckled mirthlessly.

I shed my sword belt and clothing and considered her. I consulted my manhood. It was not aware any carnal activity was imminent, and apparently could not fathom what I was considering. The linen-swathed thing upon the bed was not an object of desire, even if it had been quiet and soft in spirit. I thought of firm bouncing mounds with pert nipples and golden curling forests dripping and ripe for plunder. This induced a

little stirring. Yet I knew I would have to see those things I imagined, at least in part, in order to truly garner its interest.

Reluctantly I palmed a jar of salve and joined her. She kept her eyes firmly on the ceiling and tensed as my weight indented the mattress. Despite her intoxication, she now appeared so brittle I thought she might snap if I mounted her.

Though I knew it would not help her in the least, I asked. "Would you please remove that garment?"

"Why?"

I sighed. "A man's cock may not truly possess an eye, but the head upon his shoulders surely does, and the two share great kinship."

"You wish to gaze upon me in a carnal fashion?" She hissed. "Why? You do not favor women."

I sighed again. "Lady, I have favored a great many women in my life, and likely left a good number of bastards in my wake. I merely happen to prefer men far more. Even if I did not, and I truly favored women above all else, a man's cock is a creature of its own mind and wishes to see what it will plunder before it girds itself for battle. Occasionally, the mere envisioning of such a thing can give it rise; but this is not one of those times."

She sighed, and clumsily squirmed about, pulling the gown up her legs and over her hips. I was amused that she did so without ever taking her gaze from the ceiling.

Slim thighs and a delightful mound forested in brown curls were soon revealed. My cock stirred a little but wished for more.

"Further," I said lightly.

She rumbled her displeasure at a depth that would have done Cudro's massive chest proud. Yet she continued to gather the gown up until at last her breasts were exposed and the great volume of cloth was about her head and arms.

My cock rose to the sight thus revealed. She was indeed a pretty thing, with long well-turned legs, wide hips, a nicely curved waist, delicate ribs, and cute breasts with pink nipples, quite erect and begging to be touched. I could not resist caressing one taut bud with my thumb, and she squirmed. I found her reaction enticing, and gently explored and massaged her left mound.

"Do not fondle me!" came from beneath the cloth. She spread her legs wide. "Please get on with it!"

My hand dropped to my manhood to reassure it. "You may wish to bite down on some of that gown," I said wryly. "There will be discomfort, if not pain."

I slathered salve on my member, which convinced it we were truly going on a romp. As I eased over her, I concentrated on the look of her breasts, and not that I was not allowed to touch them. I tested her womanly opening and found it as dry as any man's nether hole.

She squirmed at the sensation and an unladylike curse escaped the gown. "Get it over with," she said firmly. "Put your damn prick where it

belongs. On a woman," she added with scorn.

Like a slap, her harsh words drove my cautious cock from the room like a humiliated suitor. I fingered it a bit more, and was met by further retreat. It had been unsure of the matter to begin with, and now it did not view the body spread before us as a meadow of delight we might frolic in, or even a field we might plow to good intent, but as a battleground of probable painful defeat from which we must withdraw before we were maimed or worse. I had never been with a woman who did not wish for me. I was not in the habit of buying bored whores or... doing a husband's duty. Nothing I could do this night would please her, and I would not subject my poor manhood to her scorn.

I knew well I would spare us nothing in withdrawing this night with the deed undone, yet I now knew it could not be done with my member. I had been in such a dire situation only twice before: on one occasion I had pleased the lady such that she did not realize I was unable to mount her, and in the other, she had possessed a dildo which we put to amusing use. In both cases, the woman had wished for me, and the failing had been due to abundant wine and other concerns haunting my seat of reason such that they eclipsed all passion I might muster. I supposed that was somewhat true in this matter as well, without the abundant wine.

I cast about, and spied the hilt of my dagger on my sword belt, which I had thankfully deposited within my reach on the corner of the bed: as I am always wont to do for other reasons. It was smooth, though somewhat ridged. With salve, and her state of inebriation, and having nothing to compare it to, I thought it would do handsomely.

Being careful not to shift my weight and alert her, I drew the blade, and being all too aware of the steel pointed at my flaccid member, slathered the hilt in salve and positioned it before her. I propped my weight on one arm beside her, and holding the dagger carefully, thrust the hilt inside her at the proper angle. She gasped and made another annoyed sound. I ignored her and concentrated on rhythmically thrusting while pumping my hips until I thought a sufficient, though short, amount of time had passed and I could pretend to spend myself with one last thrust and a hearty grunt.

The hilt was indeed smeared dark in the lamplight. I wiped it on the bed linen and returned it to its sheath.

I left the bed quickly and donned my breeches. She in turn pushed the gown down again and sat up to hug her knees. Her eyes fell upon the stain on the linen, and quickly left it to find me. Her glare was level.

"Are you satisfied?" she asked.

I shrugged. "The deed is done."

She snorted. "I do not see why there is such a fuss over the matter."

I bit my lip and busied myself with dressing. "I will come again tomorrow night. As I will sail the day after, it would be best if I spilled my seed again before I go. If the... If God smiles upon us, you might become pregnant and speed things along. Still, I think it would be

best if your body seasoned before you were with child, though that will lengthen your unfortunate time here.”

“I would rather be pregnant and get it behind me,” she said.

I nodded. I did not know how I would ever accomplish that.

“Until tomorrow, then,” I said.

She sniffed with bitter amusement. “Aye.”

As I padded down the hall in bare feet, shirt, and breeches, carrying all my finery, I wanted very much to strike my father again. Not to the degree I wanted to beat him for all he had allowed Shane to inflict upon me, but added blows for the misery he had inflicted on others.

I could hear guests in the hall and front rooms. I stole down the back stairs, and other than garnering surprised looks from the housekeeper and Coswold, I managed to leave the building unseen. I ran through the darkened streets and alleys, haunted all the way by the sounds of drunken debauch from the taverns on Thames.

There was more of the same at our house, as a card game was in session in the front room; but all grew quiet as I entered. Gaston was not in evidence.

“What?” I asked without preamble.

Cudro shook his head sadly. “He’s in your room. He feared losing himself. He did not. He feared it enough, though, that...”

I did not hear the rest: I was already up the stairs and into our room. Gaston was lying on the hammock, bound. I threw the clothing into the corner and went to him.

His eyes were calm, and dark green in the candlelight.

“May I release you?” I asked.

“Now that you are here,” he said.

I cut him free and we embraced.

“I was almost overcome with the urge to go and find you,” he whispered. “I kept envisioning you with...”

I shook my head and pulled back to regard him. “You need not. I consummated the affair with my dagger.”

His eyes shot wide, and I realized how that sounded.

“Non, non, with the hilt. I could not rise for her, or rather, stay risen. She was...” I groaned.

He moved so that he could tug on my ruffled shirt. I doffed it and my breeches and he likewise removed his clothes.

We lay naked together, nose to nose, and I told him all that had occurred with the Damn Bride.

“So your father chose her for political reasons?” he asked.

“She seems to feel that is the cause.”

He sighed. “I feel some sympathy for her. I will endeavor not to hate her, but I am pleased you could not lie with her, though that defeats everything.”

“Oui, as am I. I know not what we will do. And I have caused other mischief as well.” I told him of my arranging a marriage.

“Will,” he said when I finished, “I cannot allow you to go anywhere

by yourself." There was no amusement in his tone, but there was no recrimination either.

"Oui," I sighed. "Has there been word of Striker?"

"Non, not that I know of."

"I can only pray he will not hate me," I said. "That I chose the course he planned to take."

"Oui, tell the Gods all must be well," Gaston said sincerely.

"All must be well," I said with conviction. "I feel this is a course that can make many happy."

Though I felt some unease at my sister's melancholy demeanor when last I saw her.

"It is not an evil thing," he said with continued contemplation. "But oui, I should not allow you out of my sight."

"Because I will do mischief, or because your Horse will think it?" I asked lightly. I did not wish to dwell upon my mistakes.

He grinned. "Both."

He fondled my manhood, which, in wake of the other attempt, had only experienced tepid and cautious interest in lying there with him. It quickly came to life at his ministrations. I returned them in kind upon his, and found him equally lively.

"As I lay here waiting, I decided I wished to have you again," he said solemnly.

"There was doubt?" I teased.

"Within me," he said.

I wanted to, but as he had asked our friends to bind him lest he lose control already this night, and as disaster had occurred the last time I took him in the aftermath of our wrangling with a woman, I was concerned.

At my frown he added, "Trust me, Will."

"My love, if this goads your Horse into..."

He silenced me with a kiss, and soon I was goaded on by my unrequited manhood to not care what he wished, as long as he wished for me in some fashion.

He rolled beneath me and I discovered he opened for me with ease. I followed the course I very much wanted to follow, as water runs down a hill. He was tight and warm about me, and I sank into him with relief, not seeking to satiate my lust so much, but my soul. For the first time, I was able to thrust into him with abandon, and though I enjoyed his doing the same to me in abundance, I realized I did need to do this on occasion. I came hard, and the blinding white light of Heaven filled my closed eyes for a time. As my member shrank inside him, he pulled my arm around to stroke his. I cupped my hand about his cock head before he came, and delighted in the sudden pooling of heat. I spread the captured jism upon his belly.

As we drifted to sleep, I felt the momentary stir of worry that perhaps his Horse did not seem as content as mine once again; but it did not keep me from sleeping, nor did it trouble my dreams.

We woke abruptly to noise downstairs. It was still dark, and the candle had burned down. We reached for weapons as footsteps pounded up the stairs.

"Gaston, Will," Liam called from beyond the door. "Don' ya be shootin' me. Come quick. It be Striker."

We drew on our breeches hurriedly in the dark and were downstairs, pistols still in hand, a moment later.

Striker was on the table. The Bard and Cudro were attempting to get him to lie down. He was drunk and arguing. He was also beaten bloody. I shoved the pistol into my waistband and went to help them. Gaston ran upstairs to get his bag.

"What happened?" I asked.

Striker reached for me and pulled me into his embrace.

"He came looking for Pete," the Bard said grimly. "He was drunk, Pete was drinking again. They talked for a time in the cabin, and then we heard them fighting."

"The bastard," Striker said. He released me enough to spit blood on the floor. "No more! He doesn't own me. I'm a free man."

One eye was swelling badly and his lip was split. I thought it likely he was missing teeth, the way he drooled blood. There was a gash on the side of his head.

The Bard and an anxious Dickey were also bruised and bloody.

"How is Pete?" I asked the Bard.

He smiled grimly. "Better. Took six of us to tie him to the mast."

"Oh, Hell," I sighed.

Gaston returned and we managed to convince Striker to lie upon the table so that he could be examined. He passed into unconsciousness as Gaston stitched the gash on his head. As my matelot worked, I began to wonder who I should beg the Gods to provide me protection from: Pete or my sister.

"We must see to Pete," Gaston said in French as he finished bandaging Striker.

I nodded reluctantly.

The Bard nodded tiredly, for though he did not speak French, he recognized the name.

I looked to Cudro. "Do not let him wander off." I indicated Striker. "He has a busy day once he wakes."

The Dutchman snorted with amusement.

Gaston and I went upstairs to don clothing and weapons.

"It appears you anticipated Striker's choice correctly," Gaston said thoughtfully as he pulled his tunic on.

"So it would seem. Yet I still feel I have done a great mischief."

He regarded me curiously. "Will, if they have parted, it is not your doing."

"I suppose not. I did not bring them together. I did not make Striker favor women. I did not make Pete hate them. I did not invite my sister here with designs of them meeting. Still..."

"You seek guilt," he said kindly.

"Non," I sighed with amusement. "I do not seek it; I think it follows me about, ever ready to pounce."

"Hmm, I wish I could spew a balm to ease your conscience, but I did not tell Morgan and Modyford my friend and sister would marry without consulting them." He grinned only as he finished.

I sighed, only partly with amusement. "Thank you. I so needed to hear that."

He chuckled and embraced me for a quick kiss. "I love you," he whispered as our lips parted.

"*That* is most important."

My words minded me of my musings of the night before as we gathered our weapons and made our way downstairs. If Gaston occupied a position of primacy in my life, did I measure all things by his judgment? Had I accepted his love, and his love only, such that I heard his opinion of me and no other? Was that madness, or was that as it should be when one loved? I felt the urge to ask his opinion on the matter, and chuckled to myself at the irony of that as we walked out into an oddly misty morning just before dawn.

Port Royal was nearly silent, and the light of the few lamps appeared shrouded. There was a chill in the air: not as one would find in England, and not so that I was uncomfortable in breeches and tunic; but enough for me to notice it.

"I thought it did not get cold here in winter," I remarked.

"It usually doesn't," the Bard said. "This is strange. Happens from time to time, though. Don't worry, it won't get any colder."

I wondered if it were a portent. I did not feel it boded well if it were.

The men aboard had released Pete, as he had calmed considerably after the fight. We found him sitting on the quarterdeck, staring at nothing with his back to the rail. In the dim lamplight, I could see that he was bruised and battered, but not nearly as badly as Striker. With the mist and eerie quiet, I felt we approached him in the aftermath of battle.

He looked up at us and heaved a tired sigh. "Owlz'E?"

His words were slurred in addition to his usual lack of enunciation, and it took me a moment to puzzle through what he said. My matelot was not so slow.

"He will survive," Gaston said with a shrug. "How are you?"

"IBeWell. IDidnaMeanTaHit'ImAsIDid. MadeMeMadWithAnger."

Gaston knelt beside him and began probing his wounds. Pete did not shrug him off.

"What did he say?" I asked once I translated that last. They looked up at me sharply and I realized I had phrased my question poorly. "What did Striker say to make you so mad?" I added quickly and squatted beside them.

Pete glared at me: not as if I were a friend who had earned his ire, but as if I were a man he did not know and my words angered him.

"I am not to blame," I said, as much for myself as for him.

"YaAsked'Er'Ere!"

"Because she was in danger where she was, and long before I met the two of you!" I protested.

His frown was stubborn, and I knew I fought a fool's battle with a drunk. I stood and retreated, pleased I was wise enough to do so, yet angry with myself that I was not so wise I would not stew on his words, as they piqued my guilt.

This matter would need to be resolved once he was sober. Or, sadly, perhaps it was not to be resolved. I did not wish to consider that outcome, though.

Gaston spoke quietly with him while he worked. I stood at the rail and listened to the town begin to wake as the eastern horizon slowly brightened. At last Gaston finished and came to collect me. We slipped off the boat and into the canoe in silence.

"He is aware of why this has occurred," Gaston said, "but he wishes for a scapegoat; and you are married now, despite me, and Sarah is your sister."

I sighed and shrugged. "I know. Thank the Gods he does not know what else I have wrought."

"Do you intend for Striker to marry her today?" he asked.

I craned about to regard him and found him smiling.

"It should be soon," I said with an answering grin. "We sail... when? Tomorrow?" I tried to recall all Morgan had said last night. He thought to sail with the morning wind the day after tomorrow, which meant we would all be boarded the night before, with the usual revelry. So any wedding would well be today if they were to consummate the matter over the course of a night.

"Oui, it must be today," I said. "I do not know how..."

"Will," Gaston said gently, "you do not yet know *if*."

"Oui," I sighed.

Striker was still sleeping on the table when we returned. I did not expect him to move of his own accord until midday at the earliest, and then I imagined the activity would prove so unsatisfactory that he would merely wish to curl up someplace and sleep for another day. Of course, we could not allow him that; yet I did not think waking him now would serve much purpose either, as he had only been asleep a few hours. It would behoove us, or rather me, to set things in motion prior to his rising, but that was a thing I was loathe to do.

I explained my musings to Gaston.

He shrugged. "What needs to be done before? When he rises, we will haul him to the church along with your sister."

"Well, as you are correct, and that aspect of the matter is so simply done, I suppose preparing her will be the only order of business before he rises."

"She will likely come here," he said.

I looked at Striker, sprawled, bloody and drooling upon the table,

and turned back to my matelot. He sighed heavily and we hauled Striker upstairs and deposited him on the floor in our room. We would have put him in his own, but the snores of Cudro and others reverberated from it.

“Are you hungry or tired?” Gaston asked.

“Tired,” I said, after consideration.

“Then let us sleep.”

And so we curled in our hammock, with no erotic preamble. My mind wandered, seeking some measure of it all. Was love madness? Was it not the ultimate emotion the Gods granted, as I had told Morgan? Then my meanderings reached the disconcerting conclusion that all things involving the Gods led to madness on the part of some poor soul: I could not think of a single myth to gainsay it.

Forty-Two

Wherein We Institute New Traditions

We woke to urgent knocking on our door. It was Agnes; she had arrived with my sister, uncle and Rucker. I told her we would be down momentarily, and then I cursed quietly as we listened to her departing steps.

“I thought you liked your uncle and Rucker,” Gaston said.

“I do,” I sighed, “but... There is much that should be discussed and arranged, and I feel I have no heart for it.”

He drew my hand to his crotch and showed me what he had heart for.

“But you must be quiet,” he said with mock seriousness. There was a cast to his mien that told me I would play as much with the Horse as the man.

I muffled my laughter in his shoulder and surrendered to his ministrations. We attempted to make quick work of it, and thankfully he was not as distracted as I by the presence of those downstairs. In the end, he came with a nearly silent satisfied grunt, and I did nothing at all, neither in sound or pleasure. Yet, I was not dismayed or dissatisfied by the endeavor.

In some fashion, the activity had provided me the clarity of thought to put much into perspective. Waking to a loving cock was truly the most one could want from life, as it meant one was wanted, loved, and not alone. One should do all that one could to insure that one woke in such a state, and endeavor to assist others in achieving the same, whether it be madness or not.

In the aftermath, Gaston kissed my neck and shoulders with playful little nips, until he stopped quite suddenly and I felt his body stiffen behind me. I did likewise, and looked around to see the cause of his alarm. I found Striker watching us with bleary and sad eyes.

"Good morning," I said.

"Stupid buggers," he muttered with a grin that must have pained him.

"Aye, that we are," I said.

He touched the bandage on his head gingerly. "Have you seen Pete?"

I snorted. "Aye, Gaston saw to him, though he needed little tending as compared to you. You lost well," I added lightly. "Was that your intent?"

"My intent..." he sighed sadly and frowned at his memories, or perhaps the difficulty of thinking with what must have been a severely aching head.

Gaston left me and went to his bag to find the bottle of laudanum. He poured Striker a weak draught, which our friend accepted readily.

"My intent," Striker said at last, "was to inform him that I would pursue your sister with or without him."

"Ah," I said carefully. "And his response was that it would be without?"

He snorted. "We are matelots no more."

"And do you still feel the same; that you wish to pursue my sister without him? Or, in somewhat sober reflection..." I asked.

"Nay," he said with a thoughtful nod. "I will not change course."

"Then you might be pleased at what I have wrought; then again, you might be inclined to beat me bloody," I said.

"You best tell me now, then," he chuckled weakly, "as I'm in no condition to do such a thing."

So I told him of what had transpired, starting with my uncle's fears and wish to marry her off and ending with my solution and the reaction of others to such a thing.

He was quiet for a time, and I followed Gaston in dressing as we waited.

"So it is all so easy then," Striker said at last.

"Pete will sail with us," Gaston said quietly. "And he vows you will not dismiss him from the cabin."

Striker smirked with sad amusement. "Well, that is to be expected. And I will not. I will give him all he is due and more." He shook his head with a frown. "He has no head for money."

"My sister is downstairs, with my uncle," I said.

This brought an end to his reverie.

"They can't see me like this," he said quickly.

"Well, as you should marry today, they will have to. Though I suppose we can get you cleaned up and dressed before you go down. But perhaps I should send Sarah up."

"To see the cow she will be buying?" he asked.

I chuckled. "That would be one way to consider it. I feel you should talk to one another and assess your feelings, without the machinations of others such as myself."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"I will assist him," Gaston said. "Send Sarah up."

I nodded and made my way downstairs. As she had done yesterday, Agnes had stopped by the fish vendors, and I had smelled her purchases even as Gaston and I trysted. My stomach grumbled as I was greeted by the full aroma at the bottom of the stairs.

My uncle and Rucker seemed surprised by my appearance, but Agnes curtsied and Sarah rose from the floor, where she had been playing with a dog, and embraced me.

I asked Agnes to take some water and towels upstairs, and then I whispered to Sarah, "Striker is here. He and Pete have fought and parted."

"Oh, no," she said, but her eyes held a new and brighter light.

"Go and speak with him," I urged.

She was gone up the stairs before I could finish the utterance.

Just as quickly, I joined the men at the table and snatched up a piece of fish.

My uncle seemed distraught, and I wondered if there had been blood on the table when they arrived.

"Where is she off to?" he asked.

"To speak with her... bridegroom." I shrugged.

"I suppose... well..." he trailed off and changed the subject. "And how is it that you are dressed like a common peasant, dear boy?"

Rucker smiled with suppressed amusement, but my uncle was frowning as he regarded me.

I had at least bothered to don a tunic in addition to my breeches; but still, with my shorn head, my earrings were evident.

I smiled about a mouthful of fish and swallowed. "This is how I usually appear."

"Truly?" my uncle asked.

"I find it quite comfortable in these climes," I said.

"But Marsy, you are a gentlemen, we are expected to present ourselves well before... commoners."

I frowned. "Uncle, I know no common men here, at least not by my own definition, and that has nothing to do with breeding or wealth and all to do with their actions and beliefs. And I do not use my title here amongst men I call my equals. Nay, here, I am known as Will. I do not expect you to call me such, as it is foreign to you, but I do expect you to respect my choices on the matter, and refrain from ever referring to the men I call brothers as commoners. Especially since, as with me, you cannot know the station of their birth or wealth by their attire."

As I spoke, my uncle flushed and opened and closed his mouth to speak several times, but as I finished, he calmed and nodded thoughtfully. "I will remember that. I meant no offense."

"This is not England," I said kindly.

He frowned with more thought. "I see it is not. I... It is just that the colonies to the north are more in keeping with English tradition, and many of the men I have met here so far have been as well."

"Aye, I realize that," I said. "They wish to bring all things English here. I do not associate with men who do that by choice. This is a new land, and it deserves new traditions. And though I feel the old ways will win out in the end, I wish to live by the new."

Gaston had joined us; and now he stood at the bottom of the stairs, with his arms crossed and a small smile that told me he expected to always find me pontificating while dining.

"Gentlemen," I said with pride, "allow me to introduce my matelot, Gaston Sable."

Rucker was already on his feet and bowing. "I am honored to make your acquaintance."

"This is Mister Ira Rucker," I said.

Gaston smiled and shook his hand. "As I am you. Will has said many wonderful things about you, and blames you for making him a man of the people, for which I commend you."

"And this is my uncle, Mister Cedric Williams."

My uncle belatedly stood and bowed, but the gaze he cast upon me was confused. He had not read my letters, and my father would not have ever mentioned Gaston to him, by name or possibly in any other fashion. Apparently my sister and Rucker had chosen to either be discreet, or what they might have said had fallen on deaf ears, as my uncle would not have realized the import.

"Gaston is my partner, in all things," I said.

My uncle's eyes narrowed and then widened with new understanding. "Oh."

"Gaston is another example of one not being able to judge a man by his attire," I added. "His father is a Marquis."

I hoped Gaston would not mind this added information, but I knew that, sadly, it would aid matters in sitting well with my uncle. My glance to my matelot proved he understood, and he bowed to my uncle only so far as would be proper for a marquis' son to greet a man of lesser rank. I was amused by this, but sought to suppress it.

Gaston took a seat beside me, but at the head of the table, and helped himself to the fish with gentlemanly care and decorum.

"Does your father know of... Mister Sable's involvement with you?" my uncle asked.

"Please call me Gaston," my matelot said.

"Aye," I said with a grin, "and he sent a bride in response."

"Did he feel you would refuse her, I wonder?" my uncle asked.

"I feel that to be the case." I shrugged. "However, my bride avers that there was some matter of political or monetary expediency involved in the arrangement."

"Interesting," Uncle Cedric said. "Whitlock is... Well, the former Earl

was well-loved in the old King's court before Cromwell. I would imagine the King restored many of the taxes and other incomes granted to the current Whitlock, as he did with many of the houses that supported his return to the throne. But the current Earl is a man given to the excesses of the Restoration, from what I have been told."

"His daughter mentioned debts," I said.

"Ah," he nodded. "Well, your father is very keen on the sugar business, and Whitlock might have held some import tax or other gratuity related to that."

I shook my head. Perhaps I was being quite the fool in feeling that my father was going to lengths to thwart me. Perhaps he paid me little mind at all, yet...

"Nay," my uncle was saying. "Many pieces of the matter do not sit right with me."

"How so?" I asked. "Truly, tell me, do you believe he wishes for me to inherit?"

My uncle regarded me with a somber frown. "Nay, my boy, I do not. Not now."

"Has he said as much?" I asked.

"Nay, not to me," he said sadly. "Before your return, I thought of the matter differently than I perceive it now. I have come to believe that you are correct, that he holds Shane in far greater esteem and would have him as his son."

Something my sister had said stirred the fish in my gut.

"Please," I said, "in the name of God, tell me there is no chance Shane could actually be his son."

My uncle gasped. "Nay, my Lord, I should hope not. Nay, he never liked Shane's mother. He despised the woman and had little to do with our cousin after his marriage."

"Another strange thought has crossed my mind," I said carefully. "It is said that they were very close, my father and your cousin. Could it be that they were... lovers?"

His eyes narrowed and then darted from Gaston to me. He met my gaze and took a deep breath. "I have no knowledge of such a thing, nor have I heard rumors other than what is often said when boys are such close friends at a tender age. Yet, I have never been privy to my brother's thoughts or feelings to a degree that reasonable discretion on his part would not have thwarted my knowing of such a thing."

"Truly..." I breathed.

"It would explain his..." he sighed.

"His love of Shane," I said.

"Aye, but why would he frown upon you so very much?" he asked.

"Perhaps he wished to spare you grief," Gaston said.

I turned to find him regarding me with a troubled frown.

Anger ignited in my roiling belly.

"Gods!" I swore. "Why is it at every turn I know not whether to hate the man or... pity him, such that I should try and make peace with

him?"

"What?" Striker asked.

He stood with Sarah on his arm at the bottom of the stairs.

"My father and my damn cousin's father might have been lovers," I said.

"Might," my uncle added emphatically.

"But you think it is within the realm of possibility?" Sarah asked my uncle.

He nodded resolutely; and then his attention turned to Striker at her side, and he frowned.

"Uncle," she said proudly, "this is Captain James Striker, and we have decided to marry."

My uncle stood. He seemed as appalled at Striker's appearance as he had been at mine.

They had dressed Striker in a shirt, coat, and boots, with a kerchief to hide the bandage on his head, but the rest of the livid bruises on his face and his swollen eye were all too evident.

"I ask that you excuse my appearance, sir," Striker said. "I was involved in a bit of a brawl last night."

"As a young man who finds he is soon to marry and lose his freedom is often wont to do," I added quickly.

This brought a little smile to my uncle's lips. "As long as it is not a thing you are prone to."

"Sir, I am prone to fighting the Spanish, but not in fighting my brethren for the sake of it," Striker said.

My uncle shook his hand. "Marse... Will... speaks highly of you."

"And of you, sir," Striker said, "though I know you are not marrying anyone's niece this day."

My uncle chuckled at this. "Nay, opinions of me matter little in this matter. So, when shall the ceremony take place?"

"Today," I said.

Striker and Sarah nodded. My uncle frowned.

"We sail on the morrow, sir," Striker said.

"Well then, I suppose it must be today," my uncle said and returned to his seat. "And all other arrangements must be made as well. I seem to recall mention being made of securing land for a house here in town."

"Aye," I said.

Striker's good eye was fixed upon me, and concern tightened his features.

I smiled at him but addressed my sister.

"Sarah, you will need to consult with Theodore on the matter. I know I will have little say in the house that will be built for my wife. I am sure she will choose to have a home similar to all the others built here, but I would suggest that you not build an English house. Houses designed and constructed as the French build in these parts are more conducive to comfort in the heat. They are much like homes along the Mediterranean."

I sketched with my fingers on the table, and they came to sit so that they could see.

"I have seen just such a fine home built in a horseshoe shape," I explained, "with the rooms arranged in rows so that shutters or windows can be opened across from one another to allow cooling breezes to pass through. The inner area can be a garden, with the cookhouse and other structures well behind."

"Like a Roman villa?" Rucker asked.

"Aye, just so," I said.

"Like Doucette's house?" Striker asked.

"Aye."

"That would be a fine thing," he said with a thoughtful nod.

Sarah was frowning at my hands and the imaginary lines I had sketched. She looked to Rucker. "You know what he is talking about?"

"I believe so," Rucker said.

"Good, then you will design it," she said. "It sounds a fine thing to me as well."

Striker was regarding me with concern again.

"We will leave with you the money I keep in town," Gaston told Sarah. "It should be adequate for building such a house and providing for your expenses, possibly even for pursuing the business matters that were discussed the other night."

"I have money," Striker said uncomfortably.

"This will be Sarah's dowry, so now you will have more," Gaston said.

Sarah stood and embraced him.

"Wait," my uncle said. "My brother sent money for the construction of a house for Will's bride, and he sent some money to see that Sarah was cared for. I cannot have, and do not need, someone not of our family providing her dowry. It just would not be proper."

"All I have is Will's," Gaston said firmly. "He is my matelot; it is as if it comes from him."

"Well," my uncle said slowly, "I suppose that is acceptable, then."

Striker's gaze was locked with mine.

"Take it," I mouthed.

He snorted. "Sarah, you will keep an accounting of it."

"Of course," she said as she sat again.

"There is no need," I said as firmly.

"You will keep an accounting of any money used for a business," he said just as firmly.

She was smiling. "And the both of you will always have a room at our house."

"That will be a good thing," I said, "as Gaston and the Bride will not share a roof by mutual accord."

"Someday, we will build a house at the bay I now own on the western shore," Striker told her.

I chuckled. "Someday, Gaston and I will build a larger dwelling

upon the Point, but the Damn Bride will never live there. Though," I turned to my uncle, "I am supposed to have Ithaca when I produce an heir. Would you know if that still holds true?"

He shrugged. "He has made no mention of it to me; however, I know he has little use for the plantation itself. He has far more interest in the importing and refining of sugar."

"Well, when Ithaca is mine, it will no longer grow sugar," I said.

"Truly?" my uncle asked. "It is quite lucrative, from what my new acquaintances here have shown me."

"There are more useful and less troublesome crops to be grown here," I said. "Whether or not they have any monetary value, they will at least feed people."

He seemed perplexed by this. "Such as?"

"Pineapple," Gaston said.

"Ah," my uncle said with a bright smile. "I adore that fruit. It is considered quite the treat in England as well."

I looked to my sister. "Perhaps you could explore the idea of exporting pineapple to England. See if there are any taxes associated with it."

"I will do so," she said with a smile. "I have much to do, I should be taking notes."

"I am," Agnes said.

As was often the case, the girl had joined us without my noticing.

"What is this business you are speaking of?" my uncle asked.

"There was discussion of starting a shipping concern," Sarah told him.

"Is that a thing a young lady should be..." he began.

Sarah cut him short. "I learned much from Father, Uncle."

"Aye, but you will be married now, and..."

"I will be happy to have my wife engaged in such activities," Striker said.

Uncle Cedric's face fell.

"It is a bold new land with new traditions," I said with a smile.

My uncle chuckled. "Aye, it is not England, so you keep saying."

Sarah was deep in thought. She looked to Striker. "So any business venture I start should include Gaston and Will, of course, but I believe you mentioned others."

"Aye," Striker said. "The Bard, Dickey as his matelot, Cudro, and... Pete."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Of course. Agnes, did you record those names?"

"Aye," the girl said as she finished writing on a page in a new sketchbook.

"Theodore knows them all," I added. "Also, remember to consult with Belfry. And, there might be others who wish to invest in the matter over time. As it is, we will have to see what contribution some of those listed will wish to make. I know the Bard is particularly interested, but I

should discuss matters with Cudro.”

Gaston tapped my arm and pointed. I looked up and decided I was blind or my sight was in some other way impaired. I could understand not noticing Agnes, she was a mousey thing; but I could not believe I had failed to see Cudro standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“How much need I explain?” I asked him with a chuckle.

“I have money I would invest in such a venture,” he rumbled. “And if you are moving to a new house upon our return, I would be interested in purchasing this one. But... I would know why Striker is calling your sister his wife.”

“I will wed her this day,” Striker said.

Cudro nodded thoughtfully and scratched his beard. I thought he likely had a thing or two to say about that matter, but would not say them in our current company.

“Cudro, you have met my sister, Sarah; this is my uncle, Mister Cedric Williams, and my old friend and tutor, Mister Ira Rucker.” I grinned at the big Dutchman. “I am sorry, friend, I know no other name for you.”

He chuckled. “Wilhelm Voorman.”

He bowed and shook hands with my uncle and Rucker, and joined us at the table. We all set about discussing business ventures; and if Cudro had issue with my sister being in charge of the matter, he did not indicate it. And, thankfully, my uncle voiced no further reservations. I began to feel optimistic about what we would leave in the wake of our sailing.

Our discussion was interrupted sometime later by the arrival of Theodore. He was apprised of the particulars and more talking ensued, for so long that Gaston and I were finally forced to slip away to the market, to acquire more food to sate the rumbling bellies about the table.

“What shall we call this venture?” I asked as we headed to the market. For the last several hours it had simply been called the Venture. “I would assume that there are several companies with Jamaica and Port Royal in the title, and of course, West Indies and the like. I would not have us be so common.”

Gaston shrugged. “Though your sister will manage it, there are too many involved to name it after one or even two.”

“Oui, we have quite the Round Table of participants.”

None had been willing to take the head of the matter, and so the governance of the venture was now seen as a democracy of sorts. I had been musing on the idea of new traditions for hours. Perhaps we were building something akin to Camelot: a place where brave and hearty knights were all equal. Was that not what the Brethren represented?

But did that not make Sarah Guinevere? Nay, she had another role to play. Striker was the one who had changed partners. Perhaps he was Guinevere. But did that leave Pete as Arthur and did that then make Sarah Lancelot?

Gaston proved once again that he knew me well.

"You cannot call it Camelot. It is a thing of wolves... and money," he said seriously. "It must not be whimsical."

I grinned at him. "But as I am a centaur, if it does not contain some element of whimsy I shall want no part of it. And if it is Camelot, who is Arthur?"

He snorted. "We will sail soon and have endless hours to discuss it. If you do choose a whimsical name, I suggest you hide it well. Planters will send cargo on ships named after mythical beings or tales, but they will not trust a merchant company named after one."

I knew he was correct. Not only would future patrons of our shipping services not stand for such a thing, the wolves we called friends and did this business with would not either. They were set on building a serious enterprise, if not on founding an empire.

"An empire born of wolves," I mused, "or at least by those raised by them."

My gaze drifted over the barrels, boxes, and crates of the market. Most had been marked in some fashion with either the company or place of origin, or the enterprise that brought them to market. As such names were often long, many of these marks were comprised only of initials. I could recall a number of companies that were known by letters and not words.

"R and R Ventures," I said.

"Romulus and Remus," Gaston said with a knowing smile.

"Am I so very simple to understand, or are you attuned to my thoughts such that you can divine them?" I asked with amusement.

"Both. And one of them killed the other."

He bought a wine barrel and pushed it to me to roll.

"Is there any myth where someone did not die?" I asked, thinking of my ruminations on madness and the Gods. "I cannot recall one."

"People remember what interests them," he said as he led us toward the meat market. "In school, the boys all remembered the battles where some hero died. Among the Brethren, they remember how much gold was lost or gained on a raid. Is it not a necessity of drama that something terrible occurs, or there is risk of it occurring?"

"Oui. But I did not recall the story of Romulus and Remus because one killed the other, but because they were suckled by a she-wolf, and I wondered what that would be like."

He frowned thoughtfully. "A dog is similar to a wolf, but Bella has weaned the pups."

I was aghast at the idea. "Gods, I would never think to trouble the animal so."

His frown deepened. "Non," he said quickly. "Some could be milked into a cup."

"I do not wish to know... now. It was a thing of boyish fancy."

"You are either inquisitive about the matter or you are not," he said with some puzzlement over my apparent change of heart.

I shrugged. "I do not always wish to know the answer to my musings."

"Sophist," he said with mock disparagement.

We purchased a ham, and then stopped by Massey's to retrieve Gaston's money. I was quite tired of rolling the barrel about when we at last returned to the house. To my dismay, they were readying for the walk to the church and not inclined to sit about and drink. We each took a hunk of ham and went.

I presented my idea for the name.

"What do the R's stand for?" Sarah asked.

"Romulus and Remus," I said, and tried not to wince at the censure I was sure would be forthcoming.

They all frowned at me, including Rucker who surely knew of what I spoke.

"Did not one of them found Rome?" Sarah asked at last.

"Aye," I said.

"I do not like Ventures," Theodore said. "It has a connotation of risk."

"The R and R Merchant Company?" Striker offered.

Cudro chuckled deeply. "What is that saying? Rome was not built in a day."

"And neither will this be, but it will be built," Striker said.

"What shall I tell people if they ask what the R's stand for?" Theodore asked.

"The names of our ancestors," I said.

He shrugged agreeably.

We found the pastor was delighted to perform another ceremony; and to my amusement, he did not recognize me. This time I was pleased to be in the chapel, with someone else getting married and Gaston at my side as he should be.

And thus James Striker married my sister, and the R & R Merchant Company was born. We returned to the house and found that evening had come upon us – and with it, a good number of the ship's crew, including many of our cabal. Thankfully, they were not all in the house: enough of them were in the street so that we had ample warning of their presence.

I turned to Sarah and Striker. "Perhaps you should retire to the King's House."

Striker sighed tiredly as he perused what we could see of our men. "Aye."

"We will stay and keep them company," I assured him.

"Non," Gaston whispered in my ear. "You must go to the Damn Bride."

Even though I had not been aroused, my cock shrank further still.

I studied him and recalled all that had occurred last night, especially my returning to find him bound by his own decision.

"Go on, I will be about shortly," I assured Striker.

Striker and Sarah turned up an alleyway and left us.

My uncle hesitated in following them. "I will wait for you to change your attire."

Gaston nodded and led me to the house. My uncle and Rucker followed. We left Cudro to introduce them and retreated to our room.

"My going to her will do little good," I said as soon as the door closed behind us.

"You should make the attempt," Gaston said resolutely.

"I do not think I should leave you... again."

He frowned and spoke with a trace of irritation. "I shall be fine."

"I would not return to find you bound again," I said patiently.

"What would you have of me?" he asked with anger. "Would you rather I had done as the Horse wished and went and strangled the bitch?"

We were not discussing the same thing.

"Non... You did indeed control it admirably. Yet, I would not have you need to control it at all because of this. I would rather that "fine" be defined as a lack of distress on your part. I would rather your Horse not feel the need."

The anger left him with a sigh, and his frown turned thoughtful. "I truly do not feel it will feel such a need tonight. Now that I... it... knows how little you favor her. Trust me, Will."

"As you trust me," I said.

His eyes narrowed and he studied me with suspicion.

"What?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing. I am... not as I should be, even now. I will not have you hold my hand, though. Go. Do what we must have you do. I will be... here when you return."

I shook my head. "You need not battle it alone, and I need not..."

His fingers were on my lips.

"I must, and you must," he whispered. "And I am never alone. You are always with me."

"As you are always in my heart," I whispered. "I will go. It will do little good. Let us hope she is sufficiently intoxicated again to not know I use a dirk."

Mischief warped his lips, and he closed on me. I backed to the wall and he placed hands beside my shoulders to lean towards me – without our touching – and whisper, "Would you be able to do as you must, if you felt me somewhere else other than your heart?"

"Oui," I breathed.

His breath and then his tongue tickled my ear, and one of his hands went to my crotch.

"Oui," I said.

He chuckled as his teeth worried the line of my jaw and his fingers brought me to life.

There was sharp rap on the door, and we started.

"Marse... Will, will...you be ready soon?" my uncle called.

I swore silently, but Gaston turned and tore the door open.

"I am not finished with him yet," Gaston said in clipped English.

I could not see my matelot's face; but I could see my uncle's, and I knew he looked into the eyes of the Horse. He was, of course, quite startled.

I knew I needed to shoo him off. "I..."

Gaston's hand snapped up between us. His gaze still held my hapless uncle's.

"He is mine and I will send him when I wish," Gaston said.

He slammed the door and turned back to me. His eyes did glitter with danger as I expected.

I felt no fear. I shed my tunic and weapons and dropped my breeches.

"I am yours," I whispered huskily.

His grin was truly feral as he came to me. He spun me about without preamble and I rested my forehead and forearms on the wall as he tongued the line of my spine and kneaded my shoulders. His member was a teasing presence brushing my buttocks. My cock was straining to reach the wall before me, as if the wood would somehow provide it comfort.

"You cannot come," he hissed as he greased himself.

I chuckled in acquiescence, but I was not sure how he would stop me. But then he took me standing, with such passion that the needs of my member were eclipsed by his, as they often were when he was within me. I held the wall, and squatted to meet him, and thought of little other than the sensations he evoked in the one place he allowed us to have contact.

He held me at last when he came, and we sagged to the floor with me still impaled upon him. Sated and shrunken, he finally slid from me. My cock stirred anew, as it had become accustomed to being sated in the other's wake. He touched it with gentle fingers.

"Fuck her," he whispered. "Think of me, and fuck her as if I stood behind you driving you into her."

I gasped as I envisioned such a thing, and both my cock and my hole throbbed.

"That might indeed do the deed," I murmured.

"Good," he said with a chuckle and nip on my ear.

With that he stood and tossed me my jacket and the rest of my proper attire. My member did not diminish as I dressed, and he seemed greatly pleased in this.

"You will be here, and you will be fine," I murmured as he pushed me to the door.

"Oui."

His eyes were once again those of the man I loved.

I left him after a long loving kiss.

I ran the haranguing gauntlet of our fellows, who thought little of my destination or purpose, and found my uncle and Rucker waiting in the

street.

"Marsdale," my uncle said firmly. He looked as if he had composed quite a speech.

"He is my matelot," I said calmly, and walked away to lead them to the King's House.

This served to quiet him until we reached our destination. I felt it foolish to knock: the lady residing there was now my wife, which in theory made me master of the house. So I strode in as if I did indeed own the place.

My sudden entry was greeted by Ashland lurching to his feet from his seat in the parlor. He gave me a curt nod. Nearby, the housekeeper squeaked at my unexpected presence and bustled upstairs in haste.

"Ah, my Lord," Coswold said as he smoothly stepped between me and the base of the stairs. "We did not know when to expect you."

"Nay, you did not," I said pleasantly. "I assume the housekeeper has gone to tell my bride I have arrived."

"Aye, my Lord. Lady Marsdale has recently finished dining and retired to her room."

Hearing her referred to as Lady Marsdale was jarring. Though the title had been alien to me for much of my adult life, it was mine, and I was surprised to find I did not like her attached to it. Though I did not wish to have anyone else, Gaston perhaps, attached to it either. It was a thing of my father, and I wanted little of it.

And despite its recent thoughts of Gaston, and upon hearing her referred to at all, and knowing it would be forced to wait, my cock shriveled away to sulk.

"What is our housekeeper's name?" I asked to distract myself.

Coswold frowned ever so little. "Henrietta, my Lord. And Lady Marsdale's maid is known as Tessa."

Ashland approached. "Congratulations on the marriage of your sister, my Lord. We were all quite surprised, the lady especially."

His plain face was the epitome of nonchalance, and thus I schooled my features to blandness as well, though I wished to smile at him. I dearly wished to ask him why my wife had been upset by this news, but if he did not feel he could speak freely in front of Coswold, neither should I.

Henrietta returned down the stairs. I took a good look at her. She was plump but pleasant in appearance, with dark eyes and dull brown hair pulled tightly back into a bun.

"Um, begging your pardon, my Lord, but Mi... Lady Marsdale is indisposed at the moment. She says she will send Tessa down when she is ready to receive you."

"That will be fine," I assured her.

"Have you gentlemen eaten, my Lord?" she asked, her gaze going past me to my uncle and Rucker.

"Not as we might have wished," I said. "We have had a busy day making arrangements concerning my sister's marriage and business

ventures.”

“Then I’ll fetch something, sirs,” she said and hurried off.

We all muttered our thanks and headed to the dining room. To my surprise, Ashland and Coswold followed.

“My Lord,” Ashland said. “If you would pardon me for a moment. We have heard that you are to sail. We had some questions concerning the management of things in your absence.”

“Ah...” I sighed. “Come, join us, sit, I will tell you what I know.”

I waved them to seats at the table Rucker and my uncle shared.

“I do not sit at my lord’s table,” Coswold said stiffly.

“Your loss,” I said and sat at the head of it.

Ashland barely suppressed a smile as he sat decorously several places down on the side of the table opposite my uncle and Rucker. Coswold continued to stand with his hands clasped behind his back. I tried to ignore him.

Henrietta served us bread and a delicious soup in pewter bowls. I explained what I knew of the housing arrangements and when such things were expected to be concluded. Then to my uncle’s further dismay, I was quite frank with Ashland about the concerns over my sister’s safety.

“My Lord,” Ashland said when I finished. “Then there is a matter we must discuss. I am not in Lady Marsdale’s employ. I was hired by Lord Whitlock to bring her here and remain with her until she married. My payment included my return passage to England. However...”

My uncle seemed startled by this.

I asked, “Would you wish to stay, Mister Ashland?”

“Aye, my Lord, I have no pressing need to return to England, and as your sister must be safeguarded while you and Captain Striker sail, and as how one could presume you might wish to have Lady Marsdale safeguarded as well...”

I snorted with amusement and met his gaze. “One could presume that. However, unlike the orders I believe Lord Whitlock might have sent you with, I am not concerned about matters of decorum or reputation. I believe I can speak for Captain Striker as well when I say that there is little concern my sister will behave in a manner unbecoming a lady – unless one considers handling affairs of business to be unladylike. And as for my wife, I leave all choices concerning her deportment in public... or private... to her. She is, after all, a lady born and bred, if she does not know how one should behave by now, no amount of... safeguarding... will assure it. I would not have her attacked or set upon by drunken buccaneers or bondsmen, you understand, but I care not what company she willingly keeps.”

This unsettled Coswold no small bit, and gained me a raised eyebrow and a knowing smile from Ashland. Rucker was suppressing his amusement well enough if one did not know him. My uncle was thoughtful: not aghast or concerned, but thoughtful.

“I am sure Captain Striker will wish to meet with you as well in the

morning," I said, "since it is both of our wives we are employing you to protect. The details of your employment can be arranged then."

"Thank you, my Lord," he said with another thin but genuine smile. He stood, bowed, and left us.

I looked to Coswold. "I assume you are in the pay of your mistress' household."

"Aye, my Lord," he said stiffly without glancing toward me. "Even if she should not remain on Jamaica. I served her mother before her, as did Henrietta; and Tessa is a bondswoman who has served... Lady Marsdale since she left the nursery."

"Then you should know her well," I said with a friendly smile. "Perhaps well enough to know better than anyone how long you will remain on this fair island."

I had the satisfaction of seeing him wince at that.

"You may bring us a bottle of wine," I said. "See to it that I am told at once when my wife is ready to receive me."

"You think to put her out for unfaithfulness when you return?" my uncle asked quietly when the man was gone.

"I am considering it." I sighed and kept my voice as low. "I am at least willing to play my cards such that it is in my hand. We will see how she behaves in my absence."

"We know how you shall behave in your absence," he said coldly.

I snorted. "I believe my wedding vows stated I shall take no other woman. If I had understood them to mean the other I would not have made them."

"Truly?" he asked sincerely.

"Truly," I said. "As I have attempted to convey, if any is being cuckolded in this endeavor, it is Gaston."

"Oh, Mars...Wi ... Marsy, do not be a fool," he whispered irritably. "Men of your kind often have lovers; it is accepted as long as they are not fools about it. The hell with your new traditions. He is your paramour, he should behave as one. I can respect you having a lover. I cannot countenance him behaving as... Damn it, boy, a mistress, even a wife would not take such airs."

My ire rose to meet him and I hissed, "As you have concurred, good sir, it is very unlikely I will ever inherit. And even if I were to inherit, I do not wish to return to England. This is now my home, and by the Gods I will live here as I see fit."

Rucker had left the table and hurried to the doorway to glance beyond. He sighed with relief at apparently finding no one lurking in the hall. My uncle and I did likewise and glared at one another.

Rucker made show of dusting his breeches free of breadcrumbs as Coswold returned with the requested wine. My uncle and I quickly schooled our faces to the bored indifference suitable for the presence of servants. When the damn man left again, my uncle resumed glaring at me.

"And why do you blaspheme in such an odd manner?" he hissed.

I puzzled on his meaning.

"And which Gods would you mean?" Rucker asked with a grin.

"Oh, that," I sighed. "The Greco-Roman deities after a fashion." I looked to my uncle and shrugged. "You should consider me an atheist. It will be easier to understand."

"Oh my Lord," Uncle Cedric moaned and poured a hearty cup of wine.

Tessa arrived and curtsied in the doorway. She was pinched and petite thing, pale in skin and dark in hair.

"Mis..Miss..Lady Marsdale will receive you now, my Lord," she stuttered.

"Is she drunk?" I asked the poor woman.

She blanched as white as the walls and at long last nodded tightly.

"Good," I said and smiled at her warmly. "Thank you, Tessa."

The girl nearly fainted with relief.

I stood.

"Marsy, there are things I would discuss with you concerning the plantation before you sail," my uncle said with a sigh.

"We can likely discuss it tonight. I cannot imagine I will be long."

He swore, and I chuckled as I left them.

My knock on her chamber door was greeted by a cheery, "Come in."

I swung the door open and glass smashed on the doorframe beside my head: rum and pineapple filled the air as the bottle's dregs dripped down the wall.

"Damn!" she cried and doubled over with intoxicated laughter.

I was thankful I was wearing boots: there was now shattered glass all about the entrance. I hurriedly entered and closed the door, placing myself so I could reach her before she could fling anything else. She was dressed as she had been the night before, but her hair was bound in a long braid. As her feet were bare, and she did not seem inclined to do much more than laugh, I returned to the door and carefully scraped all of the glass I could see into a safe pile well away from the doorway, with the edge of my boot.

"We seem to be in a finer mood this eve," I remarked lightly.

"Go to the Devil," she said brightly, and jumped onto the bed to sit with her legs curled under her.

I leaned my back to the door and studied her. She looked younger than her years, swaddled in white as she was, with her hair pulled so prettily back and her nose red from the rum.

Her gaze swept over me in return. She sniffed, and her lips twitched with mischievous amusement. She pulled her gown over her head and deposited it haughtily on the bed beside her. She perched there: a bounty from Venus with Mercury's smile.

I was amused by her mood. I doffed my weapons, carefully hanging my baldric and belt over the bedpost where I could reach them. Then I shed my tunic.

Her eyes held challenge. "Do you, if you truly do favor women as

well, find me more fetching this way,” she asked coyly, and cocked her shoulders back to display her pert breasts, “or this way?” She smartly turned about and presented me with her arse.

She cast a look over her shoulder that was more challenge than invitation.

I grinned. “I find you fetching either way.”

Her playfulness and the seed Gaston had planted had wed, so to speak, and thus I was able to drop my breeches and show her I was truly appreciative.

She took a quick breath at the sight of my manhood, and her body stiffened. She quickly turned about and backed up, pulling the discarded gown with her, until her back was to the headboard and her knees and all the white fabric were between her skin and my eyes.

I smiled kindly, and went to sit on the opposite end of the bed, crossing my legs under me and resting my forearms upon my calves so that my cock was sheltered from her view and well protected by my limbs.

“I have seen one before,” she said defiantly.

“I should hope you are not ignorant of them,” I said.

“I have given many of them rise,” she challenged.

“As have I,” I teased.

She snorted. “I hear your sister’s husband is quite handsome, and that he is a buccaneer as you all call yourselves. Have you fucked him, or he you?”

I smiled. “Nay. But aye, he is a buccaneer.”

“Your sister seems quite taken with him,” she said bitterly.

“Aye, they are quite smitten with one another.”

“Lucky them,” she said with less venom and a touch of sadness.

“Have you loved?” I asked.

Her eyes narrowed, and she glared at me before tossing her head and asking coyly, “What is he like, this paramour of yours? Is he boyish?”

I shook my head. “He is manly. A year older than me. There is nothing feminine about him, if that is your next question.”

“Is he hairy?”

I shrugged. “Nay. Neither of us is boyish in comparison to the other. He has some hair about his chest, and on his legs and arms, and of course about his balls, but no more or less than I.”

Actually, he had far less than I, because of the scars on his chest and thighs, but I would not be telling her of his scars.

“What color hair?” she asked.

“Red, somewhat between rust and blood, depending on the light.”

“Eyes?”

“Green, like fine emeralds.”

“Describe him,” she challenged.

“He minds me of Greek sculptures I have seen. He is strongly built, with great definition of the muscles, so that you can see how they

work as he moves. He is shorter than I by a few inches. His bones and features are finely wrought, yet they are not delicate or pretty. He is intelligent, far more than I. He is well-educated, and of noble birth. He is inquisitive of... the workings of nature. He is trained as a physician. He is an exceptional warrior, with firearms, blades, and all manner of pugilistic arts."

"Stop," she said.

I had been studying the blanket as I sought to reduce my matelot to a few simple sentences. I looked up and found her likewise staring at the bedding.

"Do you fuck him, or does he fuck you?" she asked bitterly.

"Both, but usually he fucks me," I said.

Her eyes were hard when they met mine. "Do you enjoy it? Or do you only allow it because you love him?"

I smiled. "I enjoy it; though, I only allow him because I love him: I will take no other in that way."

She snorted and picked at the hem of the gown in her arms. "He leads you about..." she mumbled, and then her eyes were hard on mine again. "Do you lead him about by his prick, or does he lead you about by yours?"

I frowned. "I am not sure I understand your intent..."

She sighed with exasperation. "A learned woman once told me that a woman's power lies in her ability to take a man by the prick and lead him about. Because once you have hold of a man's prick, he will go anywhere."

"Ah," I said, as I began to see the glimmer of understanding on the horizon. "Generally, that is true, and I have known many women who have lived well exercising such power over men. Gaston and I are... in love, such that it is no longer a matter of our pricks, so much as it is a matter of our hearts."

She snorted her incredulity. "No man can tell lust from love. You are either a fool or fancy yourself a poet."

I chuckled. "I have been guilty of both persuasions: foolishness and poetic aspiration, but not this time."

She rolled her eyes.

"Do you wish to lead men about by their pricks?" I asked.

She snorted. "Every woman who has any sense wishes to lead men about by their pricks; how else do you get what you desire?"

"Ah, I see." And I truly did. "I must be a terrible frustration to you, then, because you cannot lead me about by my prick, as it is already embedded in another, so to speak. And you could not have such an effect upon your father, either."

Her glare told me I was correct in ways words never could.

"I could have had any man I wanted in the court," she spat.

I chuckled. "I would bet you could. Though in time, I feel you would have found that there are men well-versed in that game, too."

She awarded me a look that told me she thought herself much

smarter than that. I found this very funny, as I had come across a number of young ladies like her in my travels, and I had ruined all of them in some fashion. Perhaps it was because I was not so easily led about by the prick by such... small hands.

"Is there any more rum in this room?" I asked with amusement, "Or did you drink it all?"

She leaned over and gracefully retrieved another onion bottle from beneath the bed, exposing a tantalizing stretch of buttock and thigh as she did so. I mused on how tempted I would have been to play with her a mere year ago.

She took a long drink before passing me the bottle. I found it to be more of the fruit-and-rum concoction, and I took a healthy drink as well.

"Do you intend to stay sotted your entire time here?" I asked.

"Do you think it likely this island will cease to produce rum?" she asked.

"At least you are not drinking the water," I said with a sigh. But then I remembered Gaston's comment that nothing lived in rum and men who consumed only rum did not fare much better than things left to drown in it. Perhaps she would kill herself with strong drink. Then I thought that sad and unfair. She did not deserve such a fate. She was merely another pawn in the hand of Destiny.

"Do you wish to do as we must if ever we are to be free of one another?" I asked.

"Can you offer guarantee I would get with child this night?" she asked in kind.

"Nay."

"Then, nay."

I shrugged. "That suits me well this eve. Perhaps things will have changed by the time I return."

"You think I will die of some tropical malady?" she sneered.

"The Spanish might kill me," I said cheerily, and raised the bottle.

This elicited true laughter from her. "Oh, I hope so," she said between gasps.

I grinned. "Aye, of course, then you could return to London a grieving widow. I am sure you look quite fetching in black."

Her mien sobered, though she was anything but. "I do look truly fine in black."

This set me to chuckling, and I handed her the bottle and left the bed to dress. "If you will excuse me, then, I have matters to discuss with my uncle before I sail."

"Such as what to do with me while you are away?" she asked. "You know that bastard Ashland will sail?"

"Nay, I have hired him to protect my sister, and you. But I have instructed him that I care not who you see. You are free to find whatever amusement you fancy."

She frowned at this. "Why? You think..."

I could see she was too rum-addled to think her way out of the bed.

I leaned to her and said clearly. "If you take a lover and you are indiscreet, I can send you back to England without angering *my* father."

"You arse," she spat. "I will show you."

"Please do."

I left her there, sputtering invective, and made my way through the darkened hall toward the flickering lamplight at the bottom of the stairs. I found Uncle Cedric and Rucker sitting in the parlor drinking wine. I gave them scant greeting and poured myself a cup as they eyed me curiously.

"Do you find her so very onerous?" my uncle asked. "She is quite fetching."

"If her mien ever matched her physique, I would be quite taken with her," I assured him. "But as she is quite the bitch, getting an heir upon her is quite the chore."

"Oh," he sighed. "I had hoped you might woo her beyond her... reservations about the marriage."

"I tried to, Uncle, and I have successfully wooed many a woman. I would even go so far as to say that I have seduced a number of them into doing things they knew they ought not. But she is... Let us say I am not so very motivated with her, and she is very motivated to deny us both the pleasures that are usually so amply available in the absence of love."

"Pity," he sighed.

"Aye, it is."

"At least you will not be giving her opportunity to poison you," Rucker said thoughtfully.

I thought of the bottle in her room and frowned at him.

"Like Alexander the Great's wives, and most of the Ceasars' wives, and..." he shrugged.

I chuckled. "I had not considered that an option; but you are correct, it is lucky I will be sailing."

The more I thought on it, the more I felt I was a fool for trusting her in any fashion; but on the other hand, a bride I was ostensibly expected to reject being sent here to assassinate me was far too convoluted even for my father. And by herself, I did not think it was in her to plan such a thing: she was a drinker, not a killer: one prone to drown in her sorrows rather than find a shore to swim to.

"Did she drink a good deal of wine on the voyage?" I asked.

"Aye," my uncle shrugged, "and beer; but many of us did; it helped to pass the time, and you cannot drink the water."

"She seems to be intoxicated a good deal of any given day," Rucker added quietly.

"Lovely," I sighed.

A woman's shriek rent the night. It came from the back of the house. I was on my feet, pistol drawn, and nearly to the passageway to the back room when Gaston appeared in it. Ashland was behind him, sword in

hand, eyes intent on my matelot.

I aimed at the mercenary. "Ashland! Nay!"

Gaston bent as the man rushed up, giving me a clear target, but then my matelot did a thing I had seen him do before, and Ashland was up and over Gaston's shoulder, tumbling to the floor before him.

"Stay down!" I roared at the man.

"Pete!" Gaston gasped between pants. "Is he...?"

The front door slammed open. I did not turn to see who entered. Gaston and I raced to the stairs. He beat me and ran up them. I reached the bottom, and stopped when I felt the presence behind me. I whirled to level my cocked pistol at Pete's face.

"Striker!" I bellowed.

The Golden One was a great snarling thing, blue eyes blazing in the dim light, naked save breeches and thankfully unarmed.

"YaWillNaShootMe," he growled.

I did not blink or allow my eyes to waver from his. I spoke slowly. "If I feel my sister's life, or any other's, is at stake, aye, I will shoot you, and then I will pray Gaston can mend you."

His gaze narrowed as he grimaced with amusement, and the sigh he released was more snarl than sibilance, but he did take a step back. This made him no less menacing, though, as with his hands on either rail, he still seemed to occupy the entirety of the stairwell's end.

"DonWannaKill'Er," he said. "DonWannaUrt'Er."

"Then what do you want?" Striker asked from behind me.

Pete's gaze went past me to his former matelot. "WannaTalkTo'Er!"

"Nay," Striker said.

"I would speak with him, too," Sarah said.

I did not dare let my eyes leave Pete to turn and measure their mien.

"IWillNa'LayAHandOn'Er," Pete growled.

"If you do..." Striker started to say.

"What?" Pete scoffed. "It'llBe'Im'EreThatKillsMe." He jerked his chin at me.

Then we locked gazes again. I had not moved.

"M...Will," Sarah said. "I will speak with him. We should speak."

"Will..." Striker added.

Pete's gaze had turned speculative as he studied me.

I spoke quietly. "The threat of death will not matter to you if you feel this is a thing worth dying for."

A small but true and sad smile graced his lips, and the tension left his wide shoulders.

"AsMuchAsILove'Im. 'TisNot. IWillNa'Arm'Er."

If I did not trust him now, I would never be able to again. I uncocked the pistol and let my arm fall to my side.

He gave me a solemn nod as he passed. I turned and found that Gaston was in the hall at the top of the stair with his back to the wall. Striker stood firmly before him. Sarah was a wraith in white at his side, holding a candle. As Pete reached them, Striker stepped aside

after exchanged a long look with his former matelot and stepped aside; and then Sarah turned and led the Golden One down the hall. Striker watched after them until we all heard the door shut.

"There is wine in the parlor," I said.

Striker snorted. "I do need a drink."

He turned and met my gaze. "Damn me, Will," he whispered. "I don't know if I wanted you to shoot him or not."

I felt my face relax. "I understand."

He nodded and walked past me down the stairs.

I looked to Gaston and found it odd I could still see him. The wavering light of a candle shone from the other end of the hallway. He was staring intently at the source. I stepped to the top of the stairs and found my bride leaning against the wall holding a candle. She was fully covered in her white sleeping gown again, and appeared very small and young. Her eyes were locked on Gaston, and though still bleary with rum, held something akin to wonder and curiosity.

"Go back to bed," I told her kindly.

She startled slightly at the sound of my voice and looked over to glare at me.

"Is that him?" she asked.

"Aye."

She gave a little snort of amusement and began to turn away. She stumbled on the hem of the huge gown and flailed with the candle. Gaston grabbed it and handed it to me. Then he picked her up as one would a babe, and carried her down the hall. I could do nothing but follow.

He deposited her none too gently on the bed. She gazed up at him invitingly, her lips parted coyly, and I did not need the dim candle I held to see the light in her eyes. I wanted to cross the room and smack her. Then my gaze shot to him. He seemed mesmerized by her, and even from where I stood, I could see he was aroused. I wondered if this was the answer to the production of a child. I surely did not care if he took her. But that was what she wanted, was it not? To feel she could lead at least one of us around by his prick.

"Gaston," I growled, surprising even myself.

The triumphant smile she turned toward me was quickly dismissed when, with a growl, Gaston grabbed her by the throat and leaned down to whisper in her ear. When he released her a moment later, she rolled away from him to curl on her side. I could hear her first sob as he came to me. He snatched the candle holder from my hand and slammed it on the desk before leading me from the room.

As soon as I closed the door, he shoved me to the wall. His member was hard between us.

"She is vile," he snarled in my ear. "They are all vile. Sisters and brides and all of them. This is yours. It is always yours."

He ground slowly against me while licking and nibbling along my neck.

I thought of candlelight and white gowns and how he had described his sister on that night, and I sighed. I wrapped my arms about him tightly, and held him until he stilled and his cock shrank unspent. At last he returned my embrace and sobbed quietly into my neck.

When the worst of the emotion was past, he released me, and I felt a gentle kiss on my lips.

"I love you," I breathed.

"I am sorry," he whispered.

"Hush."

He took a ragged breath. "She looked like... Gabriella, not in the hair or features, but..."

"I know."

"I am a monster," he hissed.

"Non, you are just a man," I murmured. "And you are correct about this one; she is vile. Tonight I learned that she wishes for power through controlling men with lust. She finds delight in it, and frustration in me because she has no power over me."

"I told her I would never sully myself in her," he hissed. "That I would rather fuck a dog, and that it pained me that you should have to stoop so low to have children. I have changed my mind, Will. I want no part of anything that might issue from *that*."

I smiled. "Then it is good I failed to bed her again tonight, and that I have set things in motion that might allow us to be rid of her when we return."

A door opened and we looked up the hall to the darkness near Sarah's door. Pete emerged from the shadows and into the dim light from below.

We went to meet him.

"SheBeFine," he said.

I looked past him and saw Sarah coming out of her room with a candle. She looked well enough.

We went to the parlor. Striker was sprawled on one end of the settee, with my uncle and Rucker looking on with concern and bemusement from the chairs they had occupied before Gaston burst in. Ashland was sitting nearby, rubbing his shoulder. He eyed my matelot suspiciously.

Pete snatched the bottle of wine Striker was drinking and took a long swig; some missed his mouth and flowed down his naked chest. My uncle watched this with evident horror. Rucker seemed in awe of the Golden One.

When he was done drinking, Pete glared at Striker and grumbled, "SheTalksLikeErBrother. TakeMeDaysTaThinkOnIt. INotBeTakinYa BackThough."

He turned and headed toward the door.

"I love you," Striker said. "I can't see living or fighting without you."

Pete paused and swore quietly, and then he continued out the door without looking back.

I looked about and found Sarah leaning in the doorway of the parlor.

She wore a smile that made her appear to be a God of old: it was full of ancient and mysterious sadness, patience, and love. It was a womanly thing in a way I cannot describe.

"And I love you, too," Striker said and stood to go to her. "And I do not want to go on without you."

Her smile deepened, and he picked her up and carried her upstairs.

Rucker seemed greatly moved and entertained. He was smiling, and once they were out of sight, he began to cast about as if he would see some new actor enter the stage. His questing gaze settled on Gaston and me.

I sat on the settee, and Gaston joined me.

My uncle was quite distraught and seemed not to know what to do: whether to sit, go, speak or swear.

"They have been together for ten years now," I offered. "Pete and Striker. Sarah was well apprised of the matter and Striker chose her."

Uncle Cedric's gaze finally came to settle on Gaston and myself. He looked from one to the other of us.

I knew not how we appeared. Gaston had been crying, and I was sure it was evident. I took Gaston's hand and felt an answering squeeze. I smiled at my uncle.

"Well, it is not England," my uncle said at last, and raised his glass in toast.

"To Jamaica," I said, and hefted the bottle Pete and Striker had left behind.

I felt the Gods smiled upon the new traditions we made, as They had surely been instrumental in their design.

Puerto del Principe

March, 1668



V

Forty-Three

Wherein We Escape to War

We satisfied Rucker's curiosity about all things buccaneer, Spanish, and colonial in the tropics, for several hours. This initially proved to be both engaging and distracting, with the added benefits of calming Gaston and driving my uncle quickly to bed. But as the discourse progressed, and I heard Gaston speak repeatedly of what was and how it was changing, I began to experience the welling of a great despair and an even greater anxiety. Thus I was relieved when at last even Rucker's scholarly ambitions could not hold his eyes open. We said good night and escaped into the dark alleys and quiet back streets. I knew I too should be exhausted, and my weariness was indeed a constant pressure behind my eyes; but I felt I would not be able to sleep once we reached our house. I wanted very much to snatch up our belongings and run to the ship to hide. I did not wish to visit those we would leave behind. I wanted nothing to do with any of them, not even my sister.

I nearly ran us home; and dismayed to see light spilling from the window and door, along with drunken singing, I headed for the back gate, hoping we could slip in through the yard and up the stairs with little notice.

Gaston's hand on my arm stopped me, and I let him draw me into the darker shadows of the alley beside the house two doors from ours.

"I see why you left," I said quickly. "Did Pete arrive with the rum, and thus..."

His mouth covered mine.

I did not feel passion rise in response. I had no use for rutting in

an alley in my current demeanor. I wanted to be behind closed doors and under a sturdy table, preferably on a ship sailing far from all things English and of the Old World, especially fathers and wives.

He released my mouth, only to wrap his arms about me.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked with concern.

"Non. Let us get to our den."

"I am calm... now," he said. "It has passed. You need not worry."

"I am not concerned about you. I am... It is I who feels the need to run. I have great need to be rid of this place and all it entails."

He held me in silence for a time, and then spoke as if it were a curiosity to him. "Let me have the reins."

I chuckled mirthlessly. "Oui."

"Sit here," he said with more authority. "I will retrieve our things and we will go to the ship. They are all here, so it should be empty."

I sat where instructed. He seemed to take long in returning, and I fretted, only to soundly curse myself for doing so.

At last he returned with a bag and the rest of our weapons. I realized I had only a sword and pistol and was still dressed in a coat and boots. He had truly arrived at the King's House unarmed.

"What occurred?" I asked as he handed me my musket.

"They are drunk," he said with a shrug. "There were men in our room. But Cudro is not so drunk he will let them harm anything, and Agnes is safe in her room. The puppies are with her."

"That is not what I wished to know," I said, "but I am pleased to hear all of it. What occurred with Pete to send you both to the King's House in such haste? Though I imagine yours was precipitated by his."

He began to lead me toward the Chocolata Hole. "He arrived with the men from the ship. They were drunk. Someone asked of Striker. Pete became agitated and left us. I felt I should speak with him and stepped outside. Then I saw him running up the street. I guessed his destination and went another way."

"I am damn pleased you beat him."

He nodded and sighed. "I am pleased I did not arrive to find you with her."

"Non." I told him of my conversation with my bride.

He swore softly. "And then I..."

"Got the bit out of your teeth," I said.

He snorted, and we reached the Hole and were locating a canoe before he spoke again. "Do you truly feel I am doing better?"

I nodded. "Oui. Do you? These last days have been trying and yet... no one has died."

I had tried to keep my words light, but there was too much truth weighing them down.

Thankfully, I saw the glint of his smile in the distant lamplight as he pushed the canoe into the water.

"And you have not been harmed," he said. "Oui, I am doing well."

This earned more amusement than it possibly deserved, but I was

feeling in far better spirits by the time we rowed out to our nearly empty ship.

To my surprise, Pete was the one who took the rope to tie the canoe and then accepted our muskets while we climbed aboard.

"How are you?" I asked him.

"WellEnough," he said with a shrug. "ButNaTaTalkAboutIt."

"I am not well enough to discuss anything of its ilk, either," I said.

We nodded to the men on night watch and went to the cabin. Pete followed us. I was not pleased in this, but there was little for it; and as he did not wish to speak on matters of concern, he would probably be no bother. Still, I was now somewhat in the mood to cuddle with my matelot, and I felt guilt at doing it in front of Pete in his current circumstances.

"YaGonnaFuck?" Pete asked as he climbed into his hammock.

"Not in front of you," I said.

He snorted.

We stored our muskets and companionably arranged our weapons for sleeping, without looking at one another or speaking.

Pete spoke when Gaston reached up to dim the lamp.

"Don'tBeDoin'Nuthin'OnMyAccount. OrDon'tNotBe... FuckIt. YaKnowWhatIMean."

I sighed. "Striker wishes for both of you."

"HeCan'tAveBothO'Us. NowShutUpAnFuck."

"Non," Gaston said flatly, and pulled me under the table to lie beside him.

I lay in his arms and felt little relief from the anxiety that had gripped me at the King's House. There was literally and figuratively a wolf in the shadows outside the door of our den; the problems I sought to escape by sailing would be traveling with us. Things would not be as they were before, and some of the new traditions we had established these last few days were not ones conducive to happiness in what I thought of as my true home, that being at sea or ashore with our fellows. Thankfully, Gaston and I were well with each other and becoming stronger. That, of course, eclipsed all else when I allowed myself to think on it. Still, I would miss and mourn Striker and Pete no longer being as they were.

We woke early, to a ship silent save for snoring: most of which seemed to emanate from the hammock above us. We looked at one another and realized that nothing need be said, even if we did wish to risk waking Pete, and also that we were not truly amorous enough to risk waking him with that, either. We smiled and quietly gathered our weapons for one more trip about town, and slipped out to the early morning light. We were rowing ashore before I chose to speak.

"Food, the King's House, then Theodore and Agnes?" I asked.

He grunted his assent, and so we went first to the market. We did not proceed immediately to the King's House with our fish, though; instead, we chose to find a shady place to sit near the wharf and eat.

"I wish to go riding," Gaston said after we had watched several wherries land.

The idea delighted me. "Then let us prove we are yet free men." He grinned.

We rented a wherry and rowed across the passage. We could not remember the name of the farm at which our horses now resided, and stopped at the livery to inquire if they knew the place we sought. They were actually quite helpful; and soon, instead of riding, we were jogging toward Spanish Town with a rough idea of where we needed to turn off the road to reach Byerly Farm. It was mid-morning before we actually located our mounts, but we cared not. We surprised the plantation's livery boys by taking loops of rope to make halter bridles and happily running into the field to fetch Diablo and Francis. The animals seemed to remember us, and though they were fractious, we were soon off and running with manes in our faces and grins on our lips.

We did not ride to Ithaca. We galloped along roads we had never taken before, to the south of Spanish Town. We walked idly through pastures and orchards, stealing fruit when we hungered. We even made love on horseback, a thing I had not done with a man before.

At last the sun began to sink to the west. I found I longed to follow it.

"If I did not feel Striker would need us on this voyage, I would say let us just continue to ride west until we reach Negril," I commented.

Gaston sighed. "Our muskets are on the ship. I can hunt without one, but..."

"Pity that," I said. "We should have exercised more forethought."

"Oui," Gaston said with a smile. "We should have stayed at Negril."

He put his heels to Francis, and we were off and running back toward their home.

It was dusk when we at last returned to the wharf at the Passage Fort. Our men would be gathering on the *Virgin Queen*, and debauch would soon hold sway there. I had been supposed to speak with Striker about Ashland's services. And of course there were a number of people we should bid farewell to. As we rowed across the passage, I felt pursued by a wave of guilt. I did not allow it to gain on me, though; instead, I concentrated on how pleasurable sore my arse was and rowed faster.

"Where have you been?" Sarah demanded, once Coswold admitted us to the King's House.

She had been in the parlor with my bride, who now glared at both of us and then took to studying the wall.

"We had something unexpected to attend to," I said glibly. "Now we are here to bid you farewell. Has Striker gone on to the ship?"

"Hours ago," she snapped, but despite her rancor she embraced us both.

"Are Uncle and..."

"They are at Mister Theodore's," she said. "They went looking for

you.”

I sighed. “We will catch up to them before we leave.”

She glared over her shoulder at the parlor, and then led us into the dining room and shut the door.

“You must take care of him,” she said quietly.

“We will do all that we can,” I assured her.

“He confided to me that he has never fought the Spanish without Pete,” she said.

“Aye, he has not,” I said. “We will care for him, and it is my hope that he can be reunited with Pete for the purposes of combat if nothing else.”

She took a long, tired breath and sat. “I would have that, too,” she said sadly.

“What did you say to Pete, may we ask?”

She looked from one to the other of us and sighed. “I told him I would share James with him, and that... if it was Pete’s wish, and it would ease the matter, I was willing to act as wife to both of them.”

She flushed at the last, and I sighed.

“What did he say?” I asked when she seemed to find studying the wood grain of the table to hold far more appeal than continuing.

“He said... that he would think on it,” she whispered.

Even though she brought her gaze up to meet mine again, I felt she dissembled.

“Is that a thing you would truly wish, or is it a compromise you feel you might have to make?” I asked carefully.

Her eyes left mine quickly. “I would rather have them both than lose Striker.”

“Do you feel Striker might return to Pete and abandon you?” I asked.

She shook her head quickly. “Nay. He... That is, James, spoke at great length about what you all might face, and how buccaneers fought in pairs, and that Pete has ever been at his side, and he does not know how he will fare without him.”

“Was that before or after Pete arrived?” I asked.

“After. Before...” She flushed anew. “We did not speak a great deal.”

I found I did not wish to dwell on that.

“I do not feel that Pete will allow him to be harmed,” I said, “no matter how angry he might be.”

“I feel...” she paused and returned to tracing the whorls in the wood with her thumb. “Is there no way that James can acquire a partner for combat who he does nothing else with?”

“He is a captain now,” Gaston said before I could answer. “He is not expected to board, and even in raiding, it is not the same. That is why many of the captains no longer have matelots.”

This seemed to brighten her mood.

“You would rather he not have a matelot?” I asked her.

She shook her head sadly and did not look up at me. “Nay, I would rather he were mine alone.” She sighed. “I wish Pete no ill will, and I

will do as I say if it comes to that; but I would rather Pete find someone else."

I could hear a rumble of amusement from the Gods, and I thought she might be disappointed. I felt spiteful satisfaction in that. I supposed I did not wish it to be so easy to split a pair such as our wolves asunder, even for her happiness.

"We will see what comes to pass," I said gently.

"Aye, we will see." Her gaze finally returned to mine. "And take care of one another, as well. I would have all of you return to me."

"I should hope so," I teased.

We embraced her in parting, and left without a word to anyone else.

I caught Gaston regarding me askance as we trudged south with aching legs.

"What?" I asked.

"It is unfair to her, and even Striker, but I would have her lose," he said.

"Do not feel guilt, or perhaps we should, but... Well, I would also rather the same occur."

"Then I am relieved you will not hold it against me," he said.

I grinned. "Never. Truth be told, I know far more of Pete and Striker than I do of her, and blood may be thicker than all things, but friendship is a bond not to be trifled with. And... her winning, as it were, lends validation to all things becoming as others feel they ought, whereas her losing, *per se*, lends validation to the path I have chosen – which many say leads to ruin."

"I feel that, too," Gaston said somberly. "Even though..." His words trailed off with a guilty look.

I guessed. "Even though you feel as Striker does about the fairer sex."

"Oui."

"Do not fret on the matter," I chided. "Think of riding horses."

He chuckled. "Oui, let us not think."

My uncle and Rucker were indeed at Theodore's, dining. All appeared relieved to see us.

"I was going to send a boy to the ship to inquire of you if you did not show soon," Theodore chided.

"Sorry to worry you so," I said cheerfully. "We are here now to take our leave."

"You are here now to write your father," he said.

"Damn you," I sighed.

He gave a disparaging snort and led us to his office. So once again I found myself at his desk with pen in hand and a blank page before me.

"Tell me what to say," I whined to Gaston.

He did not smile. "Father, I have wed the bitch you sent. Marsdale."

I laughed. In the end, the piece I wrote was not dissimilar, and though it was a bit more diplomatic, it was nearly as succinct.

I soon handed the single folded and sealed sheet to Theodore. He did

not remark on its lack of heft.

My uncle and Rucker were still at the table. We joined them and Hannah brought us each a bowl of soup. I was relieved, as we had not eaten since morning.

"We have been discussing the plantation," my uncle said carefully.

I sighed and remembered what we must speak of. I looked to Theodore. "Are they truly growing food, and is Fletcher teaching the Negroes English?"

"Aye and aye," Theodore said with a small smile.

"The other planters do not do such things," my uncle said. "And as there are no plantations in England, I hardly feel it is a matter of new traditions verses the old."

I sighed. "It is a matter of my traditions verses those of others. It is a thing I wish, and as Father has little use for the place, and does not seem overly concerned about it making a profit in and of itself, I do not see why *anyone* should attempt to gainsay me on the matter."

Uncle Cedric considered that for a time. "As you will then, boy," he said at last with a tired sigh.

I looked to Rucker. "Once the Negroes speak enough English, I am sure much could be learned of their native ways."

He nodded enthusiastically at this, and I thought he would say more if not for my uncle's glowering presence.

I looked to Theodore. "If there is any doubt as to Mister Rucker's place in any of the endeavors afoot, consider him to be in my employ." I looked to Rucker again. "If that meets with your desires, of course."

Rucker nodded and Theodore smiled.

With that, we said our goodbyes and they all wished us well, some more fervently than others.

Agnes had cleared away the results of last night's festivities, and the house looked none the worse. We found her sketching sleeping dogs. She seemed surprised we were not already gone with the others.

"When the new houses are built, where shall I live?" she asked.

"Wherever you wish," I said. "You may remain here, if you like."

"But you will be selling this house to Mister Cudro," she said.

"Oh that, well, reside with... Mistress Striker then." I shrugged.

"You will not expect me to live with Lady Marsdale?" she asked.

"Nay, never. And I thought we discussed this once," I chided.

"In passing," she said with far more authority than I had heard from her before. "I just wished to be sure."

I saw the effort she put into not fidgeting with her long fingers as she awaited my response. Her gaze was steady when it met mine, though.

I endeavored to compare what I could remember of her behavior these past few days with the way she was when we were here before. I decided she had been quite a bit more forceful of late. I was proud of her.

I smiled. "You are your own mistress, Agnes. Do as you will. Truly." She curtsied. "Thank you, my Lord."

"And stop that. Take care of yourself and the dogs while we are gone, and let no one tell you otherwise."

"You are contradictory," Gaston said as we retreated to our room.

"If she did not wish to stay here and care for the dogs I do not believe she would."

"True, yet what will she do once we sell this house and live with your sister while in port, if that is to be our plan?" he asked.

"Oh Hell, I do not know," I sighed. "Let us hope she will be happy living with my sister, too."

"Would you, if you were drawn to another and yet knew there would never be any chance of sating your desires?" he asked with a cocked head.

"Non, as you are well aware," I sighed.

I had forgotten Agnes' attraction to my sister and all things female.

"Perhaps she will find someone," I said.

"There is always hope of that," he said with a smile.

I began to sort through our things, considering what else we would need on a lengthy voyage, and packing away the items of finery I had been forced to wear here. Gaston considered his medicine chest. I was heartened by this.

"Do you wish to bring it?" I asked carefully.

He sighed. "You might be injured. I would have my own tools and ingredients."

"I would prefer such a thing."

He nodded and saw that the various drawers and compartments were packed and latched securely. Then we both took up bags of extra ammunition and a handle on the medicine chest, and with one final farewell to Agnes and the dogs, we walked into the street and joined the men trickling toward the Chocolata Hole.

The festivities had advanced to the stage of overt drunkenness on the part of all aboard by the time we arrived at the *Queen*. We worked our way through the teeming deck and stowed our belongings in the crowded cabin. I prayed all I saw would not sail with us. If they did, it appeared we would be even more crowded than we had been on the way to Cow Island.

I was, however, delighted to see our cabal when we at last found them all on the quarterdeck. I was even more pleased to see that our newest associates, Ash, Nickel, Burroughs and Bones, had been properly attired and equipped under Liam's tutelage. They were now shorn with kerchiefs on their heads; and they wore tunics, breeches, and earrings, and carried muskets and cutlasses. They looked like the buccaneers they had vowed to become, and not the misplaced planters and soldiers they had been.

"Did you loan them the necessary funds?" I asked Liam and Otter privately, as Gaston and I settled in to sit beside them.

"Nay, the boy, Nickel, 'ad money and 'e bought fer all," Liam said.

"Well, that was kind of him," I said.

Otter leaned close to whisper. "He paid Bones' debt as well."

I was surprised. "Did he? Have things changed between them, or does it merely appear to be philanthropy?"

Liam sighed. "They will na' call each other matelot. They say they be *partners*." He said the last word derisively.

I chuckled. "So be it."

"Burroughs spent some o' Nickel's money on a whore," Liam added with disgust.

"It is... the way of many," I said.

Liam had now worked himself up to a good froth of anger and seemed ready to send it my way.

I held up my hand. "Do not blame me for my sister's arrival here, or for Striker's favoring of women. One was a matter of the Fates and the other the Gods."

Otter chuckled and shook his matelot's shoulders until Liam sighed with exasperation.

We turned to see Pete talking and drinking with apparent good humor with Davey and Julio, while Striker stood on the other side of the quarterdeck speaking quietly with the Bard and Bradley. I was surprised to see the other captain on board and wondered at that.

"It is trouble, the two o' them bein' separate an' all," Liam was saying.

"Aye, but it is the way of things that they change," I said.

"Aye," he said. "But I like it none."

"Duly noted," I said with a grin and a pat on Liam's shoulder. Then I leaned to Gaston. "I wish to know what they speak of."

He nodded, and I stood and approached the captains.

Striker seemed pleased to see me. "We need to even out the men between vessels. All know we sail, but they have not known what other ships do."

"So all have arrived here," I said.

"Aye," Bradley said with a chuckle. "We are trying to decide if we should even attempt to sort them out this night, or if we should pull all the ships that will sail out beyond the passage in the morning, and then apportion men to whatever vessel can hold them."

I nodded. "Before articles; that sounds reasonable. I doubt anyone will succeed with anything tonight."

Bradley shook his head. "Articles are no matter. There'll be articles for the raid once we rendezvous on the cays of Cuba."

"It is not for a ship and a ship only when we plan to raid on land with so many," Striker added.

"Ah," I said. It did not sit well with me, and I could think of no immediate reason for it other than my dislike and distrust of Morgan; so I decided to say nothing.

"Let me know if I can be of assistance in the morning," I said.

"Gaston and I will not be drinking this night."

Striker sighed. "Neither will I."

"Well that will make for three of ya," the Bard said with amusement, and lifted a bottle in toast.

Bradley snorted. "There's no reason to deny yourself, it's not as if we haven't faced the mornin' light with the Devil yet in our veins before. Come drink with us on the *Lilly*," he told Striker. "Morgan will be pleased to see you."

"He wishes for a meeting of the captains?" Striker asked, and looked around at the revelry surrounding us; and then his gaze settled on Pete, and he appeared as one lost.

There was little time to think on it, and so I thought quickly. If Striker stayed aboard as I felt he ought, it would be evident he was not with Pete, both painfully to the two of them and disconcertingly to those who did not know what was amiss as of yet. It would be best if Striker had an excuse to leave the ship this night.

"Aye, go, see if the other captains can give numbers as to how many they will take off our hands," I said lightly and gave Striker a little push.

He quickly hooked his arm about my shoulders to bring me close and whisper in my ear. "I don't wish to go alone."

"Then let us go with you," I said.

He nodded.

I went to Gaston and quickly explained the situation, and then I let Cudro know where we were bound. We followed Striker to the boat. Bradley seemed surprised as I climbed down to join them, and dismayed at Gaston's presence.

"Well, there seems to be enough of us. You boys want to join the party here?" he asked the two men who had helped him row the boat to our ship.

They readily agreed and clambered aboard the *Queen*. The boat only needed two men to row, so Gaston and I took up the oars they left.

As we pushed off, Bradley addressed Striker. "If you brought anyone, I would have expected Pete..."

"Pete isn't pleased at my marriage," Striker said.

"So... You've gotten married?" Bradley asked. "Will spoke of the possibility, but..."

"Aye," Striker said firmly. "I've gotten married."

"Other than him being unhappy about it, are you still with Pete?" Bradley asked.

"Nay."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Bradley said sincerely.

"So am I," Striker said.

"Are you pleased to be married?" Bradley asked diffidently.

Striker sighed. "Aye, that I am."

"It will be hard at first, not havin' a man at your side, but it passes," Bradley said sadly. "Things are changin', a captain doesn't need a matelot anymore, probably best if he doesn't have one."

Striker was silent for a time as we maneuvered our way around another ship in the Hole and then to the sloop *Lilly*. When at last he

spoke, it was with calm resolve. "I don't want to be the captain of a merchantman, or a naval vessel. I'm a buccaneer, and the Brethren fight in pairs. That's what makes us strong. If we begin to behave like the others, then we become the others. If we're not the Brethren of the Coast, then there's no loyalty except to gold, and men start believing they belong to a crown."

"Oui," Gaston said.

"Oui, aye, amen," I added.

"That's not the way the other captains see it," Bradley said.

I thought of all the discourse I had engaged in with my uncle.

"There are those of us who like the traditions established here,"

I said, "and want little of the ones of old. If I wanted to behave like a proper Englishman, I would return to England."

Bradley looked away, and made himself busy coiling the bow rope to throw up to the *Lilly* well before we were ready for him to do so. He finally thought of a rebuttal as we did indeed near her.

"There are those of us who had nothing in England and yet wanted it," he said, still without regarding me, "and now we're here and have something, and we still want what we did as young men."

"I hate to be the bearer of poor tidings," I said without rancor, "but I feel the lot of you are betting on the wrong horse in that regard. Or perhaps it is that we all ever want what is beyond the pasture fence. You have freedom here that no man knows in England, regardless of his rank, and yet you would heave it overboard in the name of attaining a thing you viewed with envy as young men before you truly knew the way of it."

"You've never been poor," he hissed as he stood to board.

"That is bullshit," I snarled. "I have had to barter my soul for sustenance more times than I care to admit. And though I was born into a house with money, it was so poor in all other things men might place value on I found myself driven from it. Do not speak to me of hardship."

"If you accept the rules of men such as my father," I continued, "then you accept their rule, and you lose your freedom – and you will never elevate yourself in their eyes, no matter what you do. Even if you gain more gold than they, they will never grant you respect, and all the while they will connive to take your gold or kill you."

"If you want their respect, do not bow before them, endeavor to cut their throats," I added.

"I bow before no man," he spat.

I snorted. "You bow every time you accept their laws, their rules, and their traditions."

"Men were not made to love other men," he snarled triumphantly. "If I bow, it is to a higher law."

"God made me, as he made you," I snapped. "If you truly believe God did wrong in the making of me as I am, then I will grant you balls I did not think you had."

"You blaspheme," he said. "God did not make you to be a sodomite."

That is an evil men engage in when weak. We do it, and then we are done with it, and we ask God's forgiveness as we would with any other sin!"

"I have little use for any God who does not hold the love I have for my matelot holy!"

I shouted this last, as he had shouted his last words to me, and in the silence that followed, I was acutely aware that everyone on board the *Lilly* had likely heard us. They were surely staring as if they had. I looked up along the rail and received both frowns and nods of approval. When they determined we would say no more, our audience began to buzz as they repeated what they heard or argued it themselves.

Bradley climbed aboard the ship. I sat in the boat, as I had risen to standing at some point during the argument.

"I do not think I should stay," I said.

"I cannot allow you to go anywhere," Gaston said.

Gaston and Striker were laughing.

"I do not wish to stay, either," Striker gasped.

Striker stood and told whoever would listen that we would return the boat to the *Mayflower*.

"I want Pete back," Striker said as we cast off.

"Do you think it possible?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "He is stubborn, unyielding, and a damn bastard and I'm tired of him always having his way, but..."

"So why do you want him back?" I teased. "Just to thumb your nose at Bradley and God?"

"Aye," he said with mock seriousness and then grinned. "Nay, I love him. And if he loves me, then he will by God yield on this one thing. I will have a wife, and him."

Gaston and I exchanged a look.

"We will do all we can to assist you," I said. "Do you have some strategy in mind?"

"Nay," he sighed. "I have a steadfast purpose and little else."

"Well, it is likely you will be tested to be as stubborn as both Pete and God," I said.

He grinned with resolve.

As we neared our own ship once again, Striker roused himself from reverie to say, "He's still my matelot. I'll not hear otherwise, just as he never heard me when I said I needed something more."

"I foresee a siege," I said.

"Aye, a long and bloody one." Striker grinned and clambered up the rope to our deck.

"What think you of his chances?" I asked my matelot as we made the boat fast.

"I think he is taking the wrong tack," he said with a shrug. "Pete feels he has already been made to give ground. He will not wish to give more."

"Oui," I sighed sadly.

We joined our friends, and they made room for us on the crowded quarterdeck as best they could. I sat between Gaston's legs and he held me contentedly. Striker went to stand beside Pete, and proceeded to act as if nothing were amiss between them for the rest of the night; though they did not touch, and that was evident to all who knew them.

As I watched them, I thought of Bradley and his former matelot Siegfried. Did he turn to piousness now out of guilt or shame? If good Siegfried had not died so unfortunately, would Bradley have abandoned him to marry, or stayed on with him at sea after his marriage? Bradley had been quite forthright in saying he did not consider matelotage marriage in any fashion, and he always seemed to have difficulty acknowledging it in the lives of others. In my musings, I recalled another thing: I never saw them touch one another.

I turned in my matelot's arms and kissed him thoroughly.

He raised a curious brow when I released his mouth.

"I feel Bradley was always shamed by his being with Siegfried," I said.

"I am proud of you," Gaston murmured and kissed me as thoroughly as I had him.

The cabin was filled with rowdy men, and we barely had room to move on the deck; we could do little, as the revelry continued into the night, but make one another exquisitely miserable with unrequited pleasure.

We slept curled together, and only woke at Striker's insistent prodding in the grey before dawn. By his bleary eyes, it was obvious he had not abstained from the rum, but he was far more lucid than the Bard, who lay sprawled with Dickey in another corner of the quarterdeck. Pete was not to be seen, and I thought it wise not to ask, as we assisted Striker in finding and rousing the men necessary to weigh anchor and make use of the morning breeze to sail out of the Hole and the Passage.

We dropped anchor in the sea beyond the Passage. The *Lilly* and *Mayflower* followed. The other small craft that would compose our fleet had already sailed to hastily provision amongst the cays in which we were to rendezvous. Once we met up with them and the French, we would supposedly have seven ships, and we guessed we would have some six hundred men. Bradley had added two guns to the *Mayflower*; and now, with twelve and sixteen guns, and nearly two hundred tons apiece, the *Mayflower* and the *Josephine* were the largest of our craft, with the *Virgin Queen* ranking third at ten guns and one hundred and fifty tons. The rest were smaller, all being comparable sloops of seventy tons or so, such as the *Belle Mer* and the *Lilly*.

The next few hours were spent apportioning approximately two hundred and fifty men among our vessels, so that none rode low in the water. As the *Virgin Queen* was already laden with boucan and salted beef, and the other ships were empty, we soon had proportionately fewer men than the others; and all aboard breathed a little easier, as we saw

how crowded the decks and holds of the *Mayflower* and *Lilly* were. The *Queen* still carried close to a hundred men, though.

"We seem to have quite the army," I remarked, as the boats were at last stowed and the ships prepared for elections and articles – such as they would be. At the rate things had been occurring, we would not actually sail until after the noon hour.

"This is less than we hoped," Striker sighed as he joined me at the forward rail of the quarterdeck. "We will never take a large city."

"Did Myns or Mansfield have more?" I asked.

"Nay, and we never took the larger cities," he said with a shrug. "Morgan wants Havana, though."

I looked about at the other ships and thought of all I had been told of the fortifications and size of the Spanish port of Havana.

"Morgan is a fool," I muttered.

Striker grinned. "Whatever our target, he will wish to strike soon. The *Mayflower* and *Lilly* have no provisions. And I'm not giving them our beef, though Pierrot and Savant might sell them some."

"Are there cattle on these cays?" I asked.

"Non," Gaston said. "Turtles, birds, shellfish, fish. All must be caught."

I shook my head. "Generals have ever turned their men loose upon towns simply to feed them, but by the Gods, we are at sea. We cannot cast the men out like nets to find what they can in the countryside – not unless we worked our way along a coast, and then the Spanish would surely send ships once word reached them."

Striker nodded. "We will pick a target as soon as we rendezvous, and hope it'll have provisions."

"And if it does not?" I asked.

He sighed. "We'll probably be forced to share our beef."

"At gunpoint?" I chuckled.

"By Morgan's order," he said.

"I well imagine he will claim forethought, then, in sending us to Cow Island to provide the victuals," I said.

"I imagine he will, at that," Striker said with little humor.

"Why do we do this, again?" I asked.

He chuckled sadly. "The gold, Will: if we find a rich prize, it will be more than we can earn in a year of honest labor."

Though I understood well what he meant, I felt compelled to tease. "Do you feel this is easy and you do not labor at it?"

"Nay," he snorted.

"Do you feel it is dishonest to any but the Spaniards?" I added.

"Shut up," he said with amusement.

"Do you still hold some notion of being a pirate?" I continued.

He laughed and spoke effusively as if witnessing to the Heavens. "Aye, I still hold such romantic notions. But nay, I am a mercenary in the employ of the Crown. I am married. I own land. I have legal claim to this vessel. I have strayed far from my father's path."

"Have not we all?" I laughed.

As all remaining aboard the *Queen* were men we had sailed with before, either on prior raiding or to Cow Island this year, we made short work of the elections.

We were anchored close enough to the *Mayflower* to see the results of her elections. Bradley was Captain, of course, but I was quite dismayed when Hastings, the one-eyed former Naval officer, and presumed murderer of our former cook, Michaels, was elected as quartermaster. I still thought it likely we would have need to deal with him in some fashion someday.

At long last, we began to chase the sun toward Negril Point, where we would turn North-Northwest toward Cuba. As Port Royal slid away behind us, it occurred to me that I had arrived here almost a year before, this being the last week of February, 1668. I had arrived on Jamaica during the second week of March, 1667.

Gaston and I retreated to the cabin to rest until our shift on watch in the night. We found Pete there ahead of us. He had been above deck for the elections, but he had presumably slept through most of the transferring of men and other business of the morning. Now he lounged in his hammock.

"IBeTakinTheNightWatchWithYa," he pronounced, as Gaston and I settled under our table.

I shrugged. "That will probably simplify the sharing of that hammock."

He snorted. "MakesLotsSimpler."

I was not sure if this would be true for Striker and him, but I knew it surely did not simplify matters for Gaston and me. Gaston lay with his hands clasped behind his head, glaring up through the table at the place in which Pete hung suspended in our minds as well as the cabin. The constant crowding and bustle that had gone on all morning had left my matelot quite tense, and though I could obviously think of one ready way to ease him, I did not feel sufficient calm in my own heart to do so with Pete hanging above us, awake and listening.

The whole of it made me angry. It was not our fault they were apart. They would not rob us of our pleasure.

I rolled up onto my knees astride Gaston. His gaze met mine and he shook his head. I obdurately shook mine in response. He frowned. I dug around in our bag above his head and produced the scented oil. I anointed one fingertip and ran it the length of my matelot's nose.

I leaned down to whisper in French, "Let me make it all go away, nothing more."

His eyes narrowed in challenge and devilment. "Nothing more?" he hissed.

"You would need to eclipse all else," I breathed, with a shrug that implied I doubted he could.

Soon thereafter, I heard the cabin door slam shut. I took pause in my panting and squirming and opened my eyes to look about. I saw no

one but Gaston above me, and I had not needed eyes to know where he was or the expression upon his face. And at the moment, I would not have cared if the entire crew had crammed into the room to watch us.

In the aftermath, we found we were indeed alone, and I felt little guilt as I fell asleep on Gaston's shoulder with a grin upon my lips.

That night we joined the others on the quarterdeck. Pete was not among them. When I asked, Liam pointed up the ship.

"Ee's been sittin' on the bowsprit all day."

Nearby, Striker shrugged.

"I feel we might have driven him from the cabin," I said.

This elicited several chuckles from our companions.

"Good," Striker said, "and thank God he's on night watch with you so I can sleep." He frowned at us. "Don't be driving him off the deck tonight."

"We will endeavor to keep our mind on the task at hand," I said with a happy smile.

"See that it's sailing the ship," the Bard said, and went below.

Gaston glared, and Striker followed the Bard and Dickey below with a laugh.

There was little for us to do. One of the Bard's men, Topper, was at the whipstaff, and Ash was querying him of sailing. We ran with the wind off our starboard quarter, having already adjusted our course from Southwest to Northwest as we rounded the point on Jamaica's belly known as Portland. Gaston and I settled in with our legs through the aft quarterdeck railing, and watched our wake in the moonlight.

I felt restless, and kicked my feet idly. After spending autumn and winter ashore, I now faced months of sailing once again. Though we were purportedly to raid on land, unlike our short voyages from Negril to Port Royal or from there to Cow Island, I now felt the great press of the days upon the open sea before us, and not that we were upon another short jaunt. In one way, we were free at last of the land and civilization; and in another, we were trapped upon a chunk of wood with a great many men. I needed to re-accustom myself, not just to the roll of the waves or the size of the cabin, but to the utter boredom of sailing. I knew in time it would become mesmerizing in and of itself again, but tonight it was not; and I was decidedly disheartened by my sudden lack of enjoyment in it. Gaston was calm and contemplative beside me. I did not wish to burden him, and so I tried to sit still and hope the itchiness in my legs would pass.

Pete joined us without word. He sat beside me and dangled his legs through the railing. I waited for him to speak, but he said nothing.

I reclined back upon the deck to watch the sails eclipse the stars. For some unknowable reason, I found this more calming than watching the dark waves behind us. I mused that perhaps I would feel better still if I went forward to watch the unbroken darkness we sought to cross. And then I realized that perhaps that was it: I was thinking of only what we sought to leave, not where we sought to go.

My reverie was interrupted when I noted how very orange and red a certain star was. It continually emerged and retreated behind the corner of the aft sail, as we rolled gently over the swelling sea.

"Is that Jupiter?" I asked.

Gaston turned to frown down at me, and then reclined to lie at my side and look where I pointed.

"It is likely," he said. "It is upon the correct path in the heavens."

On my other side, Pete reclined as well. "What's Jupiter? ItBeAStar?"

"Nay, it is a planet," I said. "Gaston has seen it through a fine telescope."

"IHeardO'Planets. Don'KnowTheirNamesIsAll," Pete sighed with a touch of annoyance. "WhatBeTheDifference?"

I grimaced to myself. I thought it likely the conversation would go the way of my attempting to explain latitude and longitude to Davey, even though Pete was far more intelligent.

"Well," I said carefully, "Earth is a planet, and both Jupiter and Earth orbit the Sun. Or so it is theorized, though the Papists would deny it, and many others uneducated in the ways of the sciences. Many would continue to place Earth at the center of all Creation and decry anything else as heresy. But, from my limited understanding of such things, planets orbiting the Sun can be proven with mathematics and observation. It is a thing of the world and not religion."

Pete was still looking at the red dot. "SoThereBePeopleOnIt?"

"Perhaps." I had not thought of that. I looked at my matelot and found him smiling.

Pete was still studying the heavens. "WouldTheyBeLikeUs?"

"I would imagine... Nay, I would imagine nothing at all," I sighed. "I have never given the matter thought."

"Non," Gaston said. "They would not be like us. The living things on one side of this world differ from those on the other. I would imagine that the living things on another world would be very different."

Pete smiled. "HowDoWeGetThere?"

"We have to develop a means of flying," I said with some enthusiasm as I let my mind mull it over. "I have seen the little models that da Vinci made of flying contraptions. Someday, someone will build one or something like it. Someday, man may well fly through the air as easily as we cross the seas. Once we have mastered that, then I would imagine we can sail through the heavens and reach other planets."

I imagined sailing up into that darkness in search of only-the-Gods-knew-what with enthusiasm. It would not be like sailing off as we were now, in search of other men from which to steal gold. It would be much as the Spanish had once done in coming to the West Indies for the first time; but they had been seeking a way to easily reach the riches of India; and then, upon discovering the riches of the New World – well, we had all seen how that had turned out.

"Why would you want to go?" I asked Pete.

Pete shrugged. "TaSeelt." He pointed at the Moon. "PeopleThereToo?"

"I hope they are nothing like us," I said. "I can think of no voyage of discovery that was ever made just to see anything. All exploration is suckled on greed. If the inhabitants of the Moon or Jupiter are like us, let us hope we reach them before they reach us. Otherwise we may likely end up as the Indians did in this New World."

"You think the men of the Moon would come here and enslave us all on plantations and in mines?" Gaston asked with wry amusement.

"If our wolves do not find a way to do it to them first," I sighed.

"WhyWouldYaGo?" Pete asked seriously.

"To see it. To gaze upon the unknown with wonder. I am not driven by greed. But I am not a wolf."

"YaGotTeeth. Ah. ButYaSaidYaBeAHorseMan."

"Aye, a centaur," I said, surprised he remembered.

"SoWolvesBeGreedyNoblemen. INa'BeAWolfThen."

I looked to Gaston and found him nodding.

"Nay," Gaston said. "You are not a wolf. You are not a centaur either, though."

"IBeACat. GreatBigOne. CatsBeMeanerThanDogs."

I thought of a lion I had seen in a menagerie once. It had looked sickly and pained to be in a cage, but it had been a great tawny thing with huge paws and teeth, and sleek muscle beneath its mangy pelt and clumped mane. It had looked upon all of us with noble disdain. I had envisioned it running across a great meadow or stalking through mighty forests, and then I could see the true glory and understand why it was emblazoned on so many king's standards.

"You are a lion," I said.

Pete grinned. "Aye. ISeenPicturesO'Lions. TheyBeProperCats. WolfKillin'Cats."

"We named you wrongly," I added.

He shrugged. "OnlyNeededTheNameFerTheLand. NeverLiveOnIt. GoodTaConfuseTheWolvesWithAWrongName. ICanBePeteTheLion."

"Pete the Lionhearted, like good King Richard of old," I said.

"Nay! WantMoreThanTheHeart. WantTheWholeThing."

Gaston and I were amused.

The three of us whiled away the rest of our watch talking of stars and planets and what the people on Jupiter or the Moon might look like, and the appearances of other mythical creatures like centaurs and satyrs. I felt at ease, and though I still did not know what we sailed into, I no longer felt constrained by what we sailed from.

When Striker came on deck before dawn, we were halfway through recounting the Illiad – in a less than poetic fashion that I was sure would have appalled Hesiod – and Pete had taken a distinct dislike to the Gods meddling in the affairs of man. Gaston was hoarse and I was exhausted. We told Pete we would finish the tale that night.

"WhyWouldYaGoTaTheMoon?" Pete asked Striker challengingly.

Striker stared at him dully for a full minute, but held up a hand before Pete repeated the question. I was not sure if Striker was struck

dumb over Pete's asking him anything or the nature of the inquiry. And of course he was half asleep, which in my experience is the worst time to be queried on things esoteric.

"Do you want to go to the Moon?" Striker asked.

"Aye," Pete said.

"Then I would go to keep you out of trouble," Striker said.

Pete considered this, and a slow smile overtook his features.

"YaBeAnArse," he said at last with little rancor. Then he stood and went below.

"What the Devil was that about?" Striker asked as he sagged down beside us.

"Pete wishes to be known as Pete the Lion," I said with good humor.

"Truly? And what should I be known as?" he asked.

"You might come to be known as Striker the Crafty Mule if you win," I teased.

We left him chuckling and slipped below to sleep.

The following seven days passed with sleep and the nights with mythology, until Pete was able to name the constellations, and we at last reached the selection of cays Morgan sought. Then we began to search for our fleet. We sailed about by day and anchored at night.

One morning, Gaston became pensive in the hours before dawn. When I noted this, he frowned with annoyance – not at me, but at his thoughts – and asked, "What do you feel the date is?"

"I know not," I admitted. "It is March."

"By which calendar?" he sighed. "You damn English."

"The proper number of days in a year is a Popish thing, and the work of the devil," I teased. "Though why a Pope would ascribe more to the science of the matter..." I grinned.

"Damned if I know," I said, after giving the matter thought. I had last seen a date at Theodore's, and it had been from the Julian calendar, of course. I rarely bothered to attempt to reckon the date on my own, always choosing to take the word of others as I traveled. And now, while roving, I did not mark the days: the Bard did, in order to chart our course, but I did not.

"Why is it of import?" I asked.

"It may well be my birthday," Gaston said at last. "I was born the fifth of March, *Gregorian*," he emphasized. "If it is that day, I am twenty-eight years of age. You will likewise be twenty-eight years in June, will you not?"

I was surprised and pleased he had remembered. I surely had not remembered when he was born. I silently cursed my stupidity; I should have brought some small gift to surprise him.

"Oui," I said. "Do you find great significance in the day? I have never... I have chosen to remark upon it if it occurred to me, and on occasion I have been given fêtes by those I knew, but some years it has gone wholly unnoted."

"I have never had a fête," he said wistfully.

"Then I am truly sorry I am such a fool that I did not remember the day of it, so that I could prepare something."

He shook his head. "This is enough. Last year, I received a fine present shortly after my birthday: you. And for your birthday, we arrived safely home after the wreck of the galleon."

"Ah, that I do remember. And oui, I have been here for a year now, have I not? I mused upon that as we sailed, that shortly it would be a year since my coming: a year since I met you."

He smiled. "I hope the next is as fine as this last."

"Oui, it has been the best of my life," I said.

"Oui, and mine." He frowned and then smiled widely. "You need never give me another gift."

"Nor you," I said solemnly.

"Non," he said quickly. "I am no gift. Non, let us implore the Gods that your birthday gift should be as it was last year, and delivered whenever the need for it arises."

I laughed.

Another week passed before we were able to locate the rest of our fleet. The ships without provisions had taken to enslaving the local Indian fishermen into fishing and hunting turtles for them. Our crew and the French ate beef and watched. Toward the end of March, the last expected vessel finally located us: a small sloop with only fifty men, yet Morgan had chosen to wait for them. It was a good thing the natives had an abundant supply of turtles and fish.

The *Mayflower* was brought to anchor near a cay with a large sandy beach, and soon a boat was dispatched around to the other vessels with an invitation for the captains and officers to join Morgan ashore for a private party. Striker decided I should accompany Cudro, the Bard, and himself. Gaston was relieved not to have to attend.

Pete expressed great glee that he was no longer matelot to the captain. Those of the crew that heard him seemed amused at this. I knew not whether to blame their lack of concern to Striker's stubborn refusal to admit or act as if it were true, or Liam's constant gossiping that they would soon be mended, or the more experienced men's wisdom that to sunder such a pair would not be as easy as Pete made it out to be. For whatever reason, the supposed breach between Striker and Pete had not caused nearly the consternation all had thought it would.

Cudro, Striker, the Bard, and I rowed ashore that evening. There were twenty-five men in attendance: the captains of the seven vessels, their quartermasters, some of their masters of sail, Morgan, and a few others such as myself. Bradley was unsure whether he was pleased to see us. Hastings watched us with the guarded mien of sardonic amusement he habitually wore. Morgan greeted us warmly. I was amused to note that he was wearing considerably less than he did in Port Royal, though he was still not shorn, hatless, or bootless.

Once the greetings had been made, Morgan took a place close to the fire. "Gentlemen, it does my heart good to see so many familiar faces

here tonight. And to those of you I do not know, I welcome you with open arms. Thank you. Thank you one and all for joining us on this grand mission. Gentlemen, we have been commissioned by the Governor of Jamaica to protect the interests of England and our King."

I glanced at Striker and he rolled his eyes.

"We are here on Spanish shores," Morgan continued, "to obtain vital information as to any nefarious scheme Spain may possess against our fair island. And we are here to strike terror into the Spanish heart and tell them that the Brethren will always be a force to be reckoned with."

"We be here to take their gold," someone said from across the fire. This brought cheers.

Morgan turned to point at the man with a grin. "Aye! And we are here to take their gold!"

Pierrot snorted as the laughter died down. "Morgan, you are causing me great worry. Have you spent so much time with men of politics that you forgot the Brethren sail for a higher power than a King?"

This engendered laughter.

"Never." Morgan shrugged unabashedly. "However, one goal does suit the other, and if we say we are here in Jamaica's interests, it allows some heads to lie upon their pillows untroubled. And if they have pleasant dreams they will not nose about in things they should not concern themselves with."

"What things?" someone asked.

Morgan pointed at the captains in turn. "All of you were issued letters of marque allowing for actions against the Spanish at sea, at England's behest, in exchange for the Crown's share. Which is bigger than any man who does not board a vessel has a right to, even a King."

There was general applause.

"However, it says nothing of actions against the Spanish on land," he added.

The men chuckled.

"It neither forbids nor condones, and of the utmost importance, it does not stipulate a share for the Crown if these things are to take place. Yet, yet," he waved off the applause, "we are not at war with the Spanish, according to our King. Therefore, it must be justified in some fashion."

"So we are here to divine Spanish intentions towards Jamaica," Bradley said.

Morgan raised his hands heavenward and gave another shrug. "And find food, since we have been so unfortunate as to reach these cays without any."

This brought more laughter.

"So, without further ado, let us determine how we will divide the... food," he grinned, "and anything else of value that may fall into our hands whilst we are questioning the Spanish as to their intentions."

A great deal of discussion ensued. I learned that since first officers were not *de rigueur* for buccaneer vessels, I was to be considered a

bo'sun. That entitled me to one extra share, whereas Cudro, being quartermaster, and the Bard, being the master of sail, both received two extra shares. I did not complain, as I felt they truly did more than I. Captains were to receive eight shares for their vessels and leadership. This was unsavory to Striker, Cudro, and me, as our ship had six owners. However, since all save Pete and Gaston held other posts that were to be compensated above and beyond one share per man, we decided we would distribute the proceeds in our own manner once they had been allotted to us.

Then the amounts were decided for events of calamity and fortune, with the customary compensations for loss of limb or eye, and boons to be awarded for acts of valor or heroism. Once this was completed, it was copied down for each captain, so they could return to their ships and put the matter to a vote. If the crews did not accept it, then we would be back to discussing it again on the morrow.

Once this was completed, Morgan handed a bottle to Bradley and returned to the fire. "Now, gentlemen, let us discuss our target."

I was cynical of the wisdom of this. We had been passing several bottles during the prior heated discussion, and I could not see how a band of drunken men were the best arbiters of the fate of all the rest. Though I supposed this is how all military matters are initiated; with the lineage and rank of those doing the drinking being the only thing separating a war from a battle. And I consoled myself that, in this instance, the men would have a vote on it when all were sober in the morn. I hoped that would effectively veto any lunacy concocted by men with heads full of rum whose debts could not possibly be paid without a juicy plum of a prize.

A map of Cuba was produced and put on the barrel which one of the surgeons had used as a desk for copying the articles. Several men took torches from the fire and held them overhead as we all gathered about to peruse the battered paper. I quickly concluded I could see nothing over other shoulders, and withdrew to allow others the added room. I recalled what I could remember of the island from the maps I had seen as the towns were discussed.

Several ports were mentioned and all dismissed as not being worthy of our time. Someone suggested Saint Jago, which I knew had been the target of Penn and Venable's doomed attack on Cuba before they decided to capture Jamaica as a consolation prize. This was, of course, known by far more men than me, and many said as much.

Morgan scoffed. "They were fools. We could take it. But gentlemen, I have a far fatter prize in mind. Havana."

The muttering that had swirled at his mention of being able to take Saint Jago was silenced by his last word. I peered over shoulders to see what I could in the faces illuminated by the torches. All eyes were on him. They thought him mad. I was greatly relieved.

"It would take the guns of the whole damn navy to sail into that port. Have you seen the fortress there, Morgan?" one of the captains

said quietly.

"Of course I've seen Havana's fortress, and her harbor," Morgan said with a calculated degree of annoyance.

I was curious to see how he would mount his attack upon our reason. From what Striker had said, this was a plan he had wished to present for months.

"I am not a fool, nor foolhardy," Morgan said. "You do not sail into the harbor to take Havana, you anchor up the coast and march on her overland from behind, where the Spanish will least expect it."

It was an interesting military tactic – or it would be, if we possessed more men. We had perhaps seven hundred; I thought it likely the garrison of this fortress the other man mentioned was twice that. And that would be just one garrison in one fort.

I maneuvered to see specific faces. Striker was scratching his head. Bradley was regarding Morgan as a man looks upon a beloved drunken uncle who must be prevented from wandering into the street where he might be struck by a carriage. The Bard was appalled. Cudro had withdrawn from the cluster to stand near me and gaze at the stars, with the mien of a man who is not sure whether he has been annoyed into the arms of amusement yet.

I sighed and spoke up. "That might be a very clever tactic indeed, if we were five times our current number."

Morgan glared in the direction of my voice, but I knew he was blinded by the torchlight and could not see me. As a dissident voice from the shadows often does, my words had their desired effect; and everyone began to speak freely of the madness of his plan.

Our leader was no fool. He retreated gracefully.

"Perhaps, perhaps," he sighed. "I merely thought of the amount of booty in such a prize and how we could all live out our lives as wealthy men after such a venture."

"Not in Port Royal," someone said and all laughed.

When it died down, a voice I did not recognize said quietly, "If we are considering a march inland, I know of a town that has never been sacked. And it be rich too, with cattle and hides."

"Tell of it, Hadsell," Morgan said.

"Puerto del Principe. It's here," Hadsell said.

"Not far, due north of where we are now," someone said. "How is it you know of it?"

"I was a slave there," Hadsell spat.

"Puerto?" Pierrot asked. "Why is it Puerto if it is inland?"

"The Devil if I know," Hadsell said.

Morgan withdrew from the cluster about the map to pace. "Aye, no one has raided an inland town on Cuba before. We can catch them by surprise." He stopped and faced everyone again. "I like it. Let us put it to a vote in the morning and sail to..." He returned to the map and pointed. "To this end of the Gulf of Ana Maria. As close as we can get. We will lay at anchor overnight and march by first light."

"If this map is correct, it's at least ten leagues, maybe more," Bradley said.

"And there be hills and forest too, I'm sorry to say," Hadsell added.

Morgan shrugged. "What's ten leagues to an army of hungry buccaneers?"

I could think of several choice rejoinders, but I kept my mouth firmly closed as they all chuckled and jostled and made plans.

A hogshead of wine was opened as the discussion dissolved into tale-telling of prior conquests. I wished to return to the ship; but Striker was deeply embroiled, and even Cudro and the Bard had been drawn into it again. I supposed I could leave them and find some boat to row back to our ship; but at this late hour and level of rum, I was not sure which of the hulking shadows at anchor the *Queen* was. I did not wish to make a fool of myself, rowing about in the dark looking for my own vessel like a lost duckling.

I sat and sipped rum and tried to envision what it would be like to storm a town. I had been party to attacking a manor house once. It had been a somewhat comical affair, as we had not been attempting to capture the structure, merely to rout a bevy of individuals hiding inside. True, we had climbed a wall to slip in; but once there, my compatriots and I had barged about, kicking in doors and apologizing profusely to the rooms' occupants. I gathered a town would be much like taking a ship, only much much larger: not only in geography, but in levels of complication. In the end, though, it would surely involve kicking in doors and shooting the occupants.

The Moon above beckoned my eye, and the rum swirled my thoughts. I wondered if the Gods lived there, and if sailing there would be akin to storming Heaven. Surely the Gods would put up one Devil of a fight; but then They always do when man attempts to wrest pleasure or riches from life.

Forty-Four

Wherein We Surrender to Battle

At last we were able to leave the meeting. Being the soberest, I did most of the rowing on our way to the *Queen*. Gaston helped me aboard, though our fine companions needed far more assistance than I in getting their legs over the gunwale. My matelot seemed to care not, as he pulled me into the cabin, and pushing me into the corner, embraced me in a manner that spoke of desperation and unease.

“How are we?” I breathed in French, and nodded politely at the men playing cards on our table.

“Apparently incapable of being left alone,” he whispered with bitter amusement.

I frowned. We had not spoken of the Horse or his madness in days. Since we departed Port Royal, he had seemed quite well.

“What has brought this on?” I asked.

He shook his head and assured me, “I have the reins; but we are to ride into battle, and the Horse is prancing in anticipation.”

“Ah. Before, when we prepared to take a ship...”

He spoke before I finished. “I wore the mask and kept a very tight grip on the reins, until I could at last loose the Horse upon the Spanish.”

I remembered his hacking men on the flute to death for having a whip, and his descent into madness in the aftermath of taking the galleon. We had so often spoken lightly of his need to unleash the Horse’s darker urges upon enemies rather than allies that I still considered it more figurative than literal, despite his revelatory

statements on the way to Cow Island. He needed to run wild again: another storm approached.

"What do you need of me?" I asked.

"I am sorry, Will, I will slip on all the blood and you will have to hold the cart."

"So you will become a demon of violence and then a child in the aftermath, and possibly arrange bodies?" I asked lightly.

He regarded me with surprise, and then a smile slowly crept across his mouth.

"Oui," he said with only half of his prior somberness. "Keep me aimed at the enemy; protect me when I am not myself; and do not allow me to offend our dead."

"I think I will manage," I whispered.

"You will always love me," he said. It was not a question, but more a statement of quiet revelation.

I kissed him lightly. "Oui, because I exercise very poor judgment."

His lips twitched. "As long as that is acknowledged."

"I own it willingly." I kept my face as serious as I could manage.

He smiled for both of us. "Never let it be said that you are not an honest man."

I cupped his face in my hands and ran my thumbs over his brows and then his closed eyes.

"And before we go to war, I should not leave you alone," I said.

"Oui." He sighed. "Where are we going?"

"If the men agree, we will attack a town named Puerto del Principe."

He frowned. "I have not heard of it."

"It is inland. Apparently ten leagues or so. Over hills."

"Why is it called Puerto if it is..." he began.

I put fingers to his lips. "It is a mystery, or perhaps a misnomer."

I relayed all that had occurred, and he shrugged when I finished.

"We are fortunate we spent the last months walking about in the brush," he said.

"We are indeed," I sighed. "I do not know how Morgan's other recruits will fare."

In the morning, the group articles passed without revision or question upon our vessel. The choice of target was not as well-received, but many were bored and viewed it as a likely place to start our raiding. Striker made no mention of the need to question Spaniards as to their intentions. Our men were hungry for gold, not food or some damn fool agenda.

As we were anchored near the French ships, we were witness to a great deal of discussion, though we could hear little of it: other than the fact that the *Ouis* did not seem to greatly outnumber the *Nons*. Further away, we heard the English ships erupt in *Ayes*. Hunger will do that to men.

Assuming we would sail, the Bard began to make ready. Striker sent Gaston and me in a canoe to the *Josephine* to inquire of their plans.

They were readying to sail as we approached. We found Pierrot on their quarterdeck studying a chart with his quartermaster, Rizzo; the *Josephine's* master of sail, Petit Dominic; and Savant, Chat Noir, and Peppo, the master of sail from the *Belle Mer*. They seemed pleased to see us, and as the French were prone to do, heartily embraced us in turn. My matelot bore it well, though he did little to engender their goodwill beyond that: once the greetings were complete, he proceeded to stand stiffly at my side, with arms crossed and eyes on the horizon. None seemed bothered by this: they simply ignored him. I was amused that if we had done nothing else this year, we had at least befriended the French.

"I have been sent by Striker to ascertain whether you will be joining us," I said to all.

"You will be sailing, non?" Pierrot asked with a shrug.

"Oui," I said, "but many of ours feel it is merely the first course to a grander meal over the summer."

"We will join you in this repast," he grinned, "but my friend, let us hope Morgan serves up a dish full of flavor, lest we be forced to lead our men to dine at another table."

Savant chuckled at this.

"I can well understand," I said, "though the lack of your company would make our next hosts less likely to serve up their best."

They laughed, and Pierrot shrugged eloquently. "That is life, my friend. We will see what this table offers and hope we are well satisfied."

"Well," I shrugged. "I feel any meal will be enlivened by your company; I am sure at the least we will enjoy an amusing repast."

Petit Dominic was an affable fellow, but possessed of a keenly literal mind. "We are not truly going there for food, non? You said that was merely a ploy of Morgan's making."

"For the love of God," Rizzo said. "You imbecile! They jest!"

Gaston and I left them trying to explain to the man. The *Virgin Queen* weighed anchor as soon as we were aboard.

Striker glanced at the *Josephine* and *Belle Mer* as we joined him on the quarterdeck.

"They sail," I assured him, "but this prize had best be worthwhile, or Pierrot's men will not wish to remain in our company."

"That's to be expected," Striker sighed. "At least we'll have their number for this. As we don't know exactly what this'll entail as yet. When we got enough rum in him, Hadsell admitted he hasn't been there in years. And Morgan wants us to sail first, as the Bard is the most experienced master of sail we have. I wish we had another to lead us once we were ashore."

The Bard swore vehemently. "I've never been here before," he spat. "The damn man knows nothing of sailing. We need a pilot for these waters. There are bars and cays everywhere, and we're going to have to sound our way in."

Striker sighed sympathetically, and with another curse, the Bard

turned away to harangue the men at the bow who would be watching our progress.

"I thought this Hadsell had been a slave there," I said quietly in the Bard's wake. "Though I suppose that need not be recently."

"You missed some of the discussion last night when you wandered off," Striker said. "Hadsell admitted he had only been to this place once. It was for a fortnight, and he did see much of the town, but it was more than five years ago. There was no fortress there, or any other defense works. Since it is inland, they do not expect attack and so probably haven't built a fortress, either. But Hadsell never approached the place from the South as we will. He's only seen the road on a map far better than this one." He gestured at the parchment in front of him, which showed a goodly amount of detail about the coast of the island but only vague representations of the interior.

"Do we have no one else who has been there?" I looked about at the other ships beginning to weigh anchor in our wake. "I know it is unlikely."

"Morgan inquired," Striker sighed. "One of the ships captured a Spaniard some time ago. They kept him for a slave. According to that captain, the man speaks no English, knows nothing of sailing, and will probably be of little use to us, though he was taken from around here about a year ago."

"Is he daft?" I asked.

"Who, the Spaniard or the captain?" Striker asked with a grin.

"Either."

Striker chuckled. "I would think both. Morgan plans to interrogate the man properly with a good translator, once we are ashore tomorrow." I hoped that did not include me.

"How many men do we have who speak Castilian?" I asked.

"Julio and you. I don't know about the other ships. I would imagine some. Morgan had mention of you, though," Striker said.

"Lovely," I sighed.

"I cannot believe you have no stomach for interrogation." Cudro said with a frown.

"That is not the facet of the matter that gives me pause."

"What then?" Striker asked.

I flicked my gaze to Gaston. Striker and Cudro sighed with knowing nods. My matelot tensed.

"I have no issue with it, either," Gaston said quietly to me in French. "I will accompany you."

I put my arm about his shoulder. "And if they wish to flog the man into talking?" I whispered, so that Cudro would have to strain to hear.

"Then we will end up marooned on Cuba, if not dead," Gaston sighed, but his lip twitched with some small amusement and I took heart in that.

I hugged his shoulder tighter and said briskly, "Do not trouble yourself. If it comes to that, I will simply take charge of the matter and

suggest a more creative inducement.”

Cudro had heard that, and he rumbled with quiet amusement.

Striker, though he had not understood the language, had understood enough to regard us thoughtfully. He exchanged a look with Cudro. They shrugged.

“Gaston,” Striker said carefully, “do you wish to go on this raid? You two could remain here and...”

“Non,” Gaston said with quick assurance. “As always, when I am thus, it is best to point me toward the enemy.”

“I hoped as much,” Striker said with wry amusement. “But, if...”

“With Will at my side, I will cause no trouble for you as Captain,” Gaston said firmly.

“That was not my concern,” Striker said, but I could see he was lying.

“All will be well,” I said lightly and smiled. “As he says, I will see to him so he does damage to the Spanish and no one else.”

Everyone made much of being amused; Gaston even put on a good show. But I could see doubt in our friends’ eyes. Sadly, I felt it in my heart.

The winds were not in our favor, and as the Bard had said, with an abundance of small cays and sand bars to contend with, we made slow work of the twelve leagues we had to sail into the gulf. We did not reach our destination until the sun was sinking low in the West on the second day. Thankfully, there were no Spanish craft about. The Bard chose a likely anchorage. Soon our fleet was spread out amongst the cays, and not as close to shore as I was sure Morgan would have liked for an early landing. It was not to be helped in the waning light, though. At least no one ashore would be wise of our intentions. Even if they saw us before night closed, they would assuredly think we were bound elsewhere, as there was no town in sight.

All took short watches that night so that every man would be rested in the morning. When it was our turn on the quarterdeck, Gaston and I stood at the aft rail with Pete and studied the dark around us. None of the ships had lanterns lit, as they would have made us quite visible from shore. The Moon drifted behind intermittent clouds. The night was full of the furtive sounds of men whispering in small clusters, the ship creaking as she tested her anchor in the current, and the occasional gust of breeze tugging at the rigging just briskly enough to make it sigh.

I rubbed Gaston’s back. He was tense and withdrawn, as he had been since my return from the meeting on the cay. When we had rested he had not wished to make love. We had simply slept and I had hoped he would find it restorative. Yet he had always woken sullen, and I had woken anxious. I wished to speak to him alone in these last hours before we landed, but Pete did not seem prone to leave us.

“What will you do in this coming action with no matelot?” I finally asked the Golden One.

He gave a grumbling sigh in answer and said nothing else.

"I suppose we will keep an eye on Striker," I said, "as he will likely be quite involved with the necessities of command. I would offer that we keep an eye on you, as you have no matelot, but I feel you are more likely to be able to care for yourself. But do let us know."

He snorted. "Don't Worry Yourself."

Then he left us alone.

"Was it your intent to drive him off?" Gaston asked in his wake.

"Perhaps," I said with a grin and a shrug. "It is my intent to keep my word to my sister on the matter of Striker's safety."

"Pete will see to him," he said.

"Has he said as much?"

"He has not found another," Gaston said solemnly.

I grinned at the night and embraced Gaston, resting my chin on his shoulder. To my relief, he shifted comfortably against me and caressed my arm.

"How is the storm progressing?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I should explain. This is my doing, in part. I am calling it. It is as if I draw anger from a well deep inside me. If I am to fight, I must... fuel it. And so I find the anger I keep hidden and it burns like oil, and in finding it I begin to remember the events that put it there, that first sparked it into life: not clearly, but as little glimpses of horrible things and..."

"That anger is always there." I said.

He turned in my arms and met my gaze with a nod.

"And what happens if you do not release it?" I asked. "You always say that you must release it. I am merely curious."

"I will need to spend a great deal of time alone in the woods raving at your Gods," he said.

"Ah, that places a number of things in perspective."

And it did. I saw pieces of thoughts fall into place in such a way they formed a pattern.

"The anger is not part of your madness, any more than the scars are," I said, "but the madness has prompted others to give you the scars and the anger."

He frowned and nodded. "Oui."

"Do you feel we could ever draw that anger from you, like draining a boil or wound, perhaps?"

His head cocked as he considered my words. "If we accept the metaphor of a wound, then oui, it must be drawn out before it can heal. But I do not know if that is correct. And I do not know how... other than battle."

"But all the battles you have fought here have not..."

His fingers were on my lips. "The madness that accompanies it has always resulted in more harm being done to me, and more anger. With you here..."

I nodded and kissed his fingers before pulling them away. "I understand. Perhaps I can assist you in allowing the battle to draw the

poison out without adding any more in its stead.”

“Oui,” he said thoughtfully.

“Then I will nurture your anger and madness in this endeavor.”

He shook his head and frowned with bemusement. “That does not sound as it should.”

“To me either.” I grinned. “Let us see how it plays out, though.”

Lights blazed on a ship off our starboard bow and dismissed any comment he might have made. We watched with surprise as the now-lit sloop dropped its boat and several canoes. Armed men clambered aboard the smaller craft and raced off into the night, with lanterns on poles at the bows. They were looking for something in the water.

As we were fairly near the lit sloop, I sent two men in a canoe to inquire of this activity. They returned a short time later with irksome news. The Spanish slave who did not speak English, the one I was possibly to assist in interrogating in the morning, had chosen to escape. He had dropped over the side and swam. They had not realized he could swim, either. I thought it likely he could also understand a good deal of English after a year. And even more likely that if he could not speak English, he could definitely recognize the name of a Cuban town such as Puerto del Principe.

I did not call out an alert; but a number of the sleeping men woke at the activity of lowering the canoe, and soon the deck was awash in quiet discussion of the damn Spaniard’s chances of making it to shore. I thought it likely, with the number of cays and bars. All he had to do was swim from one to the next. Then the question would be whether or not he could find someone appropriate to warn, or worse yet, make Puerto del Principe before we did.

I woke Striker and relayed all to him as the predawn grey seeped above the horizon. The Bard had us in motion before the first true rays of the sun burst above the sea. We drifted closer to the shore on the small tropical tide. We saw to our weapons and cached our valuables, so as to avoid any confusion or claims of withholding plunder.

A longboat arrived from the *Mayflower* as we were lowering our own. Morgan wished to land all as soon as possible, as we might have lost the element of surprise. Needless to say, we were not surprised. We made fast work of landing our men. Gaston and I were on the last boat across, and we bid farewell to the Bard and Dickey.

“Take care,” the Bard said. “I don’t envy you.”

“I do not envy you,” I replied. “You will be sitting here like ducks for the slaughter with barely enough men to man the guns.”

He snorted. “Have a little faith, Will. We’ll hide in the cays. The only thing we’ll have to fight is boredom.”

“Then I do envy you, as you will not have to combat sore feet and aching limbs.”

As the men of the *Virgin Queen* were some of the first ashore, Striker had dispatched a scouting party to the north: to locate the town the maps showed there and the road that led to Puerto del Principe. Both

thankfully proved to be where they should.

Within two hours, all were ashore except for the skeleton crews, and I watched the ships weigh anchor and raise sail. Though there were nearly six hundred of us milling about, I felt somewhat abandoned at the sight of our ships' departure.

Soon we proceeded to march north and inland, in somewhat orderly groups: bypassing the small village on the coast, and heading directly to the road that led through the hills to Puerto del Principe.

Striker had opted to place us in the lead, and Gaston and I soon joined Liam and Otter and two other men in scouting ahead. I spent the rest of the day just trying to keep up and stay quiet as we ran beside the road ahead of the vanguard. So, by evening, I was quite surprised when Gaston knocked me flat and held his hand over my mouth. When I had submitted enough that he was assured I would not make noise, he let me up; and I saw Liam motioning us ahead in the waning light. We stayed low and worked our way forward to discover what Otter had: a group of Spaniards felling trees across the road.

We snuck closer, and I listened and interpreted. They were preparing for us. This was the foremost party. Others were building ambuscades farther up the road. Some of the men in this group thought their efforts might be a waste of time, and that the army on the plain would surely stop us. Another man, the leader, argued that the mayor would not have time to gather that army if they did not delay us here. Further discourse proved they did not think we would arrive today, or even on the morrow.

Apparently, our army would not be able to surprise Puerto del Principe with anything other than speed.

We sent one of the men back, while the rest of us crouched in the gathering twilight with muskets aimed on the Spaniards we could see. There were too many of them for us to take them all without the possibility of some escaping to warn of our rapid approach. Especially since they all had horses. A good steed would have made short work of the length of this road, and I imagined the village the escaped slave had reached must have sent a fast one to Puerto del Principe.

Morgan, Striker, Pete, Pierrot and a group of presumably fast and stealthy men arrived sooner than even I expected. We made quick work of capturing the tree-felling Spaniards, and thereby learned our exact location and that we still had a good ten miles to traverse. Thankfully, this information did not come at the cost of whipping anyone, as Gaston was at my side the entire time.

So were the others. As one we looked to the sky. The sun had set. There would be a moon, but it was not full. The sky would be clear, though.

"I've already ordered the men to use this time to rest a bit," Morgan said. "We should press on, though. Keep the vanguard alongside the road, with two large scouting parties to find the ambuscades. The main party can work their way up the road. Once we reach a mile or so from

this plain they intend to meet us on, we will stop and rest until dawn. I will stay with the main party. Keep me informed."

"I want the rest of my men in the vanguard, then," Striker said.

"I'll send our good scouts up to you," Pierrot offered.

And so it was settled. Gaston and I saw little of the rest of the arrangements, as we were back to creeping through the woods again: this time by moonlight, with ten other men instead of four. Alone, I would have blundered into any ambushade the Spanish cared to set, and I probably could have stumbled through their hastily-assembled redoubts without seeing them. Luckily, I was not alone. I was Gaston's shadow and he was the shadow of death. At the first ambushade, as we quietly dispatched the Spaniards dozing in wait for us, I literally stumbled on the body of a man he had killed as I tried to keep up with him. My blade only tasted blood if there were two Spaniards close together and Gaston felt like throwing me a bone.

Across the road, either one of our brethren was stupid or his opponent was especially wary and skilled. Shots were fired. After that, we did not find any Spaniards waiting for us. They had withdrawn. We had once again lost the element of surprise.

Finally, we came to edge of the hills and forest, and saw the lights of a town across a plain. It was several hours until dawn. We sent messengers back and settled in for a much-deserved rest. Even as aching and exhausted as I was, I could not sleep immediately. I wondered what the morrow would bring.

As usual in such situations, I only knew I had slept when I woke disoriented. I did not remember dreaming, and I did not feel rested. The sun had broken the horizon. The gentle morning light revealed a great number of men in a distant, ragged line across the plain. There was drumbeating and the stamp of hundreds of bare feet behind me on the road. Gaston handed me an apple and a hunk of boucan, and I hurriedly ate without tasting any of it. He was checking his weapons, and with meat hanging from my mouth, I began to do the same.

He was focused on the task at hand, and as distant as he had been the previous morning. Once my weapons were ready, I touched his shoulder. He regarded me with a frown that slowly became curious as he noted my agitation.

"It appears we are actually going into battle like an army," I said.

He shrugged, and dug into his belt pouch. "It is the way these things are done. Once we are past them and in the town, it will be much like it is on a ship."

I studied the line of distant men. "I have witnessed armies in battle, when the drums and bugles and orderly lines give way to chaos. I have stood on a safe castle wall and watched from above, and heard my companions shout with glee as the side it was in our best interests to cheer performed this or that tactic. And I would look at all the men running about in the smoke and not understand what in the name of God they were talking about or how they could tell. Until finally I saw

one color or the other surge forward enough and leave a great number of bodies in their wake. I suppose in a way, it is much like taking a ship, yet... I perceive combat as I have always engaged in it as an orderly thing governed by skill and confidence. The victor is oft decided before the matter is even joined. But on a field of battle, with so many running amuck, one can handily defeat all one sees and still be felled by a ball meant for another."

I turned back to him. He was watching me with a frown I could not read. When I paused, he began to dab black paint about my eyes. I smiled and held still.

"It will be like the ship, Will, you will see," he said doggedly.

His eyes were kind.

My gaze clung to them but I shook my head. "I have known good men to die for no good reason, men as proficient at arms as I. And people called them brave... and I secretly thought them fools. And always it is for some damn political ploy. And here we are. And I recall Striker's words about the gold making the death and risk worthwhile. Morgan marching us into battle on some damn agenda of Modyford's just curdles my gut. This town had best be rich."

Gaston took a deep breath. He was not amused. I had almost forgotten how damn shadowed his eyes became when he painted them.

"Must I strike you?" he asked.

It took me a moment to fathom his meaning; and then I smiled and shook my head.

"Non, I will rise to the occasion. What would you have of me?" I asked.

"You will stay behind me," he said with more patience. "This first part will be like the bull. You will fire while I am loading."

"The bull was not firing at us while charging," I noted.

He smirked. "Do you feel any of them can hit anything?"

"Some most assuredly can," I said. "They have to have men with military experience. Or hunters. And there are always the vagaries of fortune."

"Some," Gaston scoffed. "And oui, luck is always a factor."

I did not attempt to defend myself when he got a strong grip on my jaw and pulled my face to his.

"I have survived dozens of these battles without you," he said fiercely. "You will live through this one with me."

Then he kissed me deeply and I was flooded with shame.

"I am..." I started to say but he stopped my words with his fingers.

"When the battle is closer, you will insure that no one gets behind me," he said intently. "And I will insure that no one gets close to us from the front. We will move with the others. It is just as a ship."

I pulled his fingers away. "I am a fool."

He grinned slowly. "Not for that."

I smiled as I remembered the first time we had made that exchange. It seemed an eternity ago.

"Do not die," I whispered.

"We will not die. We did well on the galleon, non?"

I nodded. "I will not fail you today."

"You had best not," he said seriously, "or we will be arguing about it for a very long time in Hell."

He turned away and led us to join our companions.

Our brethren had begun to spill onto the plain in a widening crescent. We joined Striker and our men as they passed. The *Virgin Queen's* crew was to be the left flank of the buccaneer formation. Cudro asked for order, and we obediently formed into volley lines, one matelot ahead and the other behind. I stood behind Gaston; and the calm I often felt before a duel descended over me.

I was a fool to be concerned. The men around me could fire faster than the Spaniards could approach. If the Gods wished me dead, They had been given ample opportunity many times before this.

I looked about and listened, and realized that every man here had done this before. Liam and Otter were beside us; two men I could not name but knew were to our left; Julio and Davey stood beyond them. Cudro anchored our far end.

Striker and, to my relief and amusement, Pete, walked the line. Striker made eye contact with every man and clasped hands with many. I knew he would lead us from the front. Pete looked like a lord taking a stroll of his grounds. I was pleased to see Gaston was correct: though Pete would not allow them to be called matelots, I thought none would harm Striker while he lived.

I stepped forward far enough to lean out and look across the front of our army. Morgan was walking amongst the *Mayflower's* men with Bradley. Both were as heavily armed as any here. So he would actually fight amongst us. My respect for Morgan raised a notch, so that perhaps I gave him the accord I would give a cur.

While I was beside him, I regarded my matelot. He was studying me. I smiled jauntily and kissed him. He was smirking when I withdrew.

"You are well now?" he asked.

"Oui. I am fine now."

The bugle signaled an advance and we started walking forward. I was amused: no drilling or training was required to keep us in order. Every man among us was experienced and knew his weapon's length, his matelot's height, and the amount of space he needed about him to reload.

Over Gaston's shoulder, I could see the Spaniards advancing toward us. Soon it was possible to discern what a rabble they were. I could not think of the buccaneers as an army, at least not in comparison to the ones I had seen in Christendom. Yet there was uniformity amongst us, in weapons, bearing, and even our attire. The Spanish we faced were a hastily-assembled militia. Though we were not close enough to see their weapons clearly, I imagined many carried dubious matchlocks handed down from their fathers. I also noted the Spaniards merely matched us

in number; they did not exceed us in any way.

The buccaneers began to give the hue and cry of war. Distantly I could hear imprecations and curses in Castilian; most seemed to involve us being dogs or the sons of them.

Then they charged. As they closed, I did not hear Striker's order; but our front row knelt like a rolling wave, until it pulled Gaston under and out of my sight. Then it was very quiet, and I did hear Striker's voice distinctly over the yelling Spaniards. And then it was like facing the bull. I heard Gaston fire as a noise separate from all the others, even though every retort was so closely spaced as to be a continuous roar. I could swear every ball found a home, as most of the first line of Spaniards jerked and crumpled in mid-stride. I knelt, and aimed at one that did not fall, and fired when I heard the retorts around me. My target fell. I did not care. I was standing and reloading. There was another behind him that Gaston dropped; and then a retreat was sounded on the far side of the plain and the Spanish pulled back. We did not chase them.

And so it went, until the sun was high overhead. We would advance a little, and they would charge haphazardly and then retreat. Every time they pulled away, we came in farther. Soon we were stepping over dead and wounded Spaniards. I had heard a ball rush past me at one point, but I saw no one about me get hit. Some unlucky soul took a ball somewhere amongst us, though, as I heard English curses of pain from the right.

Finally the Spanish broke completely, and it was a rout. The order was given, and we left our lines like long-frustrated dogs loosed from their chains. Howling with glee, we chased them into Puerto del Principe.

I clung to Gaston's heels, and he led us in betwixt the buildings to crouch down and look about. I saw two of our men get shot running up the middle of the street. We could see the Spaniards on the rooftop who had shot them. Gaston fired from our cover, and one man went down. The other hid before I could take him. I found another target soon after, though. There was sporadic gunfire all about. The Spanish were now entrenched in their own homes, on streets they knew well; and thus, it became very much like taking a ship.

Some time later, we were asking about for a grenadoe to clear a rooftop when a retreat was signaled. We withdrew cautiously to the edge of town and found our own men. Cudro was leading them toward the south of the town, and it seemed all our number were being dispatched to surround the place. The big Dutchman was pleased to see us.

"Striker would like a word with you." He pointed back the way he had come.

We turned as he suggested, and spied the captains in conference with Morgan. We hurried over.

"What would you have of me?" I asked Striker.

"Translate," he replied with a tired sigh.

"Eloquently and elegantly," Morgan added. "We're taking more of a

beating here than we did in the field, and I have had quite enough of it. Tell them we will burn the place and shoot every man, woman, and child that runs from the buildings if they do not surrender."

"And if they do?" I asked.

He glared at me as if I had impugned his honor in some manner.

I shrugged. "They will ask."

"We'll put them all in the church. Assure them no woman will be dishonored, and no child harmed, if they comply."

"And the men?" I asked.

"Will not suffer if they produce their valuables," he said with a wave.

"And all of this elegantly in their language, you understand? I would not have them thinking we are barbarians."

"Of course." I studied the town and chewed my lip in apparent consideration of the task at hand. I hoped it concealed my amusement. "All right, then. How are these things done? Do I approach with a white flag?"

"Nay, they'll shoot you," Bradley said.

"Get closer and shout at them," Morgan said, and waved me in the general direction.

"Well then, it is to be a civilized affair." I grinned.

Morgan glared, but Striker and Pierrot were ill-disguising their amusement.

I looked to Gaston and shrugged. He was still steeped in battle fury, though it was obvious he was struggling to calm himself. Still, he saw no humor in the situation, and I thought it likely he only sensed another opportunity to kill.

We crept closer, using what we could for cover, until we were within easy shouting distance of an occupied building. I considered my words and wondered how elegant and cordial I should appear. Deciding that honey always attracts more flies than vinegar; I adopted a pleasant tone and called out in my finest Castilian.

"Gentle men and women of Puerto del Principe, I bear a message from Admiral Morgan. Whom may I address?"

I heard muffled discussion until a voice called out, "The mayor is dead." This was followed by yelling, the gist of which seemed to involve the speaker being a fool for sharing that fact with the damned English bastards.

"State your message, dog," another voice roared from a building across the street.

"Admiral Morgan regrets the loss of your fine men that this endeavor has precipitated. He wishes to see an end to it, before more are lost, especially since we are now in the town and your women and children may come under fire."

"What does he offer?" the voice roared, sounding angrier now.

"That all here lay down their arms and proceed to the church, where they shall remain until we leave. He guarantees that no woman will be dishonored or child harmed if this is to occur. The men will likewise not

be harmed as long as they cooperate in our securing of their valuables. There need be no hardship in the matter. I assure you, the sooner we have what we wish, the sooner we will depart."

"And if we do not comply?" the voice challenged.

I slid into a harsher tone. "We will burn the place about your ears, shoot all who come into sight, and sift the rubble afterwards for your gold."

This precipitated wailing from another building and much discussion from the closest one.

Angry Man finally roared, "Give us an hour to decide."

I eyed the sinking sun. "Half that. Let us resolve this and have you all safely in the church... or the fires lit, before sunset."

"We will send a messenger with an answer as soon as we have one," the man growled.

With that, Gaston and I crept back to the captains and relayed the substance of the discourse. Morgan was pleased I had shortened the time.

Within a half hour, a man emerged under a white flag. The following parley was brief, and soon we were rounding up all the citizens and escorting them to the church. Many houses were empty, though, and we thought it likely their occupants had escaped the town before we surrounded it.

As the sun sank below the horizon, we set about searching buildings for stragglers, booty, and of course, food and alcohol. In addition to a lack of residents, we found many a house stripped bare of anything valuable. There were suspicious shadows on walls where crucifixes had hung, and dustless holes on bureaus where jewelry boxes had sat.

We did find alcohol, though, and soon a debauch was under way.

Gaston and I found ourselves in the yard of a large house on the edge of town. He eyed the deep cistern and cursed.

At my raised eyebrow, he said, "They will most likely have secreted things in it, and we will be swimming about in it tomorrow."

I did not anticipate the next days with any relish. I wandered into the cook house and found apples, mangoes, and a cold roast that did not smell unduly ripe. I also found several bottles of wine and another of rum. I whooped with joy and a concerned Gaston was soon at my side. He relaxed somewhat after seeing my find, and relieved me of the bottle of rum. We took the food and made our way into the house, still cautious of any stubborn hiding Spaniards.

Thankfully, the building proved to be empty of all save a few bodies. Tragically, one of them was a little boy. They had him laid out on the dining table, and it was obvious someone had attempted to staunch the bleeding. Gaston approached the body diffidently, and carefully raised the cloth draped over the child to eye his wound. I wondered why the family had departed to the church without covering him properly. Then I saw what must have been his mother crumpled nearby. The male bodies near the windows must have been a father and brother.

The house was on the side of town we had first entered. The fighting had been fierce here, and the whole back wall of the room was pocked with musket balls. My fecund imagination could well envision the boy getting hit by a stray shot and his mother leaving the safety of the floor to place him on the table and tend to the wound. She would have done far better to throw the table over and crouch behind it while seeing to him. People who have not lived with armies marauding through their lands do not think of such things, however; and Puerto del Principe had been virgin to the violence of war and politics.

I drank one of the bottles of wine as I watched Gaston tenderly close the boy's eyes and drape the cloth over his face. I helped him lay the other family members out properly and find cloths to cover them. Even as the wine dulled my thoughts, I could see that Gaston had retreated from the brutality of the day's events in his own way. When we finished, he stood and regarded me with a child's eyes.

I retrieved the food I had found and bade him take up his musket again. He did so, and I kissed him tenderly on the forehead. He followed me out of the house.

We wandered about and ate. I traded him a bottle of wine for the rum, and he sipped it thoughtfully. I drank steadily. Once we had finished the food he slipped his hand into mine. We wove our way through clusters of intoxicated buccaneers, seeking the relative quiet of another side of the town, one not so badly ravaged as the first. We came upon a large house on a relatively quiet street and slipped inside. It was empty. No one had died here, and I was greatly relieved, as I was sure Gaston was in the state of mind to arrange bodies if he came upon them. I was mildly surprised he had done nothing more with the boy.

The house possessed a good-sized bedroom on the second floor, with a wide window overlooking the street. It smelled of perfume: not oppressively, just pleasantly. I relieved myself out the window and stood for a time in the evening breeze. I felt it upon my skin, but little else penetrated my senses. The wine and rum had driven most coherent thought from my mind, and I was pleased with this result. I wished to sleep and dream that the day had not occurred.

I turned, and found Gaston perched on the end of the bed, regarding me. He smiled.

"How are we?" I asked as I went to join him.

He cocked his head in consideration. "I am well. I am with you. My belly is full. The wine was potent."

"Amen," I sighed.

I shed weapons and he did likewise. He offered his hand and pulled me down beside him. The bedding was cotton and clean, and the mattress thick. It was luxurious. I stretched and sank into it. I was surprised to realize how much I ached, now that I allowed myself awareness of it.

"I am well pleased with this bed," I said. "It will be nice to sleep someplace soft for a change."

He tugged at my tunic and bade me roll over. I stripped, dropping even my breeches, and lay on my belly. He soon had the oil, and I reveled in the glide of his fingers over my flesh. It was not a lustful thing, merely sensual and much needed. When he stopped, I was unsure as to what I wanted: to sleep, or for him to continue. I heard and felt him shed his clothing, and then he was astride me again. This time, in addition to his fingers, I felt another instrument of his sensation and mine, one I was quite familiar with.

I opened my eyes and twisted my head enough to regard him curiously. He was tracing swirls along my back with one hand and handling his erect member with the other. He seemed curious about its state. I pushed through the shrouds of rum and tried to remember. I had never seen him aroused when he was childlike.

“Do as you wish, my love,” I whispered.

My manhood stirred in anticipation, and I smiled.

He shifted back and slid his member between my buttocks experimentally. He seemed to like the sensation. Despite the alcohol, I began to tense with anticipation. My anxiety was contrary to our mutual needs, and I tried to will myself to calm. I thought of how to gently phrase my need for preparation to him, as I could not be sure how much he understood in this state.

Then he lay beside me, and I turned my head in that direction to find us face to face. He had an imp’s smile as he kissed my nose. He was on his belly with a hand beneath him. I rolled away enough to rise on an elbow and regard him.

“What do you want, my love?” I asked.

He smiled. “Make love to me.”

He spread his legs and raised his arse enticingly.

Of their own volition, my fingers caressed his buttock, and he made the happy humming sound I so adored. My member throbbed, yet I paused. There was some cautionary thought swimming in the sea of rum between my ears. I could distantly hear it yelling at me; but alas, the sea had begun to roil with my lust, and whatever I wished to tell myself was lost between the swells. Then the oil was in my hand and dribbling down his backside and I could not think of much else.

He was gloriously tight as always, and his squirming and mewling drove me to distraction so that I was pleased I had the rum in me to slow my pleasure. We made quite a go of it, humping away with abandon, until he came with a startled cry and I followed two strokes after. I collapsed atop him as I withdrew, and we giggled like boys. Sometime later, we crawled to the headboard, arranged our weapons, and settled into the clean bedding to sleep like babes.

I woke with an aching head and a sense of unease. I was alone, or so I thought initially. Gaston was not beside me, but he was sitting, dressed, at the foot of the bed, staring toward the open window. Even though he must have heard me moving, he did not turn to regard me. I lay still and listened, wondering if there were some other thing that

held his attention and prevented him from giving greeting. I heard buccaneers in the street and little else. Then I came to understand he was the cause of my unease: his mood had penetrated even my slumber.

"How are we?" I whispered, as I eased my way out of the bed.

He did not answer as I availed myself of the chamber pot. The room was too bright for me to focus on him with my rum-fogged eyes. Squinting, I stumbled to the window and closed the shutters. I turned to him in the dimmer light and found him watching me with dangerous eyes, made even darker by his battle mask being smudged all about them.

Fear did not grip me as it once would have; instead, a wave of concern and melancholy washed over me. I withstood it and did not let it tug me under.

I went to sit beside him on the bed. He did not turn his head to follow me there.

"Though the Devil is punishing me for the damn rum, I am not blind," I said.

He handed me a water skin. I drank most of it.

"Do you feel as I do?" I asked.

"The Horse is angry," he whispered.

"Ah, I assumed as much. Is it angry at me?"

"Oui," he hissed.

I struggled to remember all that had occurred. I finally understood the thoughts that had drowned unheard in the maelstrom of rum. I should not have taken him.

I sighed. "We were, well, I was quite intoxicated, and you... I offered, but you suggested the other and seemed to enjoy it."

"I know what occurred!" he snapped.

"I am sorry," I said. "I meant you no..."

"I know," he growled.

I did not look at him. I drank more water, draining the skin. It did little to ease my head. I availed myself of the chamber pot yet again and then emptied that rum-curdled vileness out the window to the curses of those below; thankfully, they did not sound as if I had actually struck any of them. I could not tell, though: it was too damn bright for me to see.

I closed the shutters again and returned to the bed to sit at the head, well away from him.

"What would you have of me?" I asked. "I would rather you speak your mind, or fling things at me, or even that we fight, rather than wonder at your thoughts or feel your anger so piercingly."

"Do not be so nonchalant," he said stiffly. "You truly do not wish to hear my thoughts."

I sighed. "Well then, I will tell you mine. I am a fool for drinking so when you were not yourself, and... becoming childlike as you do in the aftermath of battle. You must be... you must feel, well, you are... vulnerable at such times. I did not intend to take advantage of that.

But... I drink at such times because I see the blood and I know that some of it is on my hands, and I cannot... forgive myself, with ease, without the blessing of strong drink."

"I know," he said sadly.

I looked to him. He was still staring at the closed shutters.

"I am holding the Horse very still," he whispered, as if he might startle it, as if it were a thing standing in the room between us.

"I see that," I said quietly. "What can I do to calm it?"

"It seeks retribution," he whispered.

"For my trespass upon your person last night?" I asked with unease. He was barely audible. "For being chained to the cart."

"I am held as fast as it is, as you are, as... my Horse is," I breathed.

"It... I know. The anger is still there," he sighed.

"How can we... drain it... away: the anger?" I asked.

He sobbed raggedly and leaned forward, clutching his belly.

In the shadowed room, behind my aching eyes, I felt strangely that this time I was not witnessing his madness so much as I was standing in it with him. That the madness was the room, and the Horse stood there with us, and we were all shrouded in darkness and it was difficult to think, but think we must.

"My love is true," I said softly. "It will never stray or waver."

"I know," he breathed. "But I feel it owns me, and I do not own it. It is horrible."

"Love?"

"Non!" he snapped.

"Your thoughts? The Horse?"

"Both," he sighed.

I thought of his horrible thoughts, the ones he had been so afraid to admit to, the ones I thought we had overcome by his being able to take me. Melancholy and not fear lapped at me once again. I felt its insistent tug. My head pounded.

He finally turned to regard me with beseeching eyes.

He had been in me before when my head hurt as it did now, and I was not afraid of him such that he would need to harm me in the doing of it.

I crawled into the center of the bed to lie on my belly and look back at him. "I am yours, my love. In all ways. Do as you wish, or... as you need."

He inhaled sharp and long, and his eyes hardened, so it was as if he had inhaled the Horse from where it stood in the room.

Fear finally blossomed in my belly. I vowed not to let it spread. I looked away from him and willed my body to relax. Instead of calming me, I only succeeded in rousing my Horse. It stood fractious and ready to run.

I felt Gaston leave the bed and then heard him rummage in our bags. When he returned, he quickly knelt behind me on the bed.

"Give me your wrists," he said.

His voice was actually warm and calm, but the substance of his request left me frozen with fear. Yet, when he took up one of my wrists, I let him move my arm readily enough, even when I felt the loop of leather tighten around it. Somehow, I brought my other arm down and behind me. He bound it to the first. Nor did I fight him when he pushed the leather-wrapped stick he used for surgery between my teeth and tied it into place.

I closed my eyes and lay still as he caressed me with gentle hands. I let him roll me up onto my side a little and bring my leg up to support me. I only started and made noise when he slipped a hand beneath me to grasp my rousing member. I was not startled by his touch, but by the realization that my Horse had the bit in its teeth on the matter and I was on the rise.

"Are you in pain?" he whispered in my ear.

I shook my head.

"Are you afraid?" he whispered seductively.

I nodded.

"Ashamed?" he added.

I nodded with more vigor.

"Your Horse wants this," he said, as he continued to cajole my member into its full glory.

I nodded slowly.

"Why are we so ashamed of what our Horses want?" His voice was as gentle as his fingers. "It is like a poison in us, oui?"

I nodded.

I was fully aroused now. To my dismay, his hand left. My Horse was delighted about where it went next, though, as he began to work upon my opening with oil.

"The pus of the old wounds," he murmured. "Anger, shame, guilt, fear, they are all pustules upon our souls."

I did not bother to nod; I concentrated on opening for him and was relieved when it came easily.

"You are correct," he whispered. "We must lance them."

I could hear the trace of humor in his voice as he slid into position, the head of his member against my hole.

I nodded, and he filled me. I bit on the stick with a groan of pleasure. My aching head and bound wrists seemed very far away. There was only the familiar sensation of him. I surrendered to it wholeheartedly.

After many a satisfying stroke, he pushed all the way in and leaned down to whisper, "I know you want this... Only from me."

At the sound of the hated words, I expected to recoil; but I felt nothing except him.

I nodded, and pushed back against him as best I was able. I was pleased to hear his little exhalation of triumph.

His oiled hand snaked beneath me to take my member again, and he returned to riding me such that he forced the head of my cock into the

tight circle of his fingers with every thrust.

I came, and the pleasure filled me until my aching head exploded with pain, like a pistol overloaded with powder and plugged at the barrel. Tears filled my eyes as he finished a moment later. I was only vaguely aware of him releasing my bonds and pulling the stick from my mouth. Once free, I curled into a ball, my arms wrapped around my head.

“Will?” he queried with concern.

“My head hurts,” I breathed, even that effort causing more pain.

His hands were on me again, prying my arms away. I struggled.

“Do not,” I gasped. “Light hurts. The rum... Headache. When... I came... it made my... head... explode.”

He swore vividly and was off the bed again. A moment later there was a spoon at my lips. I accepted the bitter liquid. Then he curled protectively about me, blocking out the light and sound except for his beating heart. I found peace in that as the laudanum took the pain away.

As I drifted off, I wondered if the sole reason for my existence was amusing the Gods, or Gaston.

Forty~Five

Wherein We Contemplate Sanity and Death

I woke to flickering lamplight falling on Gaston's naked thigh. I could hear a light wind, and the shutters banged restlessly. There was a great deal of revelry somewhere in the streets beyond. My head no longer ached, though I still felt the effect of the drug and thus knew I was not fully myself. I rolled about enough to look up, and found Gaston sitting at the headboard by my shoulder. At my movement, he looked down with shadowed eyes I could not read, but his touch upon my brow was soft and reassuring.

"How are you?" he asked.

His voice was thick with tears. I slowly battled the drug to try and discover what he might be crying about. All I could recall was the piercing headache.

"It was not your fault," I murmured, and stroked his hand. "I have never experienced such a pain before, but then I have seldom woken with my head aching of rum in the company of another who would give me such pleasure."

"It will not happen again," he said firmly.

"I think not," I nodded. "Because I must not drink so, and... well, it would be best if you were not about me when I have. But no matter..."

I sought to touch him, and thus reassure him, but as I moved I discovered the cold hard bracelet of the manacles around his left wrist. The chain led, not to me, but to the iron bars of the headboard.

"Where is the key?" I asked.

He pointed at the foot of the bed. "On the bedpost."

I turned until I spied it hanging from the leather thong on which Striker had worn it.

I started to push myself to sitting, and then thought better of it as a wave of dizziness clutched at me. I rolled onto my back again, but positioned myself so I could better see his face. His eyes were sad, but he appeared calm.

"How are we?" I asked with a smile.

He snorted and looked away, but his lips moved to smile in return.

"I wished for death," he whispered, and the words took the smile from both our lips.

His gaze met mine again, this time it was earnest and beseeching. "I knew I could not leave you... behind, so I planned to kill you first. I could not. I sat here with the pistol at your head for a long time. I thought of... how much you loved me, that you would make such a request, and... I could not. So I am chained here in this life, with you." He shook his head quickly. "Non, that did not sound as it should. I... will not betray you by leaving you alone, and I cannot take you with me, so I will remain, because I love you."

Fresh tears filled his eyes. I wiped them away with my fingertip. None of the words tumbling through my thoughts seemed appropriate in the wake of his. And truly, I did not wish to contemplate what he had said, or rather the images his words conjured. Thankfully, his gaze told me I need not say anything. I caressed his cheek and he closed his eyes with relief and kissed my palm.

"So why are you chained to the bed and not to me?" I asked at last.

"I felt such reason might be fleeting, and... I find comfort in it, and I did not wish to bind you again in any fashion." He grimaced at the last, and guilt swiftly flowed over his face.

I struggled again to remember the rest of what had occurred, and found the memory less disconcerting than the knowledge he had sat about for minutes or hours with a pistol to my head.

"Is that what made you wish for death? What you did this morning?" I asked.

"Oui," he said without regarding me. "I know you will forgive me, but I could not forgive myself... it was..."

"I would not be opposed to it occurring again," I interjected.

He tensed and looked down at me. "What?"

"Your binding me, I would not be opposed to it happening again."

"Why?" He was truly bewildered.

I snorted with amusement. "Come, now, you have delighted in wringing pleasure from me even before you discovered your own. You often pin me in one way or another and take what you will and..." I sobered. "You were correct this morning; my Horse does want it. And you were also correct in that I do want you to take me... by force even, after a fashion, but only you. If another were ever to treat me in that manner I would kill them or die trying, but from you... It is surrender, and... *I find peace in that*. And that is a thing I must wrestle with..."

because, oui, I do find shame in it still, and I wonder a great many things, and not merely about why Shane still lives or... all of that."

He had closed his eyes as if my words pained him, or perhaps his thoughts.

"I cannot trust myself," he whispered.

"You cannot kill me," I offered.

"Non, my thoughts. My thoughts. I do not know what is sane. I think that what I want, what the Horse wants, is wrong and then..." His gaze came to me.

Once again I was gripped by the feeling that I stood with him in his madness. I did not feel fear, or even a sense of losing my standing in the world we knew or thought we knew. This was the world we knew. I had merely perceived it incorrectly.

"Do not use me as a standard to judge yourself," I said softly. "I am no paragon of sanity. I am... mad, too, in my way."

He shook his head and slowly smiled. "Then however will we know what is truth?"

I felt he perceived it as improperly as I had.

"We are truth," I said. "We might not cast the shadows others wish to see upon the cavern wall, but we are the true things in the light. We only need to look to one another. And, truly, that is all we can rely upon. After all, we are the only two centaurs we know."

Thoughts sparked and caught behind his eyes, and then he smiled with such brightness it was as if the dawn had broken in his head.

"I had not viewed it thusly," he whispered.

I smiled. "Neither had I, until this morning. Which is truly astounding, considering the state of my head."

He came to lean over me and gaze down at me with happiness. "Just as you long labored under the assumption that you were a poor wolf," he said, "I have long labored under the assumption I am a poor man. But non, you are correct, I am not a man, I am a centaur. I am mad, but perhaps I am not so very mad as I have assumed because I did not think like other men."

I, too, found comfort in this new concept. We had been judging ourselves harshly indeed, as we had been taught to do, never having received ought else.

He sobered somewhat. "But I will measure myself by you, as you are the only one I can measure myself against."

I pulled his mouth to mine and he kissed me.

"May I release you?" I asked.

He nodded, but did not move from above me. He pressed his forehead to mine with his eyes closed. I wrapped my arms about him and held him.

The wind tore at the shutter with renewed vigor, and the lamp's flame flickered and guttered. I found the shadows on the ceiling menacing, as I often had as a boy. And I no longer felt I stood within his madness, but that the madness was all about us, and we were the only

islet of sanity in a tempest-tossed sea. Then I remembered where we truly were, in a stolen house in a Spanish town, and I nearly laughed. We were adrift in madness; we were not an island, perhaps, but a very little boat.

"I do not wish to stay here," I whispered. "We should find our friends. They must be worried."

He nodded and rubbed his stubbled cheek along mine. He did not move from above me until a rumble of mirth gripped him and he withdrew enough to meet my eyes.

"They might think we have been unlucky with some pocket of Spaniards," he said with sad amusement, "but if they knew the truth, they would worry more."

I shook my head, pondering the run of my thoughts. "Non, that is the madness, not us... that we should be here, in this place, for their reasons, at all. That we should be plumbing the depths of our souls in the name of... understanding one another: that is not mad. That they should worry more over our introspection than..."

He nodded and smiled, and viewed me with bemusement. "You are... like me."

I frowned as a new thought led my mind astray. "I wish to know all of your horrible thoughts, in detail, withholding nothing."

He looked away and nodded thoughtfully. "You feel they may not be as horrible as I think them to be?"

"Oui. Do you trust me enough to share them?"

He took a deep breath and released it with a slow smile. His gaze met mine. "Oui. But not tonight."

I decided I would not ask for more this night. "All right."

He moved off me and helped me to sit. The dizziness had passed, and I was able to crawl to the bedpost and fetch the key without blood pounding in my ears. I released him, and we located the chamber pot, dressed, and gathered our belongings in silence.

I paused at the door and looked about the room. It truly did not seem the safe haven it had appeared when we arrived; but then, we had been drunk. It did seem a place of import though, in that we had reached some tipping point. I felt I should strive to imprint it upon my memory for that reason alone.

Gaston touched my arm, and I turned to find him curious. I shook my head and sighed with exasperation at my own whimsy, and then sighed with annoyance that I should call it such.

"It is not merely words," I said. "I truly feel we have crossed some threshold. We no longer stand... or rather, I no longer stand apart from... your madness."

"I am both pleased and dismayed by that," he said without humor.

"As am I."

I thought to smile to lighten my words, but I realized that was unnecessary.

We regarded one another silently, without flinching, or, in my case,

the urge to speak or look away, or do some small thing to relieve the tension I had ever felt when gazing into another's eyes so. I thought of little, except that, once again in his presence, I did not feel alone.

The wind slammed the shutter and we started a little, recovering with sheepish grins. He took up the lamp and we slipped out the door into the darkened stair and through the empty house below. I was surprised the dwelling was unoccupied, despite our having purloined the available food and taken the best room. Then we heard the revelry anew as we stepped into the street, and I wondered no more at it: I reminded myself that most men had better to do in their time while raiding a town than sit about woolgathering in introspection, or love.

The thought of food seized my belly, and I did wonder where we might find the means to sate it. We had boucan still, and I supposed that would be our only succor; but perhaps the fête ahead held more satisfying or varied fare.

The Brethren were all clustered about the town square and engaged in as much debauch as they had on the night we arrived: which I hoped with great fervor was only yesterday, and Gaston and I had not slipped from time in our sojourn, like men eating ambrosia in some fairytale.

The men we passed and pushed through in search of our friends were in no condition to rally for battle. I was appalled.

"By the Gods, I hope we have sober sentries," I muttered to Gaston.

He shrugged. "I am sure we do. It is ever like this while raiding, and someone is always vigilant."

"Were you often on sentry duty?" I asked.

"Non, Will, I have often spent the first nights of any raid trussed up in some dark place," he said with amusement.

I swore.

He smiled sadly.

We politely declined rum and wine, and worked our way toward the center of the square. We spied Morgan there, pontificating to a knot of men I guessed to be the captains. I only knew it was Morgan in all the smoke and shadows because of his large hat. As we came closer, I saw that we had indeed located all of our supposed leaders. I was relieved to see some of them turn at our approach with both the narrowed eyes and alacrity of somewhat sober men. The other half, however, were lost to Dionysus.

Striker rushed upon us with drunken fervor, Pete fast on his heels.

"Where the Devil have you been?" Striker snarled for our ears alone.

As I did not want this conversation to take place in front of Morgan, even quietly, I stepped back and hoped he would follow out of earshot of the captains, but Striker grabbed my arm and held firm and fast.

"Not here," I said low and fiercely.

He glared, and his grip tightened on my arm; but, oddly, I sensed I was not the target of his anger.

Pete threw a jolly arm about his shoulder and whispered in his ear. I was hopeful at this intimacy between them, until Striker turned

murderous eyes toward his former matelot and Pete gave a guilty shrug.

"ICannaLetGoNow," Pete hissed loud enough for Gaston and me to hear.

I looked to Pete and found his gaze far soberer than Striker's. I also saw pain in it.

"Let us..." I began to say.

Morgan cut my words with a jaunty, "Ah, so your scouts have returned."

I frowned at Striker, and he, with his back still to Morgan and the other captains, cursed vehemently and quietly as they came to join us.

"AdTaTell'EmSomethin'," Pete muttered.

"What have you to report?" Morgan asked. He was as drunk as Striker. "I hope it has some worth. I missed your fine Castilian yesterday."

"Well then, Morgan," I said coolly, "you missed me in vain, as we saw nothing worth speaking of."

"I tell you!" Pierrot interjected, and laid a hand on Morgan's shoulder. "We have all the Spanish here, and none of them have any damn gold!"

Despite his shouted words, his mien was his usual jolly one and I sensed no rum behind it. Beside him, Savant also appeared sober. He was studying Gaston with a critical eye. So was Bradley beyond him, and that damn man did not seem deep in his cups, either.

The drunk captains were now arguing foolhardily with Pierrot.

"There is gold in Cuba!" Morgan added to their clamor. "But, aye, it is not here! Do not fear, my hearty men! We will make them bring it to us!"

I liked not the sound of that, but his attention had turned to the others, and I was thankful of that, at least.

"I feared you dead," Striker hissed angrily once Morgan was away. "But Pierrot said Gaston went mad. That was good to hear. Then Morgan asked of you."

"I am sorry to put you in that position," I said. "We did not intend to be gone so long, but..."

"I did go mad," Gaston said calmly. "It is likely I will always do so after a battle."

Striker sighed and shook his head. "What'll we tell...?" He glanced over his shoulder at the other captains.

"We will think of something," I said quickly. "In the morning."

In turning to look at the others, Striker had discovered Pete's hand on his shoulder, and now he glared at it. He shrugged it off violently and elbowed Pete in the ribs, driving the air from the Golden One in a pained bark that quickly transmuted to a chortle of amusement.

"If I canna' touch you, then you shan't touch me," Striker growled.

"Aye," Pete sighed.

Striker did not turn to look at him, and so he missed the sadness in Pete's gaze.

"Don't be disappearin' again," Striker said to Gaston and me.

I took no umbrage at his tone. "We will not. Where is the rest of the cabal? We will sleep with them."

"TheyBeSentries," Pete said. "AnTrueScouts," he added with a grin.

"Thank the Gods," I sighed. "Where are you sleeping?"

"IShowYa."

He left Striker with the captains and led us down a street off the square, to a shop. The shutters hung askew, and the door was caved in where someone had tried to batter it open. Pete led us around the alley to the back door and inside.

I was surprised when Striker joined us, but I thought it likely Gaston had known he followed.

"Bakery," Striker mumbled, and threw himself on a cot in the back room.

Pete was laughing as he lit a lamp. "Aye, ThereBeFoodHere. NotMuch. WeSharedItOut. ButWeKeptSome."

He pulled a bag from beneath the cot and handed us each a sweet roll. I thought it was likely the best piece of baking I had ever tasted. He also had apples, and with the boucan we carried, we made a meal of it.

I sat shoulder to shoulder with Gaston, our backs to flour barrels. Pete sprawled across from us with his back to the cot. Our legs were all entwined in the little space. Striker was lost to drunken slumber as soon as his belly was full. The shadows on the walls seemed to dance to the reverberation of his snores. The whole place smelled of flour and butter. It warmed me with nostalgia. As a child, my governess had often hauled me off to the kitchens so she could sit and gossip with the other servants. The cooks had always doted on me, and plied me with loaf heels and sweet breads.

Sanity seemed close at hand: a ready presence.

I looked from Pete to Striker. "I am pleased you are reunited in battle at least," I told Pete.

He snorted. "Don'tSayIt."

"What?" I asked.

"ThatIBeTheOneWhoStartedIt."

He glanced over his shoulder at Striker, and the pain haunted him again.

"Can you not make peace with the situation?" I asked gently.

He sighed long and heavily, and his gaze returned to me.

"ItNaBeFair," he said with an edge of rancor.

I chose to eschew the usual platitudes that came to mind considering fairness, or the lack thereof in this world.

"He is as he is, and you are as you are," I said.

"Aye... Nay." Pete shook his head. "ItNaBeFairOnlyWomenHave Babies."

"Oh," I said.

"TheyBeEvil. TheyLie."

Beside me, Gaston was nodding.

I sighed. "Not all..."

Pete waved me off. "IKnow! YourSisterDoesNa'SeemABadSort. ButSheStill BeOneO"Em. IWillNa'LoseTaOneO"Em."

I considered that. "You have not lost," I said carefully. "He loves you still."

He shook his head and regarded the floor with a bitter frown.

"IWillNa'Share'Im. IWillNa'SleepDownTheHallWhile..." He trailed off with a hiss.

I recalled my words to Alonso long ago, and my protestations of the matter of my marriage to Gaston. Unlike me, Striker did wish to bed his wife with love. He would wish to lie with her through the night in the aftermath. He would have children with her, Gods willing, and they would raise them together. Striker would not mean to shut Pete out, but Pete would never be satisfied with only having what was his when they roved.

Then I remembered another thing. I did not imagine it would solve all of the problems or make things the way they had been, but it might yet offer a solution.

"Do not share him with her," I said. "Share her with him. I believe she offered that: to be wed to both of you."

Pete shook his head sadly. "SheDid. IThoughtOnIt. ButICanna'. ISwore. ISworeIWouldNeverSullyMyselfSoByPlungin'IntaOneO"Em. NoSquishy'OleFerMe. An'IWillNa'HaveItSaidWeBeSharin"ErIfI'Na'Be Fuckin"Er."

"Who did you swear this to?" I asked.

"Meself! After..." His gaze met mine and he shook his head.

I sought some purchase to surmount this obstacle. "Did you swear you would never lie with a woman, or that you would never sully yourself with their... squishy hole?"

He frowned. "ThereBeNoDifference."

I shook my head. "Women have two holes: the... squishy one, and a nether one. Some women find sodomy pleasurable. I have on several occasions..."

Pete's eyes narrowed further still, and Gaston drew a long breath beside me. I looked to him and realized what I had suggested... concerning my sister, of all people. I sighed.

I turned back to Pete and saw a satisfied and intrigued curve settling about his eyes and mouth. I did not like the look of it.

I awarded him a forbidding mien. "She is still my sister and I will not have her... taken... in that manner, to satisfy your..."

He snorted disparagingly. "Iffn'IDecideTaDoIt IBeGoodTa'Er."

We took one another's measure across the small space, and I found I felt him sincere.

"A woman cannot become pregnant through sodomy," Gaston said, as if musing more to himself than relating information to us.

I had thought that a woman could not gain a child from sodomy, but I had not been sure.

"Nay?" Pete asked.

"Only the vagina leads to the womb," Gaston said.

"The squishy hole," I clarified to Pete. "Most call it the cunt, among other things."

I wondered why Pete had settled on such a term as the squishy hole. He did not avoid any other manner of vulgarity.

"IsItSquishy?" Pete asked, as if seeing my thoughts.

"Aye," I sighed.

Pete looked back to Gaston. "SoThereBeNoGetFromIt. ThatSuitsMeEvenBetter."

Gaston shrugged.

I thought perhaps it would tidy things, as there would never be question of whose child she might carry. Of course, my sister would never forgive me if she was ever to become aware of my part in this and Pete did indeed decide to pursue the matter. I wondered if she would accept such a thing.

Striker had rolled onto his side and his snoring had ceased. Pete turned to watch him over his shoulder.

I watched Pete, and mused that perhaps he loved Striker enough to break his vow, or overcome whatever wound had forced him to make it. Perhaps Sarah could win his heart. But then I remembered that she did not truly want to. It cast a pall of doom over the entire endeavor.

Pete at last nudged Striker to the wall and lay beside him on the cot. Gaston and I curled together on the floor. I took comfort in the smell of flour, the lamplight, and my matelot's embrace. All things would resolve themselves in some fashion.

We woke to Striker cursing and scrambling from the cot. I was damn pleased Gaston and I had not drunk the night before, as we surely would have shot him in the sudden confusion upon waking if we had.

Striker ended up standing by the door, glaring down at Pete, who stretched languidly and awarded his former matelot a sheepish shrug.

"IFergot," Pete drawled.

"Are we matelots?" Striker asked.

Pete looked away and adjusted his obviously erect cock through his breeches in a distracted manner, as if he were scratching an itch.

Striker swore and left us.

I looked to Pete. "You know, on occasion you are quite the arse."

Pete snorted and would not meet my gaze, either. He crawled off the cot and donned his weapons, dug in the food bag for two sweet rolls and strips of boucan, and left us.

I looked to my matelot, and he pulled my hand to his piss-hard member with a jaunty grin.

Sometime later, we found Striker and Pete in the town square. The place was strewn with fewer buccaneers than I expected. Someone had roused them to early industry, and I guessed that someone to be Morgan, who stood by the cistern with a scowl and a flagon of wine.

In the light of day, the place seemed smaller than it had last night.

On one side was the church where all the prisoners were held. The rest of the cobbled square was ringed by public buildings and shops, like all towns of Spanish design. The well and cistern sat in the center. The buccaneers yet remaining in the square were passing bottles and talking. One corner near the church held a small mound of gold, silver and other valuables. I was dismayed at the size of it, as it was very small indeed.

Nearby, an impromptu dungeon of the Inquisition had been assembled. Two captives were strapped there. One man was spread-eagled by cord wrapped around his thumbs and big toes in such a manner that he was suspended horizontally from poles a foot and a half above the ground. Another Spaniard was hung by his thumbs from a pole. In both cases, buccaneers circled about, beating their victims, or the cord that bound them, with sticks. Davey was one of the men engaged in this. Julio was interpreting, relaying the coherent parts of the unfortunates' protestations and lamentations to the others.

I spied no whips. I looked to my matelot.

His gaze had followed mine to the torture, and he shrugged with a resigned sigh. "There are better ways to cause pain of the intensity needed for confession," he said.

"Perhaps you should enlighten them," I said. "It may speed things along, and remove us from this poor town, and allow them to return to their lives all the faster."

Gaston frowned thoughtfully. "Hippocrates. I will harm none with what I know as a physician. I am not Dominic."

I winced. "I did not mean to imply..."

He shook his head and gave me a reassuring smile. "Non, I had not thought on the matter before. I have not thought of myself as a physician when I have roved before. And I did not participate in the interrogations then for other reasons. So the question and its answer were new to me. I was telling myself as much as you."

"I am proud of your decision," I murmured.

"Thank you. And you?" he asked. "I will not judge you on this, as what you said is true. The sooner we get what we want, the sooner we leave."

One of the tortured prisoners was howling that he had given all his money to his uncle in Saint Jago in repayment of a debt.

I sighed. "I have killed for money. I will kill to protect you, or myself. I will kill or torture to bring justice where I see the need. Yet, this fills me with disquiet, and is a thing I must examine."

The other prisoner was telling them that he saw his neighbor stash his gold in a cistern.

I frowned toward his wailing.

Gaston patted my cheek. His eyes were kind, in opposition to his words. "Will, if we had lost that battle on the plain, and the Brethren had withdrawn, these Spaniards would have subjected our wounded to horrors far beyond this, and the townspeople would have stood about

and watched."

"And cheered, most probably," I sighed. "Though some would say they would be within their rights, as we came here to attack them and they did naught to us. Non, do not misinterpret me. I do not feel these people are innocents. Yet, some amongst them may be lost sheep. Some may deserve mercy in my eyes, and this is all so arbitrary. If I must kill, I prefer to kill a man I know, not a nameless, faceless enemy. I want a catalog of a man's sins before I run him through. And I..." I thought of Vincente in Florence. "I have killed at the behest of others and for gold far too often. I find it no longer sits well with me."

"I am of two minds on the matter," Gaston frowned. "And I do not know if it is due to my madness or not. The Horse surely takes no issue with killing, but it does not wish to kill because of another's whim."

Striker approached. Behind him, I saw Morgan eyeing us.

"Morgan wishes to speak with you. He wants you to talk to the ones in the church," Striker said.

I shrugged, and we walked over to join Morgan, Bradley, and the *Lilly's* captain, Norman.

We were now closer to the prisoners. The man who claimed to know the whereabouts of his neighbor's gold had been released and was being trussed so that he could lead men to the treasure.

Morgan's gaze flicked over the Spaniard and then moved to Gaston and me.

"Striker says you wish for me to speak to those inside," I said.

"Aye, aye," Morgan shrugged and leaned close to me to drape a companionable arm over my shoulder and speak quietly. He smelled of garlic and wine.

"Tell me, does the maroon's translation seem adequate?" he asked.

I had not heard Julio referred to as a maroon so long it took me several moments to discover who he was speaking of. "It has been my experience that Julio's Castilian is far better than mine, and his English is better than that of most of the men we sail with. I am quite sure he is more than capable for the task at hand. He is literate in both languages, as well."

"Truly?" Morgan asked.

"Truly," I said without expression.

"I did not know the Spaniards taught their bastard savages to read," he remarked.

I did little to hide my annoyance. "Julio was taught by a Jesuit priest. He is a fine man and I am honored to call him friend."

Morgan regarded me with a cunning smile. "What would your father say of such sentiments, I wonder?"

"I give you leave to ask him," I said flatly.

Morgan chortled appreciatively, and dismissed our exchange with a wave. "Well, since he is as he is, I do not think the Spanish will be kindly disposed toward me if I send a former slave in to speak with them."

"I agree," I sighed, and awarded him a smile. "So, what do you wish for me to say to them?"

He gestured at the small mound of treasure. "We are not finding what we need, and this method is proving fruitless as well. I wish to ransom the town. I wish to send a delegation in search of the wealth we require."

Hadsell, the captain who had suggested Puerto del Principe, was standing nearby, overseeing the interrogation.

"It appears Hadsell overestimated their wealth," I said.

Morgan sighed, "So it would seem. I feel his leading us here had more to do with revenge than greed, though he was correct about the place being rich with cattle and hides. Little ready money, though."

"Hatred often walks hand in hand with poverty," I said.

He shrugged. "Aye, but of greed and revenge, one pays; the other doesn't. We should have gone for Havana."

I grinned. "You are mad. I will see what can be done."

I left him smiling, and Gaston and I went to the church. We left our muskets and pistols with the men guarding the door, and cautiously stepped into the darkness beyond. I could feel the eyes upon me long before my own became accustomed to the dimness.

The church was not a grand cathedral, but it was large and had been built to hold the entire town. Now it did, at least what we had found of the survivors. I could not see most of them, though, for the line of men before us. They were eyeing one another speculatively, no doubt wondering who would be interrogated next.

I held my hands wide and addressed them in my best Castilian. "Be at peace for but a moment my good gentlemen. I am here to inquire as to whether a delegation of prominent citizens can be formed to meet with Admiral Morgan and carry a message for him beyond the town."

A man stepped forward to ask, "What message?" He was incongruously both sharp-featured and portly. I thought I recognized his voice from the day we captured the place.

"Admiral Morgan wishes to ransom the town." I said.

This set them all grumbling and cursing, though some sounded optimistic. Beyond the wall of men, I began to hear female voices of curiosity and hope.

While they talked, a priest emerged from behind them and approached us. "Please, my son, tell your admiral we require food and the skills of a surgeon. Our wounded are dying without care, and the children are starving."

"You have not been given food?" I asked.

"No," the priest said. "We have been given nothing but a cask of water."

Apparently possessing sufficient Castilian to follow the request, Gaston asked at my elbow, "What became of their physicians?"

I relayed the question.

"Our physician died of an ailment last month. Our surgeon died in

the battle,” the priest said. “We have midwives,” he added.

Several of the men behind him scoffed.

Gaston sighed and began to shed his blades. I knew he intended to walk in amongst them, and I could not allow it.

“Hold,” I said gently in French. “Let us do this in a manner that does not risk you, please.”

He stopped and nodded with resignation. I turned back to the prisoners.

“I will convey your needs to the Admiral and we will seek remedy for them. I am sorry... We did not intend to be here so long and...”

“Why have you stayed, then?” the portly sharp-nosed man asked.

“Because we have not found nearly enough treasure to make the journey worthwhile,” I said. “The sooner we do, the sooner we will leave. Now, I will talk to the Admiral. It would be in your best interests to decide upon a delegation.”

Outside, Morgan had been joined by several more captains and quartermasters. He watched expectantly as we approached.

“They are hungry and in need of a surgeon,” I told him.

“Are they making demands?” Morgan scoffed.

“Why not simply burn the church down around them and be done with it?” I snapped.

“Because that would make it very hard to send any for ransom or locate their gold,” he said, his own ire rising.

“Precisely,” I said.

He sighed.

“Bein’ hungry’ll help them find their tongues an’ gold,” another captain said.

“Aye, and someday I am sure someone will write of this and our exceedingly un-Christian conduct toward women and children,” I said expansively.

“We don’t have no food for them,” another captain said. “We’ve eaten it all. We’ve got hunters out now to bring in cattle for our men.”

“They shall have food once some is located,” Morgan said. “As for a surgeon....”

“I will do it,” Gaston said in English. “I am a physician.”

“We will need a few volunteers in addition to myself to watch over him while he works,” I added.

I looked to Striker, and he nodded.

“I will leave the matter to you, then,” Morgan said. “I will ask of the other surgeons. While you organize the relief of their suffering, what of my delegation?”

“I told them to discuss it and make a decision. I will bring them out.”

I returned to the church with Gaston, Pete, and several of our men, including Bones and Nickel.

We found four men standing ahead of the others. Their number included the portly sharp-nosed man.

He spoke for them. “Ask about; the priests will attest to it. We all

have family here in this church and much to lose should we not return."

I nodded somewhat distractedly, as Gaston was handing me his baldric and belt. "This man is a physician and we will have food for you as soon as some is located. Apparently, we have eaten all that was readily available."

The delegates and the men near them eyed Gaston with disbelief.

"I do not jest," I said. "I would suggest you allow him to tend your wounded. And I would strongly suggest that no malicious act occur to his person. If any harm befalls him, or is threatened, the retribution will be swift and bloody and spare none."

"Your Admiral must prize his surgeons highly," the portly sharp-nosed man said.

I met his gaze with fire in my own. "This has not a damn thing to do with Morgan."

Portly looked from Gaston to me and frowned speculatively.

Gaston smiled. "You speak for the Gods," he whispered to me in French.

I kissed him, just a chaste buss upon the corner of his mouth, but it was not a kiss between brothers.

The prisoners gasped and stood silent as one.

"I always wanted to do that in a church," I whispered in French.

"Among other things?" he teased.

"Oui, though I feel we lack the time today," I said with mock sorrow.

He smiled, and kissed me briefly, though he did take the time to find my tongue with his own for a short caress. "Get them to Morgan and return to translate for me."

I glanced at Pete and the others as I turned to go: they were laughing.

"You be the Devil himself to 'em," Bones said.

"Excellent," I grinned.

"Worry not of Gaston," Nickel said, "None will get behind him."

Behind him, Pete's gaze told me none would get behind any of them.

I thanked our friends and waved the delegates to me. "Let us go speak with the Admiral, then."

They seemed ill-inclined to follow me anywhere, but Portly worked up his courage and stepped out, and the rest fell in behind.

Morgan adopted a self-important air as we approached. I introduced him in a courtly manner and allowed the Spanish to introduce themselves as I knew not their names. Thus I learned Portly was called Escoban, had been a captain in the army, and was now the town's magistrate. The others were equally prominent in Puerto del Principe's civil structure, and had much to lose. Morgan asked them to raise fifty thousand pieces of eight, or he would burn the town, not around their ears, just to the ground so that they had nothing left. They gasped and protested and said it would take weeks to raise that sum. Morgan gave them two days and horses. He assured them the interrogations would continue while they were gone, so the sooner they returned, the fewer

the people who suffered.

They were off finally, and I was free to return to the church. A good hour had passed, and I was hungry. I smelled roasting beef somewhere nearby, and considered fetching some for Gaston but quickly dismissed it. It would not be polite to be seen eating until the prisoners were fed. So I asked about food for the Spanish. Morgan had forgotten, and most of the hunters were quite disgruntled when he ordered them to give up one of the carcasses. They delivered it still smoldering and partly raw to the church, and unceremoniously dumped it inside.

Thankfully, all the commotion had attracted others of our crew, and I was able to leave Liam and Otter to butchering the steer for the prisoners while Cudro watched over them. Now that I knew those around me would be fed, I went out and returned with a hunk of meat for Gaston and me, taken from another roasting animal: one that was done through.

When I returned, I faced the crowd before me with dismay. There were close to a thousand people, with more being brought in all the time as they were found on the ranches. I realized the one steer was not going to solve the hunger issue. I was appalled and filled with guilt. More than half of those present were women and children. Other than the hundred or so by the doors, the rest of the men were old, infirm, wounded, or adolescents.

I could not immediately see Gaston in the pool of humanity; but looking up, I could spy his angels, Nickel and Bones and two other men, in the architecture: perched so that they could rain musket fire down upon anyone below.

As I stood there, another set of families was delivered to the church. I guessed they had been hiding somewhere at an estate. The matrons had children ranging from adolescence through infancy. They clucked about as they stood in the doorway and their eyes became accustomed to the light. One of the children drew my eye because she was no longer a child, but a very pretty young lady who looked to be of marriageable age. The unmarred portions of her mud- and blood-smeared gown appeared surprisingly white in the shadows; and she staggered about, trying not to trip over those there before her, as she left her mother behind to work her way into the church, all the while calling for "Ernesto".

I followed her path, looking for my own love.

When I found Gaston, he was amputating a gangrenous leg. I backed away and found myself surrounded by hungry eyes. I tore the meat I carried into smaller chunks and distributed it amongst the children.

Gaston was relieved to see me when at last I felt it was safe for my stomach to approach.

"Have you eaten?" I asked in quiet French. "I was bringing you food but..."

"I gave all the boucan and dried fruit I carried to the pregnant

women," he said irritably. "I am fine."

He did not appear fine. He looked tired and strained.

"What may I do to aid you?" I asked.

He sighed in thought. "Ask the priests of the physician's and surgeon's houses. I need their apothecaries and anything else they had."

I turned to a young priest and relayed Gaston's question. All the priests looked relieved that the matter had been broached.

"All of the physician's things were packed away until another one would come," the first priest we had encountered said.

"Can you send someone with me to show me where?" I asked.

They discussed it amongst themselves and decided on a younger priest. Gaston listed the things he wished for and I despaired of finding them, even if they existed, unless they were well-labeled in Latin. I collected Cudro at the door, and assured the guards outside that we could handle one priest without needing to truss him.

At the physician's house, we found everything packed away in several trunks. After pawing through them, I found my fears realized. The vials and jars and pots were not labeled in Latin, but by their initials in Castilian, and by a poor hand at that.

"I may as well attempt to decipher chicken scratches," I told Cudro. "We had best take it all."

He chuckled and went to get more men.

He returned with six of our men from the *Queen*, including Burroughs and Ash. We took the four chests to the church. I alone carried nothing, as it was felt the prisoner priest should not be left to walk about unfettered whilst we were all burdened. I thought this ludicrous, but did not argue.

As we walked, I told Cudro, "We will need to procure another steer or two as well."

"For what?" Burroughs asked. "The bloody Spaniards? Let 'em starve."

It was much as I had heard when getting the first steer.

"Most of the prisoners in the church are women and children." I said.

"They all look ta be fat. Goin' without for a few days won't kill 'em," Burroughs said. "It was how I lived as a child. There's never enough food."

I looked at the men around me and was reminded of Pete, who had not even known his father's name or his own age, and then of the boys on the road to my uncle's. I sighed and surrendered the field. I, who had rarely gone hungry, had little understanding of it. Still, I felt the way of the centaur surely involved aiding the weak.

Gaston was delighted with our four chests of treasure. He eschewed the labels and identified the contents by smell and sight. Once he knew what a thing was, he had me label it anew with ink the priests provided. Soon we were back to work. We amputated several more limbs, performed two surgeries, cauterized countless gashes that Gaston said

would putrefy if sewn closed, and saw to a number of ailments not resulting from the battle.

All thanked and blessed him as he tended them. The priests worked tirelessly alongside us. Under Liam and Otter's watchful eyes, they tended the small fire at the front of the church and the pot for boiling Gaston's tools. They did not even argue at this curious procedure.

Through it all, I was his ears and mouth and second set of hands. Hours passed, and the light pouring through the stained glass windows waned. We began to work by lamplight. At last I noted with relief that the priests were no longer hurrying us along to another patient; we had nearly exhausted the supply.

Then there was a scream in the dark. Our men reached for weapons, and everyone else stilled to find out what the matter was. The young priest ran toward the sound into the back of the church. He returned a few moments later and said, "Come quickly."

Gaston and I hurried to follow him. Our weaving path through the pews and aisles led to a family. I recognized the matron as one of those I had seen entering the church that morning. More importantly, I recognized the lovely young women whose head she now cradled in her lap.

The priest held out his lamp and the matron raised the blanket covering her daughter's body. The spreading pool of blood would have been visible even in dimmer light.

"Senora, what has happened?" I asked.

"She was... she was... ruined...", the woman sobbed.

"Here? In the church? Someone used her?" I asked.

"No, no, senor, before, when they found us. They pulled her..." She shook her head and chewed her lip to stop her words. "She was to marry. But even he is dead this day. He was wounded and he died, and now..."

"She has taken her own life," the young priest said sadly.

"She had a blade?" I asked, and knelt beside her.

"A little knife," the matron wailed. "She asked someone here for it, to defend herself if it should happen again. That is what she told us, and then she went to lie down. I came to look at her, and ask her how she was, and I found her..." She trailed off in sobs. "Help her, senor. You must help her."

I touched her chest and felt the weak beat of her heart.

"She still lives," I said.

I looked up at Gaston, wondering why he was not beside me. I found him staring at her in horror and surprise. The same emotion gripped me with icy claws as I realized what he must see.

I stood and took his face between my palms, willing his eyes to mine. He met my gaze distantly.

"Does she look like Gabriella?" I breathed.

He gave a short little bark, as if he were caught between tears and remembering to breathe.

"She does not," he said at last. "I know it is not... but the white and the blood and...It is difficult."

He pointed, and I looked down at the girl again and saw the little blade clutched in her bloody hand.

"And she wished to die," I whispered softly.

He nodded. "I cannot... She will die. She... The wound is... She sliced... I can see it from here. She did not stab. She sliced. The blade is long enough. Her intestines are ruined."

I pulled his eyes back to mine. "We need to get you out of here."

He shook his head. "I am not... running... I am..."

"Senor!" the matron called. "Help her!"

I kept a firm grip on Gaston's wrist and looked down at her. "I am sorry. He says she will die. Her intestines are badly damaged."

The woman wailed and turned on the priest. "Give her the Rites before she passes. She is not dead yet."

The young priest stood and shook his head sadly. "She has taken her own life."

"No, no!" her mother wailed. "She is sick with grief. It is as if those animals did it to her. They took her life."

"By your own words, Senora," the priest said. "I am sorry."

I swore. Gaston growled. I turned back to him.

"Send her to Heaven," Gaston rumbled. "Do not let her die by her own hand."

I knew what he meant. "Not in front of you," I whispered.

He closed his eyes. "Do it."

"You will not move from this spot?" I asked.

"I will not move," he hissed.

I thought it unwise; but the thing had already been seen, the damage already done.

I released him, and knelt beside the girl again. I met her mother's eyes and whispered, "Do not watch."

Her face froze into an ageless mask, and her gaze drifted from my face to the dagger in my hand. She held her hand up. "One moment." She leaned down and gently kissed her daughter's forehead. Then she sat up straight and met my gaze again. She nodded and closed her eyes.

I stabbed the girl through the heart, coming up through her ribs, the way Gaston must have done when he took his sister's life at her behest.

I wiped the blade on her gown and looked to the priest. He was regarding me with wonder.

"She was murdered," I said calmly. "I suggest you bury her as you would any other here killed by heathen dogs. Tell her mother she will go to Heaven."

He nodded soberly and looked to the matron. "She will go to Heaven."

His gaze returned to me. "May God have mercy on your soul." He crossed himself.

I wished to tell him a number of things, but I knew it would not

matter. I wished to tell him I did not believe in his Heaven or Hell; but I could not do that with any honesty, and that scared me.

I collected Gaston, who still stood with his eyes closed. Pete and Cudro raced with us to the door.

"What is wrong?" the big Dutchman asked.

"I hate religion," I growled.

He shrugged, but his curious was upon Gaston. Behind him, Pete was poised to strike, yet he looked to me for some cue.

My matelot was withdrawn: lost in thought. I could well imagine what he saw within the halls of his memory: the great house of his birth; his sister's chamber; her great bed with its folds of linen, and her, a paler thing upon a field of paleness; her hair spread all about, the color of his, the color of blood, like that which must have marked her lips from all of her attempts to expel the death eating her lungs and sapping her life; him kneeling above her, drugged by her insistence, having just succumbed to her seduction and his own desire: not for lust of the body, but for some comfort of the soul. And then the knife in her ribs, the spreading stain of blood upon the bedclothes, the light fading from her eyes, and then the darkness overtaking his as the enormity of what he had done at last pulled him under to wait for his father's wrath like a lamb left for slaughter. The pounding in my ears was the drum of the hooves of his madness coming to run us down and drag us away. I ran outside, towing him with me.

Darkness had fallen, but there was a moon. Men were filling the square once again, and filling themselves with wine. I wondered that they could find so much to drink and so little to eat. We could not stay among them. I did not wish to return to the vacant house or even the bakery.

Striker saw us on the steps and left the captains. He was not regarding Gaston askance as he approached, but me.

"Will?" he queried.

"We need to be away for a time, into the woods," I said quickly.

He thankfully did not argue. "Liam and Otter are going to hunt cattle. Go with them."

I took up our weapons and bags, and handed Gaston his. I was relieved when he accepted them. Then I took his hand, and we hurried across the square to the place where Liam and Otter were standing with a small band of men. They were pleased to see us, until they truly saw us in the torchlight.

"Ya be well?" Liam asked me

"Do not mind us. We will be fine. We need to be away from here, though," I said.

They nodded, and exchanged looks with one another, and the Frenchmen with them, and led us out of town.

"We be campin' in the woods tonight, so that we be huntin' at dawn," Liam explained.

As I followed, I was forced to remain intent upon my footing in

the poor light and not upon my matelot. All the while, I heard the thundering hooves. I felt great relief when our friends at last found a place to camp and I was able to tow Gaston away from them and further into the trees before collapsing and pulling him down with me. He embraced me tightly.

"How are we?" I breathed.

"I am well enough, but you are quite distraught," he murmured.

I pulled from his embrace and regarded what I could see of his face in the dappled moonlight. He appeared as calm as his words.

I took a long and shaky breath. "I thought..."

"As did I," he said grimly. "But I have not fallen to the madness or even felt its call. I thought on it as you brought us here. I believe it is because I saw her through the eyes of a physician. I had been in the presence of blood and the wounded all day, aiding them, not hurting them, and I feel it steadied me so that I saw her, Will, not Gabriella."

I felt the fool. "I am sorry I thought..."

He shook his head and kissed me lightly. "If I had seen her through the battle lust that grips me the result would have been... difficult. And if I had seen her before you made me remember the events of that night, then... it would have destroyed me. But you made me remember, and now, in seeing that girl, I knew she was not my sister, and though there are similarities, it is not the same."

He brushed another kiss on my cheek. "I am sorry I scared you so."

I shook my head. "I feel such the fool. I saw... I imagined what I feel you saw that night. It is odd. I have felt its like before. When I am told a tale I often try to envision what the other saw, and sometimes these fantasies are of such a poignant vividness that it is as if I were there with them. This is how I see many of the events you have imparted to me, especially of that night. I see you... It is as if I stand beside her bed and watch the entirety of it unfold. I felt you would surely be overcome with guilt and shame, as you were when first you told me the tale."

He nodded and then his head cocked with thought. "Do you feel guilt and shame over taking her life?" he asked.

"Non," I said quickly, too quickly. Then, "Oui, but non, not shame or guilt, but... wrong. I feel it should not have been necessary. I feel God will take who He will and no man may decide that. It is not for man to judge who will enter Heaven. And then I feel that perhaps I still believe in Heaven, and... I am afraid I will never see it. I am afraid God may yet be as the priests describe, full of vengeance and reproof for those who do not follow his dictates... much like my father. And, for all of my brave words about not caring for... their love, or holding it in reproach if it is so meanly ladled out, I... do care."

He held me close. "Whatever the truth of death is, we will face it together, and we will go hand and hand into what comes after."

I nodded against his shoulder. "But, what if there is a Hell, and it is a place of endless torment? The Devil will surely separate us, as that is the worst that can be done to us."

"There is no Hell," Gaston said.

"Is that a prayer?" I tried to ask lightly, but the humor was not in my heart or voice.

"To your Gods, oui."

"My Gods..." I muttered, feeling oddly blasphemous, and not sure if it was because I held to them in the face of the Christian God, or because in a moment of weakness I had given credence to the Christian God.

"Gods are made in the image of man," Gaston murmured and rubbed my shoulder. "Ours are made in the image of centaurs. And as we are centaurs, we are not like the sheep in the pastures. We know the Gods for what They are; we do not look to Them as shepherds, but rather as powerful Beings with Their own wishes and battles. And, Hell is a place without love, Will, and as long as we have one another, we can never be in Hell."

I understood; moreover, I believed. Once again, I felt sanity as a palpable presence, and it enfolded us, holding us safe against the world beyond. Another pocket of pestilence within my soul had been lanced and drained into the light, and now Gaston was the balm to heal it.

The Gods were true, but we were truer still.

Forty-Six

Wherein We See Justice Served

Liam found us in the glade in the morning. "There ye be!"

We blinked at him like pitiful rabbits cornered in a hole; well, pitiful rabbits with pistols, anyway. The sun was well up, and I imagined they had been hunting already. I was surprised we had slept as deeply as we had.

"Whatever do you want?" I asked pleasantly.

He tossed me a finely-worked leather satchel. "We were huntin' and came across this Negro sneakin' about. He's fine dressed; don't appear to be a slave at all."

I opened the case and found several letters: two were addressed to names I recognized, and another was to the mayor. I cracked the seal on the one for Escoban the Magistrate. The contents drove me fully awake.

"Come along, we must find Morgan," I told them.

I relayed the contents to Gaston as Liam led us to the Negro: it implored the fine citizens of Puerto del Principe to stand firm against the English barbarians and delay them as long as possible, as the mayor of Saint Jago and others were hurriedly marching an army toward us. My matelot did not seem surprised. I suppose I was not, either.

The Negro was indeed finely dressed in the livery of some house, probably one of the officials responsible for the letters I held. He stared straight ahead with a great deal of dignity, and did not cringe about as slaves are often wont to do when surrounded by agitated, armed men. For the time being, I saw nothing to be gained in speaking to him on the matter. All I needed at the moment I held in my hand.

The hunters put their catch, two cows, on poles; and Gaston and I helped carry them into town. I chafed at the delay, but thought we would be better received bearing food. I also wondered why they did not simply herd the damn animals into town and slaughter them there. Then I recalled that most of the men about us were not horsemen – they would just as soon shoot and eat a steed as ride one – and cattle-herding was done on horseback.

We finally trooped into the square and located Morgan. With little ado, I told him of Liam's capture of the Negro and translated the letter addressed to Escoban.

There was a great deal of cursing, and Morgan asked me to read all the letters. They proved to be all of a type. Then he set me to questioning the Negro, who proved to be smart enough not to dissemble. He had been sent here with a small scouting party, and told to sneak into town and deliver the letters if he was able. They had thought a Negro might escape our detection, as he could blend in with the other slaves. Unfortunately, this being cattle country and not plantation lands, there were not a great number of slaves about; and those we had found were caged in a barn across town: they would leave with us as part of the booty. What amused me most was, judging from the Negro's tone, he had thought the scouting party's plan a piss-poor one.

"How long do we have, in your estimation?" I finally asked the man.

He met my eyes squarely, "Do not quote me on this, sir, lest I be wrong and lose my life over it; but I feel you have a good seven-day."

"From what he heard and saw, it is unlikely they will arrive tonight or tomorrow," I told the others in English.

Morgan turned away and began to pace.

Striker and Pierrot eyed me speculatively, and I waved them over.

"He thinks it will be longer but he could not swear to it," I told them quietly.

"You believe him, obviously," Pierrot said without rancor, but there was a tired edge to his voice.

I shrugged and turned back to the Negro. "What is your name?"

"I am called Pedro."

"What do you feel fate holds for you, Pedro?" I asked kindly.

He frowned, and his eyes returned to the air above my head. "Sir, I think it is likely I will spend the remainder of my life in chains on an English plantation."

I looked to Pierrot. "Oui, I believe him."

Pierrot shrugged and joined the others.

I turned back to Pedro. "I do not feel that will be your fate. It would be a waste of a lettered man. Do you speak any other languages?"

"Latin, sir," he said with relief.

"Do you read and write Latin as well?" I asked in Latin.

Gaston stepped in to join us with interest. Striker sighed and went to join the others.

Pedro smiled. "Yes, sir. May I say you are well educated for an

Englishman, sir.”

We laughed.

“You may even say he is over-educated for an Englishman,” Gaston said in Latin. “How and why were you educated?”

“I was born into the house of a learned man in Saint Jago. He discovered I possessed an agile mind, and instructed me so that I could copy manuscripts for him and assist in the keeping of his books. When he passed away, he had me sold to his friend, the mayor, as a house servant.”

Gaston and I looked to one another and smiled.

“Now we must teach him English,” I said in French.

“How many languages do you speak, sir?” Pedro asked.

“Five, including German. My matelot here speaks five as well, but he speaks Dutch instead of Castilian.”

“Now what is he saying?” Morgan asked from my elbow.

I sighed, “We are discussing the languages we speak.”

He frowned. “Does he speak English?”

“Nay,” I said with amusement.

Morgan snorted and resumed pacing. “The men we sent out are due back tomorrow,” he said loudly enough for all. “What are your thoughts?”

I looked to Pedro and asked, “How many men do you feel they can muster?”

“At least two thousand,” he said.

“They will likely arrive,” I said for all, “when they arrive, with three times our number.”

Bradley and Striker were pawing through a satchel of Morgan’s. They produced a map and spread it out. It was obvious that if the Spanish came from Saint Jago, they would likely not get between our ships and us as they closed; however, they could if they did choose to.

“I say we wait until the delegates return and see what they say,” Pierrot said.

“Nay, it won’t matter,” Striker said. “The Negro said he was brought here by a scouting party; likely as not, they met up with the men we sent seeking ransom and apprised them of the plan. They’ll not return with money.”

“We could take hostages and march tonight,” Bradley said.

“It be late and we have men spread about all over,” another man said. “Best we sleep well and march in the morning.”

“And send our own scouts out,” Striker said.

Morgan was nodding almost continuously. “We may get something from this yet, gentlemen. Let us send out parties to watch, and the rest of us sleep well. We will march out tomorrow, with hostages. I will have it in mind to ask for something for their return. For now, let us collect our men and inform them of this change in plans. On the morrow, we will have a meeting after sunrise.”

He happened to glance toward me. “Put that slave with the others.”

I was not pleased with that order, but I shrugged and complied. Gaston and I escorted Pedro to where the other slaves, some fifty of them, were being held.

"I swear you will not spend your days on a plantation," I assured Pedro. "Please do not do anything to harm yourself before this can be sorted through."

Pedro studied me for a time and nodded. "I will put my faith in you, sir. I assume there is no way that I can return to the mayor."

"Do you wish to?" I asked.

"As compared to many fates that may befall me, si, sir," he said. "If I can live as I did there elsewhere, I will not be unhappy."

"I believe we can accommodate your wishes. I am known as Will and this is Gaston. Ask for us if something untoward happens. The men guarding you may not speak Castilian, but they will understand names. We sail on the *Virgin Queen*. I do not know how you will all be transported initially, but once the treasure is divided..." I shook my head. "I do not know how it will be accomplished, but we will deliver you in some fashion. You have my solemn word."

He nodded. "I do not understand why you would do such a thing for a slave."

"You would not be alone in your confusion on the matter if it were well-known." I chuckled. "I practice a random philanthropy. It is a hobby of mine."

He bowed. "I must take your word for it, master."

I frowned at that last, but nodded. We left him with the guards, and they ushered him inside.

"We do as we can," Gaston said solemnly as we walked away. Then he smiled and took my hand.

"Oui," I sighed, as I tried to calculate how much worth the slaves would be accorded and how many shares Gaston and I had, and whether it would be enough to procure a slave from the small pool of them, when their worth was surely increased by the lack of other booty. Would I have to ask Striker to take him as prize? Or the ship in general, and then pay off the others?

We returned to the church, and Gaston made his way around to every patient. We did not bother to have someone watch over us with muskets ready this time: if any had dared assault us, a dozen of their own would have struck the assailant down. They were all restless, scared, and hungry still. We could do nothing for those ill. Once the wounds were bandaged anew and medicines dispensed, we withdrew, grateful to escape now that our duty was done.

It was then late afternoon, and we followed Striker and Pete to a house the *Virgin Queen's* crew had claimed. We found our cabal there, save Liam and Otter, who had been sent into the woods again: this time as scouts and not as hunters. Striker settled in at the head of the table, and began answering questions and doing much to add to the general morale, by listening to good-hearted complaints and concerns from his

men.

Gaston and I took a hunk of meat and a tankard of ale, and found a place to sit and eat next to Cudro. We listened and relaxed. As the night wore down, Gaston commented that we should boil water for the march on the morrow. We took a lamp and retired to the yard and cook house. The cistern was nearly empty, as someone had obviously dug about in it for valuables. We wandered further until we spied a well. The ground was quite muddy about it, but at least it had filled itself with water again. We hauled up a couple buckets and went in search of a pot.

A good hour had passed before we had all of the necessary components in one location with the wood burning so that the water might actually boil. We sat outside the cookhouse, and I played with Gaston's shaggy hair, which was intent as it usually was on going every which way. He handed me a knife, and I trimmed it to stubble.

"I rather liked playing with it," I teased as I rubbed my hand over the result.

"I rather like you playing with it." He ran his fingers through my unruly spikes.

I handed him the knife, and he trimmed mine.

I listened to the buzz of insects and the pop of the fire. I felt at ease, and then I felt should not. I tried to summon my concerns of the night before; but they would not come, though they had dogged my thoughts off and on throughout the day.

At my eventual sigh, Gaston asked, "How are we?"

"Troubled," I sighed again, "more so in that I cannot name precisely why. Not that there is not enough to be troubled about."

He sheathed the knife and wrapped his arms about me. I leaned into him, and felt safe despite everything.

"If you felt that all here was as it should be, I would worry," he murmured.

"You are as you should be," I said.

He kissed me, his hands reaching and caressing. I endeavored to forget for a time that anything else existed, and succeeded so well we nearly let the water boil away.

In the aftermath, we napped as the water cooled, until we could fill our flasks and skins and drink until our bellies sloshed. Sated and comforted, we curled together in the yard and slept deeply once again.

We woke to a bugle call. I recognized the sound and was only momentarily confused by it. The light appeared to have just turned gold with the breaking sun. Gaston's lips were upon mine before I could consider much else. He was hard against my belly as he covered me.

"I must relieve myself, and I believe we are to muster," I gasped with amusement when he let me breathe.

"I am well mustered," he grinned.

He had me up against the cookhouse wall. As my member finished throbbing in Gaston's hand, I glanced over and found Pete and Striker watching us with amused expressions.

"I'll be pleased to get you two back on a ship where you'll be easier to find," Striker said.

"We were mustering," I protested, as I pulled my breeches up.

Gaston snickered.

"Oh, is that what it's called?" Striker said with a thoughtful nod.

"Why were you seeking us?" I asked.

Striker sobered. "I would have a favor of you."

"If it is mine to grant." I eyed him curiously as I strapped on my belt and baldric.

"Discover, if you can, Pierrot's heart on the matter of leaving us once the booty is divided."

I sighed, and Gaston shook his head, not in negation of Striker's request, but to the futility of it.

"His men were not all in favor of this venture and the treasure is less than expected," I said.

"I know," Striker shrugged. "Yet, is there a thing that would make him stay?"

"Larger shares," Gaston said.

Pete snorted appreciatively.

"Striker, do you wish to know this, or does Morgan?"

He frowned. "I want them to stay. Our chances of doing better are poor without them. Morgan thinks we can do without and Bradley would have us hit smaller targets. I want a great deal of gold in one juicy pluck, and then I wish to be done with it for the year. I don't see that happening without the French."

"I see your point. We will spend time with him on the march back." I looked to Gaston and he nodded.

I then told Striker, "I would appreciate your assistance on a matter when the booty is divided. I want that Negro slave."

Striker grinned. "I guessed as much. He did not seem a proper one for a plantation."

"He is lettered in Spanish and Latin."

"And might have some use once you teach him English," Striker teased, as we walked around the house to the street.

"Well, it did well for you, did it not?" I riposted.

"Bastard."

The square was filled with buccaneers, including the wounded. Morgan stood upon the cistern lip, and all fell silent to listen to him.

"As many of you know, we are ransoming the town," he said. "I have told the Spanish I will burn it if they do not produce more silver."

This brought applause.

"Four of their worthies were sent to procure this money, and are due back today or they will forfeit their families. However, while we have waited, we have learned the Spanish are marching on us from Saint Jago."

This sent a ripple of concern through the crowd, and I realized how few of us knew what was afoot.

"As I see it," he continued, "we have two options. One, some few of our number can move the booty we have now to the ships whilst the rest of us remain here to insure the Spanish give us our due. Or two, we abandon this place and retreat to the shore with hostages and attempt to ransom them there."

This was greeted by anger and derision.

"I would give you all half an hour to think on it and discuss it amongst yourselves, and then we will vote," Morgan finished.

A great deal of discussion ensued, producing such a cacophony that my vehement curses were drowned in its roar.

"He has culled the truth quite nicely," I said to Gaston. "He has couched the entirety of it so as to arouse their greed and pique their pride. I cannot fathom what he thinks to gain by holding the town."

Gaston shrugged. "He is a leader. Like you," he grinned, "he can convince men to do many things."

I was hurt by his jest. Seeing it, he embraced me in apology.

"Sheep need leaders, Will. So do dogs."

"I hate that they are sheep or dogs," I muttered.

Soon, Morgan stood on the cistern again and we voted. I was not surprised when three quarters of our number were in favor of holding the town.

Though I thought there little danger in remaining another day or two, I still wished for us to go with the booty to the ships. I was tired of this place. I soon realized we would not be allowed to go with the party that took the treasure and slaves. I was needed to translate.

So, an hour later, we watched a hundred and fifty men leave with several booty-laden carts, a line of slaves lashed together, and our wounded. Unfortunately for Striker's favor, Pierrot headed up this party. After they departed, the rest of us milled about, uncertain of what to do next. Thankfully, Gaston and I had the distraction of the wounded in the church.

The prisoners were agitated, and we spent much of our time allaying their fears of the church being burnt around them – even though I could not aver this was not their fate in my heart. Still, I thought Morgan would not be such a fool as to kill so many without reason. It would raise ire even amongst the English.

Sometime later, Davey and Julio came to summon us. Apparently the ransom delegation had returned. I was as curious as anyone as to what would occur.

Magistrate Escoban and the others protested at length of how they had ridden to the surrounding towns begging for succor, and none could or would provide them with the ransom. They swore they must go farther afield and that would require more time.

Morgan slapped Escoban with the letters.

The man read the one addressed to him with horror. "I swear, sir, I know nothing of this," he stammered when he finished.

He let the other Spaniards read them. They blanched as white as he.

I could not tell if it was from genuine surprise that the mayor of Saint Jago was sending an army, or consternation that we had discovered it.

"It matters not," Morgan said pleasantly. "We have taken what we have, and to insure our departure, we will take the four of you, along with a few others. And we will burn the town in our wake unless..."

I translated, and they regarded him with breath locked in their lungs, we all did.

"Unless, sir?" Escoban prompted and looked to me as if perhaps Morgan would not understand that little Castilian.

"Unless you provide us with five hundred head of cattle at the shore, and the salt and barrels necessary to ship the beef," Morgan said.

My initial thought was imprudent, and Gaston kicked me lightly to stay my lips, as if he had heard me think it.

There was a great deal of muttering among the buccaneers close enough to hear, and all eyes were on me as I translated. The Spanish blinked and frowned. Morgan gloated as if he had performed some coup.

"You want us to drive cattle to the shore, today, with salt and kegs?" Escoban asked.

Morgan looked to me, and I translated, as I did not wish to simply answer the question for him.

"Aye, that is precisely what I wish," Morgan said. "You will meet us at the shore tomorrow morning. Actually, you will already be there as a hostage, your men and the cattle will meet us."

Escoban and the others scoffed when I finished.

"We can not move that many so quickly," Escoban said.

"I would suggest you start now, then," Morgan said.

"We will need the men in the church," Escoban sputtered.

Morgan nodded, and they were off. Thankfully, I did not have to follow, as I did not need to translate for anyone in the church, and I decided not to interpret any of the shouted imprecations and discussion I heard from within it.

Soon men slipped cautiously from the church and ran off in several directions. Morgan gave word that no women or children were to leave, and he had the delegates and several other wealthy-looking men pulled aside. Soon another party departed for the shore; this one included the hostages, Morgan, Gaston, and me. I was pleased it included most of our friends as well, at least those who had not accompanied the booty.

Just as we had traveled on this road before, we did not stop when the sun set. We lit torches and kept our pace. We knew the road now, and we were following another party – who were in turn following scouts: we would have been able to make far faster work of the journey than we had on the way in, if not for the hostages. They were not well-suited for jogging down roads by torchlight. I thought it likely they were all a bit thinner by the time we reached the shore in the morning. I was thankful none of them had collapsed.

We found Pierrot's party at the shore. They had arrived not long before, as they had experienced an even slower go of it with the carts

and wounded.

Gaston and I considered searching for Pierrot, but it was likely he was sleeping amongst his own men; and we were exhausted. We found a place to rest on the periphery and took turns napping.

I was quite relieved to see the ships sailing in soon after. I was even more pleased when at last they were close enough for us to exchange waves with the Bard and Dickey.

We had most of the cargo loaded when the cattle began to arrive in the afternoon. I was called to translate, as the men bringing the herd asked for the hostages. Morgan refused, and said they would only receive their men when the meat was salted in barrels and aboard the ships. He did, however, send men to tell the buccaneers in Puerto del Principe to leave the town unmolested. The Spanish were greatly relieved.

Thus the slaughter began, with the Spanish working shoulder to shoulder with the buccaneers to speed the process. I truly felt I had seen enough dead beasts to last a lifetime on Cow Island, but as my matelot was quite skilled at butchering them, I was blood-spattered and knee-deep in offal for most of the day.

Sometime toward evening, the work was disrupted by an altercation, and many about us were happy for the distraction. The cattle were abandoned as men, English and Spanish alike, hurried off to see what all the ado was. Gaston and I were curious; but initially we did not wish to add to the chaos of armed and warring men running amuck, listening for hearsay or trying to force their way closer to the source of the matter. We thought that if we were needed, someone would come and find us; and sure enough, someone did. Young Nickel was the one they sent.

"What is amiss?" I asked the panting youth.

"Burroughs is in a duel," he gasped. "Striker says to come and help with the French."

"A duel?" I asked.

"Aye," Nickel said sadly. "He took the marrow bones of a steer other men slaughtered. There was a fight. One of the men, a Frenchman, challenged him to a duel."

"Over marrow bones?" I asked with amusement, as I wiped what I could off my hands and picked up my weapons. "What else did our hot-blooded friend do?"

"Taking another's marrow bones is a serious matter," Gaston said with sincere gravity as he abandoned the side of beef he was working on.

"That may be, but worth dueling for?" I asked.

Gaston shrugged. "He dislikes the French; it is likely he said a thing he should not."

"Why would Burroughs do such a thing?" I asked Nickel. "I mean, with all else afoot."

"I do not know," Nickel said. "He is quite angry, and Ash was in

the thick of it. And now, Liam and Otter.” He frowned. “It seems the Frenchmen were friends of theirs.”

I swore, and we hurried toward the storm of confusion until we were forced to slow and shoulder our way through to the center.

When at last we reached the middle of it, we learned the Frenchmen involved were indeed Liam and Otter’s good friends, Tooco and Crème. Tooco was to be the one to duel with Burroughs. They had chosen muskets, and the Brethren were forming a long corridor in which the duel would take place. I was dismayed to see the French on one side and the English on the other. There were other divisions as well. Ash was with Burroughs, as was Bones, and Nickel hurried to join them; but Otter, Liam, Julio and Davey were clustered near Crème. In this, I saw all too well that perhaps our new men had never been fully taken into the fold.

Not wishing to add to the division, I sought unity, and thankfully found it in Pierrot and Rizzo standing with Striker and Cudro; and though they were engaged in a heated discussion, all four seemed pleased to see us.

“So Burroughs stole marrow bones?” I asked.

Pierrot shrugged expansively. “It does not matter where the road began now, my friend.”

“I see that,” I said. “Where do we feel the road leads?” I gestured at the lines of angry men.

“Hell and back,” Striker spat. “If Burroughs lives through this, I’m going to beat him senseless.”

“I feel you will not have far to go,” I said. “The man is a boar. Who chose muskets?”

“Tooco,” Rizzo said. “Your man will not live.”

“Probably for the best,” I sighed.

With a last pat on Striker’s shoulder, Pierrot crossed the corridor to the French.

Cudro and Rizzo went to confer with the combatants, as neither quartermaster had agreed to oversee the entirety of the matter. I thought it good they stood together.

All others had withdrawn from the corridor save the duelists. Burroughs and Tooco discharged their weapons to insure they were not fouled, and then reloaded them quickly under the eye of the quartermasters. Then they went to stand a good twoscore feet apart, with their pieces at their sides. When the signal was given, they would aim and fire. If neither hit, they would reload and fire as quickly as they could.

I was curious as to how much movement was permitted on the part of the parties. Was it permissible for a man to strive to make himself difficult to hit, beyond standing side-on to his opponent?

I looked from one man to the other. To our left, Tooco was sure and strong, joking with the men who shouted encouragement from the French line. His matelot, Crème, was not as enthused as the

onlookers; he stood solemnly with Otter and Liam across the gap from us. Julio and Davey had stayed with them, though Davey appeared uncomfortable.

Burroughs, to our right, was anything but calm. His hands shook and his eyes darted about. As I had noted when we trained them, the man was too easily flustered. He was truly a boar, prone to charging upon spears or anything else lain in his path. Even had they dueled with pistols, swords, or fists, I thought him inevitable loser. Against an experienced musketeer, it would take an act of the Gods for him to win.

Rizzo raised his hand, and silence settled over the crowd. Tooco looked to his left, possibly at Crème. There was movement to my right. I turned my head in time to see Burroughs aiming his piece. The retort of his musket split the silence. Tooco took the ball squarely in the chest and went down. The Brethren howled as one; my own throat gave cry as well.

Gaston was in motion and I followed him to Tooco. We were among the first to reach him. It was obvious, even to my eye, that he was beyond any physician's abilities. Gaston pressed his head to the man's heart all the same, and then probed the wound. Crème bent at Tooco's head, but his man was beyond speech, even if his heart did still beat.

There was one last twitch, and Gaston sat up and met Crème's gaze. The Frenchman nodded slowly; he looked about, though I thought he saw little of us.

"Duel 'im," Liam said in English and shook Crème's arm. When Crème did not respond, Liam turned to Otter. "Tell 'im to duel the bastard. Burroughs fired. By all rights, Crème should 'ave the shot his matelot didna' take."

I agreed, though I thought Crème so shocked at the death that he was beyond caring for even vengeance at the moment.

There were shots fired behind us; they cut through the cacophony. Cudro's great voice boomed for silence in their wake, invoking Morgan's name. I had not seen our admiral along either side of the corridor of the duel. I wondered if he had just arrived.

When some semblance of quiet had been achieved, Morgan spoke. "As your admiral, I command you to cease this madness at once! This is not the time or place to settle disputes, damn you all! The Spaniards are marching on us, and we have but few hours of day left to finish our business here! Let this be resolved on the cays!"

"This bastard murdered a man!" Pierrot roared in response.

"How so? I thought this a duel," Morgan asked.

Hundreds of men spoke at once and Cudro again had to bellow for silence.

I stood and pushed my way toward Morgan.

"He fired before the signal," Pierrot said when at last he could be heard.

"If that is so, then the matter will be tried and justice will be served," Morgan said.

"That is so!" Pierrot roared. "The dead man's matelot deserves his shot!"

The cry of "Duel, duel" was taken up by many men.

I reached the captains. Morgan and Pierrot were like two bulls in a ring, nostrils flared and feet pawing; between them lay a battered Burroughs. The fool did not appear dead, and thankfully, did not appear so very foolish as to try to speak. He regarded the men fighting over him with trepidation through his un-swollen eye.

"Not here!" Morgan bellowed. "And if the man cannot be trusted to follow the rules of a duel, why let him do it again? He shall be tried in a court and justice served. But not here and not now!"

"On the cays, then," Pierrot rumbled. He called loudly in French. "He's correct. This is not the time. Justice will be served, but not now. Go back to your cattle. The faster we load, the faster we reach the cays and settle this."

I knelt beside Burroughs and whispered in his ear, "You fired before the signal. Why?"

He frowned at me. "The Frenchie raised his hand. Not my damn fault the bugger weren't watchin'."

Ash was at my elbow. The sallow boy looked as bad as he had after Pete beat him, and I was proud he had at least tried to defend Burroughs. His eyes were cold as he looked on the man now, though.

"What was the signal?" I asked Ash.

"Fire," Ash said. "The quartermaster would call for them to be ready, and then for them to fire."

"E raised 'is hand," Burroughs sputtered defensively. "Ya saw it! It be the stupid Frenchie's fault."

"You heard Cudro say it," Ash said with a mix of disbelief and anger.

I patted Ash on the shoulder. "Leave it. He did not listen then; he will not listen now."

I stood and found my back to Striker's chest and many eyes upon me.

Morgan looked away when I met his gaze. He called for men to truss Burroughs and deliver him to the *Mayflower*. Then he stalked off with the glares of the French upon his back.

I turned enough to whisper to Striker. "He is our problem."

He swore. "Aye, I know."

I looked to Pierrot and Savant and the French men still about them.

"We will see that justice is done," I said quietly in French. "If he can be delivered to you, we will arrange it. If not..."

"I want him to hang," Crème said.

He had joined us along with Gaston, Liam, and Otter.

"I don't want to duel him. Dueling is honorable," Crème continued. "I want him to hang like a dog."

There was no anger in his words, just a deep sadness.

I nodded. "Then he will hang. Need you witness it?"

"Non," Crème said. "The watching of it would not bring Tooco back."

The French about us muttered among themselves, but all nodded with deference as Pierrot's gaze swept over them.

"Crème has spoken. Tell our men what has been decided," Pierrot told them.

"Morgan won't hang him after a trial," Savant said with anger. "Morgan won't have a trial."

"I have already conducted my trial," I said. "The man will hang. Morgan be damned."

Savant took my measure and nodded. "Your word I will take."

"It would be best if this matter were resolved before we part ways after the treasure is divided," Pierrot said.

Gaston had thankfully been translating for Striker and Pete.

"It'll be done," Striker said. "I wouldn't have you leave, but there's no helping it now."

Pierrot nodded sadly and said in English. "We will speak later, my friends. I am sorry this man was yours."

Striker snorted. "Not as sorry and shamed as we."

The French walked away, leaving only our own about us. Ash was looking at us with old eyes. Nickel and Bones stood beside him.

"You understand?" I asked them gently.

Ash said, "I will not speak to defend him now."

Nickel nodded resolutely.

"Man be a fool," Bones said with a shrug. "We all heard Cudro's tellin' him the signal."

"He broke the rules of a duel, simple rules, and thus committed murder," Ash said. "He deserves to hang. I only wonder how you will be about it."

"I wonder that myself," Striker sighed and awarded me a raised eyebrow.

"We shall pay our former friend a visit upon the *Mayflower* this night," I said. "I feel he will be quite overcome with remorse after he realizes what he has done."

"So remorseful he might hang himself?" Striker asked.

I nodded. "I think it likely."

"Well then," Striker said with a shrug, "we must endeavor to help him find his peace with his Maker." His gaze met mine. "Morgan won't be pleased if he learns the truth of it."

"Actually, I feel he will," I said. "That it will occur will leave him in better standing with the French as regards future endeavors, despite the ill-will and their misgivings about this venture. And, it will free him of the necessity of concocting some rationale for not giving the man a trial when even the English feel he is guilty."

Striker snorted. "I forgot, you can think as he does."

We headed back to the steer we had been butchering. I found Striker's words had stung me deeply. I owned I could see Morgan's heart, and knew the way of wolves like him; but as always, I took no pride in it. I also was not pleased with what we must be about

concerning Burroughs. Despite my resolve, it did not sit well with me.

Gaston put his arm about my shoulder as we walked.

"He is a fool and he made a fool's error," I said. "His stealing the marrow bones was probably a matter of mistaken understanding of the situation as well. I only fault him on his belligerence about the matter, and his attitude toward the French. Yet he did not do this with malice."

"It is better he dies here before he can harm one of us with his foolishness," Gaston said with calm resolve.

"True."

Still, I did not relish the coming of night and our sailing as I should have. I argued the matter again and again in my heart as we salted and barreled beef. Always, I found my reasoning and decision sound. It was best for all. However, I knew if it had been another, say Pete perhaps, who had made such an error, I would have done all I could to save him. But Pete would never have committed such a grave mistake. And therein lay the crux of the matter. Burroughs was not such a friend as I would defend, because he was not such a man as I would truly take to my heart as a friend.

It was a sad thing to admit, but the men we thought of as our cabal were not all true and loyal friends in my estimation. Davey, for instance, was not my friend. I would not raise my hand to save him, and I thought it likely I would someday be forced to raise my hand against him. Julio, though, I would do much for. I hoped no situation would ever come to pass where I would have to choose between them.

As for Bones, Nickel, and Ash, I was still fond of them, and thought their reaction to today's event held great promise as to their continued association with what might be considered the true cabal; but they still needed to be tested in other ways. And, we would see how they truly reacted to the night's planned event as it had time to wear into their souls.

The sun was sinking when we finally had all the beef and men aboard the ships. I kissed the Bard in relief when we reached the decks of the *Virgin Queen*.

"That bad?" he asked. "We heard of the ruckus with Burroughs."

"Aye, and the matter is not finished yet." I said. I quickly whispered to him and Dickey all that had occurred and the planned resolution.

"That is a sad thing," the Bard said, "but aye, he must pay for it."

Dickey was eyeing me soberly. "You can do such a thing?"

"Aye, sadly, I can," I said.

"I could not," he said. "Not in cold blood."

"Do you judge me harshly for it?" I asked.

He shook his head and sighed. "Someone must stand as executioner."

Troubled, I slipped below to the cabin, with Gaston on my heels. As always, he knew me well.

"Are you still in fear of Hell?" he asked in French as we settled in under our table to sit side by side.

"Not so much Hell, as... well, I do not feel I will be sent to Hell for seeing justice done, but perhaps for having the hubris to judge. I have oft played judge and executioner. In my heart I know that it is sometimes necessary, in order to see that justice is done, but... who am I to ever be deciding what is just?"

Gaston embraced me. "I feel you are better suited than any other, in that you at least ask that question of yourself."

"I suppose I will know the end result when I am dead, and all my deeds are done, and I stand at the brink of oblivion."

"Until then, you must do as you feel is right," he said.

"And not care how or if I will be judged?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Men who ever worry about such things seem to live very poor lives. Our fellows respect you. I love you. Be content in the goodness that implies."

I turned to face him. "The same goes for you, my love."

He smiled slowly. "Oui."

"You should watch what you say," I teased.

"Oui, as you will make me eat it," he said with rueful amusement.

We heard the anchor being weighed, and we smiled at one another. Despite what I must do, and despite our being filthy, caked in blood, hungry, thirsty, and damn tired, it did not matter. We were safely aboard our ship. We had survived yet another debacle in the adventure that was our lives.

Our cabal spent the evening sitting on the quarterdeck relaying the rest of the adventure that was Puerto del Principe to the Bard and Dickey and their men. We had a few bottles, and we drained them and lay about in relative peace.

My sense of well-being was only disturbed by a quiet discussion among Striker, Gaston and myself as to who should go to the *Mayflower*. I decided, and Gaston reluctantly agreed, that he should stay behind. I won the argument by telling him that if all went poorly, he and Pete were the best suited to rescuing Striker and me. Pete, too, wished to go, but he also acceded to my reasoning.

When the lack of light made continuing to sail through the cays and bars too dangerous, our small fleet dropped anchor for the night. In the lamplight, Striker and I looked to one another. He nodded, and we stood. I was concerned when Ash stood as well.

"If you are to go over there to meet with him as friends," Ash said quietly for our ears alone, "then I should go too, as all knew we were partners."

"Can you do this?" I asked him.

He looked away and sighed. "If I find I cannot in the face of it, I can at least stand as lookout."

Striker and I exchanged a glance and nodded as one. The three of us rowed a canoe over to the *Mayflower*. We did not have a plan beyond asking to see Burroughs. We had brought his gear, but not his weapons. We also had a length of rope wrapped about my waist under my tunic.

It was strange boarding the *Mayflower*. She seemed a different vessel than the one we had sailed on only last summer. In the torchlight, I looked for the bloodstains that had been deep in the wood of the waist decking. Bradley's former matelot had made one of them, and Liam, Otter and the Bard had made others, during the fight to take the vessel from the Spanish. Being the ones who could not swim, they had surrendered on the cay on which the wreck of the *North Wind* had marooned them, and been brought aboard the ship unarmed: as a distraction, so the rest of the buccaneers could swim around the Spanish ship and take its crew unawares. When the attack began, the Spanish captain had put a gun to Siegfried's head and fired. The stains were gone now, washed away during the constant cleaning and wetting that a ship's decks require.

Bradley had been so distraught over the entire affair that he had chosen not to rove, and thus the *Mayflower* had sailed on her first voyage as a buccaneer vessel under Striker's command. All this was in my mind as Bradley emerged from the captain's cabin and came to greet us. It was still hard for me to reconcile the man I met, with Siegfried beside him, the day I arrived in Port Royal, with the man who had argued with me over God's dislike of matelotage and sodomy a few weeks ago. But then, the first night I drank with him I had been disappointed to realize he was not a wolf who led, but one who followed.

"We come to see Burroughs," Striker told him. "We have his bag, but we left his weapons behind."

Bradley grimaced and sighed. "He's in the cabin."

I thought that an odd place to keep a prisoner; but I was not surprised, as I thought it unlikely Burroughs was in irons. However, it made our work far more difficult.

Bradley led us to the master cabin. As we stooped to enter, I decided it was indeed a different ship. Gone were the large hammocks Striker, Pete, Gaston and I had used. They had been replaced by a large table behind which Morgan held court. There were hammocks; but they were the narrow type, anchored at two points, and they were folded up in the corner now. This was a good thing: with the three of us, and Bradley, Hastings, Morgan, and Burroughs, the little room was excessively crowded, especially with the table. Thankfully the room's current occupants were sitting around said table. They moved even further about to make room for us, and we packed ourselves in until Ash was able to close the door and stand with his back to it. I felt we looked quite absurd, crammed against the walls about an inconvenient piece of wood that held two bottles and nothing else.

"I need a ship with a bigger captain's cabin," Morgan said with amusement.

We chuckled appreciatively.

"You need a bigger ship, admiral," Hastings said.

I kept myself from glaring at him, and more importantly, from glancing to see if he looked upon me with his single eye or awarded me

with his usual sardonic smirk. He, of course, was familiar with bigger ships, having come from the navy. I thought him not a buccaneer, though he had sailed with the Brethren for several years and was liked by some enough to win the vote for quartermaster. I still think he murdered Michaels.

Instead, I looked to Burroughs, who seemed both deep in his rum and happy to see us. He would have stood to embrace us, I was sure, but the table prevented it.

"What brings you here?" Morgan asked as he slid a bottle toward us.

I did not wish to kneel before the table, and I did not wish to stand, so I pressed against the wall and brought one knee up to lean on the table. It was a bit more relaxing.

"We came to see how Burroughs fares," I said. "Ash here was his partner."

"I be fine, Will," Burroughs said. "The admiral here says I got nothin' ta worry me head about. Long as I stay hidden until the Frenchies leave."

"Is that so?" I asked; but my eyes were on Morgan, and his narrowed in response.

He glanced about the table, and I took a moment to do likewise. Hastings looked amused, Bradley was ill-at-ease, and Striker was annoyed. Ash was glaring at the floor.

"How should it be?" Morgan asked with sincere curiosity. "I don't give a damn if one of my good men mistakenly takes a marrow bone, and apologizes for it, or misunderstands a signal to fire in a duel."

Bradley and Hastings tensed, and Morgan saw it.

"Aye, aye, it were all a mistake," Burroughs said effusively. "I don't speak French."

"Neither do I," Ash said with venom. "Cudro explained the signal in English."

"Well..." Burroughs sputtered, "There were a lot goin' on. I... didn' understand it an..."

"You shot a man before the duel had officially begun," I said coolly, "before he was fully prepared, and in front of at least five hundred men." The last I aimed at Morgan.

"I did not see it," Morgan said, without a trace of defensiveness.

"We were busy with the Spanish," Bradley said, "and did not arrive until after it happened."

"Rizzo raised his hand to get everyone to settle down," Striker said. "Tooco, the man who was shot, wasn't even looking at Burroughs yet."

Burroughs was not so deep in the rum he did not sense the change in mood of all about him. "I were thinkin'... I were thinkin'... well, the Frenchie ain't ready, his loss. His loss. Gotta fire quick in a duel."

Morgan awarded Burroughs a disappointed grimace and looked to Striker and me. "What do you propose? A duel when we divide the booty?"

I realized there was nothing to be gained by subterfuge; we would

not now accomplish this behind Morgan's back.

"Crème does not wish to duel him," I said. "He wishes for him to hang. He does not need to witness it, and this has been made known about the Brethren, the French Brethren at least. And, it has been suggested that things would be better with the French if the matter were resolved prior to their parting company with us."

"So they would be happy if we handed him over?" Bradley asked.

I shrugged. I was still watching Morgan. He was frowning and tapping the table with the rum cork.

"Nay," Morgan said. "I will not... We do not need the French..."

"Do you ever expect to need them again?" I asked as lightly as I could manage.

He snorted. "Aye, aye, damn them." He glared up at me. "I will not just make a show of handing a man to them. Nor will I... I cannot have the man tried on English soil. That will bring too much attention to many a thing that our Governor would rather avoid."

His gaze upon me became more speculative and he included Striker in it. "What was your intent in coming here this night?"

Though there was no need to dissemble, diplomacy is always wise. "Not knowing your plans, but knowing the nature of the matter, as you had not yet had a chance to learn, we thought it likely that Burroughs might be overcome with grief, such that he might hang himself in his cell."

"What? What?" Burroughs tried to stand.

Hastings barked with amusement and rammed the table into Burroughs' belly before pulling a piece on him. Burroughs settled down, gasping for breath, his eyes wide on the pistol barrel.

Morgan took this in stride. His grin was large and white-toothed under his mustache. "And this would satisfy the French?"

I shrugged. "If the body is delivered to Burroughs' former shipmates for burial."

Morgan looked to Bradley and Hastings. "Can you think of a place aboard ship, other than from the yardarms, where a man could be hanged quietly?"

"The hold," Striker said, "or anywhere really, even here."

"Aye, if he is on his knees, ceiling height is not a problem," I added. We had discussed that before coming over.

Burroughs was producing a continuous mewling of pleas and denials.

"Damn, this table is large," Morgan said distractedly. "I suppose I can make show of saying that, now that I know he did evil, I will have him in chains below deck and he will go back to Port Royal for trial. And then, when he is discovered, we can say that he realized his error and chose to hang here rather than wait for it."

"That should satisfy all," I said. "Including the English Brethren who saw him disobey the rules of a duel."

Morgan gave me an annoyed smile. "And I thank you for telling me

the whole of the matter so that I would not make so grave a mistake as to let my men think I condoned such actions."

I gave him an accommodating smile. "We thought it likely that once you knew the truth of the matter, you would do what is right – unless, of course, you were constrained by matters of policy or politics, in which case we thought to save you the trouble of worrying about it."

His smile became a little truer. "Thank you even more, for holding my best interests and good name in your heart."

But I could tell he would not trust us again, if indeed he ever had.

We wrestled Burroughs out of the cabin and down into the hold, while Morgan explained to the men on deck that, in light of his being accurately apprised of the events of the duel, he now saw no other course than to take Burroughs to Port Royal and have him tried and hanged for murder. Meanwhile, Striker, Hastings, Ash and I gagged Burroughs, bound him hand and foot, and hung him on his knees. He took a while to die.

I could not help but recall the last time I had hanged a man. It had been an act of vengeance against a beloved friend's lover: a stupid boy who had not been able to comprehend madness, whose leaving had driven my poor friend to take his own life. I also recalled relaying all of that to Gaston, the day he admitted his madness to me. I had told him of it as we rowed a canoe to shore after visiting Pierrot on the *Josephine*. I thought it fascinating how events were sometimes connected in our minds, and even in the world around us.

Ash did indeed have the conviction to face Burroughs' death. He forced himself to watch his former friend die. I did not think it was due to any cruelty of spirit, but rather a desire to imprint the scene upon his memory. He turned away with relief when the man jerked his last.

Hastings, however, obviously reveled in watching Burroughs suffer. He breathed faster, and the smile upon his lips would have well graced a cat. I thought he might actually find physical pleasure in the thing, but his crotch was shadowed such I could not tell without staring.

Striker alone did not watch. He held the rope that kept Burroughs' legs from the floor and he stared at the wall with grim determination, holding himself firm in all ways against the hanging man's struggling.

We unbound Burroughs' hands and feet, leaving the rope about his neck, and then Ash, Striker, and I slipped away and off to our canoe, leaving the buccaneers about the deck to wonder and Hastings to find the body when the time seemed right. I thought it likely no one would buy the entirety of the tale Morgan tried to sell them, but they would know that justice had been done.

Our cabal was solemn as we returned, though they were relieved to see us. We told them all had gone well, with Morgan's blessing even. Then Ash and Striker withdrew. Ash sat alone in the corner of the quarterdeck and eschewed company. Striker started to do the same; but Pete was stubborn in keeping him company, and soon they were talking quietly.

As Gaston was on the night watch, I settled in beside him on the deck, and sighed with relief as his arms closed around me. I told him of my thoughts and my words with Morgan.

"You handle him well," Gaston said.

"I am well-accustomed to dancing with wolves," I sighed. "One must know when to lead and when to follow, and determine deftly whether your partner knows the steps he should take, and cover for him when he does not, lest he tear your throat out for making him appear the fool."

"Do you feel he would have done as he should if he had understood what Burroughs did?" Gaston asked.

"Aye, but... he was not asking to understand. He was willing to take Burroughs' word, and if the matter had continued beyond tonight, I believe he would have cornered himself such that he could not reverse his forgiveness of Burroughs and do what was right."

"And you feel he understands that?" he asked.

I sighed. "Aye, which is why he is grateful to me, even as he said, and yet he now has another reason to hate me, because he knows I knew him to be the fool."

"He is a dangerous opponent, for us." Gaston said thoughtfully.

"Oui."

"It seems our options narrow as to who we can sail with," he sighed.

"Oui, but this time it is because of me, not you." I gave him a rueful smile. "And he is a threat on land as well as at sea, as long as we stay on Jamaica – until he dies or loses favor with the governor."

"True," Gaston said.

He pulled me tighter. "Do you feel guilt?"

"Over tonight? Non."

"Good." He kissed me.

And I did not. I did not feel I had overstepped my bounds and done the work of Gods, but that I had done service for the Gods.

Forty-Seven

Wherein We Gain Great Treasure

The Bard had us under way, with the other ships in our wake, before the sun broke the horizon. I looked to the *Mayflower* often, but I knew not what I expected to see. We would not be informed of events there until we made land to disperse the booty.

By midday we found a likely large cay, with sufficient safe harbor for all the ships, and we dropped anchor and began to offload the treasure, slaves, and able-bodied men. Striker, Cudro, and I took a count of all our men, our wounded, and the number of shares due our officers. We made notes as to the choices of those who would or could not go ashore and who did not have matelots to speak for them. We only had one man due recompense for losing a leg. We had two dead as well; but under the group articles, no one received a thing for them, matelot or no. There were three other wounded, but not maimed so as to be compensated for it, as it appeared they would recover whole: they would receive their usual shares. That done, Gaston and I went ashore, and I volunteered my services for booty sorting.

I soon learned all slaves were valued at one hundred pieces of eight or twenty-five pounds, regardless of age, size, or skills. We had left the infirm and young slaves with the Spanish, so all we had were somewhat able-bodied. There were fifty-five of them. This both simplified my concerns over acquiring Pedro and complicated them.

The valuation of ready coin was also not an issue. While we were in Puerto del Principe, several men had been appointed as clerks to sort, count, and bag it. So we had an accurate accounting. Thus, as it

had been with the emeralds last year, the bulk of the job before us lay in ascertaining the value of the odd items, such as silver candelabras inlaid with stones or a woman's necklace, or at least assigning enough value to separate them into piles of equal worth.

Some pieces gave us great consternation, such as an intricately-detailed gold plate. It must have been the art of the Indians of Terra Firma. I did not recognize the design or the figure in the center with the outthrust tongue, but it reminded me of ancient things I had seen in antiquities collections. It was a flat circle with a rim; but judging from the hooks on the back, it was meant to be displayed and not served with. As it was gold, albeit thin, by weight alone it was the equivalent to some thirty doubloons.

"That'll be a number o' shares there," one of the men sorting said. "We'll most likely be meltin' it."

With resignation, I placed the value of Pedro's well-being above the plate, but I called Gaston over and showed it to him anyway. He was quite impressed, and had seen its like before. He had heard it was a thing of religious significance amongst the natives of New Spain. I wondered at the path it had taken to reach a home in Puerto del Principe.

Pete had followed Gaston, and it did not take a scholar to see what he wondered at. He was entranced by the plate, and I had to pry it from his hands to return it to the piles.

While some of us were thus engaged, the captains gave the accounting of the men aboard their ships to the surgeon keeping the lists. After this, Striker came to stand beside me.

"There has been a death upon the *Mayflower*," he said in a conversational tone.

The men I worked with looked up with concern.

"It seems Burroughs took his own life," Striker said with a heavy sigh. "From shame at what he did, most likely."

One of the men near us crossed himself, but another muttered, "Serves the bugger right."

"Morgan has asked that we see to burying him as soon as the booty is settled," Striker added.

"Of course," I said solemnly.

I thought it likely the French would stay until the following morning, but I asked Gaston to speak to Pierrot anyway.

Soon enough, my thoughts were elsewhere once again. As we finished assessing the treasure, Morgan made great show of awarding the boons and recompense for injury. Four men had lost limbs, and were given the equivalent of six hundred pieces of eight or six slaves. Then two men were awarded boons of fifty pieces of eight each for valor in the initial battle for the town. Then the surgeons, gunners, and carpenters were paid a hundred pieces of eight, or one slave each.

Three of the maimed men, including the one aboard the *Virgin Queen*, and two of the surgeons, took their recompense in slaves. They

did not appear to be land-holding types, and I wondered at this. I also fretted that they had just taken twenty of the fifty-five slave shares available, and I was concerned as to how the allotting and picking was done.

I slipped to Striker's side. "Do the wounded often take their due in slaves?"

He nodded. "If they can't rove any longer, they sometimes choose to settle down. Slaves are risky. They don't always carry the value we assign them, but since they're a ready commodity, their owners can often trade their labor for a plot of land or the like. Or they can auction them off and receive more money."

"How is the selection done of the slaves thus allotted?" I asked.

"By picks. Once we know who all will be taking slaves, some order is established, and each man due a slave picks and so on until all have one and then we go to the next round." He grinned at me. "Don't worry, we'll get him."

"I am not worried, *per se*. I can always buy him if he is allotted elsewhere," I said.

"True, but your interest will drive his price up," Striker said. "I've been thinking on it, and I spoke with the Bard before I left and Cudro just now. If you and Gaston are willing, we'll pool all our shares and I'll speak for all of us. As captain of one of the larger vessels, that'll let me pick early."

I smiled. "I will, of course, confer with my matelot, but I am very keen on that plan."

"I thought you would be," Striker said.

I glanced at Dickey, who was standing nearby, and he nodded. When informed of it, Gaston was in agreement on the matter. Pete was still talking about the plate, and upon hearing this plan about the slaves, he hurried to Striker's side.

With the wounded and those who would not be compensated in shares out of the way, the total number of shares had been determined at eight hundred and twenty-six. We had thirty-five slaves remaining for a value of three thousand five hundred pieces of eight. There was twenty-eight thousand, four hundred and thirty-one in ready money and approximately another twenty thousand in miscellaneous valuables. So close to fifty-two thousand all told, divided by the number of shares needed, put each share at about sixty pieces of eight. So all of the last five days, all the death, all the privation, had basically amounted to fifteen pounds per man. That would not pay the debts with which most of them had sailed.

The men were not quiet about airing their disappointment, once the figure was told.

Now that we knew the amount of a share, those of us involved in sorting the odd items returned to them, and ordered them as to how many shares they were worth. The gold plate was thus named at an astounding eight shares. None but a captain could take it.

And a slave was worth more than one share. After much discussion, it was decided that two slaves would equal three shares for this allotment, and they should be parceled out in groupings as a result. I was initially concerned at this, and then I remembered I was a bo'sun, and thus allotted two shares; thus, Gaston and I could acquire Pedro, and apparently one other, with the three shares we had between us.

Morgan was allowed first pick of the booty for his shares as commander. Not blind to the mood of his men, he eschewed the valuable slaves and ready money, and chose necklaces for his wife, and other valuables that would be difficult to sell, from amongst the miscellaneous items. Next came Bradley, as captain of the largest ship. He took six shares in slaves, so four slaves, and a share in ready money, and a bauble for his wife. Then Pierrot, as the next captain, divided his shares between ready money and jewels from the piles. Then it was Striker's turn.

He spoke to all. "As we have six owners of the *Virgin Queen*, plus one additional matelot – and of those men, one is quartermaster, another master of sail and another bo-sun – we have by my reckoning, nineteen shares between us. I have leave of my companions to pick for all of us. Does that meet with your agreement?"

None gainsaid him, but there were mutters of disapproval.

Striker gave the names of those for whom he would exercise choice, and we were stricken from the lists.

"We choose three shares in slaves, eight shares in ready money, and that gold plate," he said.

Pete whooped for joy and ran in to snatch up the plate. The buccaneers that had grumbled seemed pleased we took so few in slaves and that we had relieved everyone of the damn plate.

Pedro was relieved to see us. I had not had the opportunity to see to his welfare before now, and I regretted it; though I knew not what I could have done to remedy his situation. He had been collared and leashed with rope, and his hands bound before him for the march to the shore. They had not released any of them for transport on the ship. Still, he looked to be in better spirits and health than the others. I assured him all would soon be well, and we waited.

Our cabal stood about and studied the plate. Striker shook his head in wonder as he handed it back to Pete. I did not think it was due to his being in awe of the workmanship, but rather to bemusement at his matelot's fascination with it.

"He's sticking his tongue out," Striker said.

Pete raised his chin a notch and grinned. "Nay. 'EBeSmilin'AtMe. HeKnowsYaNa'Like'Em." He turned the plate to Gaston.

My matelot nodded soberly without trace of even a smirk. "Aye, he is smiling."

I was laughing too hard to play along. My mirth almost drowned Striker's heavy sigh.

The rest of the slave shares were soon allotted, and the men who

had taken them were gathered. One of the men had a die, and it was decided to roll for the order in which we would make our choices per round. All of the men choosing slaves would be allowed to pick in the first round, then those with a second set of shares would pick in the second, and so on. I was relieved there would be rounds, as this meant a man with four picks of slaves would not take his all at once; but I liked the order for the round resting upon the roll of a die very little. It left too much to chance, and I was sure Pedro would be quickly chosen due to his size and general well-being: he would be seen as an excellent field hand and naught else.

When it was our turn to roll, Striker sighed and handed me the die. I told the Gods firmly that we required a one. I rolled a two. One of the wounded men rolled a one.

I tried to keep the concern from my face as the first man made his choice. I thanked the Gods when he did not choose Pedro. Then it was our turn, and Striker chose Pedro. We quickly fetched him to us and removed his bonds.

"Thank you, Master Will," he whispered. "Do I belong to you or him?"

"Me, I will explain later. It has to do with the way the treasure is divided."

"I was observing," he said. "There seems to be a great deal of order to it, Master Will."

I smiled. "Well, amongst so many armed men who kill others for gold, there must be great order."

This seemed to amuse him.

As we had to make a second choice, Striker looked to me to make a decision. Though I had known the necessity was in the offing, I had not thought beyond Pedro, and now I looked at the others with dismay.

"Him," Gaston said, and pointed at a young man hobbled with rope with his hands bound behind his scarred and scabbed back.

"He is very new to slavery, Master Will," Pedro whispered. "He fights endlessly, and the others told me he is only recently off the slave boat. He speaks only his own language."

"Well, it is the centaur way," I muttered. At Pedro's curious look I sighed.

Gaston led our acquisition over on a leash. I met the new slave's proud and hostile eyes with a curious gaze. He looked away from me, and took in the rest of us speculatively. He finally settled on Gaston, who was still holding the rope. My matelot studied him in return, with calm indifference and his weight on the balls of his feet.

"ELooksLikeE'dBeGoodInAFight," Pete said.

"That is not what you choose slaves for," Bradley said from nearby.

"Well, it is not what *you* choose slaves for," I retorted.

Bradley shook his head.

"Pedro says this one does not even speak Castilian and is new to slavery," I told Gaston in French.

I looked at the slave and asked, "Do you understand me?"

He looked away.

Gaston shrugged and cut the man's bonds, including the rope collar. The man rubbed his wrists and regarded all of us warily. Gaston pointed at himself and gave his name and then went about naming each of us in turn. Then he pointed at the slave.

The man pointed to himself and said, "Ikela," with great dignity.

Gaston sheathed the knife he had used to cut the man free and handed it to him. Ikela regarded him with suspicion that turned to wonder. Gaston moved to check the wounds on the man's back, and Ikela flinched and stepped away. With a sigh, Gaston unbuckled his belt and un-slung his baldric, handing both to me. He raised his shirt and showed Ikela his own scars. The slave's eyes went wide. I wondered what he must think. Here was a man more badly beaten than he handing him a knife. He seemed to understand when Gaston dug through our bag and produced a pot of salve, though. Gaston let Ikela smell it and then pointed to the man's back again. This time Ikela let Gaston tend him.

"What do you intend to do with him?" Striker asked with a smile. "I guess you won't be sending him to the fields."

"The Devil if I know," I sighed. "I imagine Pedro will have some use in Port Royal; he is lettered and speaks several languages. I do not wish to own him, though; I would rather he were indentured. Though I imagine the matter is somewhat more difficult with Negroes than it is with Christian men."

"I could see it with that one there," Striker said, indicating Pedro, "but this one," he pointed at Ikela, "will be nothing but trouble for you. I don't see him sweeping floors or fetching pails."

"Aye," I said.

Ikela had tested the length of the knife and its edge, and now he was adjusting the position of the scabbard in the rope that held up his breeches, so that the blade was fast to draw in a manner he found familiar.

"He is a warrior," I said.

"I see that," Striker said. "Pity that. There was a time when there were Negroes among the Brethren, but that was before so many of the Brethren began to own them as slaves. You see how Julio is often treated."

"So you are saying that is a battle I should not join?" I asked.

"Aye," he sighed. "He could stay on the ship as a slave, but since you won't treat him like one, I think it's best if he doesn't."

"Ah," I said sadly. "Well, I would put him on a ship back to Africa if I could, but unless it was ours, or I was to accompany him, I feel I cannot guarantee he would ever see his home again. We will discover some purpose for him here."

As Gaston tended Ikela, I looked to Pedro, who had been watching it all with curiosity.

"I do not wish to own slaves," I told him. "I do not like the institution

of slavery.”

He regarded me with alarm.

“Do not misunderstand,” I said quickly. “I do not wish to sell you. I am saying that I would rather have you as an indentured man capable of earning his freedom than a slave. We will find some use for you in Port Royal, one that befits your education. Perhaps you can be a clerk for our business interests. Then I wish to establish a contract of indenture for the money you have cost me.”

“Thank you, Master,” he said reverently.

“And stop calling me that.”

He smiled. “Yes... sir.”

Once Gaston was done, we all walked back toward the shore. A thing had occurred to me, and I asked Striker, “Now what do we do with them while we continue to rove?”

He frowned at me, and then smiled as he realized I did not understand an obvious thing.

“The usual way of it is to send a ship back with the slaves and our wounded,” Striker said. “Then it’ll meet us someplace while we careen and decide our next target. I imagine Morgan’ll want to send word to Modyford, too.”

“Ah, of course,” I said. “So we can send detailed instructions regarding them to Sarah.”

He nodded, but there was a thing he was not saying. He paused, and I stopped beside him and let the others walk on. Striker looked to Pete who was showing the plate to Liam and sighed.

“What?” I asked.

He met my gaze. “Pete and I have been talking.”

“I have seen that,” I said carefully. “I take it you are now discussing matters of substance.”

He smiled ruefully. “Aye.” The smile fled. “He wishes to take Sarah up on her offer to be married to both of us.”

“Oh.” I decided that mentioning matters of squishy and nether holes and the like was not in order.

“Aye, he... I can’t go back, Will,” he said, “not unless we name another captain and... I should stay. But Pete, he wishes to settle this matter as soon as possible. He says he’ll not take me back as matelot unless Sarah will take him.”

He studied me a moment. “Would you go back, with Gaston, of course, and the slaves and see that... It’s not that I don’t trust Pete not to harm her. It’s just that...”

“You need not explain,” I said. “I would feel better shepherding our new sheep to their home, anyway, instead of leaving them to be penned and treated like cattle. And I am sure that Theodore has much to tell me, and there might be matters I must attend to. And, I should see if my damn wife has taken a ship for England or not. And... my presence will smooth Pete’s arrival with my uncle, Ashland, Theodore, and any other male who feels it is his duty to watch over her in your absence.”

"Oh, God, aye," he said. "I thought of that too. Do not let Pete know..."

"Never."

I found Gaston standing nearby, and I explained Striker's request and my thoughts on why it would be good if we returned, anyway.

"We will avoid the Damn Wife," he said.

Burroughs' body was delivered to us wrapped in old sailcloth. Our cabal retreated to one end of the cay and prepared to bury him. While some of our number dug the grave, Cudro and I severed the head and placed it in a sack. When the rest of the body was in the ground and a few somber words had been said, I gave the grisly bag to Liam and Otter to take to Crème. Gaston and I followed in their wake, in search of Pierrot.

The big Frenchman embraced us with his usual fervor.

"Liam and Otter are delivering a thing to Crème," I said quietly. "It will not bring his matelot back, but at least he will know his man did not cross alone."

He smiled. "Thank you for that."

"You should know that Morgan was party to it," I said.

"Good, that is a good thing to hear," he said thoughtfully.

He looked out over the waves to the North and chuckled. "What a wretched little adventure that was, non? Never again will I raid a town so oddly named. By God, if they do not know where it is they are, how can they be expected to make money for us to steal, non?"

"So where will you hunt?" Gaston asked.

Pierrot shrugged. "We will cruise for the Galleons and the Flota. They are much like a meal at an inn and can feed many."

"But only if you reach the inn when they have food prepared," I said.

He chuckled. "That is the way of it everywhere, for those of us who do not cook for ourselves."

"We are indeed hapless wayfarers," I said. "We wish you well and hope to see you again."

"May the angels watch over you, and God smile upon your name," he said effusively. This was followed by more embraces, and then he was gone.

Then, despite standing on a cay the size of my father's sheep pasture with several hundred men, we were alone for the first time in hours.

"However did you befriend him?" I asked, and gestured to Pierrot's retreating back.

Gaston frowned thoughtfully. "It was he that befriended me. He was elected captain of the ship I sailed on after my trouble with Cudro. I was angry and lacked trust. I stayed well away from the others, and there was talk that I should not be among them. Pierrot called me into his cabin and asked if I was as mad as they said. I told him what I could." Gaston shrugged. "I saw he had books and asked to borrow one. He decided to like me. At first, I was concerned that his fondness might harbor more, but he never acted as if it did. I owe him my life on two

occasions.”

“When your life was threatened by the men you sailed with,” I said.

“Oui,” Gaston sighed. “I have never stood by his side in battle with the Spanish.”

I put my arm about his shoulders, and he found the small of my back. We stood companionably for a time, watching the surf.

At last I felt the need to move words past my lips. “I am not pleased with the prospect of returning to Port Royal.”

“Do you feel we must?” he asked with little emotion.

“If not for Striker’s entreaty, non. I could find all manner of ways to dismiss the rest. They could all be written fine letters.”

“Do you fear for your sister at Pete’s hands?” he asked.

“Non, not...” I sighed as I grappled with the cause of my concern. “I do not feel he will do her harm, other than the harm that will occur due to what he intends. That is, I do not feel he will strive to cause her pain, but I believe that his arriving without Striker, and her having to face her strong words made in love when her bed has been cold for these weeks...”

“You think she might have changed her heart?” he asked with curiosity.

I shook my head. “Not changed, *per se*, but perhaps her perspective of the entire affair has been altered, now that the flame of passion is not so very strong and urgent.”

“Do you fear she faces regret?”

“Oui. And I fear that Pete will not present his case well,” I sighed.

Gaston nodded. “Oui, in that he will not be gentle. He will present an ultimatum.”

“Oui. So I feel we must go to smooth the way.”

“Do you feel the matter of sodomy should be mentioned?” he asked.

“Non, I do not,” I said, amusing the both of us with the alacrity of my response.

“But Will,” he enjoined with a smile, “she will not truly be married to him, so if she does not choose to accept him in that fashion, she can refuse him and break the arrangement.”

I sobered. “My greater fear is that she will be unhappy with the arrangement and choose not to break it. Yet, I feel if we make much of it she might become skittish. And underlying it all is the knowledge that despite our tie of blood, I know her not well at all.”

“Perhaps it is a thing she has fantasized of,” Gaston said with a shrug. “I do not know what women think of such things.”

I mused on old memories. “Some women I have known have been quite enamored with it, both in theory and in practice, and oddly sometimes one but not the other.”

“So they wish for it but do not like it?” he asked.

“Oui, or they profess to not like it and then are quite willing and pleased by it.” I shrugged. “But truly, I have only bedded a few in that fashion.”

"I would think that it would not be so different for a woman as it is for a man," he said with a thoughtful frown.

"So would I, but with some, you are the Devil himself for suggesting it." I clearly recalled being slapped hard for that, after the lady had been making inferences to it all night. "They deem it un-Godly and unnatural. And as they have another hole well suited to the purpose, one can see their argument. However, I still hold that we would not have been created in a form in which we can derive pleasure from many different acts of intimacy, if we were not intended to partake of them."

He was quite amused with me. "I think you should discuss this with your sister."

"I think I would rather bed the Damn Wife."

Gaston chuckled and looked about, as there had been shouting some distance to our left. He tensed. I followed his gaze, and discovered as he had that Ikela was squatting ten paces from us, with his back to the waves and his eyes on the men behind us. I was thankful he did not speak French. Then I was amused, as it seemed he was standing guard.

With Ikela at our heels, we returned to our friends and discovered that the *Lilly* had been chosen as the ship to return to Port Royal. She was a fast, fore-and-aft rigged sloop who could make easy work of sailing against the prevailing wind with a minimal crew. She had also been careened recently; and her captain, Norman, was a great favorite of Morgan's, and the admiral trusted him to bear his letters to Modyford.

Many of the slaves were already being moved aboard her. Gaston and I did not wish to board the ship until the early dawn before she sailed, so we decided to spare our men the discomfort of being treated as slaves for the night.

And so we cavorted about on shore with our cabal. Pete and Striker sat apart and talked for a time before joining us, but everyone else was in fine spirits without wine or rum. Ikela and Pedro seemed set on staying close to Gaston and me. I was concerned Ikela would be confused when Gaston and I chose to spar, but his eyes grew large and his grin wider as we put each other through our paces with swords and daggers. When we finished, Gaston tossed me his rapier and turned to Ikela to bow and gesture with his dagger. Despite his bruised and bloody back, the black man enthusiastically dropped into a practiced fighting stance. He sparred excellently; his speed matched my matelot's, and nearly matched Pete's when the Golden One decided to join in on the fun.

Striker joined me to watch that bout.

"Damn, Will, whatever shall we do with him?" he asked, when Ikela offered Pete a curious gesture, obviously a salute, at the end of the match.

Pete pounded Ikela on the shoulder with glee; and it was clear that, though none of us could communicate well with the man using words, the honor of warriors for one another was a thing that needed no translation.

"If I were roving on account," Striker added, "I would take him on as crew; but here, now, I can truly see no way to do it. As I said before, some of the men would accept him, but others..."

"You sound like Bradley," I said.

He punched my shoulder, hard, and I swore.

"Perhaps after this season's endeavor," Striker said bitterly. "In the meantime..."

"Well, as we have discussed, he will not go to the plantation, and I cannot see him serving as a house servant," I said. "And I will not take that knife back from him now, after it has so obviously restored his pride."

"Aye," he sighed. "But we don't have need of a fighting man in Port Royal..."

We looked at one another and grinned as we heard the folly of his words.

"Aye, we do," I said.

"Aye, and didn't we bemoan not having one to leave behind," Striker said with equal amusement. "But do you think he could serve as a bodyguard, and would your sister have that?"

I chuckled. "I do not know what my sister will have."

He sobered. "Will she have Pete?"

"For the love of you," I said carefully.

He considered the waves for a time, and worried his lip with his teeth.

"I would have that," he said quietly at last. "I wouldn't have her love Pete as I do, or him love her as he does me. I feel that is selfish, but..."

I smiled. "Nay, it is human. And truly, I feel they will each always love you more than they care for one another, however much that might be."

He sighed. "I would say, as long as they don't hate each other, but... I would have them fond of each other, especially since he intends to lie with her. I wouldn't have her forced for love of me to do a thing she might hate."

"I do not want that, either." His words echoed my thoughts on the matter, but that was a thing I could not tell him.

"I suppose I have my work cut out for me," I said to change the subject. "How long will we have before Port Royal?"

"Depending on the winds, a week possibly," he said with a shrug and his eyes on the sky, as if he could somehow gauge the winds we would face, two days from now and a hundred leagues from here.

"Well, then," I said. "I have that much time to teach Ikela enough English to convey to him that we have a very special and honored duty for him to perform."

"The way you make that sound," Striker grinned, "just don't have him thinking he's to marry her."

I chuckled. "I would hope that Pete's bedding her would allay that."

His grin fled. "Aye, then he'll probably think she's Pete's wife."

"As mercurial as you are on the topic, I think it will be a long time before there is comfort between the three of you in this arrangement," I said gently.

"That's if the arrangement is even made," he sighed.

"We will do what we can," I assured him with a hand on his shoulder.

With Ikela looking on, I told Gaston of the plan for our new friend.

"We must teach him English, quickly," Gaston said. "We must discover his feelings on the matter before entrusting him. His people might not place value on women, and he might take offense at being asked to guard one."

I had not considered that, and I sighed. "Well, if he wishes to escape into the hills, he can at least do that on Jamaica."

"True," he said with a nod. "We should teach him to shoot, too."

As the sun had sunk too far to provide light for shooting, we watched the blazing sunset and began to teach our charges English. With Pedro, the matter was of course made easy by my speaking Castilian; but with Ikela, each word had to be given an example, either in actuality or with crude sketches in the sand or much gesturing. Thankfully, our warrior proved intelligent. I would have despaired and considered shooting him if he had proven to have Davey's intellect.

When quiet crept over the cay as men began to bed down for the night, Gaston and I explained that we would be sleeping on the beach. Pedro seemed confused over this, but after a time managed to make a hollow in the sand and settle down. Ikela was not confused in concept; however, he wished to remain very close to Gaston and me. As we had other plans for the moonless night, we did not wish that. We at last got him to stay a short distance from us, but he did not lie in the sand; instead, he sat with his eyes peering. It was some time before we could forget his watching in the dark and sleep.

We slept for a time, and then woke to pleasure one another before dawn, when we would have to board the *Lilly*: where we expected little privacy on the crowded deck. We were soon storming the gates of Heaven with great fervor, with me above and he deeply clenched inside me. In the light of the slivered, just-risen Moon, I could see little of him but a pale shadow on the paler sand. He was rocking his hips to meet my thrusts, and we were locked together in a world all our own, transported to a place as distant as the stars reflected in his eyes.

Then there was shadow in his eyes and he was throwing me sideways. Feeling the danger about us like a fog, I strove to tear free of it as I fell off him and he twisted out from beneath me. I reached for a weapon, and turned in time to see Gaston rolling upon the ground with a dark shape. Gaston was atop it before I could reach him. I saw his blade flash in the moonlight, and then heard the grunt and gasp of it biting deep into flesh capable of complaining. The knife rose again and again: the protestations of the flesh beneath became weaker with each thrust.

"What's about?" Liam called softly from nearby.

"We have been attacked while coupling," I said as I crawled to Gaston's side.

"What?" he asked.

There was scrambling in the sand about us, and someone lit a torch. Before its light reached us, I knew who lay beneath Gaston: Ikela. He was a black shape marred by blacker holes, lying upon a pool of spreading darkness. The dagger Gaston had given him was in his hand.

Gaston withdrew slowly toward the surf. I scrambled to my feet to reach him. He pulled away, gasping, his eyes wild and glittering.

"My love," I murmured.

He flung his bloody blade away. "No one will tell me what I will do with you," he snarled in French. "No one. No one. You are mine. It is as it should be."

He pulled me to him and then pushed me down. I let him mount me, grateful for the familiar sensation in all the turmoil. I was reeling with knowledge of the event, set all aswirl by the racing conjecture in my heart. Had Ikela truly attacked us? I had to protect Gaston before all thought him mad. Gaston came with a growl.

Torchlight flickered, and our friends exclaimed over the body and called out queries to us. The entire cay was coming alive and alight as the alarm spread.

A shot rang out. Gaston started and pulled free of me. We knelt side by side, peering at the men running about in the uneven light, looking for danger.

Someone approached: Striker.

"We were attacked," I hissed.

"Aye, aye," Striker said, and then he was gone.

Gaston let me pull him into my embrace. Once there, he clung to me with fervor, and we sank to the sand.

"Are you wounded?" I asked.

"Non. Thank the Gods you are not." He ran his hands down my back. "He struck. I thought I could not move you in time. He came so close."

"I am well, I am well," I murmured.

I did not feel wounded, and I supposed I was physically as well as I said. My heart and mind were another matter, though.

"Are you well?" I asked.

"Oui," Gaston said, and took a long steady breath to slow his panting. "He surprised me, and the Horse bolted, but we are well now that the danger has passed."

He turned to look to the place where we had lain. "I killed him, non?"

"Oui. Many times over," I said.

He swore quietly and sighed. "I was so overcome with anger that he would dare, that anyone would dare, and it reminded me of my father in some manner."

I nodded. I wondered what had brought it about. Had Ikela seen his chance to strike in our coupling? And what had he thought to do? And where was Pedro?

I distantly heard Striker speaking in a loud voice; I did not bother to listen to his words. I was sure he offered explanation. I was sure many would laugh, and others would shake their heads that we would be so foolish as to have armed a Negro.

We flinched when a shadow fell on us.

"Will, Gaston?" Cudro queried.

I nodded, not sure if he could truly see the gesture, but I supposed with all the torches there was enough light now.

"He came at us while we coupled," I said.

"We know," he said. "It's the other one. He's dead."

"What? Pedro?" I asked.

"If that was his name," Cudro sighed. "The man on watch at the boats shot him. He said the Negro came running up like a madman and tried to overturn a canoe. He says he yelled at him to stop and stand down, but the Negro kept at it and started yelling something in Spanish. So he shot him."

I thought of when we had heard the shot in relation to what had occurred here, and I knew that Pedro had gone running upon seeing Ikela's attack and Gaston's answer to it.

"Was he able to offer any account of what Pedro was saying?" I asked.

Cudro gave a mighty rumble of a sigh. "The only word we could make out of what he related was *sodomite*."

My heart lurched. I felt as if the Gods had yanked my head about so I could see the entirety of it clearly. I heard Shane's laughter in the shadows.

They had seen us trysting in the moonlight. One had sought to stop it. The other had fled, either from what the first sought to stop, or from how the matter was resolved.

I understood what Gaston had seen. I could envision how Ikela's face must have been curled with disdain, or hatred, or fear. Anger bloomed in my soul, like a brazier suddenly fanned.

Beyond Cudro, I heard the sounds of amusement rippling across the cay as men were apprised of what had caused such an alarm. I could well understand how many men here would find it humorous: that a Negro would be induced to run in a blind panic at the sight of two men fucking; or that another would come at us with a knife we had given him.

I heard the echo of Shane's laughter yet again. And then I thought of how Bradley and Morgan must think me the fool. I was gripped by hatred. I hated Ikela for his betrayal. I hated Pedro for his fear. I hated the Brethren for not seeking to be other than what they were: dogs made by wolves: men willing to enslave others in the name of greed and calling it survival.

"Damn them all!" I snarled, and attempted to struggle to my feet. I knew not what I would do, but I could not bear to hear them laugh.

Gaston held me fast. "Will!"

"Let me go!" I fought him. "They will not laugh!"

Pain exploded across my jaw, and my ears rang. I found myself on my back with Gaston atop me, pinning my arms.

"Will! You must stop!" he said.

He seemed to be amused, and this only fueled my rage.

He said something to Cudro. I used this distraction to try and roll him off me. He quickly redoubled his efforts to hold me still.

"Will, do not make me hurt you," he said firmly.

I was determined to hurt him.

And then he was not alone. There were other hands on me. I struggled, and fear replaced the rage. I opened my mouth to scream and Gaston's hand covered it.

He pleaded desperately in my ear. "Will, I love you. Stop. Please."

I was helpless beneath him.

"Please let me have the reins," he whispered. "You have bolted. Let me help you."

I could see only him. He eclipsed the stars and the Moon and the circle of faces that must be about us. I could only hear our pounding hearts and the gentle surf. I could smell and taste blood on the hand he held across my mouth. I knew it was not my blood, or his, but Ikela's.

The Negro warrior had attacked us. Gaston had gone mad, mad enough to let his Horse act, to strike out at one who had inadvertently reminded him of the horrors of his past. And now... I had gone mad, once my Horse had been reminded of the horrors of my past, and of angers I could not assuage. It was the suddenness of it. There we had been assailing Heaven, and then the violence and the fear had struck deep.

I willed myself to go limp, to submit.

His hand moved. "Will?"

"I am not well," I breathed.

He gave a brief bark of amusement. "Non, you are not."

I understood his humor now. He laughed at irony, not at me.

"I am calm," I said. "Please have them release me."

He nodded, and the phantom-seeming hands withdrew.

"I wish to drug you," Gaston whispered.

I could still see only him. I nodded.

He moved to prepare the draught. I looked up at the stars. I could hear our friends about us, but thankfully I could not see them. I did not wish to meet their curious gazes. The mere thought of seeing pity or concern on their faces made me close my eyes. I drank the bitter water gratefully.

"Will I sleep?" I asked as he pulled the vial away.

"Non, I did not give you so much. Perhaps later. Now what shall we do, Will?"

I shook my head. "You have the reins."

"And my footing is sure," he said solemnly. "And I can pull for a time, but where shall we go, my love?"

I shook my head again. I did not wish to think of the day, or tomorrow, or even the next moment.

"Do you feel this will pass?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Then shall we brave Port Royal, or shall we remain with the ship?"

I sighed. I wished to do neither. I knew that would pass, too.

"Port Royal," I whispered. "I will be angrier at myself if we do not go as we should. I am ashamed now, and I do not wish to have everyone staring at me."

"I know," he said kindly.

And I knew he of all people did truly know how I felt.

"I will be as brave as you always are, though," I said.

He took a long breath, and sudden tears glistened on his eyelids in the moonlight. I smoothed them away with my thumb.

"I must speak to the others," he said.

"I will survive their attentions," I sighed. "I feel the drug upon me."

He pulled me to sit and handed me my clothes. I did not look about as I dressed, and I tried not to listen as he made arrangements with Pete and Striker to have the rest of our things fetched from the *Virgin Queen*.

Then Striker was standing before me. I sighed and met his gaze. Amusement curved his features, but his eyes were kind.

"Don't be angry," he said. "You tried to save them, and things don't always go as we hope. How could you know they'd have such a mortal fear of sodomy?" His laughter bubbled forth.

I could not hate him for it, but his words minded me of many of my other attempts at philanthropy.

"Things never seem to occur as I would hope, when I set myself to aiding others," I said.

"You'll laugh about it someday," he said with a grin.

Anger flared anew. "I do not laugh about it..."

"Yet? I can find humor in that damn galleon sinking," he said with another chuckle.

"Yet," I conceded. He was correct: my state of mind would pass. The anger left me on the predawn breeze.

"Now," I said seriously, "I think of Bradley and Morgan finding me the fool, and it fills me with rage. I do not see them trying to help others and..."

"Will," he chided. "To the Devil with them."

"I know, I know," I sighed, "yet I cannot embrace that now, either. I am... distraught."

"It's to be expected. You had quite a start." His eyes sparkled with mirth. "I don't know what I'd do if Pete were in me and we were attacked." He chuckled. "Pete would likely want to finish, once he killed the bastard. He'd be quite put out with me for worrying about the

matter.”

This brought a smile to my lips. It surprised me. And then on a wave of laudanum, my mirth at the absurdity of the situation bubbled forth, like a spring that would not be stopped.

“Gaston... did... finish,” I admitted through gaps in my laughter.

My matelot returned to us and sighed with relief at my state. I embraced him and he held me solidly.

“He’ll be well,” Striker said, and patted Gaston heartily.

Then Striker sobered somewhat. “You two must return to us. Don’t be tempted to stay in Port Royal, please. I don’t want to face another damn raid without you.”

“We will return,” Gaston assured him.

Then there were others about us, bidding us farewell. I was able to look them in the eye and share their smiles. And then, all too soon, we were upon a boat rowing to the *Lilly* with our things.

Once I was no longer among men we knew well, I took to avoiding the curious stares, and quickly dropped onto a space of deck Gaston chose beside one of the larboard cannon. Pete and Gaston were with me, and beyond them, Farley from the *Queen* and our wounded and maimed. With all my duties toward civility and movement now past, I found I was overcome with exhaustion. I curled on the deck with Gaston’s thigh beneath my head and slept.

It was evening when I woke; the sun was setting in a brilliant display in our wake. Gaston handed me a water skin and regarded me with sad eyes.

“I feel better,” I assured him. And I did.

He looked away, watching the colored clouds over the rail. I studied him and sipped water.

“We are becoming more alike,” he said after a time.

“Is that not the way of it?” I asked.

He shook his head and did not turn to regard me. “If I become more like you, it is wondrous; but your becoming more like me, I feel that is ruinous.”

I mulled over my recollection of the morning’s events.

“I believe we are reaching a greater understanding of one another,” I said. “I feel I understand how you are when it grips you now, at least in part. I know how I wished to avoid others after and...” I sighed.

His smile was grim. “And I understand what it is like to have to handle me when it occurs.”

I chuckled. “I was so angry at you for finding amusement in it, and then mere moments later I knew you were amused by the irony and not me.”

“I have bruises all about from where you fought me,” he said. “I was scared: first to almost lose you, and then for you to fight me so.”

We smiled at one another, our gazes locked as they had in the room in Puerto del Principe; neither looked away. We at last moved together and kissed. On my part, it had not occurred because I felt the need to

end our gazing, but because our bodies had begun to move together of our own accord, as if drawn by some thread between them.

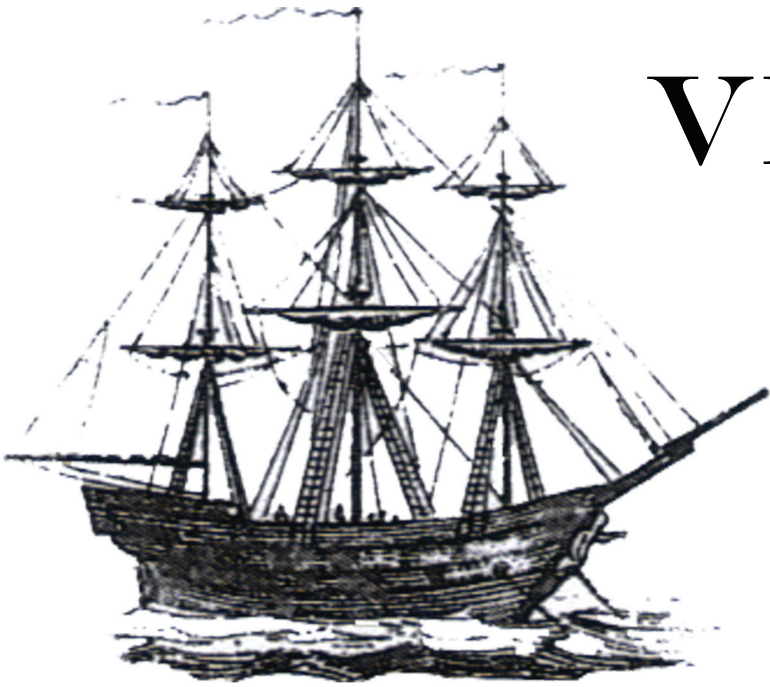
When our lips parted, Gaston whispered, "Pete was studying his plate earlier, and he remarked that it is good we are rich, since we no longer have anything to show for our raiding. He is wrong."

I grinned. "Oui."

The Gods had chosen to give us much this voyage.

Port Royal

April, 1668



VI

Forty-Eight

Wherein We Peer at Destiny From a Safe Distance

The winds were fickle as is often their wont, and thus made slow work of a relatively short voyage. Sadly, the delay served in lessening our crowding in an unfortunate manner, as the wounded, and the slaves unaccustomed to sea travel, began to die. When the second man from the *Queen* began to thrash with fever – Mally, a man we knew, though not well – Gaston asked Farley if he could examine his patients. The young physician seemed somewhat in awe of my matelot's reputation, and also a bit defensive of his own abilities, but he stood aside and let Gaston inspect them.

"It is infected," Gaston pronounced after examining the long, ragged wound on Mally's upper thigh. "Though it only appears a little red upon the skin, feel how hot it is beneath the stitches. There must be something left inside the muscle that is causing it. I would suggest it be opened and another search made for debris, perhaps a piece of his breeches. Then, if the putrefaction has not seeped through all of the surrounding muscle, it could be cauterized. It will scar badly and leave him deformed, but it will save his life. This kind of infection will not turn to gangrene and take his leg, but slowly kill him with fever."

"What are you speaking of?" Farley asked. His pinched features took on a keener edge as every muscle in his face seemed to tighten, and his voice became unpleasantly shrill. "He fevers because he lost a great deal of blood, and thus upset the balance of his humors. A poultice will draw the heat out, and I have been seeking to bring the humors into balance with a broth of..."

"Men fever when the body is diseased," Gaston said gruffly.

"I was taught, at a fine school of medicine, that a fever is the result of an excess of ..."

"That is incorrect," Gaston cut him off with a sigh. "Men are comprised of bone, muscle, organs, and blood, and it is all flesh."

Farley snorted, it was meant to be derisive but came out a bit more incredulous. "Sir, then what of phlegm? The body has a great deal of phlegm in many forms."

"Phlegm is a secretion of organs," Gaston said, "much like excrement is a product of the bowels. It does not comprise the body, anymore than a cow is made of milk because it produces it."

"That is not as many learned men..." Farley attempted to continue doggedly.

Mally's matelot had been listening to it all, and he cut Farley short by grasping Gaston's arm and saying, "Save him, please."

Gaston nodded, and I handed him his bag before he could reach for it. I went to the cook fire and began heating the iron for cauterizing in the coals, and set a cup to boil to cleanse the instruments he would use.

I thought Farley would argue with Mally's matelot, or retreat in a huff; but instead, he stayed silent and watched Gaston with interest.

I was, of course, familiar with the humors and the theories as to their balance and function. I found it odd that, until Gaston had spoken just then, I had not truly known he eschewed them. I had simply assumed it was a part of his repertoire as a physician that had not yet had cause to be put to use in my presence. In thinking on it, I knew that many would ascribe aspects of his madness to those theories; and yet he had not made mention there, or with any of the ailments suffered by the Spanish in the church. Nay, truly, I had not once heard him mention the humors, nor had Doucette.

As this had occurred in the afternoon, all about us had been awake to hear the exchange; and the rest aboard quickly knew of it, as whispers were passed all around. Soon the vessel was quiet except for the omnipresent creaking of the rigging and wood, and the rushing of wind in the sails and water beneath her hull. Thus, Gaston had quite the audience as he dosed Mally with enough laudanum to keep him still and reopened the wound.

There were indeed bits of fabric deep within the cut, and around them were pockets of pus. Once they were removed, Gaston drenched the area in rum and then cut away the swath of flesh that had previously been sewn closed. When he finished, Mally had a short trench on the outside of his leg, which Gaston cauterized. I fought the urge to retch at the smell.

Throughout it all, Farley observed in silence. When Mally's fever subsided a day later and it appeared he would live, the young physician came to sit with us.

"I was taught..." he began hesitantly, "to not question what I was taught." He grimaced.

Gaston nodded, and then he spent the remainder of our voyage teaching while Farley questioned. I thought it all time well spent, as I learned much in the bargain, and I felt we had made new friends. After his success with Mally, many another man asked for Gaston's opinion about his own wounds, or the wounds of his matelot.

On the morning of the seventh day of our supposedly-short journey, I sat with Pete and watched Gaston work. Since my matelot was instructing Farley, the man was always at his side and Gaston did not need my assistance. So I had taken to sitting with the Golden One, who had been quite morose since we left the fleet. He had the demeanor of a man being taken to his execution, and he had expressed little humor at my attempts to cajole him from his melancholy.

"AManShouldDoWhat'EBeBornTaDo," he said after we had been sitting silently for a time.

"You mean Gaston?" I asked. "You feel he was born to be a physician?"

He nodded. "Aye, ButAllMenToo."

I agreed with him about Gaston: teaching and healing appeared to bring such peace to him that I found it hard to believe it a mask his Horse fretted to shed.

But Pete's words made me think of other things as well.

"What were you born to do?" I asked.

The question seemed to pain him, and as I felt turmoil in my own soul at asking it of myself, I well understood.

What had I been born to do? I had been bred like a fine hunter, with the best possible sire and dam, to be a lord. But nay, I was a centaur and not a wolf. Since that was the truth of my heart and soul, then was that what I was born to be and not the other? I supposed the answer lay in who decided upon the destiny, and not in what one was destined for, as that would vary based upon the decision-maker's perspective. I chose my soul as the seat of power in the matter.

"IBeBornTaKillMen, NaHeal'Em," Pete announced at long last.

Pete's far less esoteric rumination reminded me that I thought too much; but then, perhaps, that was a matter of perspective as well.

But when I regarded the matter as Pete had done, as a matter of vocation, I was once again left with a thing I had often thought: that I possessed few skills but those used to harm or exert control over others by way of might or wit. Which, sadly in my opinion, made me very much a wolf. Whatever my soul might profess, I was suited to the trade my parents had intended: I possessed little talent for creation, and no other skill of any practical import.

"Me, too," I told Pete.

He nodded sagely.

"What other thing would you be if you could choose?" I asked. "I would be an artist."

H shrugged. "Don'WishTaBeNothin'Else."

I studied his profile, and remembered our naming him a lion and

not a wolf or any other creature. He was the master of his domain. As Gaston had once said, Pete was all Horse. And with that thought, I was blessed by a moment of epiphany regarding his mood.

"You feel that doing this thing... taking my sister as wife, is a thing you were not born to do?" I asked.

"Aye," he sighed.

"How so?"

"ThereBeThoseMenThatLiveAsTheyShould, hatMarryAn'MakeBabies, AnLiveInOnePlace, AnWorkAtATrade, An'... INa'BeOneO"Em."

"And Striker has tied himself to her and all of that, and therefore tethered you as well," I said.

"Aye," he said with a truly heavy sigh.

"And it chafes," I said.

He nodded, his gaze somewhere past the bow.

"Gaston feels the traces of love chafe as well, at least he did," I said. "I found their weight reassuring. We have come to view it as we are not chained together, so much as we are harnessed to a cart, or chariot, which is the embodiment of our love for one another. It is a thing we haul about. We have found it is sturdier than expected, and light enough in design as to not be an encumbrance. Yet it is ever there, and we have a tendency to load it down with things, such as his need for children, or the requirements of my inheriting. So sometimes it is heavier to haul than at others. I once envisioned all matelots as teams pulling chariots across a vast plain. I thought of Striker and you as wolves, but I think now that you are a well matched wolf and lion."

He had turned to me with a contemplative frown as I talked, and when I finished he smiled. "ILikeThat."

Then he shook his head and sighed. "IWish'EDidNa'HaveTaGoAn' Load AWomanInTheCart."

I nodded sympathetically. "Aye, like our Damn Wife, and my damn inheritance, it makes it harder to haul; but as we have chosen to be hitched together, we share the load."

He gave me a rueful smile. "Aye, IMadeMeChoice, An'SheBeAThing HeSaysWeMustHaul." He shrugged with insouciance, but his eyes were somber. "INa'Make'ImDoItAlone."

He looked to me and his smile broadened. "YaNa'BeBornTaKillMen. YaBeBornToThinkTheThoughtsOthersCan't."

I was perplexed by this; even more so, when Gaston awarded me the look he gave me when I was an utter fool, upon my relaying the entirety of it to him that night.

"You are a physician," Gaston said. "You are as compelled to heal as I, but whereas I tend their bodies, you seek to tend their hearts and souls. You have surely saved me from certain death."

I frowned at that. "I do not..." Then I felt it foolishness to attempt to gainsay him. I did seek to mend and aid many I encountered, and perhaps likening what I considered philanthropy to my attempting to heal hearts and souls was correct.

"Thank you," I said. "I have not viewed it as such." I smiled. "You are gifted in the art yourself."

"Only if you say so, and only with you."

"Do you wish for more?" I teased.

He grinned. "Praise, or an expansion of my curative abilities?"

"Both."

"You may shower me with the former, but I do not wish to be encumbered by the need to heal any other of woes of the heart or soul," he said seriously.

"I would not have you do so," I said in kind. "I find great reassurance that I will always have a personal physician well-versed in healing all that might ail me."

Then I asked, "Do you feel you are called to be a physician?"

He sighed. "Oui."

"What do you wish to do about it?" I asked.

"Nothing, now, except that which I am already engaged in," he sighed as he looked about his deck full of patients. "Once we reach Port Royal, it will cease, and I will think on it."

I decided that was such a great stride I would not ask him for more.

Several days later, the men crowded upon the *Lilly* cheered mightily when we at last caught sight of Jamaica. Sadly, it was Negril Point, our land, and our home, that we spied first.

"I am gripped by a compulsion to dive over the side and swim ashore," I told Gaston quietly as we stood at the rail and watched it slide by.

He sighed. "As am I."

"But..." I said for both of us.

He sighed again and shrugged. "But. We must do what we must do."

As if conceding defeat now that we were in sight of familiar land, the winds relented in their effort to impede us as we sailed along the southern shore of the island; and at last we were able to make good time in the final leg of our journey. However, since we had spent so much time reaching our destination, Captain Norman warned us that he wished to sail quickly after our arrival, and those of us with business ashore should best tend to it within a day. I had rather gotten used to attending to business in Port Royal quickly. It always seemed to be the way of it. I knew not what I would do if I were ever to spend more than a week in the place.

We finally anchored in the Chocolata Hole, on an evening late in April.

Pete, Gaston, and I made our way directly to our house. We were greeted warmly by the dogs – once they got a good whiff of us – but little else. We walked in and looked about. The front room had new furniture: a nicely-carved sideboard, some graceful chairs, and a set of shelves. However, by the look of the legs, the table gracing the center of the room appeared to be the old dining piece we knew well, though it was now covered by a fine cloth and a crystal vase with fresh flowers. Theodore's

old desk, which Bella had used as a den, had also been moved back into the front room and placed against the wall. It was filled with neat stacks of papers.

The back room had been converted into a sleeping chamber behind a clever screened wall. There was a cot, with stacks upon stacks of books about it. I was minded of Rucker's room at his sister's, and realized that this must be where he now lived.

We glanced at the small servant's room at the back of the house, and surmised Agnes still inhabited it, unless they had let it to some other artist. Then we made our way upstairs and discovered that one room was occupied by a woman, presumably Sarah, and the other by a man, presumably my Uncle. I was pleased to see they had settled in here. I was not pleased to see that my uncle was sleeping in a great bed wrapped all about by heavy hangings, as if he sought to ward off the chill of an English winter. Sarah's bed was thankfully hung with fine netting to keep the bugs at bay but not the breeze.

I wondered if my Damn Wife still lived in the King's House. Surely there had not been enough time to complete the dwelling planned for her.

"Your uncle has been ill," Gaston said from that doorway with a wrinkled nose and a grimace.

I looked again at the room. I was relieved to see that he did not appear to be dead: his things were not packed away. Upon closer inspection, I could smell what Gaston had, a certain sickly odor lying beneath a nearly viscous stench of vile excrement. I thought it likely he had contracted the flux. I opened the shutters to let the air flow through and whisk some of it away. I thought the bedding should most likely be burned, though. I doubted it could be cleaned sufficiently to ever seem fresh again.

I stuck my nose in Sarah's room and sniffed. It smelled fine.

When I turned, I found Pete behind me. He frowned at me and then peered into the room.

"We feel my uncle is or has been ill, but Sarah has not," I said.

The hard lines that had been drawn on his face relaxed somewhat, and he appeared relieved.

I left him standing in the doorway and joined Gaston downstairs.

"There is a fire banked in the cookhouse," he said.

"So they are out but briefly, perhaps," I noted.

I sat in a comfortably-stuffed chair in the back room and petted a curious dog. Our puppies had continued to grow tremendously; and now, though they were still less than six months of age, they were larger than my father's hunting dogs.

Gaston settled to the floor, and Bella came to greet him with greater thoroughness than she had shown at the door.

Peering around her huge head, he frowned at Rucker's things. "Was not the other fool to guard your sister?"

"Ashland? Oui, he was," I said as I too peered about.

We had seen no evidence of where he would be sleeping if he were living here.

"Damn him," I muttered. "I wonder if he has left her."

The front door opened, and the dogs rushed off in greeting.

"Who is here?" Sarah's voice called firmly.

"Your brother," I said.

She was in the room and flinging herself upon me before I could stand.

"Are you well?" she asked.

"Well enough, no wounds," I said. "We brought you..."

She pulled away and looked about. "Where is...?"

"ENa'Be'Ere," Pete said from the base of the stairs.

"Why?" Sarah gasped. "Is he...?"

"ENa'BeDead."

She frowned with consternation. "Is he well?"

"He was quite hale when we sailed here," I said quickly. "He sent us. He is a captain. He could not come away."

"Oh," she said with great disappointment. "I see."

"The first town we raided did not yield much," I said to fill the silence that followed. "And now the fleet is careening and preparing for another target. We came to see to any business here. We will sail the morning after next to meet up with them again."

"So soon," she sighed, and gave me a wan smile. "And then how long?"

"Months," I sighed.

She nodded sadly. Then she smoothed her skirt and tried to compose herself. "Well, it is good you are all well. Gaston, Pete, I am pleased to see you. We will do what we can for you as guests in your own home. As you can see, we are somewhat tight on accommodations."

Beyond Pete, Agnes stood carrying a wrapped parcel. She nodded at all of us. I was pleased to see she was well.

"We see that," I said. "I assume that our Uncle and Mister Rucker reside here. What of Ashland?"

Sarah sighed heavily. "He died of the flux. Uncle nearly went with him."

"We... smelled that," I said.

She groaned. "He will not listen to me about any of the instructions you left regarding water or sleeping with adequate breezes. He says it is all nonsense." She gave a grim and somewhat sarcastic smile. "We have been well and he has not, though. And Ashland also called it poppycock, and look where that left him."

"Where are our uncle and Rucker?" I asked.

"Uncle Cedric is at Ithaca, and Rucker is who-knows-where," she said with a dismissive wave. "One makes the habit of going visiting planters, the other makes a habit of strolling off and sometimes getting invited here or there for dinner, and sometimes neither of them return home for days; and when they do, they are full of tales of some new

acquaintance they have befriended. I swear between the two of them they shall know the life of every man in town before long."

"You are left here alone?" Gaston asked with a touch of the ire I was feeling. Of course, we had left her alone, too.

She sighed and nodded. "It is not quite a matter, yet. There have been letters, not only from Father, who cannot be trusted, but from others we can trust. Shane will not be traveling here this year, if at all. He is disfigured and can barely walk."

"The Damn Cousin is not the only danger," Gaston said.

Sarah pulled her pistol from a slit in her skirts. I saw that she had ingeniously suspended it from a lanyard to hang at her side. I had not realized she had it, and I had embraced her.

"Agnes and I practice quite a bit," she said. "We carry daggers, too."

"We have a roast ham," Agnes said, "if you are all hungry."

"Is there enough?" I asked.

"We buy for four people, with the scraps going to the dogs," Sarah said with a sigh. "It will serve a small army."

She led us into the front room and went to the sideboard for plates.

"I have letters I have written for my husband," she said. "I did not know if I would be able to send them, but... Well, at least the letter I write tonight will not need to be as long."

"Ere," Pete said, and thrust a sealed missive at her.

"Thank you," she whispered, and regarded it with trepidation.

"Go on and read it," I urged. "We can see to ourselves."

Agnes nodded enthusiastically and shooed her from the room. Sarah retreated upstairs with the letter.

"We should wash up," I suggested, and led Gaston and Pete to the cistern.

I looked to Pete. I had not known Striker sent a letter, but I had guessed it. I wished I knew what it said before she read it.

Pete washed his hands diligently and made great work of smoothing the golden stubble upon his scalp. He grimaced as he rubbed his hand over his jaw. He usually kept his beard short and his lip shaved, but he had been lax these last few weeks.

"We should all shave," I said casually.

He nodded but would not look at me.

We groomed and donned clean tunics, even Pete, and returned inside. Agnes had laid out the table quite nicely, complete with mugs of watered coconut milk. In addition to the ham, we were to have pineapple and cheesecake.

Pete's eyes went wide at the food, and he sat gingerly at the head of the table before looking about as if anyone would challenge his choice of seats. As was our habitual inclination, Gaston and I sat beside one another with our backs to the wall so we could watch the doors.

Sarah had not returned downstairs yet; or if she had, she had since withdrawn again. Or perhaps, my vivid imagination suggested, she had slipped out of the house to escape down the street while we washed.

Agnes was playing quite the part if she had, though; the girl kept looking toward the stairs with concern.

We were nearly done eating when Sarah at last joined us. She had been crying. She paused upon sight of us at the table, and then without meeting any gaze, made her way to the opposite end from Pete and sat.

Pete did not appear to wish to look at her, either, as she filled her plate. I wondered if he knew all the letter had said.

He stood abruptly and went to his bag to retrieve a familiar oilcloth-wrapped object.

"WeGotThis," he said, and presented it to Sarah.

He did not return to his seat, but stood there, looming over her.

She opened the parcel carefully and pulled the golden Indian plate from the cloth.

"Oh," she said with sincere appreciation. "Rucker has books with crude renderings of this design. It is said to be a calendar. It is lovely, if a little vulgar. The craftsmanship is extraordinary." She turned it over in her hands and examined the hooks on the back. "We will have to find a suitable place to hang it."

"That much gold in Port Royal," Agnes said. "We had best not hang it close to the door."

Sarah was looking up at Pete expectantly. The Golden One seemed reluctantly pleased, and I knew she had passed a test.

"Pete was quite taken with that plate," I said. "He convinced Striker to use all of his shares as captain to obtain it when the booty was shared out."

Pete grinned. "EThinksItBeUgly."

"Well," Sarah said quietly with a small smile. "That is unfortunate, since I feel it should hang in the bedroom..." She paused, and looked up at Pete again with trepidation. "That is, if you will have it there. Since it will be... our bedroom too... and..."

"Aye," he said gruffly.

She flinched and he appeared apologetic.

He glared at us and I realized what we must do. Thankfully, Gaston had the same good sense about the matter and we stood as one. We pulled Agnes from the room a moment later.

"It is good that we did not appear to be needed after all," I said in French as we reached the yard.

Gaston snorted. "Oui." He looked as if we had just narrowly avoided a harrowing battle.

"Lord... Sir, what is happening?" Agnes asked in English.

"As Striker and Pete were matelots," I said carefully, "and it is sometimes the custom for buccaneers to share a wife, my sister offered to take Pete as husband. Pete has decided to take her up on her offer."

Agnes turned back to the house, but stood there tautly, her body a bow unfired; and I keenly felt her need to return.

"How have you been?" I asked. "Have any of the things you ordered from England arrived?"

She fidgeted from one foot to the other at the change of subject, but she did turn back to me.

"I have been well, I suppose," she sighed. "With no servants, we have had much to do every day."

I sighed at this. It was a matter that would have to be remedied. My sister could not be seen as a scullery maid by the planters' wives.

"And, no," Agnes continued, "the lenses and such have not arrived yet, but the apothecary was able to provide me with paint. So I have been painting." At this last, her mien brightened considerably. "If we can sneak into my room, I could show you. Would you like to see?"

We professed our interest, and Gaston slipped to the back door to listen. Then he stepped inside. When he returned to our view, he waved us over.

"They have gone up," he said, as we passed him in the doorway.

Agnes picked up a candle from the back room and remarked, "We will need another chair or two."

In the dim candlelight I could see enough not to trip as I stepped down into her room. It contained a chair, a large trunk, a shallow desk, several shelves, and a cloth-draped easel. There was a hammock hung in the corner. I silently applauded her not trying to fit a bed into the cramped space, which was truly nothing more than a low shed attached to the back of the house. My head brushed the ceiling.

Gaston brought a chair from the front room. I did not see where we could fit another in with his and hers.

"You will need to have a proper room in the new house," I remarked as I sat on the trunk.

"There is a room for me," she said with a smile. "With a large window on the outside and louvered doors on the inside facing the courtyard. Or at least there will be. The land has been acquired, but the men who will build it are working on your house now."

"My Damn Wife's house," I corrected.

She grinned and continued lighting a lamp.

"I do not paint in here," she said.

As there was only one small window, I could see why.

The small space was soon filled with light. The desk was covered with paint pots, brushes, charcoals and the like. She had tacked her sketches up on all of the walls. The shelves were filled with paintings.

All of her canvases were small, a foot square or less. Most of them were of birds, and crude when compared to her drawings. They varied greatly in skill. The composition was simple and similar to her sketches, which is fine for a sketch but not sophisticated in a painting. Her usual attention to detail was best relayed in her colors, which were very natural. I was sure she had spent great care in matching the hue of each feather. In an attempt to obtain the detail she was familiar with in charcoal, she had endeavored to use very fine brush strokes. On canvases this small, it still appeared blotchy. In time, I was sure, she would refine her technique and work to the medium instead of trying to

recreate her sketches in color.

She stood aside, entwining her fingers and shuffling about while we regarded her work.

"You need larger canvases, more paint, and time to practice," I said. "But you know all of that. Your colors match what I remember of such birds. I am sure you will discover how to make the brush produce the texture and detail you desire. And I have seen far worse hanging in great halls. You have talent, Agnes."

She smiled, and the tension left her for a moment until she looked to Gaston.

I nudged him.

"I like the raven," he said.

It was probably her first attempt, and contained the oddest use of color. The black feathers were streaked with green and blue. In thinking on it, I realized that raven feathers were iridescent in the proper light, much like those of the odd chicken Pete would find and adore.

"Did he sit to be painted?" Gaston asked of the bird.

Agnes giggled. "Aye, he surely does. He is often my subject. I bring bits of food for him and he sits somewhat still as long as I feed him. He always seems to know that I am about something, and occasionally he sits closer or behind me, as if he wishes to see what I am doing. I wanted to capture the colors, but..." she sighed. "I do not know how, though I have made several developments since that piece."

"And what are those three there?" I pointed at three canvasses wrapped in cloth and leaning in the corner.

She looked at them and made a rueful face. "Just whimsy."

"Come now," I chided. "Is not all art whimsy?"

She braided her fingers for a moment, until she decided. She unwrapped the three and then set them up very quickly in front of the others.

These did not match her drawings at all. They were ordinary objects portrayed in riots of unreal color, with compositions as dramatic as their palette. Her brushstrokes were large and heavily applied, in a rough fashion that sketched the object rather than cleanly delineating it.

"They are striking," I said. "In the bird paintings you are trying to imitate your drawing, here, it looks as if you are exploring paint."

"I had just gotten the paints," she said. "The colors are so pretty."

"Paint a bird like that," Gaston said. "There are birds I have seen with those colors."

She smiled, but her fingers continued to twine about one another.

"I want to be able to paint people, like I draw them," she said while still studying her work, "but when I play with color, it as if I am led by a different muse. You are correct, I do not... find as much interest in these where I have tried to paint exactly what I see, which is how my father taught me to approach drawing. I would love to be able to color a piece such as those, though," she sighed, and pointed at the sketches on the

wall behind her.

There were two larger pieces among the charcoals of birds and flowers: one of Christine and another of Sarah. They were gorgeous, drawn with an accuracy that made them appear as if she had captured her subject's image in a fine mirror.

"Perhaps you will learn to view color differently, or perhaps the muses will lead you to do another thing with color," I said. "The important thing is to practice and follow your heart."

She nodded. "I will stay with painting ravens for now, and not people, but I think I will see where the colors lead me. It is hard to remember I need not fear the cost of the paints."

"You need not," Gaston said firmly.

My gaze was still held by her remarkable sketches, and I remembered a thing.

"I wish for you to draw Gaston," I said.

He rolled his eyes.

She nodded amiably. "Now?"

"If you would," I said.

"If I must sit for her, then you shall too," Gaston said.

"Agreed." I grinned. "Without our shirts."

Agnes shrugged.

Gaston awarded me a withering glare, but he shed his weapons and then his tunic.

"Oh," Agnes remarked when she first saw his scars.

He sighed and did not look at her, which was a pity, because her face held anything but pity. She was fascinated.

Her eyes darted between us and then narrowed as she looked about. "I will need another lamp."

She hurried out and I doffed my tunic.

"I will have her prove you are not ugly," I teased him.

He shook his head with that look he always got when confronting my devotion.

Agnes returned with another lamp, and then made great work of positioning him and the light. I guessed she was seeking the maximum display of the texture of his scars. We ended up with me still upon the chest and him sitting sideways in the chair, his arm draped across the back and his head resting upon it, looking at me.

She settled in, and propped her feet upon a small crate, with her paper on a board across her legs. Her gaze roamed all over us, but in the way of artists which I had come to understand. She did not see us as people anymore, but as studies of lines and shadow.

"May we speak?" I asked.

"Aye," she said distractedly.

"Do you speak French?" I asked. I could not remember.

"Nay, speak it, then I won't feel I have to listen," she said.

I grinned at Gaston and spoke French. "She has developed quite the spirit these last months."

"Oui. It suits her," he said.

His eyes narrowed with mischief. "In truth, if a thing were to befall the Damn Wife, I would have you marry this one. I feel she would give us very fine puppies: intelligent and talented puppies."

I was surprised, and then I vaguely recalled his saying something of the sort before. "You do not see her as an opponent in the least, do you?"

He smiled. "Non."

I glanced at Agnes; she was oblivious to us. Other than my prior laudanum-induced imagining of her with charcoal stains all about her, I had never felt any interest for her.

"She is young yet," I said.

"She is merely skinny," he said.

"I have little interest in her, or she in me," I countered.

He smiled knowingly.

I sighed and smiled. "All right then, if something were to befall the Damn Wife, I will endeavor to marry this one and give you intelligent and talented puppies."

Then I grinned. "What is she? She is not a centaur."

He thought on this for a time. "She is a dryad."

I liked that: there was something very much like a tree in her long limbs and fingers.

"Hold your faces still," she said suddenly.

Gaston and I gazed upon one another as we first had in the room in Puerto del Principe, but this time there was much mirth leavened into the love in our eyes.

Finally, with a heavy sigh, she stopped working at her furious pace; and she sat back and stretched.

"May we move?" I asked.

She nodded, her eyes still on the piece. She made some small smudges here and there, and then eyed it again with her head cocked.

Gaston and I stretched.

"It is not my best," she said. "I would need more time, and I was attempting to do too much to do parts of it true justice, but..."

"Hush," I chided gently. "Let us see it and judge."

With another sigh, she turned the paper to us.

Even though I have sat for two painted portraits, and with my habit of associating with artists, seen many a sketch of my likeness, I am always surprised to see myself rendered on the page. Thus, I regarded her work with surprise, but that alone was not what held the breath in my lungs for a time. Agnes was truly extraordinary, and possessed of an uncanny ability to capture a subject.

The piece showed both of us above the waist. I sat with my back to the left edge of the page, as if I leaned back upon it while gazing at Gaston, who occupied most of the right side of the paper. I was seen in a three quarter frontal view, whereas Gaston was seen from behind at the same angle. She had shown only a crescent of his face, while

spending great detail upon his left arm and back. There, she had rendered beautifully the way the scars appeared as a cat's stripes upon his flesh. The chair he was draped over stood between us. It appeared as if it kept him from me. And even more, as if he were reaching for me over it. All the while, we gazed upon one another with love I would not have thought possible to capture, especially since not all of Gaston's face was available in the picture.

Gaston took a long shuddering breath, and I looked to find him nearly in tears.

Agnes seemed dismayed by his reaction.

"It is beautiful," I said quickly to ally her fears. "We will wish to preserve it."

"Truly?" she asked, her eyes flicking to Gaston.

"He is overcome," I said gently. "He has not seen himself captured thus before."

"Nay," Gaston whispered. "I have not."

He stood and kissed her lightly on the temple before leaving the room.

"He feels he is ugly," I said quietly in his wake.

She frowned. "He is not."

"I know."

She smiled. "I will take very good care of it for you until you return."

"Thank you." Then I too kissed her lightly on the cheek.

I took up the candle and our weapons and tunics, and left her. I found him in the front room sitting in the dark. I set our things on another chair and the candle on the table, and went to kneel before him with my arms on his knees.

"I am not ugly," he whispered as if it were a wonderment.

I grinned. "Did you truly think me blind or delusional?"

His smile was slow in coming. "Oui."

I chuckled.

He leaned down to kiss my forehead. "Thank you."

I kissed his lips, and then let mine trail down his body, showing him how very beautiful I found him.

We woke to my name being called. We had crawled under the familiar table to sleep. Sarah now stood beside it in her nightgown, with bare feet and a lamp. I glanced at Gaston; he thankfully did not have a pistol aimed at her. Now that we knew it to be she, he lay back with his hands behind his head. I rose on my elbow to regard her.

"Is something amiss?" I asked.

She leaned down to whisper. "Whatever are you doing here on the floor under the table? You could have slept in Uncle's room."

"Well, my dear, to be precise, we could not," I said.

"Aye, I know," she sighed. "The smell makes me retch."

She lowered herself gingerly to sit next to us. I did not miss her indrawn breath as her arse touched the floor. I grimaced in sympathy and she froze. Even in the lamplight, I could see her flush.

I sighed. "Pete told us, reluctantly, and in confidence, that he had d
forsworn himself to partake of a woman in the normal manner and... I
had hoped he would overcome it, but..."

"He was not... coarse... in the matter," she whispered. "And I
suppose I suffer no more discomfort than is necessary... Yet, I do not
understand..." Her eyes were hard upon me now.

"It is an acquired taste," I said quickly, and shrugged.

Behind me, I could feel Gaston rumble with amusement.

Sarah was quiet and looked away, though I did not think it due to
Gaston's finding humor in the matter.

"I suppose it is one I must acquire," she said softly.

"Sarah," I said with concern, "if this is a thing you do not wish,
then..."

"Nay." She met my gaze again. "He is a handsome man, exceedingly
so, and willing to be kind to me; and James loves him, and you
obviously care deeply for him, and I can truly see the qualities you wrote
of... and... I feel I can grow fond of him, or perhaps even more."

"Pete is a unique man among men," I said. I did not wish to explain
about wolves and sheep, but I needed to impart it in some fashion. I
mulled words around and settled on, "Pete is a great lion of a man. He is
a king in this forest, and he bows to no one."

She smiled warmly. "I see that. And truly, I admire him for it. It is
just that all of it is something I did not expect of life and must become
accustomed to, like this place, and how I live here, and..."

"Was your heart set on a manor house and servants?" I asked.

"Nay," she said with a smile. "I was hoping I would not be saddled
with all of that, and here, look, I get my wish. And, I get two handsome
men and..."

Her smile did not flee, but it changed.

"And?" I prompted.

She sighed. "There is a thing I must tell you. Only you two, and
Agnes, and Pete, and James once he receives my letter."

"We will hold it in confidence," I said.

"I know." She took another deep breath. "I feel I am with child."

Gaston sat to peer over me at her. "Why?"

"They say a woman can tell," she whispered. "Of course, others say a
bride as new as I, who has spent but a brief time with her husband, will
come to the conclusion by wishful thinking, but... Truly, I feel different,
and I have not had my monthly bleeding, and I retch in the morning."

My matelot nodded. "Have you seen a midwife? Do not rely upon a
physician for the matter."

"I know, but nay, I have not seen a midwife, nor have I wished to...
yet..." She shook her head.

"Why?" I asked.

She gave a throaty huff of frustration. "It is your damn wife."

I chuckled. "Funny, but that is what we call her. What has she to do
with it?"

"She claims she is with child," Sarah said.

I snorted.

"Could it be yours?" she asked carefully.

I frowned. "What is your meaning? To the best of my knowledge, I am capable of begetting one. And... I am usually capable of lying with a woman, but..." I sighed. "In this case, the woman was far too cold to warm me to the event."

Sarah nodded. "I thought that might be the case. I cannot see anyone lying with her. Agnes cannot even conceive of it." She tittered and covered her mouth as if she had said a thing she should not.

I grinned. "So you have had that discussion with the girl?"

"Aye, aye." She smiled. "And nay, we will not be entertaining one another in my husband's absence."

"I do not wish to know," I said.

"Oh, hush," she chided.

I laughed, but it was short-lived. "So the Damn Wife claims a child?"

She sighed heavily. "She has a lover. She has chosen a young planter's son who bears a resemblance to you. At least she had the wisdom to do that. However, she is so deep in the rum so often, she has not possessed the sense of a goose about the matter in terms of discretion. Everyone knows of it."

"Oh Bloody Hell," I said lightly.

Behind me, Gaston gave a grumbled sigh.

I was not truly surprised, nor was I truly angered or even distraught over the matter.

"So, do they all find me the cuckolded fool and the object of many a jest?" I asked.

"Only those who do not know of Gaston," she said sadly. "Those that know you are a buccaneer and have a matelot think her the fool."

I shrugged. "I suppose, as those are the only ones whose opinions I should care about, I should not feel badly over the matter."

She shrugged. "If she is with child, though, it is not yours by your admission. What of that?"

"I do not know," I said sincerely. "I will have to think on it. Obviously, there is enough gossip that I could put her out, now, could I not?"

"With ease," Sarah said. "There are many who expect you will as soon as you return."

"Then I have not returned of yet," I said quickly.

"Then you had best sneak about town," she said.

"Or ask Theodore to come here," I said. "He is the only other I would see while here."

I regarded her again. "So, I assume she has been telling everyone that she was so blessed as to become pregnant on her wedding night – with all knowing she has a lover – and thus your being truly in that state after your wedding night would make others look askance at you and the friends you keep."

"Aye," she said sadly. "I know not what to say. I have only been hopeful that James would return soon. But even then, they will count months and wonder."

"There is nothing for gossip in a small court or city," I said kindly.

"I know," she sighed. "It makes me angry, though."

I sighed with her. "I well understand that; I do."

Movement caught my eye at the base of the stairs, and I saw Pete standing there. I had doubted she had slipped from bed without waking him. I waved him over.

Naked, he padded over and dropped gracefully to the floor beside Sarah, to lie on his belly and elbows. He regarded her curiously.

Sarah, shy in his presence, spoke demurely. "I needed to speak to Will."

He nodded. "BoutTheBabe?"

"And my Damn Wife," I added.

He nodded thoughtfully, then his gaze met mine and he seemed poised to speak; but as was sometimes his way, he uttered nothing and merely grinned.

He turned back to Sarah, and shifted so he could run fingers down her thigh. She rewarded him with a slight gasp of breath.

"Let'sGoBack," he murmured.

She nodded mutely, and I could see much in her eyes; and none of it could be named reluctance or resignation. He stood, and pulled her to her feet. Once there, he deftly stooped and lifted her into his arms.

"ILikeYa, YouBeLight."

She giggled and they disappeared back upstairs.

"People should have more faith in one another," Gaston whispered.

"Oui," I sighed with a smile. "Striker should have trusted Pete."

"Non, all of us," he said with a shake of his head.

I spared no thought for his meaning as he pulled me down to lie beside him and kissed me deeply.

I woke to my name yet again. This time it was Gaston. I opened bleary eyes and saw it was before dawn; the golden light of a candle competed heartily with the weak light from the shuttered windows. My matelot sat on the floor, watching me expectantly. The house was silent.

I pushed myself slowly to sit. He rewarded my efforts with a brief kiss and a bottle of water.

"I found your chests under the stairs," he whispered.

I nodded. I had wondered where the things we had left in the house had gotten to.

"I wanted to find this." He indicated a burlap bag sitting on the floor between us.

I thought I had seen it before, but could not remember what it contained. I nodded again and attempted to gauge his mood as I sipped water. He appeared pensive, and this urged my sluggish mind to full wakefulness.

With great purposefulness, he upended the sack, and the horse

whip I had purchased for him tumbled out, like a large snake. My heart seized for a moment, but I did not allow my gaze to waver from his face. He appeared calm and controlled as he smiled weakly at me.

He reached for the whip, a sudden movement that froze as his skin contacted the leather. There was a pause of several breaths before his hand contracted about the handle. His breathing was fast, and his features tensed, but I did not see the Horse.

I ran a tentative finger over the coils of braided leather resting against my leg and waited.

"I wish to wield it," he whispered.

"Are you still fantasizing about flogging your father, or someone else?" I asked carefully.

"Someone else, perhaps," he sighed, and pulled the handle to him to examine it.

I thought "perhaps" was far shy of the truth, and he was not looking at me.

"Do you wish to flog me?" I whispered.

His breath caught, and his eyes darted to mine. "Not with this."

And then there it was, lying between us like the three-headed dog of Hades, a giant sleeping thing we dared not wake. We studied one another over it. He was pensive, scared of my response. I do not know what I showed upon my face, as my thoughts were a jumble. Then one rose above the rest. He was entrusting me with one of his horrible thoughts: he was putting faith in my love.

"What... would you wish... to flog me with?" I asked.

He took a deep breath and spoke slowly. "I have envisioned spanking you with a strap."

I tried to recall the strappings I had taken as a boy. They had hurt, but it was a pain quickly gone that left only a lingering soreness. The beatings had never deterred me from committing the crimes for which I had been punished. They had stayed my hand on lesser offenses, where I thought the pleasure of the infraction would not be worth all the trouble of the beating if I were to be caught; but for serious things, things I truly wanted, I had taken the beatings in stride.

I needed clarification. "I do not wish to be punished. That is to say, I would not have this done as a chastisement, even as a game. I have seen that played by certain people and I never found favor with it. The courtesan would call the man a bad boy or the like and beat him playfully, and..."

Gaston frowned in thought. "Non, I want to hurt you." His brow furrowed deeper still and his eyes were earnest. "I do not wish to enact the things done to me, the punishments I received, but to discover how it feels to have that... power."

I nodded. I had thought as much.

"However shall we...?" I began to ask.

"You would allow me?" he interrupted.

"Oui," I said quietly. "I would allow us to try it at least ounce, to see

if the matter meets with your expectation, or... exceeds mine."

He sighed with great relief. "You do not hate me."

"Non," I said with assurance, "I cannot conceive of hating you, as we have discussed many times. I know... This is one of your horrible thoughts, is it not?"

He nodded.

"I am not appalled by it," I said. "I cannot see how we will be about it, though. There will be noise involved, unmistakable noise to some, and... Well, we will require a great deal of privacy. Perhaps when we return to Negril Point."

"Or when we raid again this summer," he said. "In all the noise, we can slip away as we did in Cuba."

I nodded, but my breath caught in my chest as I thought of him coming for me with a strap in hand, and battle lust and the Horse in his eyes. The shame and arousal I had felt when he had bound me were very vivid in my memory.

"Oui, that might do," I managed to say.

It would not be here and now, though, and I was not sure if I were disappointed or relieved.

"I must relieve myself," I said, and crawled from beneath the table to stand.

He nodded up at me. "Thank you."

I shook my head. "It is not..." I was a fool. I was granting him a thing few would. "You are welcome."

He was running his hand over the braided coils as he peered up at me. His having a whip was such a strange sight.

"Will you be well enough alone with that?" I asked.

He frowned and looked at the whip he was slowly drawing into his lap. He sighed and smiled back up at me. "I feel it will no longer affect me as it did before. It still gives me pause, but I have untangled more of the knot concerning it."

I stood there, nearly cramped with the need to relieve myself, but I could not leave him just yet.

"How so?" I asked.

"I have been afraid of wanting to wield it. I have considered that craving evil, and that was knotted in with the rest, and I considered it madness. And it surely is, but..."

"I will condone it," I finished for him.

He nodded. "I am still not sure where the line lies between madness and sanity, but I am beginning to see how much it can move."

I smiled. "As am I."

"Go," he said with a small smile as I fidgeted. "I will be here."

I left him and sprinted to the latrine. For a few blissful moments before I emptied myself, I was able to avoid thinking of what had just occurred. Then it wrapped tight about me, pressing upon my heart and inducing my soul to writhe a little. I wondered where the line lay in my heart between the oblivion of madness and the safety of sanity. I felt I

had crossed it, just as I had in Puerto del Principe.

The whip was back in its bag when I returned, yet he was naked and waiting for me with eyes that glittered in the candlelight. My heart raced and my cock sprang to life.

His voice was warm but commanding. "Lie down. Under the table. On your back."

I dropped my breeches, which won me a smirk, and did as he ordered.

"Grasp the table legs," he ordered once I was in place.

I spread my arms and wrapped my fingers about the ball of wood at the base of the legs.

He sat astride my waist. I wished he would slide further down my body and thus trap my manhood between us, but he did not.

I watched with delight as he teasingly greased his cock upon my sternum. Then he carefully wiped his hands dry on a rag. His fingers played over my chest, toying with the sparse hair there and finally moving to caress my nipples. I gave a small grunt as the pleasure tingled through me. He awarded me a nasty smile. Then his fingers tightened. The sudden pain tore a gasp from me. He did not smile at that, but leaned closer to study my eyes as he continued to twist and pinch. I tried to stay quiet. I gripped the table legs tightly, such that the wood creaked.

I knew I could tell him to stop and he would, but that was not a thing I would do. I thought it a test and not a game. I must endure; I must prove I could endure; furthermore, I must prove I was willing to endure. It was not a challenge, however; and though it did not bring the peace of surrender of his being inside me; it brought another pleasure of my Horse. I imagined being ridden hard at the hunt, urged toward a jump I could not see, and having to trust his hand and eyes to keep from breaking a leg. I ran for him, gasping and twisting. Through the haze of the pain he caused, I saw his fascination with it, and deeper yet, with me.

I wanted to please him in this, and at that thought, shame blossomed through me and I let out a little cry; and then I realized the jump was behind us. The pain muted and became a distant thing, and there was only him.

Sensing the change in me, he kissed and nibbled the corner of my mouth, and I met him with hungry lips and tongue. He abandoned torturing my nipples and moved so that he could push my legs up to enter me in one hard thrust. Then he truly rode me hard, and I clung to the table and tried not to wake the house until we both came with harsh grunts and cries.

He collapsed upon me, and we clung together. Our lips said what words could not.

We slept again; and in my dreams, the Gods offered me an apple, but I could not say whether it represented temptation or absolution.

Porto Bello

June ~ July
1668



VII

Forty-Nine

Wherein We Are Fools

Sometime later, we woke to feet upon the stairs and scrambled to dress. Thankfully, it was only Pete, and he was carrying his breeches.

“SheBeFeelin’Sickly,” he said.

“I know not what to give her for it,” Gaston said, “but I will look in on her.”

Pete seemed relieved by this, and, ever the physician, Gaston went upstairs without so much as a glance at me.

I smiled at Pete and donned my breeches; my breast was so bruised I had hurried to don my tunic first, lest someone ask of it.

“So, do you regret your decision?” I asked.

“WhichOne?” He sighed and sprawled in a chair.

“Taking her to remain with Striker.”

He shook his head thoughtfully and frowned at me.

“YaDoLookAlike.”

I snorted. “This, after seeing her naked?”

He smirked, but it quickly fled and he smiled sincerely. “ILike’Er. DidnaThinkIWould.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“Striker’llBeDamnPleased’BoutTheBabe. Iffn’ItDon’tKill’Er.”

“She is healthy, and of a good age for it,” I said as much for myself as for him.

“SheNa’BeSeasoned.”

“But, she is...”

He waved me off and shook his head. “Don’MeanTaSpeakADoom.

Just, TheyDieEasy, AnIWouldNa”Ave’ErGo.” He sighed. “Battle, ThatA ManCanDoAThingAbout. ButBirthin’Babes, ThatBeAThingO’WomenAn God. Nothin’AManCanDo.”

“True. I have seen many a strong man made weak in the face of it. I did not know you had been about many women with child,” I said carefully.

“MyMumDiedBirthin’MeBrother. An”ThereBeAnotherWhenIBeOlder. AndISeenBabiesBornStill. NeverSeenABabeBornWithoutSomeoneDi’n.”

I wanted to ask if the women had been in good health and well cared for, but thought better of it. I told myself not to worry over the matter: it was true, women often died in childbirth, but not all did, or neither of us would exist. Then I told the Gods I wanted very much for her to live and have a healthy child.

Gaston returned downstairs and went to rouse Agnes before joining us.

“I have examined her,” he sighed, “but I know not what to look for. She needs a midwife.”

“Let’sFetchOne,” Pete said.

“Nay, well, aye,” I sighed, “but you must speak to her about it. She does not wish to because of my Damn Wife.” I quickly explained about Lady Marsdale’s behavior and claims.

Pete snorted when I finished. “ThatOneCanDieBirthin’.”

“We can only hope,” I said.

Pete returned upstairs to speak to Sarah, and Gaston and I went to forage in the markets for food.

“Should we speak?” Gaston asked as we started walking up Lime Street.

“About this morning?” I asked.

“Oui,” he said without looking at me.

“We do not need to, but perhaps we should. Is that a thing I should expect often?” I asked lightly.

“That was an experiment,” he said quietly.

“And did you learn what you sought?”

“Oui. You love me and I am mad,” he sighed.

I shook my head and smiled. “Non, I question your observation. I love you, and we are both mad. I found pleasure in it. Not the pleasure I find in other things but...” With a sigh I explained my metaphor of being ridden and jumping.

He was thoughtful, and as we had reached the fish market, we were silent on the matter until we were returning to the house.

“It brought me great pleasure,” he said quietly when we were relatively alone. “And I am ashamed of it.”

“We are quite the pair, are we not?”

He smiled sadly. “We must belong together.”

“That has been my assumption for a time now,” I said with amusement. “I feel the Gods saw the two of us and decided we deserved one another.”

Sarah was downstairs when we returned. Though she professed pleasure in our procuring the morning meal, her stomach wanted little of it and she hurried to the back door to retch.

"She'll Be Seein' A Midwife," Pete pronounced as he watched her run out. "Rachel's As One. Ya Need Ta Ask Theodore O'Er."

I had forgotten Theodore's wife was pregnant. I sighed. "We must ask Theodore a number of things, but I do not wish for any to know we are here. Someone needs to fetch him, discreetly."

"I will go," Agnes said, and hurried out the front door with several dogs in her wake.

Theodore arrived as we ate. He was as always – and ever to my amazement – delighted to see us.

"Thank God you are well," he said as he embraced me.

"Aye, and how are you? And of more import, how is Mistress Theodore?" I asked.

He sighed and appeared tired. "She is as well as can be expected. She has been lying in for a month now, and we expect the babe any day."

"I am pleased to hear it, and sorry we will not be here to greet the new arrival. We sail with the dawn," I told him.

He nodded and shrugged. "I expected as much from what Miss Agnes said. Has the raiding met with any success?"

"Not really," I sighed. "We sail for another target once the *Lilly* returns. And we have lost the French."

"A pity." He frowned in thought. "As you do not wish for any to know of your brief presence here, I suppose you will not be writing your father or... seeing your wife?"

"Those are precisely the two people I wish to avoid."

"There are matters we should discuss," he said carefully.

I nodded. "Let me tell you what Sarah told me, and then we can progress from there." I relayed all that Sarah had said regarding my wife's proclivities.

"That would be the lay of it," he said when I finished. "I assume you will divorce her upon your return."

"I must think on it," I said. "Sadly, I will very likely return before she could give birth if she is indeed with child. If I could avoid her until after she gave birth to a son, I might not put her out, as it would serve my purposes. And that is why she has done this: not to cuckold me or out of love for this young fool, but to insure our mutual needs are met with all haste. She has apparently shown an unfortunate lack of discretion in the matter, though, and the talk of it will most likely sink the entire affair, even if it did meet my interests."

He nodded sadly. "Aye, many know she has taken a lover in your absence. I would have been appalled for you if I thought you might care."

"Has anyone written my father of it?" I asked.

"I have not," he assured me.

"Well, do not, as of yet. Let me return from this voyage and then express outrage as is necessary. In the meantime," I looked to the others in the room. "My sister has an announcement."

Sarah sighed, but she informed him of her news, her concerns in being made to look the fool in my wife's wake, and her need to meet discreetly with Mistress Theodore's midwife.

Theodore said that all could be handled discreetly.

"Do you have the time and inclination to discuss other matters of business concerning the plantation, houses, properties, and shipping interests?" Theodore asked.

"I suppose I must," I sighed.

Sarah chuckled at this. Gaston and Pete stood.

"Do not be alarmed. I merely need to be alone, and... I have no head for this now," Gaston told me quietly in French.

I nodded, and he retrieved the sack with the whip from the corner and departed to the back of the house.

Sarah stood, and pulled Pete's ear close to her lips to whisper to him before he could follow my *matelot*. With a mighty sigh, the Golden One returned to sitting at the table beside her.

Then, Theodore and Sarah proceeded to bore Pete and me with details of all of the business affairs we were somehow connected to. I wished to assure them that I thought all was probably well-managed, until they informed me that my uncle had taken a keen interest in the plantation and decided to manage it himself. Though he had not disobeyed my directions concerning the growing of edible food in the garden plot, or of Fletcher teaching the Negroes, he apparently agreed with everything Donoughy and every other planter from Barbados told him. It meant little change from how things had been done before; but sadly, it meant there would be little change until I dislodged him.

Of course, the truly troubling aspect of that was that the only way I could unseat him was if I did produce a male heir; which my uncle was apparently well-informed enough to realize would not legitimately come from the woman to whom I was married.

It all made my head and heart ache, and I felt great relief when they finished.

Oddly, I was the only one relieved; Pete had actually mustered an interest in it all and was asking questions and making suggestions.

I thanked them for their excellent work and excused myself.

Throughout their presentation, I had been disturbed to hear the cracking of a whip. The first weak sound had been noticed by me alone, but as he gained proficiency, and the cracks became gunshots, all about the table had begun to jump. Pete had at last gone to see what the matter was, and regarded me quite curiously upon his return. I had merely shrugged.

I now followed the sound, which had taken on a metronomic precision some time ago. I was sure the neighbors were quite displeased. I found Gaston standing between the cistern and the cookhouse,

practicing cracking the whip in midair, without it touching anything at all. I maneuvered – well out of the reach of the lash – until I could see his face. He was not himself; or rather, he did not wear his mask. I wondered if I would ever settle that matter in my mind.

I sat on the cistern and thought of what to say to catch his attention, as he had not looked my way though I was surely within his view. Dozens of inanities paraded through my thoughts, but I bit my lip and kept them in. I found myself scratching at the mortar between the bricks with my thumbnail, and a clear memory surfaced of his doing the same, in this place, just over a year ago.

So I spoke. “I remember sitting at this cistern, washing away the smell of a burning ship, and speaking of whether we would sail together or not.”

He stopped, and ever so slowly the tension departed his features and shoulders. The whip dropped to his side, and he sighed.

“I have been at it for a time now, have I not?” he asked.

“Oui. You should rest,” I said gently.

“I wish to conquer it,” he sighed, “but... the sound... bothers me, and then I wish to conquer that.”

“You will, my love, in time,” I said quietly.

He nodded. “What... If you could stand there... on that day... and speak to your self as you were then...what would you say?”

I thought on it deeply. “I would tell myself that there is far greater complexity and... poignancy... to love... life... and even lust, than I had ever dared dream. And that the red-haired stranger I gazed upon then was the key, if not the very door, to it all.”

He smiled sadly. Then he coiled the whip and shook his arm vigorously, clenching and unclenching his hand in a way I knew well. He was numb again. I motioned him over, and he came and gave me his hand. I massaged his wrist and forearm. With a deeper sigh, he leaned his forehead to mine.

“What would you say to yourself then?” I whispered.

“To not be afraid,” he said solemnly.

He pulled free from my ministrations and wrapped his arms around me.

“Will,” he murmured, “I will overcome it... my madness. I promise.”

I nodded. I did not tell him it was unnecessary. I had faith in him, just as I had faith in the Gods who had led me to him.

We made our farewell to Sarah, when she came downstairs to see us off in the hours before dawn. Gaston and I had said goodbye to Theodore and Agnes the night before. We had still not seen Rucker or my uncle; I hoped both would survive until we returned.

Pete kissed my sister sweetly in parting, and she seemed truly distraught that he would leave so soon. I thought I would always wonder how they had won one another over. Obviously, both had many admirable qualities; but I was pleased, relieved, and somewhat surprised that they had seen them in one another. As Gaston had

noted, I had apparently been exercising little faith in the matter.

As we trod down quiet streets, steering our steps between darkened buildings by the light of a torch, I found that I did not regret missing the others I knew here. With the notable exception of not seeing Rucker, I had visited with and said goodbye to the three people I cared to ever see again. And now, once again, I greeted packing myself onto a vessel, with dozens of other men, to sail at peril to places unknown, and there to make war for gold, with great anticipation: and not merely because that course of action would keep me at my matelot's side through its entirety.

There were parts of what we were to do that gave me pause and threatened to mire me in a moral quandary; but overall, it was preferable to being among presumably civilized men. The only thing that would have been better than our escaping Port Royal would have been our escaping mankind altogether; and this after yet another short visit. I truly quailed at what we do if we were forced to stay here for any length of time. How many unfaithful wives, evil cousins, commanding fathers, idiotic uncles, and conservative-minded plantation managers would we be forced to endure were we ever to truly reside in the place? Or was I merely more aware of all of that because I was not allowed to slowly watch their antics evolve, like watching flowers bloom in the spring, but was instead presented with a full and tidy bouquet of their stupidity whenever I arrived for my short visits?

Once upon the *Lilly*, the three of us claimed a small patch of deck near a cannon, and settled in to nap a bit before sailing. I thought of the other times I had sailed and found myself overly concerned with things I felt we could not escape; I was not troubled this time by such thoughts. I had great faith in our being able to sail beyond anything.

Gaston was curious as to my ebullient mood. He placed his hands alongside my face and raised an eyebrow.

"We are escaping," I whispered. "We must not return."

He smiled and kissed me.

"We will not spend the rest of the year here when we do," he said. "I would not survive it."

"You are not the only one who would need to worry about his sanity in such a place."

He frowned at that. "You are becoming more like me."

"Non," I said with a grin, "I think that I have perhaps ever been like you, and now, only in your presence, is my true self becoming known."

He did not share my amusement or enthusiasm over this, and I recalled how concerned he had been at my bout of madness on the cay. And then memory of my reaction to his torturing me the day before drove the rest of my humor away. He was correct; it was not a good thing: one of us truly should be sane. But, what if that was not the way of it, and my words spoken in jest were true?

"I can still act saner than you," I teased.

He shook his head and sighed, but amusement curled his lips.

The return voyage to the Caymans was more pleasurable than sailing to Port Royal had been. This time there were no slaves or injured men aboard, and the mood of the buccaneers was considerably brighter. In our small corner of the ship, Pete's improved demeanor was a relief, though he still pined for Striker and worried overmuch, as he had not been prepared, at least in spirit, to be gone so long.

And we had been gone quite a time, when at last we spied the masts of vessels we knew. Even though we had been running with the wind throughout much of our voyage, we had encountered a storm that the master of sail thought it best to sail around, and thus reaching the fleet at the Caymans had taken nearly as much time as sailing to Jamaica from Cuba had. We had been separated from our friends for nearly three weeks, and it was now approaching the middle of May.

We at last dropped anchor near the other ships, in the bay that lay in the lee of the largest island. Pete handed us his things, and dove overboard to swim for shore and his matelot, rather than wait about for a seat on a boat. Thus, by the time we reached our cabal, they were already informed we were well and returned, and were celebrating Striker and Pete's reunion. Our wolves had, of course, withdrawn from the others to celebrate this in a more carnal fashion. And as they had so long denied one another, I thought it likely we would not see them for days.

So I was somewhat surprised when mere hours later Striker emerged from the bushes to give us greeting. He dropped into the sand at our side, and Pete collapsed next to him, clinging to him as if he would never release him again. Striker seemed pleased with this as he leaned back into his matelot's lap.

He looked about before speaking, but Gaston and I were relatively alone at the small fire where we were roasting beef.

"I am to be a father!" he exclaimed.

We chuckled.

"Aye," I said with a smile. "Your seed has proven potent."

"Aye," he grinned. "There will be a new Striker come this fall."

"Ah, so we will not even be able to escape the year without another version of you running about," I teased.

"Or of Sarah," he sighed contentedly.

"Would you be disappointed if it were a girl?" I asked.

"Not as much as you," he said. "Pete says your wife has been up to no good."

"Nay, and my uncle is a fool, and we are all men of means, apparently," I sighed.

"All is as it normally is in Port Royal." He grinned, then sobered. "I wish someone was there to guard Sarah."

"Should we have stayed?" I asked, curious as to his mood. His eyes were heavy with satisfaction and it was difficult to gauge him.

"Nay, nay," he sighed. Then he shrugged. "Well, maybe someone should have, but thankfully your cousin seems safely maimed."

I nodded at that, though in my heart I knew it false. But my gainsaying him, in arguing that my Damn Cousin was a man capable of hiring evil men to do his bidding if he himself could not lift the blade, as was my father, was not a thing either of us wished to hear; and thus it was best left unspoken. I consoled my guilt by telling myself that my Damn Cousin was, moreover, the type of man who would wish to see pain inflicted upon those he despised with his own eyes. If he were to come at all, he would not come for her until he could well do it himself.

"What has occurred in our absence here?" I asked. "Liam said you might know of a target, as you have regularly been with Morgan and the other captains. And I have heard the *Fortune* caught up with us."

"Aye, and we needed the men, but she brought more than that with her," he sighed. "Do you know anything of Providence Island?"

"Some," Gaston said, "But Will knows none of it."

Striker nodded. "Providence sits off the Terra Firma coast, off a place the Spanish call Honduras. The Spaniards call the island Saint Catalina. It's a likely place to raid from, and Mansfield wished to colonize it. We English had been there before, but the Spanish drove us off. So Mansfield took the island again in '66, and left men there to hold it while he returned to Jamaica to beg for more. The governorship was in turmoil, and the Crown wanted none of angering the Spanish that close to their shores. So the colonists were months in coming. By the time they arrived at the island, the Spanish had already taken it back; and they tricked the newcomers so that they were captured too, men and women both. Morgan was under Mansfield's tutelage at the time, and he took it near as hard as the other did. So he's vowed to get that damn island back someday."

"So we are going to take this island?" I asked.

"Nay, if it were that simple we'd be kings," he said and shrugged. "The *Fortune* was collecting dyewood this spring, and they found a man along the Mosquito Coast running from the Spaniards in a small canoe. His name is Cork, and he was one of the men Mansfield left on Providence Island. He says the colonists were sent off to the Inquisition on Cuba, but the Spanish kept the Brethren they captured as slaves at Porto Bello. Cork and a few men found a chance to escape, and they took it; but his matelot is still there, and he's vowed to return for him and the few others left alive. Morgan is quite taken with his tale, as are all who've heard it."

"Are you?" I asked.

Striker nodded solemnly. "And Morgan has an excellent plan."

"For Porto Bello?" I scoffed. It sounded like Morgan's foolishness about taking Havana.

"Did not Drake die in the attempt?" I added.

Gaston snorted. "As I have heard it, Drake grew ill and died while sailing about beyond the range of Porto Bello's cannon trying to decide how to attempt it. And they have had a hundred years since to improve their fortifications. It is a city of death filled with disease. The Spaniards

do not even stay in it, except when they bring the treasure across from Panama for the fleet."

I pictured what I could remember of a map and tried to place it all. Porto Bello was nearly due north of Panama, with only a thirty-league strip of land between them. Thus Porto Bello served as Panama's port on the Northern Sea. No one sailed east around the bottom of Terra Firma: thus the Spanish would rather take the treasures from the west coast overland by mule than sail all the way round the world to bring it home. Once in Porto Bello, the treasure was picked up by the fleet known as the Galleons at a fair.

"The Porto Bello Fair should be about now, should it not?" I asked. "Or is it in June?"

"June," Striker said. "We don't intend to arrive during it, and we have preparations to make."

"So we will take it right after?" I asked.

"Aye, when much of the money is still there," he said. "We can't take on that fleet and the forts, nor the extra people in the damned place during the fair, even if the silver is piled in the streets as they say. We can take it after the fleet departs, though."

"With maybe five hundred men and seven small ships?" I asked.

The *Fortune* was nearly the size of the *Virgin Queen*, and had brought a number of men; but it was not enough to offset the loss of the French.

"Why the Devil not just stalk the Galleons?" I added.

He shrugged eloquently. "One could say that's not our charter."

I sighed with disappointment and frustration. "Well, politics has never been logical from the perspective of any save the ones who will most benefit from it."

Striker shrugged again. "I think the plan will succeed. We'll not sail into her harbor. Cork knows the place well. He'll lead us in by land."

It was my turn to shrug. "Ah, as Morgan wished to do for Havana. But will this Cork lead us in for his own ends as Hadsell did at Puerto del Principe?"

He sighed. "All know of this place and its wealth, so we're assured of something. And drunk or sober, Cork says the same of what he's seen. True, he wants his revenge, but he also wants to rescue his matelot."

"I would talk a fleet of fools into such a thing if it were to rescue mine," I said. "I well understand that, and will blame him not, even if this comes to as little as the other. I merely do not wish for us to die in the attempt if it is truly ill-considered."

"I don't think that'll happen," Striker grinned. "Come, let's find our fellows and a bottle, and I'll tell you of it. I have celebrating to do."

We found out cabal and gathered about another fire with a bottle of rum. Striker announced his impending progeny and all cheered him, with little evidence of the misgivings they had shown his marriage. I was not surprised. A woman was a thing that challenged our way of life, but a man sowing his seed was ever applauded.

Once the congratulations had died down, Striker settled in to explain Morgan's and Cork's plan. It was indeed simple and sounded reasonable, until one recalled our number.

We would sail to a point a hundred and fifty miles or so west of Porto Bello; there we would leave skeleton crews upon the ships, and the rest of us would disembark and pack ourselves onto canoes. So as not to be seen, we would paddle the low canoes down the coast at night, and hide them and us in the forest by day. Once we were very close, we would abandon the canoes and slip into Porto Bello by means of a path in the forest. At a specified number of days, our ships would sail down to meet us, and only enter the harbor if they were sure we indeed had the place.

Cork had assured Morgan that the port would hold fewer than a thousand when we arrived, including women and children, and possibly fewer yet. The fortresses, of which there were three, were somewhat sparsely garrisoned, by conscripts who were often sickly. The Spanish did not expect these men to defend the town as an army. They did not think it would ever be necessary. They relied heavily on their cannon to keep any from the harbor, and only placed a few bored sentries on the landward side.

"Where will we get the canoes?" Cudro asked. The question had been on my mind as well.

"Along the coast," Otter said. "We can take them from the Indians."

The talk continued, and I looked to Gaston. He was frowning at the stars. I nudged him, and he shook his head.

"Will, the place is truly renowned for illness. You worry over things like a stray shot taking one of us in battle. I worry about us contracting some incurable ailment that will stay with us all of our days or kill us in the first wave of fever."

"Well, we will surely not drink the water," I said lightly, though his words concerned me greatly.

"Or eat the food, or spend time about the Spaniards," he added seriously. "And it sits on a morass, so the air is purported to be thick with insects. They do not call the land to the north of there the mosquito coast without reason."

"We could stay with the ships if you are so concerned," I said. "I will do..."

He shook his head and reminded me, "Drake died without entering the harbor."

"Then let us hope the Gods favor us more than They did Drake in this endeavor," I sighed.

He snorted. "That is not likely. The Gods loved Drake."

A figure approached the far side of the fire; and Striker rose to greet the man, and usher him into the circle and introduce him. It was Cork. If I had not been told he was an Englishman, I would have thought him an Indian in the firelight. His skin was dark, and as he neared to shake my hand I saw he was leathery, as if he had spent the last two years in the sun. And he was so thin as to be only skin and bones in places. His

pale blue eyes were as strong and warm as his grip, though.

Cork settled in to sit between Pete and myself.

"This be your matelot?" Cork asked Striker.

"Aye," Striker said proudly. "This is Pete. And he's brought me wonderful news from our wife. We'll have a babe in the fall."

"Damn," Cork said. "Let's drink to that."

And we did, replete with another round of toasting.

When it settled somewhat, Cork turned my way and said, "So, you're the lord Morgan speaks of."

"Oh bloody Hell," I sighed.

Our friends chuckled.

I looked to Cork with amusement. "And what does he say, might I ask?"

Cork's gaze flicked to Gaston, between whose legs I sat. "That you've taken well to the buccaneer life."

"Ah, and that my matelot is mad," I said with a grin.

Gaston snorted.

The man shrugged diffidently. "Aye, that too."

"I wonder if I should feel honored to have crossed his mind," I said.

I looked around the man to catch Striker's eye.

"More than you know," Striker sighed.

"Why? What is it about me?" I looked about the fire and found all eyes upon me.

"He finds you a puzzle," Striker said.

"I am never what men such as he expect, I suppose," I sighed. "Since my birth I have been called strange by all whose paths I cross. Yet I do not understand the how and the why of it."

I regarded Cork. "You, who do not know me and have only heard of me, do you find me odd?"

"Aye," he said sincerely after considerable deliberation.

"Can you name this oddness?" I asked.

A knowing smile slowly creased his face. "You're a fool."

Laughter erupted, not the least of which issued from me, as I thought him jesting. Gaston did not, and his arms were tight around me.

"I often am," I chortled. "Or at least I play one to great success. And my actions are oft misunderstood and are surely ascribed to foolishness."

Cork shook his head. "I don't mean you're stupid. I mean you're too stupid to know better. The world doesn't scare you as it should."

This quieted us, and his words were echoed about the fire for those who had not heard them.

His eyes were both shadowed and reflecting the flames. I could not see his purpose. There was no sneer about his lips, though.

"I fear," I said quietly.

He smiled sincerely. "You only feel fear of things that others would flee in terror from."

Once again his gaze slipped past me to Gaston for the briefest moment. I knew Gaston saw it as well, because his arms tightened about me anew.

"And how is it you surmise all of this?" I asked with genuine curiosity.

"Striker can attest to it; they speak of you a great deal," he said. "Always talking about how you should know better and you have this or that damn fool notion. It minded me of my brother. He's a fool, too."

"And what became of him?" I asked.

Cork grinned. "He married the Lord's daughter and lives in a fine house. All because he didn't know he couldn't."

"Thank you," I said quietly, and we smiled at one another.

Gaston relaxed, once he too realized I had been complimented and not insulted.

I leaned forward and mock-glared at Striker. "And what have you said during all these defamations of my character?"

Cork chuckled. "He defends you, and they call him a fool for doing it."

Striker awarded me a mock-wounded look, and I crawled over to embrace him and apologize. Pete decided he would not be left out and dove atop us. Gaston was soon digging me out, and there was much laughter all about the fire.

When it subsided, and we had returned to our places, I glanced at Cork and found him watching us sadly. I stupidly wondered at it for a moment, until I realized he was alone.

"We will rescue him," I told him.

Cork smiled sadly. "If he still lives." He shook his head. "Pay me no heed. Enjoy your man while you have him and hope for the best."

"I do. Sometimes I think I am truly a fool for risking it all for... anything. But we do not sail to gain a thing, but to leave other things behind."

He nodded. "When Wolf and I were captured, we spent a month arguing and blaming one another over how it wouldn't have befallen us if we had done this or that. Then the men started dying around us, and we realized we were fools. In a place like that, we learned to just be happy when we woke to find that we had both lived through the night."

"By God," I said, "it must be torture to be here and know he still faces that alone."

He shook his head. "I know he's happy I ran. They kept most of the matelots apart, chained us with other men just to be cruel. So I wasn't with him when the time came. I had no chance to say farewell. I can only hope he knows I escaped. I'm sure the Spaniards told them we're all dead. Either way, we had talked on it when we could. All of us there decided that if any escaped they should bring help rather than try and get the rest out on their own. I've been like a man possessed since. And still..." He looked about us. "I worry about bringing all of you into it."

"You must not feel any guilt over it," I chided gently. "You know

damn well that though we sympathize, and we are all too happy to rescue your matelot and the others, most here are going for gold.”

Cork chuckled. “As Wolf and I would if we were with you. Nay, I well understand that.”

“Good. I would not have you laboring under any illusions.”

I looked to Gaston, who had settled in beside me. He nodded.

“However,” I added, “I will say this: if the needs of the many should run contrary to yours, we will stand by your need to the best of our abilities.”

He looked from one to the other of us and nodded solemnly. “Thank you.”

“Now, Striker has given us a fine account of your description of the place, but I would hear it yet again from you, if you do not mind.”

Cork nodded and began to sketch in the sand.

Later, Gaston and I found a quiet place on the beach. My thoughts had taken darker and darker turns as I had considered the underbelly of Cork’s words and tale. I imagined Gaston and me being chained apart with fifty others in the tiny cell he had described. I felt the twisting in my gut and wretched pain in my heart that would occur if I were forced to watch Gaston flogged because he was too weak to stand. It filled me with fear, and I thought Cork the fool for seeing me as he did.

I lay looking up at the stars as Gaston arranged weapons. “Does your contention that I am a fool match with his in meaning and intent?” I asked.

He pounced upon me and gazed into my eyes. “Oui, you do not know better. Thus you are a fool for loving me. But you are my fool.”

“But I am afraid. Of all manner of things,” I sighed.

He kissed the bridge of my nose and then each eye in turn so that I closed them. It was no matter, as it was too dark to see. I listened. He was a long time in replying.

“Do you still fear me?” he whispered.

“Non. To be sure, I am afraid of your demeanor after this battle. But I am in far greater fear of our being captured. I am afraid of losing you. Of seeing you harmed. But it is true that I do not truly fear for myself. You are the focus of all my fear, as you are the focus of my life.”

“You are my fool indeed,” he murmured and kissed me.

As he stirred me beyond my dark visions, I wondered again where the line lay between madness and sanity, and where foolishness fell upon that continuum.

In the morning, Morgan called for us all to gather on the beach. Those of us ashore came to stand in a great semicircle about the dune from which Morgan had chosen to speak. I guessed our number at less than five hundred. He spoke of what our cabal already knew: his plan to take Porto Bello. There was much grumbling, primarily about our being so few against such a target.

Ever the statesman, Morgan walked down amongst us and said, “Though our number be few, our hearts are large, and the greater the

amount of booty each will receive.”

Porto Bello as a target was shortly passed by a hearty majority. Buccaneers are easily swayed, even when they have bellies full of beef.

That afternoon, the *Fortune* was hauled ashore to careen. When she was cleaned and tarred, the *Lilly* would be brought up. Then we would leave. In the meantime, the Brethren who knew the way of it had been busy making boucan of the salted beef so it would keep longer.

Despite all this industry, Gaston and I were needed for little, so we told Striker we would withdraw for a time, and we walked a league or more across the small island to find a little cove on the southern shore. Once there, we swam and frolicked in the surf like colts, as was our wont.

As the sun began to set, Gaston practiced with his whip, while I watched and dug holes in the sand and made little castles. He had not shown anyone else the whip. Pete alone knew he could touch one, and I doubted in all the excitement of his return that Pete had told Striker. Now I wondered if Gaston sought to hide it, or whether it was a thing that should be known.

“Will you tell others you have overcome your fear of those?” I asked between cracks.

He shook his head and paused in flogging a palm tree. “I have not overcome my fear.” Then he looked to me with a nasty grin. “And if any think to use one against me to my disadvantage, they will be surprised.”

“Then I will not mention it.”

“Why would you?” he asked, and looked away.

I frowned at that. “If I were called on to give proof that you were doing well.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Do not.”

“Pete knows. Should we tell him not to speak of it?”

“Oui,” he said somberly. “I wish for whips to be a private thing.”

Then his gaze was upon me again, and it was speculative.

“We are quite alone here,” he said huskily.

I nodded and smiled. I did not understand why that should have import, though my manhood understood his intent well enough to stir.

He coiled the whip and stuck it in its sack. Then he approached to kneel on the other side of the little castle I had shaped in the sand. His gaze was intent upon mine, and there was a great deal of the Horse about it.

“What?” I breathed.

“May I hurt you?” he murmured.

“Oh,” I said stupidly. My chest still had the remains of yellowed bruises that I dared not show. Yet, my breath caught, my heart raced, and cock swelled at the thought of it, whilst my knees felt weak and my stomach sick.

“Oui,” I breathed.

He appeared quite pleased with this response, and I followed him into the trees. He found a likely tree with large ropy roots I could grip,

and told me to strip and lean across it. I slowly shed my clothes as he patiently removed the scabbards and other attachments from his belt. When it was a single strip of leather, he folded it in half. I tried to remember how it would hurt, but all I could truly feel was how very hard my manhood was.

"Kiss me first," I said.

He nodded, and the Horse receded a little, so that when his lips reached mine his eyes were warm.

"Thank you," he murmured, "for allowing me to try this."

"I will see if I can take it," I said.

He looked away.

"What?" I asked.

"I wish to bind you as well, and..."

"Make me take it?" I asked.

He nodded sadly and turned away. "Non, let us not."

"Non," I said quickly and caught his arm. "Let us try it. This time without my being bound. If it is a thing I will take, then next time we can try that as well."

He shook his head and would not look at me. "You always make it sound so reasonable."

I sighed. "You do not wish to hurt me for the sake of... hurting me, or rather, to punish me, oui?"

He nodded. "I wish for you to... prove your love to me." He faced me, his eyes searching mine. "I know that is..."

"Non, we have discussed that," I said quickly. "I am still troubled over the matter, but... like your need to conquer the whip, it is a thing that grips me that I feel I must examine."

I brought his hand to my throbbing member. "Look at me," I sighed. "As confused as I am regarding the matter, my Horse is very solid upon this path."

He smiled and fondled me so that I gasped.

"Kiss me again, and fuck me after," I said.

He nodded, and his mouth closed intently over mine. When he let me breathe again, his eyes were emeralds in the afternoon sun and his lips curved wickedly.

I thrust all doubt aside and went to kneel and grip the roots. The first blow was as hard across my buttocks as my old governess had always given me. She had ever been quite bothered to be forced to take a strap to me: I always thought she disliked the amount of exertion it called for; thus, she had always been quite thorough and forceful in her beatings.

I closed my eyes and did not wonder at Gaston's motive for striking so hard. I concentrated on how it felt: the sting of the blow and the deep burning, like fire within my muscles. I was gasping by the third blow, afraid that if I tried to bite my lip to hold it in I would bloody myself. He moved the placement of the blows down the back of my legs and back up again. On the fifth blow I cried out. He hit harder on the sixth

and I was louder. But I knew, as I had before, that I would not ask him to stop. And then I felt as if I were running again. I was a great beast beneath him, with a pounding heart and heaving lungs, and I ran for him. I felt there was surely some precipice ahead in the brambles of this path, but I had faith he would stop us in time. And then, somewhere along the way, the pain receded and there was just the running. My cries changed as I became aware of my manhood again. It had shrunk from the pain, but now it returned in even greater need and glory. And then the strap was gone, and his belly was pounding on my savaged backside while he pumped furiously within me. Then I came, with nothing to caress my cock but air.

We collapsed on the roots and panted with mutual exhaustion.

"You may do that again if you wish," I at last gasped.

"I wish to," he whispered.

"And you may bind me, and even gag me if there is need to keep me quiet," I added.

He held me so tightly my ribs creaked. Later, when we lay curled together in a nest in the sand and watched the stars, some sense returned to me and I realized how very sore my arse was, I asked, "Am I badly marked?"

"You are bruised, but I did not break the skin."

"Will it be obvious if I drop my breeches in front of someone?" I asked.

"Oui," he sighed.

Then he nibbled my ear and chuckled. "If it is in front of me, I will take you again."

"Well, I suppose that is all right, then."

Still, I wondered how we would hide this new aspect of our relationship from others.

He did not wish to do it again in the week we spent on the beach. He was true to his word about finding great satisfaction in seeing the bruises that ran from my hips to my knees, though. We coupled often and heartily, but with pleasure and no pain.

All too soon, we felt we must return to the others; and we packed our things and walked back across the island, to the northern end of the long western beach where everyone was camped. Then it was much as it had been on Cow Island: the days were spent lounging about for those of us with little to do, and the nights were spent drinking the alcohol the *Lilly* had brought from Port Royal.

At the end of May, this peaceful time came to a close, and we all boarded our respective vessels and sailed west to the coast of Honduras to seek canoes.

As with all such undertakings, this one sounded much easier over a bottle of rum than it proved to be. It took us nearly a month to gather twenty-three seaworthy canoes to accomplish our goal. Many of the captains called for seeking the Galleons, which were surely sailing by as we skulked about. But Morgan held firm to our goal, and when we

finally had enough craft in tow, we sailed to Boca del Toro, fifty leagues or so west of Porto Bello, and moved to the canoes.

I was even more loathe to leave the relative comfort and safety of the ship this time than I had been at Puerto del Principe. The thirty-foot vessel Gaston and I were assigned was a bit large to truly be called a canoe. It had a sail, and was larger than the flyboat we had stolen in Cuba; yet still it seemed small and very close to the water, which of course made it ideal for our purposes. However, with over forty of us aboard her, I expected a miserable trip.

An amused Bard joined me at the rail and looked down at the canoe with humor. "Well," he drawled. "If it sinks, you'll be right on the shore. You can swim. And we'll be along in a couple days to pick you up."

"Do not mistake my meaning," I said. "I do find comfort in what you say, but as to that grin on your face, to the Devil with you."

"Aye," Dickey said and smacked him lightly upon the arm. Then he embraced me sincerely and whispered, "Be careful."

"All right, then," I said with a chuckle as he gave Gaston the same admonishment. "Let us sail home then."

"What makes you think that will be safe?" the Bard chided. "From what I hear, there are wives and babes there."

Gaston snorted. "He is correct. We will take our chances with the Spanish."

Upon viewing it in that manner, I agreed. Then I reminded myself I was the kind of fool oft favored by the Gods; and so far, I had surely led a charmed existence.

Fifty

Wherein We Suffer Loss In The Face of Victory

The first day was misery such as I had not experienced before. After a night spent taking turns at the oars or sitting in one another's laps, we finally pulled to shore in the grey light before dawn. We hauled the canoes up after us, and disguised them as best we could, lest they be seen by a passing ship. We did not wish to announce our presence with smoke from fires, so we ate boucan and dried fruit. Gaston had seen that we were well slathered in fat before we even entered the canoe. After a night of salt spray and sweat, I felt the filthiest I ever had. I wanted nothing more than to scrape the congealed mass from my skin. And as the morning sun began to heat the fetid forest, I felt like a basted chicken set to roast. However, I must admit I was not bitten by insects, though I had begun to attract flies. They surely thought I was dead. I could not even begin to envision how horrible I would look or smell by the time we reached our goal. All we need do would be to stagger from the forest; I was sure the Spanish would throw down their arms just to run from us.

After four days of this, we arrived at midnight, at the place we had chosen to abandon the canoes. We checked and reloaded our weapons there, as we were still a good three leagues from the town. I felt no more ready for this battle than I had the last. I was not afraid, however; rather I was tired and irritable and still coated in grease. I was still thankful of this, even more so than I had been on the first day, as the damned incessant mosquitoes swarmed all about us, so thick that a man had to be careful how he breathed lest they go up his nose.

Gaston did not seem as if we were heading into battle at all. He was serious as he loaded his pistols, but he did not seem to be calling forth his battle lust. I did not dream this calm would last much past the first spill of blood; but for now, I thought he was merely as tired of it all as I was.

We started out. Thankfully there would be no marching, beating of drums, or lining up to fire in volleys for this assault. We would slip in as quietly as we were able. As Cork was leading us, and we had befriended him, our usual cabal made up the vanguard. Once again, I found myself following Gaston and paying far more attention to not making noise than I did to my surroundings.

After several hours, we found the first sentry where Cork said he would be. Morgan instructed he be taken alive. I crouched next to Gaston and hoped the drowsy Spaniard did not have a nose keen to the smell of rancid fat, while Pete and Striker slipped into the shadows and closed on him. They dragged the sentry back to us with a hand over his mouth and a knife at his throat. Morgan then had me question him in detail. The man was too surprised at our appearance to dissemble much, and what he said echoed Cork's description. We were able to learn things Cork had not been privy to, though, such as the assignment of the sentries during the night and so forth.

With this new information, we planned our assault on the first fort. It sat on the edge of the town and guarded the mule road to Panama. It was not the largest of the three, or the most heavily garrisoned. That honor went to the main fort, which overlooked both the harbor and the town from across a shallow river. The third fort sat on the other side of the harbor and was sparsely garrisoned. It did not pose an immediate threat to us.

The first fort held the prisoners, or at least it had when Cork was here a few months ago. I asked the captured sentry of them, and he assured me they were still there. I relayed this to Cork, though his fears would not truly be allayed until he beheld his living matelot.

We bound the hapless sentry, and had him lead us the rest of the way, on pain of death if he should fail us. Our swift approach to the first fort was not challenged, and we had surrounded what we could of it before a sleepy voice even asked if someone were below.

The fort was a low, thick-walled square, not even two stories high on the town side. It would be easily scaled with grappling hooks. There were only a few gun slits in protruding turrets from which they could fire from cover. All other defense against us would have to take place from the top of the wall, where they were easy targets for our men despite the crenelations.

Under the protection of the closest fifty buccaneer muskets, I urged our captured sentry forward into the feeble lantern light near the gate. Once he was in view I called out from the shadows with a pleasant tone. "Greetings, we have the fort surrounded, and we wish for you to surrender. If you do not, we will kill you."

There was a great deal of cursing in Castilian, and they waved torches around until they confirmed that what I said was correct. Our true number stayed secreted in the shadows beyond their light. Then the Spanish curses were hurled along with sporadic shot. Both words and lead were returned with accuracy and followed by grapples. A number of our men took a log to the door. We were soon inside, with less commotion than one might imagine. Though an alarm had been raised for the town, it seemed to spur little activity there.

Striker, Pete, Gaston, and I followed Cork below, to the cell where they kept the prisoners. Pete cracked a Spanish skull whilst asking for the keys. Despite Cork's description of the misery in which they were kept, I was appalled when a torch was shone on it. The room could not have been much more than twelve feet by twelve feet, and there were seventeen men chained to its floor so they could not stand. There had once been fifty. The place reeked of unwashed bodies, piss, shit, vomit, and the hideous smell of gangrene. I was nearly overcome at the first whiff, and had to skim air through my mouth to keep from gagging.

Cork waded in with little heed of the stench and found his man: presumably still alive, as the dead cannot return so fierce an embrace. Pete and Striker freed the prisoners' bonds, and Gaston and I helped them into the hall. Those who could walk were escorted up into the fresh night air by Liam and Otter. Those who could not walk were carried up by Cudro, Davey, and Julio.

The freed men touched us with wonder, and I had to gently pry several hands off Gaston and myself. They clung to us as if we were phantoms who would disappear, and I assured them as best I could that we were real. Gaston looked over each man we sent into the hall, and gave instructions to whoever would take them out as to whether they should be taken directly to a surgeon or not. They were all sickly in appearance, with thin limbs and backs burned nearly black by the sun. I guessed Cork had been fattened up considerably once he had the good luck to encounter the *Fortune*. His matelot, Wolf, had once been a big brawny man, but now was nearly a skeleton and little more. Thankfully, he was able to stand and walk on his own, only holding to Cork for comfort.

Despite some men being too sickly to walk, we had the room clear in a matter of minutes. Then we too escaped back into the fresh air with relief.

We found the fort in an uproar. The sight of these poor wretches had inflamed the men. They had been ready for battle before, and quite flushed with the heat of this first easy victory. Now revenge was added to their furor, and they were barely under anyone's control. Many wanted to subject the captured Spanish to the treatment that had been visited upon the English. That would take too long, though, and we would not be taking them back to Jamaica to work our plantations. So it was decided that we should kill them, as we had said we would if they did not surrender.

Thus they were herded into a room in one of the walls, which was barely larger than the subterranean cell below. With a good seventy of them in the chamber, they could do little but stand. Then all of the fort's powder was packed into the cell beneath them and a fuse line was run. The freed men had already been helped from the fort, and most of our men were descending on the town, their war cries mingling with the screams of distraught citizens. Those few of us remaining lit the fuse and ran.

If any had been left in Porto Bello who did not know of our attack, their ignorance did not survive that explosion. The dark hour of the morning was rent asunder, and the orderly lives of the townspeople gave way to chaos at its most feral. The people of Puerto del Principe had at least a day to prepare for us; these people were caught completely by surprise. I saw many a man or woman running about in night clothes with a money box or jewelry in hand. Thus we could see there would be booty for all, though the Gods were up to Their usual tricks: the mother lode of the city treasure house was empty now that we were well past the fair.

With so many people, both English and Spanish, running about in so disorganized a fashion, I was not surprised that many of the citizens escaped to the main fortress. We rounded up all we could and herded them into the church and convent, keeping women and children apart from the men this time. As I was somewhat alarmed to note that there were more of them than there were of us, and still more in the main fortress, I thought Morgan wise to order the women and children be kept separate as hostages against the men.

Now that the battle was upon us and he no longer needed to wear his mask as physician, Gaston had retreated from sanity and allowed his Horse to run free. I found myself following him about, until at last the sun was fully risen and we ran out of Spaniards to chase.

While checking a house for occupants, I found bread, cheese, and wine. As the place was empty, I was able to get Gaston to sit and eat in peace. He was still very much under the sway of his Horse, but I saw little to fear there; and not because I was a fool. All was relatively quiet, except for the desultory fire our musketeers were exchanging with the main fort. I wanted to sleep, but that gunfire told me what we would be about next.

With our bellies full, we made our way to the center of town and the manse Morgan had claimed as his headquarters. Our few wounded and the sickliest of the freed men were in the house next to it.

As we approached, there was a flurry of shots from the block of buildings nearest the main fort. This was followed by the much larger boom of cannon. I surmised the muskets ours but the cannon theirs. Sure enough, I heard the nearby impact of the ball on brick and timber. The bastards were firing into their own city to get us. I thought it likely the Spanish paid dearly for every shot, though, as they surely lost a good number of men each time their gun crews showed themselves to

run their pieces out.

We did not immediately spy Striker, and so I asked of him. One of the captains informed me he was assessing the fort with Morgan. We went in search of them. The buccaneers were concentrated between the square and the buildings facing the fort. We found Morgan, Bradley and Striker squatting behind a thick wall, where they could pop their heads up to see across the shallow river and the clear apron of the fort.

This fortress was not the small affair the first one had been. She was a great structure, easily two stories tall, with taller inner buildings more like a castle than the usual Spanish fort. The river and harbor bounded her like a moat. The thick outer walls were wide on top, and that was where their muskets and cannon were situated, with a waist-high crenelated lip attempting to hide both men and guns from our direct view.

There was another flurry of fire from our side, and I saw two Spaniards fall while trying to load one of their cannon. Thankfully, the fort only had four guns she could bring to bear, as that was all she had spaces for in the wall facing the city. She had not been designed to defend herself from her own town. Those four cannon appeared to be twelve-pounders, though, and they readily bridged the distance to the buildings in which we huddled. All our men could do was make it exceedingly difficult for the Spanish to fire one.

We joined Striker and Morgan.

"What now?" I asked.

"Well, we shall endeavor to take that fort there," Morgan said drolly.

"Ah, aye, I see," I replied in kind. "And after that amusement?"

The Spanish managed to fire another cannon. This ball struck very close, and we found ourselves covered in dust from the shattered stone of the wall to our right.

Morgan doffed his hat and slapped it clean. "Please do as we discussed," he told Striker. "We will arrive at some plan."

Striker nodded, and led us to the left and up to a rooftop, where Pete was firing upon the fort with Liam and Otter and several more of our men. They all shot as we came upon them, and I glanced at the fortress in time to see another Spanish gunner fall from the wall. There was another retort behind me, and I turned to see Gaston. I followed the line of his barrel and saw another Spaniard finish slumping.

I stayed low and watched Striker expectantly as he whispered in his matelot's ear. Once Pete was informed, Striker turned to Gaston and me.

"We need find Cudro. I am to take some men and scout out the third fortress. If it will be easier than this, we shall take it first. We need one of them before our ships arrive."

We found Cudro, and Striker told him what we were about. Then we left him there with most of the *Virgin Queen's* men. The rest of our cabal, and several dozen more, hurried across the corner of the town and around the bay. The third fort was situated so her guns covered the

area of the harbor that the main fort's guns could not reach. Any ship entering the port had to pass between them.

This fort was much like the first in the stalwart simplicity of her design. Unfortunately, she was so situated as to be even harder to get around. As we rounded the bay to come upon her, I noted that, due to the distance and the narrowness of the path leading to her, it was unlikely many of the townspeople had fled here. I also thought it likely that fewer soldiers were garrisoned here than at the other forts. This one would merely need an adequate number of gun crews in order to perform its function.

"Who are you?" a voice called from the fort as we found cover in the forest beyond her apron.

"We are English," I called back in Castilian.

"Why are you here?" came the reply at length.

"To take your gold and silver," I replied, to the amusement of my comrades, who – though they did not understand the entire sentence – understood well enough the Castilian for gold and silver.

"There is no war?" the Spaniard asked.

"No! We are pirates!"

This engendered a great deal of cheering on our side of the wall, as all knew that word, too.

There was another lengthy pause before we heard a diffident, "We have no gold here."

By that I assumed he meant with them in the fort. It also seemed to indicate that they did not wish to fight.

"I am sorry, but we must ascertain that for ourselves. If you would be so kind as to surrender, there will be no need of bloodshed in order for us to look for gold and other valuables."

"I am most sorry," the Spaniard said, "but we cannot."

"We understand," I assured him, and turned to the curious eyes on my side of the wall and spoke in English. "If the speaker was any indication, they are not overjoyed at the prospect of fighting us, yet they cannot relinquish the fort without battle."

Striker nodded. "Pete spied something on the way here. I think we may have a means to breach the walls with little trouble, but it'll take the four of us."

"So we are not here merely to scout," I teased.

I was surprised, as we had brought so few men.

"I didn't think we'd try and take her when I offered to scout," Striker grinned. "But if it's a thing we can do, then let's do it."

He turned to Julio, Liam, and the thirty or so men we had and spoke quietly. "Harass them, let them think we're truly attacking, but don't do anything foolhardy. We'll see if we can go in the back. If you hear a great commotion inside, charge them while they're distracted. Julio's in command. Liam, make sure they keep their heads down, especially on the seaward side."

All nodded, and Gaston and I followed Pete and Striker into the thick

foliage, away from the fort.

Staying out of sight of the walls, we worked our way back down the road until we could slip down to the water. From where we now stood, we could see the bay side of the fort, where it perched at the end of the horn of land encompassing the harbor. Pete pointed, and after a moment I understood. There was a thin lip of land beneath the fort's wall above the water, and a small wharf where a ship could be landed. There was a door in the wall to permit entry for that purpose.

"So how do we get there?" I asked. "Even with Liam and Otter clearing that wall, I doubt we could row a canoe over without being seen."

"WeSwim," Pete said.

Striker grinned and began to shed his weapons.

I looked to my matelot. He was intently studying the harbor between the fort and us. There was little of the Horse about him now; in truth, he appeared fearful.

"That water is bad," he said in English.

"We'll float some and we'll endeavor not to drink it," Striker replied.

"Non!" Gaston said and backed away.

I joined Pete and Striker in regarding him in surprise.

"I will not die here of disease," Gaston said. "Smell it!"

I did; it was rank: we would be swimming in a sewer.

Pete shrugged. "EBeenRight'BoutWaterAn'Such."

Striker swore.

"Can we find a boat?" I asked.

"You said it yourself. They'll see us," Striker snapped.

"A wound I can heal," Gaston said.

Striker frowned. "All right, we will find a boat."

They gathered the weapons they had shed, and we hurried along the harbor until we found a small, low canoe. It barely cleared the water once we were aboard, and we took on water as the four of us moved about until we were as low in her belly as we could get.

Pete and Gaston rowed, and we made our slow way across to the fort's apron. All the while, I told the Gods how very good it would be if we were not seen by any within her. Either They listened, or the Spanish had angered Them, because no one fired on us as we drew close, until at last we were able to crawl onto the dock and run to the wall.

Pete had brought a grapple to scale with, but we hoped it would not be required. We checked the door. It was barred. There was constant gunfire and even the boom of cannon from the landward side of the fort. Yet we stood in relative quiet. We all took turns listening at the door, and heard nothing we could ascribe to movement in the room beyond. However, we could not see in through the cracks, either. Pete unsheathed a long knife, and slipped it between the door and the jam, feeling his way up until he found the bar. It proved a simple matter after that, as the bar proved to be light and not secured.

We heard it clatter to the floor above the noise of battle; and for a

painful second, we froze. Nothing occurred of it that we could discern, though, and Striker carefully nudged the door open. Not wanting to alert anyone with pistol fire, Gaston and I readied ourselves with a blade in each hand. We dove into the dark room and found cover. We heard nothing within it; and after feeling about, we decided it was a storeroom as we had surmised, and it was quite empty of life save rats. Pete and Striker entered and closed the door behind them. We all snuck to the inner door and opened it a crack. It let out directly into the yard, where there were a number of armed Spaniards. We closed it very quietly.

"Perhaps there is another door," I whispered, and we spent several long minutes trying to accustom our eyes to the dim light.

Finally deciding we could wait no longer, we split up, and feeling our way carefully among the crates and barrels, Gaston and I found an opening at the south end of the long room. I met Striker in the middle again. They had found another door at the north. One opened into a cook area and the other into the armory. We kept our amusement and glee contained.

Mere moments later, the two men in the armory were dead, and we were in possession of all of the fort's stored powder. The far door in this room opened into a stable with a few horses. We discussed how best to make use of this wonderful tactical position. As our objective was to demoralize the Spanish and get our men inside, we decided on an overt announcement of our presence, without revealing our true number.

Thus we took a small keg of powder into the stable. The farthest outer door was very close to the gate. We gave the keg a short fuse, lit it, and Pete dove out and hurled it at the gate whilst we covered him. I saw four stunned Spaniards see him, but none moved to do a thing about it. They were still staring like daft cows when I stopped watching them and we ran like madmen back to the armory. The explosion roared a moment later.

We crouched in the shadows inside the armory door and shot any Spaniard we could see, as they ran about like rats from an overturned barrel. We paid special attention in our aim to any man who shouted for order or approached our position. Soon, there were buccaneers inside the walls and we emerged. Then it became much like taking the first galleon, in that we cast about with shot and blade until all who were not us were kneeling or prone.

At the end of it, one of our men approached: nearly too quickly for his own good, as I almost stabbed him.

"Come quickly, someone is hurt," he told Gaston.

We followed him back out the gate to the edge of the forest. My heart constricted painfully as I saw who was injured.

Liam was holding Otter across his lap. Otter was bleeding profusely from his gut. Blood seeped into the ground in a shadow that widened even as we ran to them.

"Fuckin' bastards," Liam sobbed as we reached them. "They canna' shoot worth a damn. The bastard were tryin' ta hit me."

Gaston dropped to his knees beside them and probed the wound. Then he started speaking in Dutch for Otter's sake. I did not need a fluent mastery of the language to understand the gist of it. Otter's bowel and liver were badly perforated. He would die. All Gaston could do was give him laudanum for the pain. Otter, always quiet, even in agony, nodded. Liam was now equally silent. His eyes pleaded, though. Gaston met them and shook his head sadly.

We had secreted our bags back along the harbor where we had found the canoe. I ran to retrieve them, all the while wondering what would come of this. Liam and Otter had been together a good twelve years. Even only knowing them a year as I had, I could not envision Liam without his Dutch shadow, his anchor, his teammate. With dismay, I remembered the first time I ever saw them upon the *North Wind*. Liam had been arguing about the articles pertaining to matelots inheriting one another's shares. He would not, here, because no provision had been made for it in the group articles. I cursed the other captains and Morgan, though that was truly the least of the matter.

Pete had caught up with me, and I was thankful for it, as it meant I did not have to try to carry anything but the bag with the laudanum. It left me free to run back.

Wave after wave of memory washed up as I ran. They were dear and trusted companions. We had lost men before, but none I knew so well. And even before venturing here, I had lost friends, but none so loyal and true. I told myself that Liam was not dead yet, but I knew it mattered little if he did not wish to go on. It would be a thing decided between the two of them in the time the laudanum would buy them to say goodbye.

Striker, Julio, and Davey were with them when we returned. I knew Cudro would regret not being here to say his farewell, too, but little could be done for it. Gaston found the bottle of laudanum and mixed a heavy dose, which Otter drank gratefully. They had stuffed rags in his belly to staunch the bleeding, yet still he had lost so much blood upon the ground that I was surprised there was any left within him.

Gaston mixed a second dose, a much milder one, and proffered it to Liam.

The Scotsman shook his head until Otter asked, "Is it much?"

"Just enough to dull the pain of the heart," Gaston said.

"I want this pain," Liam said stubbornly.

"I want to see you smiling before I die," Otter whispered.

The laudanum was taking affect and the rictus of pain had released his features.

Liam studied his matelot and gave him a sad smile. He took the draught.

Pete had returned. One by one, we clasped Otter's hand and said our farewells. Then we left them alone.

We found ourselves inside the fort. All of the surviving Spanish had been herded into the barracks and the doors had been blocked. We had two other wounded, but not severely. Gaston was needed to tend them,

as we had not brought another surgeon with us.

"Well, we have this damn place," Striker said sadly.

It was evident on every face that we had been robbed the pleasure of victory. Otter had been well known and loved. And amongst those with matelots, there was the unspoken knowledge that it could have been us.

"Run up our colors," Striker added, "so that they'll know in town."

"We do not have a flag," Julio said quietly.

"Jolie rouge," Striker said.

Pete ripped a blood-soaked, formerly white shirt off a dead Spaniard. We affixed it to the line and ran it up the pole atop the fort. I thought I should tell Belfry someday how very practical the pretty red flag of the Brethren is. Wherever buccaneers go, there is always sure to be blood and rent cloth with which to make one.

Gaston finished bandaging his last patient, and came to join me where I leaned in the shattered gateway. I could not see Liam and Otter in the brush from where we stood, but my eyes were drawn to where I knew them to be.

"I do not know which would be worse," I whispered, "to have to watch you die, or to not have a chance to say goodbye."

I turned to regard him and found him overcome by his childish demeanor.

"I would wish to say goodbye," he said solemnly with large eyes.

I thought of the peace simply talking to him now gave me, even if he was not fully himself, and even though I could not be sure what his demeanor would become in the next minute.

"I feel I would, too," I whispered.

He embraced me.

Pete and Striker joined us. I saw their gazes dart to the brush.

Striker looked away and sighed. "We must go back. Not all; we'll leave some here."

He gazed toward the brush again.

"I am afraid I will hear a pistol," I said.

"Aye, and I don't want to listen for it," he said. "I tell myself we should've sent for more men once I decided to take the place. But I know it was an unlucky shot that took him, and it could've happened had we been a thousand and they but fifty."

"Tell yourself to be quiet, then," I said with a slim smile, which he returned.

He glanced at Gaston, who had his face buried in my shoulder. "Are we well?"

I silently mouthed, "I do not know," and Striker's eyes clouded with worry.

"Gaston," I whispered, "perhaps you should..."

He raised his head and met my eyes. "I will stay with you. I will be ready."

I nodded, and shrugged at Striker. I assumed arrangements had been made amongst the men already, as Striker took off walking without

a word, and the three of us fell in behind. Gaston held my hand for most of the way back to the town. When he suddenly dropped it, I looked over. Gaston the Child was gone, and the Horse was once again in full sway. He was calm, though, and his kiss on my temple was reassuring.

I wanted to talk, but now was not the time. I had not seen him exercise such control before. He was not drifting about the cave today, but choosing where he would stand in order to cast whatever shadow he wished. I could see where this was beneficial, but still my Horse shied with alarm.

Our arrival amongst the Brethren in town was greeted by cheers. It seemed we were the heroes of the day. All had not been well with the attempts on the other fort in our absence, and our victory across the bay had restored much lost morale. A plan to burn the gates had been decided on, but every time men crossed the apron to deliver fire there, the Spanish showered them with stones, hot oil, and grenades. We now had far more wounded: none mortally, but many would be marked or maimed for life.

Morgan had apparently had quite enough. When we found him, he questioned us intently on how we took the other fort. Obviously, that tactic would not work here, though he applauded us heartily for it. Thankfully, he had another plan in mind, and had already set men to the first piece of it. Our carpenters were building ladders of a height necessary to reach the top of the wall, and a width such that several men could scale at once.

"Who will deliver them?" I asked. I could not see where we would have any more success approaching the walls with the ladders than with grenades.

Morgan grinned. "Priests and nuns. They are Papists; I think they will hesitate greatly before firing on their men and women of the cloth."

I had to commend his cleverness. It was surely a plan I wished I had formulated. And so we brought the nuns and priests and told them to carry the ten ladders to the wall. They were understandably incredulous. However, our brandished pistols and blades soon had them on the move, ladders in hand. Those of us to be in the first wave crouched behind them, and we made our slow way to the wall, accompanied by much wailing from our unhappy hostages.

"Do you not believe in Hell?" one nun asked me.

I wondered why religious people always thought this the ultimate threat to bar my behavior. Was the threat of eternal retribution the only thing that kept them stalwart and moral?

"I do not know, and surely if I am to go there it will not be for this alone," I told her.

She nodded in miserable agreement.

I had not intended that Gaston and I should be party to this initial wave of the assault, but he had dropped the reins completely again and his Horse was very much in favor of it. And Striker and Pete were committed to it, and I felt honor bound to follow them into... well, Hell.

I should have told the nun that. I would probably not reach Hell of my own doing, but by way of being a fool, as I would surely follow some other into it, all the while hoping it would not be permanent.

Except for the sobbing and praying, all was quiet as we made our way out of the streets and across the river to the fortress' apron. We were now well within their musket and cannon range, and still they did not fire. One of the foremost priests began to beg, not us, but the Spanish upon the wall. I hazarded a look up and saw over a hundred faces gazing down at us in horrified incomprehension.

"Fuego!" was heard from the fort. I cringed, but there were no retorts. "Fuego!" the same commanding voice extolled, followed by curses. Still, no Spanish musketeer pulled the trigger. The commander then said that he would shoot any man who did not fire.

I imagined that every man above us wondered which Hell one went to for shooting a priest, and whether or not disobeying an officer's order and having him shoot you was suicide. They went to Hell either way. Some of them decided, for better or worse, and shot began to rain down on us.

It was evident we would quickly run out of nuns and priests, and so we exhorted our ten little groups to hurry. Meanwhile, our own musketeers were taking advantage of the fact that the Spanish must stand to depress their guns enough to hit us. I wished Liam and Otter were our guardian angels as they had so often been.

We reached the wall, and I shamelessly stooped below a nun as we pushed the ladder up. In truth, it was needed in order to help brace the ladder's leg; and in actuality, it proved inconvenient, as when she was struck by a rock thrown from above, she collapsed upon me. I swung her off my back and propped her against the wall. There was gash on her head, but she still breathed.

Then we were climbing and firing with pistols. I followed Gaston; and beside us, Striker followed Pete. We soon gained the top of the wall. Once we were there, we lost the support of our own muskets, as those men could not easily fire into the melee. Instead, they ran to join us, now that we could prevent any from firing on them.

It was like taking a very large ship. Thankfully, many of the Spanish were demoralized and surrendered readily. There was only one pocket of fierce resistance across the courtyard. Gaston and I made our way there. Striker and Pete were already in the thick of it.

As we approached, Pete joined in combat with a tall Spaniard, with rapiers. I was surprised at this, as was Striker. Pete waved him off, even as his opponent came in fast and took advantage of Pete's momentary lapse in concentration to mark his shoulder with a vicious little cut. Pete parried adroitly, and twisted away before the blade could bite deeper. Then he grinned and closed on the man.

As much of the rest of the battle was over and done, we stood about and watched. The Spaniard was good: very good. His style was graceful, and his skills as honed as the fine blade he carried. There was

something quite familiar in the way he moved, and I wondered if he had a teacher in common with someone else I knew. And then their duel shifted enough that I clearly saw his face.

I was dumbfounded, and words failed me for several seconds. Then I closed my jaw only to have it fly open again as the words finally came in a rush. "Pete! Do not kill him! I know him! That is Alonso!"

Alonso had been lunging to take advantage of Pete's distraction. Hearing his own name caused him to lapse as well, and Pete quickly turned the tide, driving him back onto a wall and pinning him with a blade at his throat whilst he twisted the rapier from Alonso's hand. I ran to them and relieved Alonso of the thin blade he kept under his breeches on his left thigh, and then the small pistol secreted at the small of his back under his coat.

He peered at me curiously, and then his eyes widened with surprise. "Uly?"

"What?" I asked in Castilian. "Can you not recognize me without hair?"

"YaKnow'Em?" Pete asked.

"Aye, aye, from Florence," I assured Pete.

"This is the Spaniard?" Gaston growled in French at my other elbow, and my balls nearly contracted into my belly.

Gaston's eyes glittered like emeralds in the sun as they studied Alonso with contempt.

"Oui," I whispered. "This is Alonso. Alonso, this is my matelot, Gaston. And this other fine fellow is our good friend, Pete."

"I am sure we are well met," Alonso said in English, with more composure than I could have mustered with Pete's blade at my throat and Gaston glaring at me.

But then I knew Gaston and Pete well enough to know how damn dangerous they were. I was not sure how we appeared to Alonso, but he was studying me again with a frown.

"Uly, you look awful. Are you well? What are you doing here with these people?"

Pete chuckled. "HeBeRight. YaLookLikeShit."

"As do you," I said with a small degree of dignity.

Smeared in fat, with powder smudges and eye paint and torn, blood-spattered clothing, we were indeed quite the sight.

"And what does matelot mean?" Alonso asked with a glance at Gaston.

"Partner, lover, husband," I smiled.

Alonso's eyes went wide, before they flicked to Pete with concern.

"Oh, he has one too," I added.

"Ohhh," Alonso said with wonder.

"Will!" Striker called from the corner of the yard. He waved me over.

"Well, I assume I am needed to translate. Watch him," I told Pete.

"He is quite clever and experienced."

"Aye," Pete grinned.

I clasped Gaston across the shoulder and whispered in French in his ear. "Please do not kill him."

"Why?" he growled. "Do...?"

I interrupted him with a fierce whisper. "I am yours. You have far more of me than he even knew existed. If you respect that, then respect me on this."

His eyes narrowed, and he finally pulled them from Alonso to regard me. I saw his anger shift into something deeper. His left hand snaked up around my neck and held my head still as he plundered my mouth. My gut twisted, but my cock stirred as well. When he let me go, I kissed the tip of his nose to annoy him, and went to join Striker without looking to see Alonso's reaction to any of it.

"What the Devil?" Striker asked as I neared. His eyes were still on Pete and Alonso.

"Did I ever mention that I once had a lover in Florence, a Spanish lover?" I asked.

Striker's eyes widened, and he looked over my shoulder at the others again. "That is him?"

"Aye," I said with a grin. "I do not know what he is doing here. He was going to Panama, so I suppose it makes sense. Yet... Well, if my matelot does not kill him, I suppose I will find out."

He grinned in return. "I would not tell anyone else."

"I do not intend to," I said seriously.

"Striker! Will!" Morgan called.

Striker shrugged. "We need your skills in Castilian."

"As always," I shrugged.

We joined Morgan in facing a dignified Spanish officer. The Spaniard had his back to the wall, but he still brandished a sword.

"Tell the damn fool to surrender," Morgan said.

I looked about. The fighting was over. We had the fort.

"Sir, please do us the honor of surrendering," I said.

"Never," the officer snapped.

"Don Jose, please. It is over. Let us live to fight them again," another Spaniard said.

"Never," the officer repeated and glared. "I will not surrender to these dogs."

I looked to the man who had pleaded with him. "Is there anyone he might listen to? We do not wish to shoot him if it is unnecessary."

"His wife and child are here," the man sputtered.

The officer swore vehemently at the man.

I explained to Morgan, and he sent someone to fetch the prisoners we had taken in the center of the fortress. A number of women and children were brought into view. The man who had told of them pointed out the officer's wife and daughter, a stately woman and a girl of ten or so. They were brought over. The officer refused to look at them.

"Please, Jose," she implored, "they say they will not..."

"Silence!" he roared. "I will not surrender. I would rather die a

valiant soldier than be hanged as a coward.”

I had reloaded my pistols while we waited for the woman to arrive. Now I aimed at the officer and glanced at Morgan. He shrugged. I looked to the woman, and flicked my eyes at the girl before her. She raised her chin and took a firm grip on her daughter’s shoulders. The girl only had eyes for her father. I did not wish to kill him in front of her; but perhaps it was better she remembered him as an honorable man, as he and the mother intended. I looked the officer in the eye and he rewarded me with a contemptuous glare. I pulled the trigger. The ball struck true, just to the left of his breast bone. He crumpled quickly. I looked to the girl again. Her eyes were huge and her hands were on her mouth. The mother’s eyes were closed. I considered shooting the woman, for forcing the poor child to have that memory for the rest of her life while she cringed from it. Instead, I walked away.

Striker and Cudro had joined Pete, Gaston, and Alonso in watching what occurred. I noted they had bound Alonso’s hands behind him. He regarded me with narrowed eyes as I approached. I shrugged, and looked to the others. Striker was watching them run the jolie rouge and the English flag up this fort’s pole. Pete was still frowning at the place where the officer had fallen. Cudro was frowning at the sinking sun.

Gaston was watching me with concern.

“Reload,” he prompted.

I did as he said.

“I want to go back to the other fort,” Striker said, “and see to Liam.”

With the exception of Alonso, we all nodded agreement and started walking. Pete shepherded Alonso with us.

“Does he speak English?” Striker asked.

“Aye,” I said. “Well enough.”

“French?” Gaston hissed.

“Some,” I sighed.

I did not wish to fight with Gaston over the matter. I did not wish to deal with Alonso. The girl’s grief-stricken face, and then Liam’s, kept swimming in my vision.

“I am tired of anger and death today,” I whispered in French.

Gaston was quiet beside me. As we cleared the gates and crossed to the town, his arm slipped about my shoulders. I transferred my musket to my other hand and hooked my arm around his waist, and we fell into step together. It felt good.

We followed Striker, Cudro, Pete, and Alonso into the town. We were, in turn, followed by a number of our men from the *Virgin Queen*. Alonso would attempt to glance back when he was able, but I knew he saw little of us. I studied his back at leisure. He was a little thicker about the middle, and I could not see how he could bear to wear so much clothing in the oppressive heat and humidity. However, his clothes were not as fashionable as we had worn in Florence, being more functional than fancy; though the coat and breeches were of fine cloth and well-tailored. He still wore his lustrous hair pulled back, as he always had when not

formally dressed; and the wavy mass reached deep between his shoulder blades. I could not see how he could stand that, either. I was so used to being shorn all hair appeared hot and heavy to me now.

I remembered how I had found him so very handsome. He was still pleasing to look upon, but I felt distant from the enjoyment of it. This was due not only to the man at my side, but more to changes I sensed in my perception of beauty. I wished to explore that, but I was tired.

I also noted his hands were bound so tightly that they were losing color. When we stopped for the others to procure wine and rum, I disengaged from Gaston with a reassuring kiss on his cheek and went to loosen Alonso's bonds. He started at my touch, and then gasped as the blood began to reach his fingers again.

"Is this necessary?" he whispered in Castilian, as I finished retying him.

"For now," I sighed. "I do not wish for anyone to misapprehend the situation; and truly, much has happened in our lives since last we saw one another, si?"

He turned to regard me. "Si, we have much to talk about. Your French lover is jealous?"

I sighed and smiled. "Always."

"I take it he knows of us," he said.

"He knows of what we had, si."

"Does he speak Castilian?" he asked.

"Some," I sighed.

"Will we have a chance to speak privately?" he asked.

"Si," I replied quickly, though I doubted my veracity of what I said and the wisdom of what he suggested. And that made me even more tired.

"Good. There is very much I would say to you," he said earnestly.

His brown eyes held a look I had not often seen while we were together. It contained love and longing. I found it difficult to accept.

"I received your letter," I said.

This gave him pause, and then he smiled. "It reached you?"

"Si. In December." At his frown I added, "Of last year. Just a few months ago."

"Ah," he nodded. "I was beginning to think its travel had been very fast indeed." Then he frowned again. "I was very drunk."

"I could tell," I smiled. "It was difficult to discern your words toward the end."

"I meant every word, though," he said.

He had the look about him that he had always assumed when he wished to convince me of a thing.

"I know," I said, though I could not truly believe that, either. "And I thank you. But, Alonso, it can change nothing now. I am with Gaston, and will be for the rest of our probably short and surely misbegotten lives."

He shook his head slightly and spoke with incredulity. "Uly, these

pirates, they live like animals.”

I smirked. “And this from a man who has not witnessed us in our true element.” I sobered. “Si, we do, yet I have found truer friends here than anywhere else I have traveled.”

“And truer love?” he asked wistfully.

“Alonso,” I sighed. “We have much to discuss... later.” I thought of one thing I could say to begin to explain the situation to him. “Gaston does not favor men, and yet he has chosen to be with me in the eyes of all.”

This gave him pause, and his eyes went to Gaston with curiosity until the others returned.

They had a great number of bottles, which we distributed among us and some of our men. Then Striker sent in more men to roll out two hogsheads of wine. We proceeded in a large party, back around the harbor, to the second fort we had captured.

“What did he say?” Gaston asked quietly as we walked.

I regarded him curiously. The jealous anger seemed to have dissipated. He was quite calm again. His eyes met mine, and I found little of the Horse in them. I sighed with relief.

Still I did not wish to tell the truth: that I felt Alonso still harbored hope I would return to him. I found it too odd to contemplate, much less discuss with Gaston. Yet I did not wish to lie to him, either.

“There is much he does not understand,” I said. “He knows little of the Brethren and how we live. He will have difficulty contemplating our love, as the depth of it is such an alien thing to a man such as he – or rather a man who has been forced to live his life hiding his desires in shadow. I will need to speak with him. Or perhaps not need, but... I wish to speak with him and settle things between us. I do not wish to upset you, though.”

Gaston nodded. “Now that I have seen him... I both understand and cannot comprehend how you were with him. I suppose he is fine enough to look upon, and he is quite skilled with a blade. And he seems to have his wits about him. Yet...”

When he did not finish I spoke. “I did not love him as I do you. You know that. Else I could not have left him, as I surely can never leave you. And, if I had met you first, I never would have entertained him. He was the best I could manage at the time.”

“Does he still love you?” he asked.

I could not suppress my sigh, and so I was forced to speak the truth behind it. “I believe so.”

“Good,” Gaston smirked. “I am sure you are the best he ever experienced, and now you are mine.”

That last had been very much the Horse, and I struggled to keep the alarm from my face. He saw it anyway. His eyes narrowed, and I envisioned his hackles rising, as a dog’s does when it smells fear.

“Your shadow is flickering about quite a bit today, my love,” I murmured.

He studied me, and the suspicion left; so did the Horse. He nodded soberly. "True. I am sorry."

"Non, do not worry overmuch," I said gently. "Just do not be angry with me for being... concerned."

"Or afraid," he said soberly. "I understand. I am very... mercurial today, oui." He frowned in thought. "I feel I exercise some control over it, though."

"I have seen evidence of that, oui," I agreed.

"I love you," he said.

"And I you." I smiled reassuringly. "Thank you for saying it."

He smiled. "Do not let go, Will, though I flicker about like a wraith."

"I will not," I promised, "though you might be very hard to hold."

Julio and Davey were waiting outside the gates when we arrived. They looked grim.

"Has there been a retort?" Striker asked.

They shook their heads as one.

"Well, someone should go into that thicket and speak to him, then," Striker said.

He looked at me. I looked at Pete and found him looking at me.

"YarBetter," Pete said.

"Nay, you are," I said.

Striker swore. "You both go."

Pete and I left our muskets and the bottles we carried, save one, with our matelots. We slipped into the section of brush where we had left Otter and Liam. We found Otter laid out in the quiet repose of the dead. Liam sat cross-legged next to him, a pistol in his lap, his eyes red and puffy and his face wistful. He smiled sadly at us and holstered the weapon in his baldric.

"I thought I might," he said. "But I knew if I didna' by the time someone showed then I wouldna'."

I sat next to him and handed him the bottle. Pete sat nearby with obvious relief.

"We are glad to hear it," I said. "Though I can only guess how this pains you, it would be a damn shame to lose you both."

"That's what 'e said," Liam sighed and took a long pull on the bottle. He handed it back and shook his head sadly. "I do na' know how I'll live without 'im, but it seems I must learn."

He touched his dead matelot's arm. Then he pulled his hand away and shook himself.

"So, did we win?" he asked with a weak attempt at his usual good cheer.

"Aye," we said in unison.

"Good," he sighed, "because I would give 'im a burial like 'e asked, and that would be hard if we still be fightin' the Spaniards."

"How does... did... he wish to be buried?" I asked.

"E wants to be burned on a boat. Does not want the worms or the sharks to have 'im."

Pete and I nodded.

"There are a number of boats in this harbor," I said. "When?"

"Tonight," he said with a thoughtful nod. "Good to 'ave it done afore 'e starts ta stink. I could na' bear rememberin' 'im as stinkin'."

"I'llGetABoat," Pete said and left us.

Liam held out his hand and I gave him the bottle. "I need be drunk," he sighed after another long pull. "Otherwise I will na' sleep. I have na' slept alone in a long time."

"I am sure you could sleep with others tonight." I was also sure he would sleep well with the laudanum in him and only a little additional wine.

He shook his head. "Nay. Then I'll just be confused when I wake, an' it'll hurt that much more. Best I learn ta live with it right quick."

Gaston joined us, and one look told me he was now under the sway of the Child. My heart and gut constricted in unison. He circled about Otter's body with reverent awe, and knelt on the other side of Liam, who he embraced.

Liam returned it and then regarded me with curiosity. "He be well?"

"Well... nay," I grimaced. "Death affects him deeply at times."

"I seen that. Don't let 'im touch Otter," Liam said very seriously. His hand went to the pommel of a pistol.

I nodded quickly. "Gaston, come sit with me."

He crawled around Liam to join me without question.

"Why he be fascinated with the dead?" Liam asked, with a little more ease now that I was between my matelot and his matelot's body.

"His mother died when he was young, in childbirth, and it had a profound effect upon him," I said.

Liam nodded sympathetically. "Me mother died birthin' me. Me father married me wet nurse. I thought she was me mother fur a long time. Then she died birthin' me half sister. She had seven afore that. I was thirteen when she went."

"Don' want no wife, an' no bairns," he continued. His hand strayed to the body again. His breath was ragged. "E wants me ta find another. Says I'll be happy. 'E knows me better than I know meself. But... It won't be 'im. It'll be odd. An' I never been with another man."

I could not say the time-honored platitudes about allowing himself time to grieve. Instead, I asked, "Would you take another man?"

He shook his head with a bemused grin. "Don' rightly know. I did na' favor men in me youth. I did na' fall in love with this bugger. 'E had never been with a man either, but 'e had entertained the notion. So... our lives bein' livin' shite in that army, an' me na' wishin' ta die without... well, at least once. So we put foot on the trail to see where it led. I don't regret it none. Don' know if I'd walk it again, though. But I canna' stand bein' alone."

"You are a good man," I said. "You should not have to be alone if you do not wish it. I am damn sorry you lost him."

"Thank ye," he sighed.

He handed me the bottle, of which there was very little left. I had drunk none of it. I wondered how much laudanum Gaston had given him.

Gaston captured Liam's hand while it was still between us. He squeezed it, and gave Liam a beatific smile.

"Love is heavy," he said haltingly in English, "but it gives life purpose."

Liam nodded and cocked his head. "I do na' know 'bout that. It made me life lighter."

His gaze flicked to me, and I smiled reassuringly.

"That is better, then," Gaston said with a thoughtful frown. "I am heavy. Will must carry us both quite often."

I wished to refute him, but my throat was choked with sudden tears. Liam's eyes were on mine and appeared as moist.

He smiled sadly. "Now don't you be startin', you'll get me goin' again. We be needin' another bottle."

Gaston released him and kissed me on the temple. Then he stood, and presumably went to fetch another bottle, though I could not be sure.

"How often he get like that?" Liam asked once Gaston was gone.

I tried to compose myself. "Not often. Primarily after battles, when there is so much death."

"An' how... Do ya get any warnin' afore he goes the other way?" Liam asked carefully.

"None." I smiled.

Liam shook his head with mirth. "Damn, Will, Cork were right, ya be a fool. Is love na' strange?"

"Oh, aye," I said.

"We all worry 'bout ya," he said with sudden sobriety.

My smile deepened. "I am not sure if that is good or bad."

He grinned again. "Me, neither."

When Gaston returned, the others accompanied him. A steady trickle of men came to Liam and offered condolences. I retreated with Gaston. I wished to check on Alonso, but I was very leery of his seeing my matelot in his present condition. I did spy him, standing near the shore with Julio and Davey guarding him. Julio appeared to be conversing with him. I was concerned about that, as well, but there was little to be done for it.

Or was there? I led Gaston away from the others until we were alone in the trees. He embraced me once we stopped. I held him and tried to let my worries fade away. It did not work, but I felt better for the attempt. I released him and took his face between my hands.

"You know I love you when are thus, oui?" I asked.

He nodded.

I kissed him lightly. "And you know I understand why you are this way at this moment, oui?"

He nodded again.

"However," I said gently, "it would be better if you were not as you are now, until such time as we can be alone again at our leisure this night."

He nodded once more, and the innocence receded from his face. He kissed my palm and then pushed my hands away to step into my arms again. His kiss was thorough and compelling. I did not wish it to end, and pulled him back every time he sought to break it off. He finally pulled his mouth from mine and trailed his teeth down the side of my throat. I gasped and he bit. I held his head again and savored the mixed pain and pleasure of his marking me.

"There," he said with a devil's grin when he finished, "now he will know you belong to someone."

I was amused. "Thank you for not killing him, yet."

"The Horse does not want him dead," he said with mischief.

"Truly? What does the Horse want?" I asked.

He took a quick breath and his grin slipped away, as did his eyes. "Do not..."

I put fingers to his lips. "Do not dissemble now, please. You are doing so well today, with the battle, and Otter's death, and Alonso even, and yet I would know if..."

His fingers were on my lips and he nodded. "You would know if I will wreak havoc yet."

I grinned. "Precisely."

He met my eyes solidly and took another deep breath. "The Horse wishes to take pleasure with you while he watches."

I was not terribly surprised. I did not flinch from his gaze. "I would be amenable under certain circumstances."

This surprised him. "Those being?"

"That the flavor of the night is such that we would not be alone amongst the Brethren in engaging in those activities: essentially, that our lovemaking not appear to be staged for his benefit alone," I said.

He smiled and a great deal of tension fled him. "You do not take issue with his seeing?"

I grinned. "Non, when I think on all the times he publicly shunned me in the name of propriety – well, let us say I wish to wave a thing or two under his nose as well. And if it should please you and lessen your damnable jealousy, then it is icing upon a cake I already wished to eat."

He lightly kissed my lips. "Then we will see how the night progresses."

We returned to the others. Striker and Pete had found a fine flyboat, and men were busy dousing it in lamp oil and bringing extra timber to stack about the body.

Alonso appeared very relieved to see me. He was still with Julio and Davey, standing apart from the others. Gaston and I joined them.

"How are you?" I inquired of Alonso in Castilian.

"I have needs, but they can wait a little," he replied in kind.

"Good," I said. "There will be festivities all about, once this is

completed. Not that they have not already started.”

I smirked and looked at all the drinking men watching the funeral preparations. Liam was obviously drunk and drugged beyond pain already. He was stumbling about helping Cudro and Pete get Otter’s body situated on the boat. And they were passing a bottle.

I thought we should join them soon, so as not to appear unsociable; but I thought we might wait a little, until the preparations were complete.

Alonso interrupted my musings. “Do they bury all their dead so?”

“No. We do not,” I said. “It depends on the circumstances, and how well-loved a man is, and what his last wishes were. Otter and his matelot, Liam, were well-liked. And usually we bury our dead in the ground or at sea. Otter asked for neither.”

“Julio says you came with less than five hundred; and that you traveled down the coast in canoes,” Alonso said incredulously.

“I did not think it mattered now if I told him,” Julio added quickly.

“No, it does not,” I told Julio with a smile. “Si, it is true,” I told Alonso. “It was a clever plan concocted by our Admiral Morgan.”

“Uly, how is it you came to be amongst pirates?” Alonso asked. “Did you not return home? I surmise that you did, as my letter must have passed through your father’s estate.”

I laughed. There was so much concern in his voice, as if I had truly fallen to some terrible end.

“I could well ask you the same,” I said. “Though I think a guess is easy enough to make. You did indeed go to Panama and you were here for the fair.”

“Si,” he said. “I have a cousin here, who asked that I remain a time and see to his business for him, as he has been unwell.”

“How is Panama?” I asked.

“Fine,” he said distantly. “My brother and I have a plantation and... I am married.” He watched my reaction closely.

“As you knew you would be.” I smiled. “Well, congratulations. Progeny as of yet?”

“She is with child,” he said with a frown.

I doubted he had suffered any hesitation in that matter.

“So is... Striker’s wife.” I pointed vaguely toward our friend.

They had pushed the boat away with only Otter’s body on it.

“Now we should join our friends,” I said.

We wound our way through the loose clusters of men until we were amongst our cabal. Liam waded unsteadily into the water with a torch and tossed it. The boat caught fire with a menacing whoosh, and Pete looped an arm about Liam’s chest and fetched him back to shore. All was silent for a moment as we watched the boat burn. Then an amazing sound issued from among us, and we all turned to find Cudro singing. It was in Dutch, a lament judging by the sound of it, though I could not quite follow the words. I had wondered if the man could sing with that voice of his. He surely could.

Liam stared at him in wonder, and then bent over sobbing and cursing, and turned back to the burning boat. Pete and I caught him up and got his arms about our shoulders. We had to support him as we stood there: he was past the ability to do so himself.

Thus we held him until the boat was burnt away and sank beneath the waves. It took longer than one would think, but not nearly long enough to truly say goodbye. In the wake of Cudro's song, I stood listening to the crackling fire and Liam's quiet sobs, and wandered through my memories of the last year. I wondered how I could convey any of it to Alonso, when he obviously held the Brethren in such disdain.

Then I thanked the Gods I had left him sleeping.

Fifty-One

Wherein We Battle Ghosts

As the fire burned down, some men slipped away in twos and threes, and returned to town or into the fort. Soon, only our cabal and Alonso were left standing on the shore.

I looked to the others. "Shall we stay here, then? I feel Liam is ready to sleep now."

Liam was nearly asleep between us, as it was.

"Aye," Striker agreed with a doting smile.

He tousled Liam's hair and earned a sad smile in return.

"I do na' wan' be alone," Liam slurred.

"We will be with you," Striker assured him.

He looked to the rest of us. "I'm not sure who will remain sober. We should set watches."

"Aye, and that will see to this fortress," I said. "But what of the rest?"

Sounds of revelry and the light of fires drifted across the harbor.

"Bradley has taken some men and gone out on the road to Panama," Striker said. "According to Cork, there is a defensible defile somewhere near here, and the road can easily be held by a small number of men."

I grinned. "I will sleep better, then. I feel the rest of the town could be taken from us by but a small number of men, with so many of ours under the sway of Bacchus."

Striker nodded and took another pull on the bottle he held. "So we will hold this fort, Morgan will hold the middle, and Bradley will hold the road. The rest may revel to their heart's content."

"Wonderful. Let us remember to bar and brace that storeroom door,"

I said.

"We did that," Julio grinned. "Not that the Spanish could have mustered four madmen."

Alonso was curious, and so I told him of how we took the fort as we walked back to it. He was sincerely impressed and expressed it. This seemed to amuse Pete, once I translated.

The fort was filled with rowdy buccaneers who did not wish to go into town. Julio led us to the officer's quarters in one corner of the building. We eschewed them, though, as they did not have ready access to any portion of the place from which we could overlook the harbor. Thus we found ourselves atop the wide wall where it most protruded into the water. We lit a fire in a brazier, and Striker and Pete went to find food in the kitchen before our men ate it all. We brought up a mattress that did not smell profoundly, and laid it out for Liam. He was too drunk and exhausted to protest.

Relieved of one burden, I addressed another, and released Alonso from his bonds so he could see to his needs, under my watchful eye.

"You truly would shoot me if I attempted to escape?" he asked as he relieved himself.

I could not contain my amusement. "Assuredly and with alacrity."

He seemed hurt by this; and I sobered, though bemusement now gripped me.

"What would you have of me, Alonso?" I asked sincerely.

He glanced over his shoulder to the place where Gaston sat with the others. Alonso and I were far enough from them to converse in private. My matelot looked toward us, and I smiled at him. I was pleased he had found the wherewithal to keep his jealousy in check for the moment.

When I looked back at Alonso, I found him watching me. He quickly returned to looking over the harbor.

"You have grown thin," he said.

I chuckled. "You have grown."

He snorted, and sucked in his belly, though in truth there was not much of one. Yet I could see he was on the road to ruin in that regard.

"Such vanity," I chided gently. "You are still as handsome as ever." It was not a lie.

"I would say the same," he said while studying me, "if I could perceive you through the layer of filth."

"It is fat," I said. "Well, most of it. It keeps the insects at bay."

"Ah, well I can understand the need here. This place stinks, and it is home to all manner of pestilence, but the worst of it is the damn insects. I could not bring myself to roll in lard, though."

"Do you drink the water?" I asked.

"No, I drink the wine," he said.

"That may be why you live."

"How so?" he asked.

"Poor water holds little insects that might make one ill: very tiny insects that one can see with lenses," I said.

"What?" he asked with a good deal of incredulity.

I sighed. "Gaston is a physician, and he has studied such things."

He gave my matelot an even more incredulous look. "Truly?"

"Truly," I sighed. "And the son of a Marquis."

I felt the fool for adding that last. I did not need to prove Gaston in those terms. It galled me that the next glance Alonso threw his way held respect. He had always put great stock in breeding.

"So, do you have a wife as well as a lover?" he asked.

I felt the stirrings of annoyance. "As all good sons do, I took a wife to appease my father. He wishes an heir. It is complicated... I wish to keep him at bay and yet stay in his good graces for the time being. Gaston is my life, though. If he told me to put her on the street, I would. If he told me to wish my father to the Devil and damn the consequences, I would."

He watched the bay in contemplative silence.

"And what of you?" I asked. "Have you some lover you keep tucked away?"

He shook his head and smiled. "Uly, I have not taken a lover since you."

I raised an eyebrow. "Do tell? No men at all?"

"Men si, lovers no," he shrugged dismissively.

"Ah," I said with the taint of sarcasm. "I have only had the one."

He snorted derisively. "You jest. You, an avowed sodomite among so many, and only the one? You truly have not seduced that golden god I fought?" he asked quietly.

I grinned. "No. He is with the dark-haired one."

I pointed. Striker was reclining across Pete's lap.

"They have been together ten... no, eleven years now," I said. "The Brethren of the Coast do not go about seducing one another's matelots, else there would be very few of us indeed, and we would travel nowhere for all the dueling."

He laughed. I had forgotten what a rich, musical sound it was.

"So just the one?" he asked as he sobered. "How did he win you?" His eyes had grown quite serious in the torchlight.

"We share a commonality of the spirit," I said and shrugged.

I looked to Gaston and thought of how best to say it. He felt my gaze upon him and turned to me. I smiled, and so did he. His eyes were coals that warmed my heart, and I once again found myself filled with the ache of loving him. He stood and approached, and I heard Alonso sigh, most probably with frustration that our talk would be interrupted. But Gaston came and handed me a bottle, kissed me lightly on the cheek, and went back to the others. I wanted to jump atop him and smother him with kisses.

I took a pull on the bottle and handed it to Alonso.

I shrugged. "We saw one another and were mutually smitten."

"I thought you said he does not favor men." There was the hint of challenge in his tone.

My grin widened. "He does not favor men, he favors me."

"So you feel you have found the love you sought," he said sadly.

"Si, I feel that very deeply."

"You left me because I could not love you... without discretion, did you not?" he asked carefully.

I wondered if I need say more.

I shrugged again. "That was the main thrust of it, si. I have since learned that... after my cousin... I am resentful... was resentful, of all those who came into my life before who... could not place me above the imagined sin or disgrace."

He nodded thoughtfully, but it was something of a feint. I could not see his thoughts, but I could see his movements as if we were sparring. He had changed so very little. I wondered at myself and what he saw.

"And if you were in Christendom somewhere with this Frenchman," he asked, "do you feel he would behave there as he does here?"

"Alonso," I chided, "I well know it is different here."

"Is that why you came to the West Indies?" he asked quickly.

I shook my head slowly and considered what I would say on that matter. "No. I came because my father would not allow me to kill that cousin, and I realized there might be merit in inheriting from him, though it will never occur. So when he wished for me to oversee the venture of a plantation, I agreed."

"And then the Frenchman enticed you into becoming a pirate," he said.

I grinned. "I was enamored of the idea before I met him."

"And then you were enamored enough of him to follow him anywhere," he said with a trace of anger. He sighed and shook his head. "I am sorry. I am somewhat bitter still over your leavetaking. I... Uly, I would have gone elsewhere with you. You were correct, you would have lived as a servant here; that is all that would have been tolerated, and you would have been miserable. I was wrong to ask it of you. But, it need not have..."

He shook his head irritably this time and met my eyes. "I miss you. I miss the life we had. I am... miserable."

His confession cut deep, well past any armor about my heart that time and the new understandings of our relationship had built. I had given him more than two years of my life quite happily once.

"I am sorry, Alonso. I..." would not lie.

I smiled sadly and pushed myself up to sit on the crenelation of the wall. "Let us talk freely this night. You will not reclaim me, and it is likely we will not see each other again. I would not have us harbor confusion as to motive or... matters of the heart."

He nodded thoughtfully, and the tension left him in a prolonged sigh. He came a little closer and joined me in sitting on the wall.

"Why did you leave?" he asked. "Were you so truly unhappy with what we had? Did I give you great misery?"

Everything I had said to Gaston about him tumbled through my head, and I suppressed a grim smile. I would not speak that freely. Yet

there were things I realized Alonso had never really known.

"When I left my father's house... I carried a wound, a deep festering wound, that even now is not fully healed," I said carefully.

"Your cousin?"

"Si," I sighed.

I struggled to remember what precisely I had told Alonso about that matter. I had not discussed it with any lover I took prior to him, but I had spoken to him of it; however, my telling him of it had been under the aegis of strong drink, and I did not remember it well and wondered if he did, either.

I shrugged. "I am not sure what I told you. So I will tell you this now. My second cousin, Shane, with whom I first learned of love, reviled being a man-lover and blamed me for his lust. He abused me often and took me by force on many occasions."

"I do not recall you putting it so bluntly," Alonso said.

I smiled. "I doubt I did. I have only learned to speak of it of late. I... You were the first I told. And as I believe you know, you were the first I allowed to take me after him. Not that I allowed him... though."

I shook my head at my folly in feeling the need to explain that.

"I did not believe you," he said quietly.

"What?" I asked with more surprise than rancor.

"I did not believe you," he shrugged apologetically. "I am sorry. I thought... Many claim a lack of experience and..." He met my eyes sadly. "Things occur when one is intoxicated that we wish not to remember. I thought you paid me honor by insisting upon it, that I was the first since the tragedy had befallen you. Though, damn it Uly, I did not truly understand that, either."

"What did you think had occurred?" I asked.

He shrugged with his hands and sighed expansively. "I thought you had a bad affair and it ended poorly, and that in your youth he had been a bit forceful with you and you had found you liked it little. Receiving is seldom pleasant and..."

"No," I said quickly. "Receiving is very pleasant, if... one is properly prepared or well used to it."

He appeared stricken and a trifle embarrassed. "I have not experienced it and... my lovers have..."

"Expressed otherwise, as you have not prepared them as you did not know you should," I said. "So you thought I had been startled by... Well, that explains a great deal. I thought you just an insensitive arse."

He winced.

I shook my head. "But I truly did not speak of it in a way to make you understand, and without knowledge imparted from me, how were you to know otherwise? Alonso, my cousin would beat me until I was too stupefied to fight him, pin me face down on my own bed, and take me by force with little lubrication save my own blood. In thinking back on it, I am not sure how he stood it. I know my member prefers to slide rather than grate."

He was stricken. "Oh God, Uly," he sighed. "Oh, God. I am so sorry. I used you poorly in many ways."

His distress was genuine, and I felt pity for him.

"It was not your doing alone," I said. "I could not tell you. While I was with you I... knew it should not hurt. But I thought it a thing that applied to others, and that I was merely tight and perhaps damaged by Shane, and therefore it could not feel for me as it should. So I said nothing. I would get drunk and let you and I said nothing. And I could not discuss the cause of it all, either. I knew not how; my shame was so great. The first time I told Gaston, I vomited profusely. I have since learned that it is a thing that occurred and I must face it. I cannot dissemble about it, especially to myself."

"Still, I am sorry for being blind and stupid," he said sincerely. He glanced to Gaston. "Does it still pain you?"

"No. Only if I am tense," I sighed. "But you must understand. We put great effort into preparing me. We spent weeks lying about pleasuring one another with him atop me and his fingers up my arse. Now I feel it a natural thing, and I do not fear intrusion there or the weight of another. Weeks, Alonso, and we spent months talking first. When I said Gaston and I possessed a commonality of spirit, I meant that we tend with equal fervor toward what you always considered sophism. We talk a great deal, such that I am sure we would bore any who listened." I held his eyes with mine and smiled kindly. "You and I never talked, not like this."

He smiled sadly in return. "No, we did not. I have never spoken of such things with anyone." He looked to Gaston again and sighed. "I understand why you are with him now. I understand why you left."

I shook my head but I smiled. "No, I do not think you do, yet. I am sorry I left as I did. It was cowardly. Truly cowardly. Yet I knew if I stayed until you woke, and told you of my decision, you would have persuaded me not to go, or wished to accompany me, and I did not feel that would have been best for either of us. Alonso, I left because your words of that night touched me and made me think. You said that it was time for us to mature and put aside boyish pastimes and accept being men. I realized I needed to banish the demon that haunted me, and face my father for whatever it was worth and... I returned to England to kill Shane."

"Did you?" he asked sincerely.

"No," I sighed. "My father kept him from me, and an old friend instructed me on the folly of it. I would have hanged or been running from the law in a manner I had not before. So I came here, thinking if I could gain my father's good graces, perhaps I could supplant my cousin in his heart somehow. It was a foolish thing, and one I am embarrassed to admit. Yet, I feel there was perhaps a guiding hand in all of it, as Fate surely smiled upon me. I am far more content with life than I have ever been. I am not at peace with myself, but I am at least allied."

"I am truly happy for you in that regard," he said sadly. "I was a fool

then, and I have been a fool since.”

“Alonso, as I said...”

“No, no.” He waved me off. “Not for that alone. There is the thing you did express displeasure to me about, and I did nothing to assuage that, either.”

“It is different here,” I said.

I grinned. Pete and Striker were kissing. I gestured to them.

“Very different here,” I continued. “And I asked much of you there. And my need hinged upon... the tragedy that had befallen me, as you so aptly named it. I could not have conveyed it well to another, but... in addition to the idea that sodomy was painful for me, I labored under the conceit that if a man did not feel he should be with me, in that I was a man, and yet he chose to bugger me anyway, then that was love. And I have since learned that is not love. So, in a manner of thought, I truly did not leave you because you could not love me without discretion, but because I would not have recognized you loving me at all. Was that intelligible?”

He smiled. “I did not understand love, either.”

“It is not an easy thing to understand,” I said. “It has destroyed nations and brought all manner of fools to ruin.”

“So you truly have found love here?” he asked.

“Si, though in all honesty, if I had known what true love entailed, I would have run screaming in fear from it as well. But I am a fool.” I smiled.

He chuckled and frowned, not at me but at the others. I followed his gaze. Pete had mounted Striker and they were storming the gates quite happily. I chuckled at Alonso’s discomfiture.

“You see this all the time?” he asked.

I laughed. “We live upon very crowded ships for months at a time. You become inured to it, both the seeing of it and the being seen.”

I looked to Gaston and found him watching us. I remembered what he wished to do that night, and my gut churned. After the discussion Alonso and I had held I no longer wished to wave anything under Alonso’s nose. Yet, with Gaston’s current mercurial disposition, I was not sure how I could avoid it without an argument I wished for Alonso to witness even less.

“I have never seen... They are quite...,” Alonso was muttering while still watching the lovers.

“Si, they are quite.” I grinned anew. “Made even more amazing in that none of us have slept in more than a day, we rowed and marched through all of last night, took a town today, including rowing about the harbor, and still they go at it with enthusiasm.”

Alonso chuckled. “So are all of you pirates sodomites?”

“No. We have just long been plagued with a shortage of suitable women and we live like sailors. And we do not perceive ourselves as pirates as you so freely use the word,” I teased. “We are buccaneers, the Brethren of the Coast of the Haiti and we sail under a marque granted

by the Governor of Jamaica to make tacit war against Spain. As you must know, there is no peace beyond the Line."

He nodded soberly, though to my amusement, his eyes did not leave Pete and Striker.

"No, there is not," he said at last. "There are many here who would drive you English out, and the Dutch and French as well."

"We intend to stay," I said. "And as the King will not spare troops or ships, we are the English military force in the West Indies, horrifying though that may be."

He nodded. "You are correct; I have been naming you wrongly. You are mercenaries."

"Just so," I said.

Pete and Striker finished with mutual grunts and barks; and Alonso shook himself as if waking, and turned away from them to look out over the water again. I chuckled.

He was thoughtful when he looked to me. "None here thought you would be so bold or be able to amass so many, though this is a small number to take a town such as this."

I shrugged. "Si, we have a very ambitious commander, and an even craftier governor."

"Are you the same force which attacked a town in Cuba in March?" he asked.

I nodded.

"What next?" he grinned.

I gave a disparaging snort and grinned. "As if I would tell you if I knew. I truly do not know. As it is mid-summer, I imagine we will return to Port Royal. Many of us have plantations to attend to, and there are wives and businesses and the like, and none of us like to be sailing about during the storm season."

I studied his profile and thought about the future. I supposed I had much to look forward to. "Are you truly miserable?"

Alonso shook his head. "It is... tedious. I miss the way we lived. I missed the ever-changing string of lovers, the parties, the intrigues, the money.... My family is not so very wealthy. There is wealth enough; but Uly, we lived very well indeed in Florence."

I chuckled appreciatively. "Si, that we did."

"What with the marriage, and coming here, and establishing a household, and investments needed in the plantation and... taxes." He swore softly. "I spent much of what Teresina gave me. I am not poor, and yet even if I felt wealthy, there is little to do with it here. Gambling and whores to be sure, but it all lacks allure for me now. Not much to do but hunt on occasion, and check on the doings of our overseers. My brother did not need me here to help with the plantation's management as he claimed; no, he needed additional capital, and his shrewish wife was bored and wished for the company of another. She drives poor Maria to distraction, and there is nothing I can do for her, or me. I find myself snapping at her because she is not... She is simply not what

I would wish. She is a simple and virtuous girl, raised in a convent. Carnal activities are to take place with the lamps out and the covers tucked all about."

I laughed, and he regarded me sharply. I waved my hands in supplication.

"She sounds quite unlike, yet like, my wife, though that is a long story," I said.

He smiled. "Not like the women we were accustomed to, si?"

"Si." I chuckled.

He sighed and shook his head sadly. "If I attempt to please her, she becomes quite distraught and thinks it is improper and we must confess to the priest."

"And so," I teased. "Mistresses?"

"It is not so easy. All know one another's business, and there is little I could do in that regard unless I had the tacit consent of my brother or some of his friends. My going off by myself would be tantamount to having an affair, no matter the destination. And my brother frowns upon such things."

"Men?" I asked.

He chuckled ruefully before sighing and considering the water thoughtfully. "There is an officer who may have desires such as ours. I have been leery of pursuing the matter."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why? I would think a *friendship* with a man might be easier to explain."

He snorted. "It would; but I am afraid, in the absence of all other excitements, that... I will become easily and sincerely enamored with any I may dally with. And I fear I will lose them as I did you, because here, I surely cannot love them as they may wish, or allow them to love me as I may wish. So you see, losing you has stripped me of much of my callous disregard for anything but my own pleasure."

"Oh, Alonso," I sighed. "Truly, I do not know whether to applaud or pity you in that."

He grinned. "For the good of my soul, applaud me. For all else, I will take whatever pity you feel you may bestow."

The entendre was strong in his voice, and I shook my head sadly.

"I can offer you ought but words," I said. "Gaston would kill you if I were to but touch you."

He took a sharp breath, and nodded his bemused acquiescence. "I see."

"See that you do," I smiled reassuringly. "Though he is behaving such that he has earned my undying admiration this night, be aware that he takes his jealousy very seriously, as do I. We do not toy with one another."

"God, I envy you," he sighed. "And you can tell your Frenchman I am jealous, too."

"Let us not," I said.

I looked to Gaston again. He had stood, and was now watching us

with arms crossed and hard eyes. I wondered at the change, especially on the heels of my praising him for his forbearance, and then my gut churned. How was I ever going to make him understand that I could not do as he wished?

"And speaking of that, I need to see to him now," I said quickly. I looked back to Alonso. "I feel we should bind you again, in some fashion."

"I give you my word I will not attempt to escape," he said solemnly.

"And I accept that; your word, however..." I shrugged.

He looked about at the others, who were paying no attention to us, and raised an eloquent eyebrow.

"They care not now because I have taken responsibility for you," I said.

He cocked his head. "Uly, what is amiss?"

I could not tell him – after all of my protestations of love – that I needed to go and argue with my matelot and, perhaps... do other things... and I did not want him about where he could witness such.

I glanced to Gaston again, and found he had moved closer.

"I will not explain," I told Alonso. "If you are still my friend, you will do as I ask. If not, then you are my prisoner and you will do as I ask."

"Is it him you must appease in this?" Alonso whispered.

I did not like his choice of words. "It is the way of a partnership, is it not?" I said harshly. "I *appeased* you often enough."

He sucked his breath in and studied me with both speculation and pain. It hurt, but if I had to anger one of them, it was far better it was Alonso.

"As you wish," he sighed.

"I am sorry," I sighed in return. "We will speak again on the morrow."

I cast about and spied a cannon. "Sit there," I said, pointing at the end of the carriage.

He did as I bade, and I bound his wrists before him, to an iron ring for the ropes used to run the weapon in and out.

"You should be able to lie after a fashion," I said with a tired sigh. I knew I would not be comfortable if bound so, but at least he could scratch his nose.

"I will come around and see to you later," I added.

He snorted. "I doubt you will see to the needs I wish seen to," he teased.

"Alonso..." I chided in warning.

I could feel Gaston near us, and as I stood and turned, I found myself face to face with him.

"Let us go and speak," I murmured in French.

My matelot's eyes narrowed; however, he gave no immediate protest, and followed me as I walked away.

I descended the stairs to the central courtyard and began walking the perimeter, checking doors. The barracks, kitchen, store room, and

even the damn armory were now occupied by trysting or snoring men. At last I reached the stable. To my surprise and enmity toward the Gods, it was empty save for the horses. I did not wish to argue with him in a damn stable, but I saw little choice, as I thought it likely the rooms across the fort were also occupied: I saw none of our reveling men in the yard now.

I turned to find Gaston still following me, slowly, with his arms tightly crossed.

"This is private," he remarked coldly, when at last he joined me in the stable.

"Oui," I sighed. "I wish for privacy."

"I thought we planned another diversion this night," he said.

It was dark, but I did not wish to see the light glitter in his eyes, I could very well hear the edge in his voice.

"I cannot," I said quickly. "I cannot do as we planned before him."

"Why?" he hissed.

"I... I... Damn it, Gaston! I do not know if I can explain when you are thus. You must listen to me. This is not a thing of my loving him. Non, it is a thing of my loving you. I will not have him witness us. I will not have him witness..." I trailed off as I realized what I would say next: I would not have him witness me... being taken by another. Not when he would see it as a matter of ... servicing, or accommodating, or even his damned *appeasing*.

"You no longer wish to wave it under his nose?" Gaston asked harshly.

He had been advancing on me, and I found myself backed to the wall.

"I would gladly flaunt our love and lust if I thought he would understand," I said. "I cannot explain now why I do not feel he would appreciate what we showed him, or perhaps he would, and that is why I will not show him. I do not know, damnit! Much was said tonight, and I need time to think on it."

"You are mine," he hissed, and his hands were upon my shoulders.

"Always!" I tried to throw my arms about him but he held me away. "Gaston?"

"He still loves you, oui?" he growled.

"Oui," I sighed. "He still loves me. And oui, he still wants me. But..."

"I will kill him," he snarled, and released me.

My anger finally flared in full measure: not for Alonso, but for me.

I grabbed Gaston's shoulder as he turned away. "Non, you shall not," I hissed. "You will listen to me. You will control yourself. You know what state you are in. Trust me."

In the darkness, I did not see the blow: I saw stars behind my eyes, and then he was upon me. We wrestled, but I have never been his match. My ringing head did not aid in the matter: I was greatly disoriented. Despite my struggles and attempts to escape, he soon managed to pin me on my belly. I knew well what he would do next,

and I ceased fighting. I lay there in the straw in despair, offering neither aid nor resistance as he pulled my breeches down. I heard him grease himself, and thought that strange. It was not a thing he had done before. Perhaps this time would be different.

Then he was in me, and it did not hurt as it always had. I struggled anew, but this time to find purchase so that I could better meet his thrusts. My cock was hard and ill pleased with the straw: it poked and scratched and did not offer warmth. I wished to comfort it, but if I did not support my head and shoulders he would drive me face first into that same straw.

At last, his pounding slowed, and he leaned down to whisper, "You want this, from *me*."

The words were odd. He had said them before, so many times before, but tonight they were in French. I did not know he spoke French.

And he was wrong. I did not want it from him. I wanted it from Gaston. He had taken what belonged to Gaston. It was not his. It was no one else's. I did not wish to share it with anyone.

He finished with a growl of pleasure and quickly withdrew.

I did not wallow in my shame and rage. I had done enough of that. I fumbled with my breeches and felt about for my belt. I only rose when I had my rapier and dagger in hand.

He seemed quite surprised at my first lunge. He dove away and drew his weapons.

"Will!" he cried hoarsely.

I knew he wished to keep us within the stable, so I drove him out. I wanted the world to see that I would fight him.

I was better than he, as I had always known I would be. He fell away before every rush, and did not return them. I chased him about the yard.

Then there were others about. They yelled things I could not understand.

Then a new shadow loomed to my right. He looked toward the presence, as I continued to lunge forward. I too was forced to react to the looming bodies hurtling toward us. He blocked my blade at the last moment, diverting it up, and we slammed into one another, our right arms locked together. Someone grabbed my left before I could bring the dagger in. I slashed savagely with my sword as I attempted to pull free. I smelled blood.

Then the world exploded, and once again I saw stars, millions of them; and I thought them the Gods, and felt they welcomed me: I reached for them as the darkness closed in.

I dreamt of a Hell in which all the villains who had ever darkened my life chased me through every abode I had ever occupied. I screamed and fought and ran until there seemed nothing left of me. I was bound and gagged and helpless before them. And then their ranks were filled with faces of those I thought my friends: Striker, Pete, Liam, Cudro, Farley, and even, curiously, Alonso. They would not deliver me, and in

that they became as monstrous as those I sought to escape. Until at last I saw a familiar pair of emerald eyes, and the dream fled before their power, and I woke from it, as if I had been drowning, with a great gasp of air as I broke the surface of consciousness.

He was there; he was real. I was still bound, though, and I could not talk. Panic gripped me, but he calmed me with small words I could not understand and hovered above me so that he was all I could see. I finally made sense of what he said.

"Be calm, my love. You must not fight. All is well. I love you," he murmured in French.

I ceased pulling at the ropes about my wrists and tried to assess my surroundings. Wan light leaked through the shutters of a window high on the stone wall beyond my feet. It competed with lamplight somewhere to my right. There was a wall on my left. There was a curious crucifix upon the wall above my head: a snake seemed to be curling around Jesus' legs. The bed stank as most do, but this one doubly so with urine and feces, and I felt that I had fouled myself. I was not gagged *per se*, as there was nothing across my mouth; but there was something about my head so that I could not open my jaw, which ached horribly. My left eye also troubled me: it would not open fully. My throat felt raw, and my wrists and ankles hurt from their bonds, but the rest of me did not seem to be in pain, though I hungered and thirsted greatly.

There were other people in the room beyond Gaston, I could hear them moving about and even breathing and sighing.

I could not understand where I was, or why. I sought the last things I could remember and found only the nightmare. But then part of it took on a clarity denied dreams: I had fought Shane.

"Shane," I hissed through my closed jaw.

Gaston frowned.

"Shane," I tried again.

I attempted to peer around him, but he held me down with his hand. Then I saw that his right arm was in a sling, and a great blood-stained bandage was wound about his naked chest. He must have fought Shane as well.

He was still puzzling my muddled words. "Shane?" he queried.

I nodded vigorously. "*I fought Shane.*"

He frowned sadly, and a great number of things raced through his eyes. "He is gone. You won. You are safe."

His gaze was compelling me to... remember. I found myself in Plato's cave. I faced the wall. The light was so damn bright from behind me that all the shadows on the wall danced. I was free; I could turn to face the light and see truth. But I was terrified to do so. I kept my eyes steadfastly on the wall.

"*I love you,*" I said as best I could.

He nodded. "And I love you. And I know it will pain you more than most," he smiled, "but you must stop trying to speak. Your jaw is fractured. I am going to release you now. Be still and calm."

He looked over his shoulder and spoke somewhat harshly in English. "Cut him free or give me a blade."

There was great sigh beyond him. "All right, if you feel he's calm." It was Striker.

"Does he not appear calm?" Gaston asked, and accepted a knife.

My wrists were soon free, and I helped Gaston remove the bracelets of rope about them. My flesh was quite raw. Then I examined the bandage that was wound about my head. The right side of my jaw was excruciatingly tender at the back, beneath my ear. Gaston's look was chiding, as if I were a child, and I withdrew my hand.

"I will examine Farley's work later," he whispered in French, and turned to free my ankles.

Striker came to loom over us and eye me with curiosity and concern. I met his gaze in like measure. He frowned.

"Are you well now?" he asked.

As I was not sure in what way I had ailed, other than a damaged jaw, I gave him a look of incomprehension and pointed at my jaw.

Peter appeared next to Striker, looking both concerned and guilty. "EBEAddled?"

Gaston was annoyed by the question. He returned Striker's knife to him and looked to me with a reluctant mien. "Do you know your name?"

I nodded and frowned. I was Will; who else could I have been?

My matelot's eyes had narrowed. "Are you the Viscount of Marsdale?"

Nay, I was Will. I shook my head and tried to frown with even more perplexity to make my point.

He smiled. "Do you know where you are?"

That surprised me, or rather my having no ready answer did. I shook my head sadly.

"Do you remember... how you came to be injured?" he asked carefully.

I nodded. Someone had struck me while I fought Shane. "*Shane*," I said.

Gaston's smile was reassuring, but his words filled me with concern.

"He is addled," he told Pete, "but I do not know if it is because you broke his jaw."

"IBESorry,Will," Pete said. "ButYaBe..."

"Non," Gaston said sharply. "I will tell him what he wishes to hear, but it is the way of these things that a man usually remembers in his own time," he added calmly. "Now let me bathe him. Will one of you bring water and a tub?"

"I'll find something and bring water," Cudro said from somewhere in the room, and I heard a door open and more weak light flooded the ceiling.

"I tried ta keep 'im clean, but what with all..." Liam said sadly.

"It is not your fault, Liam. Thank you for caring for him," Gaston

said, and turned to look at Liam even though the movement obviously pained him. "And Pete, do not blame yourself for his condition. I am pleased you hit him when you did."

Pete gave a snort of amusement and withdrew.

Striker had stepped back as Gaston had turned.

"I'm sorry," he said: to my matelot, not me.

"You should be," Gaston said with a touch of anger. "If you had let me come to him days ago, he might not be..."

"And he might have tried to kill you again," Striker said quietly, with a guilty glance at me. "And what the Devil was I to do? You tried to kill Cudro and Farley, and he's been raving for four days and trying to strike anyone he saw."

I was stunned by his words. The light at the cave mouth flared such that I could no longer see the shadows on the wall. I almost did not hear what was said next. I endeavored to not think about the light, and to merely concentrate on what I heard. I could think later. They were merely saying words. They need not be about me.

"I would have been calm if you had let me get to Will," Gaston was saying coldly. "And I might have calmed him as I did now."

"Might," Striker said.

"May we have our bags?" Gaston asked. "You can lock us in here if you fear for the fortress."

Striker sighed with annoyance and hung his head. "Damn it, Gaston. I made the best decision I could. It's hard enough knowing the two of you'll kill each other someday. Maybe I'd like to keep that day as far away as possible."

"You come between us again, and it is not our deaths you need worry about," Gaston said.

Striker sucked wind in a long and warding breath, and then his gaze darted to me. I glared at him, because though I knew not what they spoke of, I trusted Gaston that Striker had kept him from me.

Striker winced at what he found in my eyes. "Oh, fuck me," he muttered. "All right, never, I swear it. I swear it on my unborn child. I will never attempt to separate the two of you again, even if you have blades at each other's throats...again."

"Thank you," Gaston said.

"Your gear is under that cot Will's on." Striker began to leave us.

"And Striker," Gaston said quietly to his back. "I know it is because you love us, but it is... *our* problem. And we must live or die with it."

"Try not to die with it," Striker said sadly, and then he turned to frown at Gaston. "And, someday, I would bloody well like to know what happened that night."

Gaston sighed. "If Will wishes to tell you, he will."

With a grim smile, Striker left us. The door closed in his wake with reassuring solidity. We were alone and safe.

Gaston turned slowly back to me with a grimace of pain. He should have laudanum. Striker had said our bags were under the bed. I moved

to sit.

Then everything else they had said tumbled through my head, and I felt it was like a great press of people pushing me ever closer to the cave entrance with all their jostling. If I was not careful, they would turn me toward the light. I closed my eyes.

"Will, all is well. Do not think about it. You do not have to, now," Gaston murmured. His hand was soothing upon my shoulder.

I finished sitting, slowly, and opened my eyes. I was disgustingly aware of having soiled myself, and that served to push the other thoughts away quite handily. I looked about. We were in a small square room with stone walls. I could not recall seeing it before. This realization did not bring forth the fear of looking into the light.

I gestured about us and raised an eyebrow: my right, as my left eye was quite sore. I fingered the pained side curiously and found it bruised. Gaston watched me with a glum mien of guilt. I decided that the reason for it was another thing I dared not look at.

"We are in an officer's room at the fortress we took in Porto Bello," he said, with a note of query.

I let myself consider it. I knew where Porto Bello was, and then I remembered we had come here to take the town. Images of the battles flashed through my memory, ending with a boat on fire. Someone had died: Otter. That hurt, and I quickly winced away from it like a man burned.

Gaston moved so that he was in front of me, kneeling between my legs, his eyes boring into mine. I nodded for his benefit and kissed his nose. He appeared somewhat relieved.

There was a knock on the door, and at Gaston's call, Cudro, Nickel, and Liam entered with a small washtub and four pails of water. Once they deposited their burdens, they regarded us curiously. I tried to appear sane and not addled, if indeed that was what I was. My meeting their gazes and smiling, such as I could with the bandage about my jaw, seemed to please them.

"It na' be hot," Liam said and kicked a pail.

"It's not cold either," Cudro said with a forced hearty chuckle. "Nothing here is."

"It will be fine, thank you," Gaston assured them.

They gave a final nod to me and slipped out. Once again I was relieved to hear the door shut between us and the world.

"Our weapons are here, too," Gaston remarked with a sad smile as he looked beneath the bed.

I nodded my pleasure at that. Then I saw that the effort of trying to pull our bags from beneath the bed pained him greatly. I gently nudged him away and moved to kneel on the floor, pull all of our things out, and deposit them on the mattress.

"You can be our body, and I will be our head and mouth," Gaston said with a sad smirk.

I grinned as best I could. The idea suited me. I did not wish to

think, and though there was much I might wish to say to him, it would most probably involve thought, and there I was at that again.

Gaston explored the room as I emptied one of the pails into the tub. He found a chamber pot, and paper and ink, but seemed to have even more delight at discovering a spoon in a drawer. I understood why this find would outrank the paper, which might allow me to communicate, when he scraped accumulated hogs' fat and filth from my arm with the side of the spoon.

We quickly stripped and took great care in scraping each other clean, depositing all of the muck in the pot. Only when I had been nearly scraped as raw as my wrists did I squat in the tepid water of the tub and bathe as best I could with a rag and soap. My skin was marred in many places with boils and pustules, and Gaston set about draining them and applying rum and poultices. He then applied salve to my wrists and ankles and bandaged them. Despite the occasional discomfort, it was all very peaceful and calming. It felt good just to have him touch me. It felt good to be cared for.

At last he unwrapped my head and examined my jaw. I considered speaking, as I could have, but it truly hurt such that I was actually afraid it might crack further or some such thing if I did try to speak. He seemed to understand, as he asked nothing of me; though he did appear to be deep in thought and on the verge of speech himself, he did not make a sound as he shaved me, trimmed my hair, and bandaged me again.

Then it was my turn to tend to him. I was curious to unwind his bandage, but he urged me to bathe him everywhere else first; and so I did, taking pleasure in touching him and soothing his hurts as best I could. His wrists were as raw as mine, and he was quite bruised. It appeared he had fought hard, and then I began to consider what and when he had fought, and I began to recall his words with Striker and my mind stumbled badly. I was forced to close my eyes and grip the side of the tub for a time. When I dared open them, I found his green eyes before me.

"I should have asked when I had your jaw unwrapped," he said.

I shook my head and pointed at the paper.

He gave a relieved sigh. "Shall we finish this first?"

I nodded and continued. I applied poultices to the few boils he had developed beneath all of the damn hogs' fat, and then at last we turned to his chest. Once it was revealed, I was aghast at the wound. It ran diagonally from the thick muscle of his right shoulder – where it had cut deep, thus making it difficult for him to use his right arm until it healed – down across his chest, to the middle of his ribs. Thankfully, it had not been mortal, as the blade that made it had been stopped by his breastbone. But it was an ugly thing; there were dozens of stitches, and the result once healed would be an even more ragged and puckered scar than those made by the whip, because it cut across them, and scarred skin never heals as unmarred flesh does.

I judged it to be a sword slash. That thought stirred something deep inside, and panic gripped me yet again.

His hand was upon my cheek. "It will heal," he murmured, and then with sad amusement, "We are even."

My heart pounded and my breath caught. Unseen hands clawed at me, dragging me toward the light. I put desperate fingers upon his lips.

His eyes held guilt as he gently pulled my hand away. He kissed my fingers and breathed, "I am sorry," upon them.

I was still in the clutches of fear and struggling to keep my gaze on the wall. The light blazed all around me, seeking to burn out my eyes.

"Will," Gaston said. "Find the mirror. I wish to examine Farley's work. It is a good thing I trained him well. Despite my..." He stopped with a sigh. "I feel he used a clean needle: it does not feel putrid, and I have not fevered much."

I was grateful to concentrate on finding the mirror; I was even able to allow myself to know he had set me upon that as a distraction. It was odd how aware I could be that I was avoiding thought, while at the same time doing so.

I came upon the laudanum as I looked for the mirror. I was dismayed to see how little was left. I wanted some. Actually, I wanted a great deal. But it should be for Gaston, who was obviously in pain.

Gaston took the bottle from me and regarded the amount with a sigh. "We shall both have a small amount so we can sleep. Perhaps we can go and look for more on the morrow. The damn surgeons will not think to use it; probably none here save Farley and I know how to make it, or that it diminishes pain. Since it is a thing of the Orient, and this port sits on the road to Spain from the Orient, it is likely they will have the proper pods; and none will think they are of value, and we can abscond with as much as we want."

I thought that a good plan. Perhaps then I could have as much as I wanted. I knew under its gentle embrace I would not feel tugged toward the cave mouth at all.

"But you cannot drown your sorrows in it," he said sternly, dispelling that happy thought. "It is madness of a different sort. You care for nothing else while under its influence, but when it is gone, everything is a thousand times more painful." He sighed. "I would not have survived the flogging without it, but I surely hated Doucette for later taking it away. That led to a bout of madness I have not equaled since."

There was something in his words that told me he expected me to look into the light... someday, perhaps soon.

I found the paper, ink, and quill, and wrote, *I do not wish to look into the light at the cave mouth.*

He smiled sadly as he read it. "You know it is there, though?" he asked while studying me.

I nodded.

"Then you are not addled," he said with relief.

Am I mad? I wrote.

He sighed and tried to shrug and quickly thought better of it. “Oui, after a fashion. But it is a madness you will recover from. When you wish.”

I do not wish to now, I wrote.

He smiled. “Then you shall frolic in the field for as long as you like. I will hold the cart. It is your turn. You have earned it.” This last made him sad, but he looked away and wiped his tears quickly.

I love you, I wrote.

He met my gaze again, with great love in his eyes. “I know, Will. I know it now more than ever. I never lost sight of that. I... You... fell, hard, and I knew I had to hold the cart and that all would be well. I knew the cart was strong and we would survive, even though... Non, I am sorry. There is much I must speak of when you are ready; but you are correct, now is not the time. It is my burden, and I will carry it for now. And Will, it no longer chafes.”

His words had brought the cave to mind again, but it was not so fearsome this time. The light seemed less harsh and not so angry. I was still not ready to turn to face it, but I was no longer terrified that I would have to.

Now that we had said all that need be said, we dosed ourselves with a small amount of laudanum and finished cleaning our clothes. Gaston’s tunic was so rent it would not easily be repaired. Thankfully he had a spare, but he eschewed attempting to don it. We also ate – or rather, Gaston chewed boucan and I satisfied my belly as much as I could by sucking upon slivers of apple and mango that would fit between my teeth and did not require chewing. Gaston promised me broth or soup on the morrow, and I salivated at the very mention of it. This made the fruit easier to swallow.

Then we reluctantly smeared a fine layer of fat upon us, and lay naked in the bed with our clothes left to dry – such as they would in the damn humidity – upon the chair and drawers. The cot was narrow, and as Gaston was comfortable doing little but lying upon his back, and I had to exercise great care with how I supported my head, it was a while before I could discover a position in which to sleep: on my side, with my back to the wall and the upper part of my head cushioned upon one of our bags.

Gaston quickly dozed, but I lay awake, almost afraid to sleep lest I dream of things I did not wish. I fingered my flaccid member idly, grateful it had not chosen to add to my confusion. I knew I was actually scared that its arousal would bring me back to fighting against the light in the cave: it has always proven to be a revelatory organ for me.

I wondered what the Gods were hiding from me in the light.

Fifty-Two

Wherein Madness Takes Its Toll

I woke several times in the night: a few awakenings were due to the nightmares I had feared, but other waking was due to Gaston prodding me to stop lying across his wounded chest, or my jaw giving protest to some untenable position into which I had attempted to settle. Despite all of that, or perhaps because of it, I was reluctant to rise with the light I saw streaming through the shutters and around the door. So was Gaston, and we lay there for a time in companionable silence, with our hands clasped and my lips worrying his upper arm in what little I could give him of a kiss.

"It will be weeks before I can kiss you properly," he mourned at long last.

I was appalled at the thought, and raised on my elbow to peer down at him with a grimace showing how disagreeable I found such a wait. He found amusement in this.

Then he sobered abruptly, and his regard became more speculative. "If... you wish to do a thing other than kiss, I am yours in any fashion you might desire."

I nodded solemnly. Until that moment, I had not thought of the cave since waking; now it loomed. I shied quickly from it, and with a sigh, crawled over him to avail myself of the chamber pot. Once I was through, I helped him rise so he could do likewise. He mentioned the other no more; but he did not meet my gaze as we dressed, and that troubled me almost as much as dealing with the damn cave over the matter.

He decided he would not wear a tunic for a time, and we applied more fat to his shoulders to keep them from burning. We donned our weapons. Just as he would not slip a garment over his head, he also chose not to wear his baldric, but I slipped mine over my shoulder with relish, taking comfort in the weight of my weaponry. We wrapped his right arm in the sling again, to keep it still. Even though he wore his sword belt, I was not sure what he could draw save his knives, but as he could not wield a rapier well in his condition, I guessed it did not matter. He stuffed a loaded pistol into his belt so he could use it with his left hand. And then he took the one he usually used with his right, and stuffed it into the sling above his arm.

As we were not sure if we could continue to claim the room as our own, we packed everything, including the paper and ink. I slung our bags and his baldric across my back and picked up our muskets. We would leave nothing behind. I felt no sorrow in this, as I liked this room little. It seemed a place of bad memories, just as the one we had occupied in Puerto del Principe had seemed a place of madness.

I stopped him in the doorway and kissed him sweetly upon the lips. His eyes were curious. I nuzzled his neck, wishing I could nip him a little. His good left hand was tentative upon my chest, and then it stole up around my neck and he pulled my mouth back to his for a firmer press of our lips. Then he embraced me as best he could, and we held one another for a time.

When at last we emerged into the light, we found the sun well up in the eastern sky. There were men upon the wall, but few in the courtyard where we stood; and Gaston eyed the gate wistfully, before reluctantly deciding we should speak to whoever might be about before we headed into town. I shared his reticence on the matter, as I thought of how Cudro, Nickel, and Liam had stared at me last night. I was not sure what had occurred, but I knew they were sure they knew.

Striker and Pete were amongst those talking, as were most of our cabal – including, to my amazement and consternation, Alonso. I had not been sure whether he was real, or merely another aspect of my dreams.

They all seemed surprised and happy to see us, but Striker stood and made a hurried interception.

He studied me critically, and seemed to view our being armed with annoyance.

“We are well enough,” Gaston assured him doggedly. “Will is... not himself, yet. He will recover. He does not wish to speak of what occurred, or have mention made of it. As I cannot see where most will honor that, we should stay away from the others. We need to find something for Will to eat, and then we need to search the town for laudanum.”

“I would rather have you go to the *Queen*, now that the ships have arrived,” Striker sighed. “But if you must, you’ll not go into town alone. And you’ll send someone to find me if you run afoul of Morgan.”

Gaston frowned at this. "Why?"

Striker sighed. "He wishes for Will to translate, and has been awaiting news of Will's recovery from a blow some Spaniard gave him."

I ignored Striker's words, and thought of Morgan and what he might want. The idea of translating the cries of tortured men filled me with dread: not the like of the cave, but of a more depressing and mundane variety. It was not a thing I wished to ever do. And obviously, I could not bring his demands to the good citizen hostages this time.

Gaston was shaking his head firmly. "Will cannot."

"Well, as he can't talk, I know that," Striker said with some exasperation. "That is not the problem; I do not want Morgan to see him if he is addled, or mad, or whatever state he is in."

My matelot sighed. "Neither do I."

"I'll send Liam with you," Striker said.

Gaston regarded Striker as if he were mad. "Did I not just say we do not wish to discuss the matter?"

Striker shook his head and smiled sadly. "Aye, aye, but take pity on him; with his matelot gone, he's not been himself, and he's been right worried about the two of you. I'm sure you can ask him to shut up if you explain why." His look said he did not accept any reason we had yet given him as adequate, but perhaps we could work some miracle with Liam.

I liked Liam, and I knew whatever query he would make and anything he would say would be from a good heart. I tapped Gaston's shoulder and nodded.

He sighed but nodded to Striker. "All right, we will take him."

"There is another thing," Striker said, and worried his lip with his teeth.

"What?" Gaston asked with narrowed eyes.

"The Spaniard, Alonso, there," Striker said and gestured. "Do either of you wish him dead?"

Gaston's sigh was prolonged, and he glanced at me with guilty eyes. "Nay. He should not be harmed. I am sure Will would not want him put with the others."

Striker shook his head. "That's not a concern. He doesn't wish to return to Panama, and he has some ideas on smuggling from these parts, and... well, he'll be sailing with us."

Gaston swore low and vehemently in French.

"Fine," he at last said in English. "I suppose that is... as it should be, somehow. The irony is fitting."

Striker leaned close to whisper to Gaston, but I heard him anyway. "Did you two fight over him?" he asked.

I walked away, my eyes firmly on the cave wall. I saw images dancing upon it, and heard sounds whispered all about. I had talked with Alonso. I had talked with him of many things. He did not wish to return to Panama. His brother had wanted his money, and his wife was from a convent and possibly better off without him. And he could take

no lover of merit and thus relieve his heart. And of his heart... well, he still cared greatly for me, though somewhere in the light, a voice whispered that it was a mistaken and misguided thing. I had left him for a reason. I had always left men like him – even those who did not compete with him in stature in any way – for a reason.

Gaston was beside me, his hand in mine. I squeezed it reassuringly and turned to find him regarding me with concern. I could see the words waiting behind his eyes, all jumbled and pressed together, waiting to spew from his mouth if I would but let him. I shook my head and he bit his lip.

A diffident Liam joined us a moment later. His gaze was all over me, and I could see the millions of words behind his eyes as well. Gaston released me, and gently towed Liam beyond my hearing.

I studied what I could see of the town as they talked. Someone was roasting beef in the fort, and the smell of it made my stomach clench painfully. I was nearly driven to brave the other men in order to attempt to fetch some, but I knew not how I would eat it.

“Will, are you well?” a voice asked from behind me.

I whirled to find Nickel and Bones standing there watching me. Nickel had spoken. I shrugged and smiled a little.

Nickel seemed unsure of this response. Bones was fine with it, however.

“Striker said we should do a useful thing and join ya in goin’ ta town,” the lanky man said with a shrug. “I thought we were doin’ well enough for the world holdin’ that wall up with our shoulders.”

I smiled sincerely.

Nickel rolled his eyes and smacked Bones’ arm.

Gaston was beside me. He studied the newcomers intently.

Nickel took a step back. “We are to accompany you to town,” he told Gaston with a polite bob of his head.

“Let us all go, then,” Gaston said with a tired sigh and a glare in Striker’s direction.

I tapped him on the shoulder and pointed at my belly.

My matelot immediately frowned with concern and asked Liam, “Were you able to feed Will... while he...?”

Liam shook his head.

Gaston cursed and, after motioning for me to remain where I was, headed toward the fire.

In the uncomfortable silence that followed, I glanced at Liam, and found him regarding me with a thoughtful mien. When my gaze met his, he came to embrace me.

“Ya worry none, now,” he said.

I nodded, and wondered what Gaston had told him.

“What happened...?” Nickel began to ask.

“Nothin’ Will wants ta speak ov,” Liam said quickly, and stepped between me and the boy. “Leave ’im be.”

Neither Nickel nor Bones was the stubborn or ornery type, and

so they nodded amicably. The curiosity in their eyes still bothered me, but I supposed I could bear it. I knew I had done much to earn it. That thought alone was enough to threaten me with the light. I turned away from them and resumed studying the harbor and town beyond.

The light, or perhaps the darkness I would not let it reveal, was a hungry rumbling in my head and heart that nearly matched the pain in my belly. This struck me with renewed fear, but now I was not afraid I would remember that which I sought to avoid, but that its inevitable visitation upon me would occur at an inopportune time – say in the presence of anyone other than Gaston – and I would be struck by some frenzy or other loss of reason and control. Yet I knew that if I were to return to the officer's room and attempt to turn to the light of my own accord, I would not be able to. I was still not ready. Thus, I wondered how long I could hold it at bay.

Gaston returned with a hunk of meat and a cup of warm water. With Liam's help, he minced the beef as finely as could be managed. Then they put the bits into the cup and gave it to me to drink. I was able to suck the little pieces between my lips. Most went down my throat and made my belly happy, but a surprising number of little morsels seemed quite intent in staying betwixt my teeth. I rinsed them out as best I could, and resolved to suck on the remnants without complaint. I was quite disheartened with the idea of eating in this manner for several weeks.

"I suppose we could make a mash o' fruit for 'im," Liam said. "Iffn we 'ad bread, we could make a puddin'."

Bones joined in on thinking of other things they could reduce to mash to feed me; and Gaston gave me a rueful smile and went to stow his musket and my bag with the other men, so that I was not carrying all our gear.

As we headed to the gate, Liam ceased reminiscing on the things one added to a pot to make a truly fine stew, and paused to look around. The smile quickly left his face; and a great sadness suffused him, and he cursed quietly and fell in with us.

I touched his shoulder gently, and he shook his head. "I keep lookin' for 'im is all. I forget," he said thickly.

As, I too, had felt there to be a thing missing in Liam's presence, I could only imagine how it must have been for him: to be ever beside a man for twelve years and then to have him gone.

I looked to Gaston and saw his bandage, and fear and pending grief gripped me in equal measure. I stumbled.

Gaston was quickly beside me. "Do you wish to do this today?" he whispered.

I nodded. I felt little choice in the matter. I could not hide.

Our search for an alchemist or apothecary was not noted or impeded by any we encountered, and truly I was surprised at how few of our men we did see; but then we were avoiding the main castle and the square near it, where Morgan had holed up and the prisoners were

held. At last we located a shop, and I assisted Gaston in rummaging about the place, until he did indeed find what we sought: not as bags of the flower pods to be pressed, but in a great jar of the elixir already prepared. Gaston explained to our friends that we were acquiring medical supplies, and then he and I spent a good deal of time carefully distributing the laudanum into smaller bottles and vials that we could put into Gaston's bag. When we truly had three times as much of the substance as Gaston had ever made before – and we had been forced to appropriate another sack to carry it all – he regarded what was left of the jar with a heavy sigh.

"We must take the rest to Farley," he said. "He might be disposed to use it."

I was disposed to use it then and there, and I indicated as much to Gaston. He awarded me a patient smile and prepared a small draught for each of us.

I was offering my small glass in toast when we heard a trumpet call. Liam called for us from outside. With grim looks, we downed our cups and hurried to see what the fuss was about.

In the square, we quickly learned that Bradley's men had easily held off a force sent from Panama. Much of this fortune was due to the mountains and treacherous forest east of us, and the road only being able to pass through an easily, defensible narrow defile.

"Ah, you," a man cried when he spied us, "Lord Will, the Admiral be lookin' fer ya. The Spaniards sent a man and a letter."

Gaston cursed, but I sighed. We began to follow the man back to a large house on the square. Liam sent Nickel to fetch Striker, and then he and Gaston were tight about me.

"Do you wish to do this?" Gaston asked me in French.

"Can 'e do this?" Liam asked Gaston in English.

I snorted with amusement and continued following the man leading us to Morgan. The laudanum was easing all my cares away, and I seemed to have no issue with the languages.

Gaston's hand closed tightly about my arm, and he turned me to face him. He studied me with an earnest frown. I awarded him a shrug and kissed his nose.

He sighed and addressed Liam. "He will not appear addled, just drunk. And if he does exhibit strange behavior, we can explain it as the drug I gave him."

Morgan was ebullient when we reached him: this seemed as much due to my arrival as to the victory. He thrust a letter at me and demanded, "Tell me what it says."

"He cannot," Gaston said, and pointed to my bandaged jaw.

"Does he need that?" Morgan asked with annoyance.

"He will need paper," Gaston said firmly.

Morgan swore. "We will need that, well enough, for the writing of a return missive. Hurry, hurry, their envoy is waiting, and I wouldn't have him think us barbarians who can't even write."

I endeavored to ignore their search for paper and ink, and unfolded the page and began reading. The letter was from the President of Panama. We were expected to leave by nightfall. I wondered what the president would do if we did not go, since he had already failed to reach us. In that, I thought the letter to be a rather perfunctory gesture made in the expectance of such. What else could he do, congratulate us?

Once they gave me paper, I knew Morgan would have no patience for reading any notes I might make as to the tone, and so I merely rendered a literal translation.

Morgan was greatly amused, and in his pacing about, he mentioned the possibilities I had considered. Then he said, "But it is no matter. Our ships are here; we can retreat any time we wish." He looked to one of the captains. "Begin loading the treasure, but make no alarm of the matter."

Striker had arrived while I translated the note, and Gaston had left my side for a moment to speak with him. Then Striker had stood about waiting with the other captains present.

Morgan now looked to Striker and told him, "Leave a few men at your fort as lookouts, and bring the rest into town. I do not fear the sea."

I wondered if Striker would be so kind as to leave us at the fort. I wanted little of the town, and I was not yet ready to be stuck upon the ship. But, of course, he might not think we were capable lookouts.

Morgan turned back to me, and began to dictate his response before I could allow that thought to make me angry, or sad.

As I had expected, Morgan ransomed the town for a truly noble amount of three hundred thousand pieces of eight, threatening death to all the prisoners and destruction of the town and forts if his demand was not met. I made it sound polite and a little less perfunctory than the president's note, without any sarcasm as to lack of a Spanish position.

When I finished, Morgan considered the Spanish words, mumbling through them. I could see doubt in his eyes as he occasionally glanced at me.

With a sigh, I snatched another piece of paper and wrote, *It is as you said, and it is polite. Go ask someone who reads Spanish to read it aloud for you, or translate it. I suggest Julio.*

He snorted dismissively, and folded and sealed the page. "Nay, I trust you. I am merely concerned that the blow to your head might have diminished your diplomatic abilities, seeing as it was a Spaniard that struck you." He chuckled, but there was mischief in his eyes, as if his mention of the matter was goading.

I wanted to tell him that it was not a Spaniard who struck me, but Pete, because I had been...

The room spun and I found myself in the cave again. The light was blinding, so bright I could not see anything within it, even though I was facing it. I felt a great urge to throw my hands before my eyes and cry out; but there was a steadying hand upon my arm, and I turned to find

Gaston watching me with worried eyes. For a moment we were in the cave together, and then we were once again sitting at the table in the house Morgan had claimed.

"He becomes dizzy from the wound on occasion," Gaston was telling Morgan.

I met Morgan's speculative gaze with the best reassuring smile I could manage.

Morgan shrugged, but his eyes were narrow. "I once got kicked in the head and could not see well with one eye for a week. It passed, but while it was about, I sometimes could not think clearly."

"Men oft become addled when hit hard," someone said.

With a snort of annoyance, I wrote, *I am not addled*, in large block letters.

My umbrage over the matter seemed to reassure Morgan. He chuckled and left us, presumably to give the missive to the envoy; but for all I knew, he might seek Julio.

I cared not. I wished to be away. I stood slowly, and Gaston's good arm was immediately about me. Striker was on my other side a moment later, and I felt quite foolish as they ushered me from the room as if I were an invalid.

"The envoy will return with a reply on the morrow, I would imagine," Striker said grimly as we walked outside into the square. "Will should rest until then."

Recalling my earlier thought on the matter, I pointed in the direction of the fort.

Striker sighed, "Aye, at the fort, you will rest." He looked around me to Gaston. "Did you get what you needed?"

"Oui," Gaston said, "and we must stop and see Farley." He did not appear pleased at doing this.

Liam, who had been waiting with Nickel outside, joined us. He was carrying the jar of laudanum.

We went to the house where the wounded were, and Striker and Gaston urged me to sit on a barrel near the entrance and remain there. I was not sure if it was because they wished to continue the pretense of my being prone to dizziness, or if they were worried I was truly addled enough to wander off. I took Gaston's hand and gave it a kiss.

"Are you well to stay alone?" he asked quietly in French.

I nodded: with an expression that I hoped conveyed my puzzlement over his concern.

He sighed and whispered, "Will, you closed your eyes and sat gripping the table for several moments. All saw it."

I nodded, so it was a thing easily explained by dizziness. I was damn pleased I had not cried out or warded my eyes as I had wished.

"I wish you could tell me what happened," he said.

So did I, but I knew he was not seeking explanation of the event I was avoiding. Before that thought could even begin to plant roots, I smiled, gestured at myself and the barrel I sat on, and pushed him

toward the door.

With a final nod, he left me with Liam, Bones, and Nickel. Striker had slipped inside as well, and I wondered if any of the *Queen's* men were wounded.

I stood, and was immediately surrounded by my companions. I waved them off and went to the doorway to peer into the dim light at the wounded. The rooms I could see contained a score of men spread all about. Most were wrapped about the head, shoulders, or arms with bloody bandages.

"Poor buggers," Bones muttered. "Makes me damn glad I'm a musket man. I do na' fancy stormin' the gates o' forts where they can throw things down on ya. Most of these blokes are maimed for life if they don't die o' rot over the wounds. Me, I'd rather be shot and dead than maimed."

Liam stiffened beside us, and I wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Nickel punched Bones in the arm, and the lanky man looked confused as to what he had said to deserve it.

"I suppose," Liam said quietly, "that death might be a bit better than havin' half your face gone from boilin' oil, mayhaps. No pain once ya be dead. Lessin' ya go ta Hell."

The silence was awkward for a moment; then Nickel said a thing I wished to, and I was pleased with him.

"Otter was a kind and good man," Nickel said, "I am sure he was welcome in Heaven."

Liam sighed. "I don't know... I wish there be another place a man could go instead o' Heaven or Hell."

"Well, there's Purgatory," Nickel said with a frown.

"Naw," Liam said. "Just a place ya went when ya be dead. No reward or punishment like, but just a place, like here, where there be both good an' bad, and a man can 'ave some pleasure o' life an' maybe some sorrow, but... It na' be fair that it be one or the other. A man don't always have a chance ta live the life the priests say will please God."

I could not stand there silent in the face of his pain. I wondered if I could locate paper and ink in the house, or even charcoal and a wall. I wanted to tell him of the Elysian Fields, and that man had not always believed as he did now about such matters.

"Me maw always said that ya know ya be good and go ta Heaven if ya do right by yur fellows and ya feel God loves ya in yur heart, even if ya be hated by the clergy and the righteous," Bones said. "An' she said Heaven was a place like Earth, an' that a person could find whatever made 'em happy there, that's why it be Heaven."

I could have kissed Bones' mother. I settled for clapping Bones' shoulder and smiling. I chuckled and shook Liam lightly.

Liam gave me a curious look. "Ya be the right philosopher, Will. Ya believe that?"

I nodded.

"I would na' be tellin' no priest that," Bones drawled. "They done

hung me maw fer witchcraft.”

I swore vehemently. Nickel was appalled, but Liam smiled slowly, and then he laughed. I looked to Bones, and found him frowning at Liam’s humor. I was surprised; I had thought Bones to be jesting. I was not sure whether Liam had also thought it a jest, or if our Scotsman were just so overwrought that laughter at Bones’ words seemed an easier path than tears.

“It weren’t funny,” Bones said sadly.

I could take no more. I tore the bandage from my head and grasped Bones firmly by the shoulders. “It was not. It was a horrible thing,” I rasped carefully, trying to move my jaw as little as possible. “I hope... I pray that God meets priests at the gates of Heaven, and smites those who have done horror in his name down to the lowest pits of Hell.”

“Amen.” Liam said. “I weren’t laughin’ at yur mother. I just...” He turned away and wiped his now-teary eyes.

Bones nodded solemnly. “I pray me maw were right in her thinkin’. She were a good woman, an’ I canna’ bear the thought o’ her bein’ in Hell, neither.”

“What are you doing?” Gaston hissed from the doorway.

I turned to face him and held up my hand in supplication at his concerned anger. “Bones’ mother was hanged for witchcraft, and Liam is worried that Otter is in Hell,” I said slowly and carefully.

“That be ’bout the gist of it,” Liam said.

Gaston smiled slowly. There was great regard for me in his gaze. It made my heart ache. He came to hold me with his good arm.

“My love,” he whispered, “You cannot minister to them until you heal.”

“I am sorry,” I whispered back, “but you were not here to speak for me and...”

His fingers were on my lips. I quieted, and when he was sure I would not try to speak again, he led me to the barrel and sat me down. With Farley’s help he re-banded my jaw.

Farley spoke nervously as he worked. “I know the mandible joint here to be broken, but I was not sure of other injury or...”

Gaston silenced him with a nod. “As I said, you did well, very well, and we thank you. I am sorry.”

Farley quickly shook his head. “Nay, nay, it was... You were distraught. I wish I had known of the laudanum you carried, then. It would have made it all much... easier.”

“If... such a thing occurs again,” Gaston sighed. “And Will is not there to calm me, please search our things for laudanum if you do not have any yourself, and drug me insensate.”

“I will do so, then,” Farley said; and with a final compressed smile and a bob of his head at me, he left us.

Our friends had retreated a little, and we were somewhat alone; but, of course, I could not speak to voice my anger that Gaston had suffered such a wound being sewn with nothing to dull the pain.

Striker's words surfaced: Gaston had attempted to kill Farley and...

I could see Gaston lying there with Pete and Cudro holding him down, crying for me with his broken voice while Farley worked upon him.

I clutched at Gaston and held him tightly; my ragged sob was restrained by my bandage and the curious realization that what I was envisioning was not a thing I had seen. There had been no cave, no light; it was merely a nightmare vision like the ones I had visited upon myself concerning his sister's death and his flogging. It was not the thing I feared.

"Will?" Gaston whispered.

I released him. I wanted paper, or to tear the bandage from my head again, but I was sure he would not allow that, and the only paper of which I knew the ready location was in my bag, back at the fort. I stood and took his hand. He allowed me to lead him down the street. All the way there, I thought of what I must say. I composed great paragraphs in my head, and then discarded them.

We at last returned to the fortress, and I found my bag. As it was near the men still there, I took great care to meet no one's eye. I took my things and retreated with Gaston in my wake. The sun was high overhead, and there was little shade to be found. I finally resolved that this was another light I must deal with, and sat atop the wide wall far across the fort from the others. I dug out the paper and quill.

Gaston joined me with a reluctant mien, and I knew he did not wish to face the light any more than I.

I wrote, *I cannot frolic until I know how I fell. I cannot face the light of truth alone. I am afraid it will burst upon me beyond my control. Help me.*

Gaston settled more comfortably beside me, but his expression did not relax from guilt. He fidgeted with the edge of my bag, and then he finally met my gaze with tear-filled eyes.

"You fell because I kicked your legs from beneath you," he said.

I gathered from those words that he had suffered a bout of madness. It almost made me curious to peer into the light. Perhaps I was making much of nothing.

He was shaking his head as if he read my thoughts. "I could make excuse that I was ragged from the battle and that the Horse proved too much for me, but... it would be a lie. I dropped the reins, Will, or perhaps... I did not."

Now he did not seem to wish to meet my gaze. I took his hand and he squeezed mine so that it hurt as he struggled with his words.

"I saw you speaking with the Spaniard," he said at last. "I told myself there was no concern and that you loved me. And I believed it. I knew you... love me more than you ever did him. I thought of all the ways you had proven it... and... I wished to show the Spaniard that. And... I do not know if it was my madness or not, if I lost control or not, but I thought I should let myself go and that you would care for me... and I wanted that, especially as you became more at ease with him..."

and... So, I cannot say if it was jealousy that drove me, or... I do not know.

"I do know that I did not fight the Horse at all, when it wished to run you down and haul you away."

He pawed tears from his eyes and regarded me with guilt and trepidation. As his words of yet had stirred nothing of the cave, I could but love him. I leaned close and kissed his cheek.

He shook his head with consternation. "Non, Will, you do not understand. I did an evil to you in that. I let myself..."

I put fingers to his lips until he stilled.

His eyes narrowed and he pulled my hand away. "Will, someday you must become angry with me. With me!"

I sighed with frustration and wrote, *What did the Horse do?*

"Do you remember speaking with the Spaniard?" he asked. "Do you remember leading me to the stable? Do you remember our arguing?"

This brought me to the cave. I stood facing the light. It did not seem blinding, but it was of such intensity I could make out little within it. I took a steadying breath and prepared to take a step toward it. I felt Gaston's hand on mine, and then I could see him standing in the cave next to me, holding my hand, facing the light.

I looked: I could see Alonso, and feel his need for me; I could see Gaston watching, and feel his jealousy. I remembered not wanting to do *a thing* in front of Alonso... not wanting to tryst before him, and not wishing to argue with Gaston over the matter. I scurried away, running, seeking a place to hide to have the argument. I cursed my luck as the stable seemed to be the only available location. Gaston followed me: the Horse followed me. I had been afraid.

I did not wish to see what came next. I stepped back and opened my eyes. Gaston was regarding me intently, his cheeks still wet with tears despite his frustration. I let myself truly think on what he had said. Whatever had happened next that night, he had allowed it. He had allowed the Horse to come for me. He had not fought it. He was correct, I should have been angry with him.

I had been angry with him.

I was angry with you because I knew we would argue, I wrote.

He seemed to find relief in this. "Good. I... goaded you. I said..." He shook his head. "It was not about the damn Spaniard by the time we were in the stable," he sighed. "It wanted... I wanted to own you. I wanted to prove that I owned you.

I stood in the cave again, with him beside me. I could see the events unfold in the light.

"And you... fought me," he continued. "Like you did at Theodore's. You told me no. You faced me with anger and... The Horse panics so when you do that. It... I feel such the child when you do that. I feel as I ever did when I was outnumbered and I knew I would lose. And I feel compelled to strike out. And run... But I did not run. We wrestled, and it became trysting after a fashion, and you submitted to me, you seemed

pleased to accept me.

"And then, when I finished, you... I did not seek to please you. I regret that, I ... But... You pulled your breeches up and reached for your belt and then... You drew, and you were upon me. There was such anger and hatred in your eyes. And it was as if you did not see me. I could not believe you would look at me as you did. I was... It was all I could do to keep my wits about me and hold you off. And then Pete and Striker were there, and I sought to get them to pull you off; but they distracted me, and you were able to press your attack and I was wounded. Then Pete hit you."

The light receded, and I saw what I had wished most to avoid. I almost killed my matelot. I had thought him Shane and almost killed him. I gave a great ragged sob as the horror of it gripped me with vicious claws. I had nearly let Shane rob me of this happiness.

I had lost my mind.

"Will, I am sorry," Gaston said. "I am sorry."

I shook my head and wrote, *I almost killed you.*

He swore. "Non, that is... I drove you to it! I have driven you mad."

That angered me. *Non*, I wrote, *Shane drove me mad.*

Gaston swore again. "Will! I did wrong! You should be angry with me!"

I tore the bandage from my head. He made no move to stop me, and he backed away from what he saw in my eyes.

"Non," I hissed. "I will decide who I am angry with! I will decide who I love! I will decide what I wish to think! I will not bring us to ruin! And I am not a fool!"

I felt off balance, as if I had just over-extended my reach with a sword. I hovered there, leaning toward him menacingly, and I felt my ire die in confusion like flames under a pail of water.

His eyes were full of a child's panic.

"And do not hit me now," I added quietly.

This elicited a short bark of amusement from him, and he regained his control. I saw a smile playing about his lips, and I could not but grin in response. His left hand went about the back of my neck and he pulled me to him to kiss me thoroughly. The kiss, and the prior activity of speaking, made my jaw ache terribly, yet I did not want him to stop. When he at last released me, we laughed, and that hurt even worse.

I finally pulled away a little and cradled my poor jaw. I answered his concerned expression with a sad sigh. He nodded gravely and retrieved the bandage.

"I must become inured to your anger," he said thoughtfully, as we tried to rewind the bandage and tie it. "I know that it does not threaten... us. Yet, it scares me. You are so damn amiable most of the time that..." He finally trailed off with a sigh of frustration and eased his arm from his sling to use both hands on the bandage.

I could see what he said. I wrote, *I have surprised many with my anger. It surprises me.*

"I must not hit you again," he said sadly, and gingerly touched my swollen eye.

I nodded. There was little I could add to that. Now that I could remember the events of that night, I felt his blow – more than the straw, or the act of sex, or any other factor – was what had caused me to think he was Shane.

I wondered how we could inure him to my anger such that he did not feel he needed to strike me so, but I could think of nothing. I wrote, *You seldom anger me.*

He nodded. "I do not have an answer for it. I have no wish to go about doing things to anger you such that it becomes a common thing."

I chuckled at that.

We sighed companionably and considered the day around us.

"Do you feel... better?" he asked.

I nodded and raised a questioning brow.

He nodded. "I feel much relief." He regarded me curiously. "Do you feel you can frolic now?"

I shrugged and wrote, *I do not know if I can as you did that time.*

He sighed. "Your Horse and man are not so very separate as mine are." His expression became thoughtful. "And perhaps...mine are not so very separate now."

I wrote, *I am not troubled by that. Are you?*

"I do not know." He shrugged. "Somewhat, I suppose. I always imagined I would someday conquer my madness. I envisioned it as a matter of dispelling it: being rid of it. And now, I have begun to see it as a matter of mitigating the ill effects of it by allowing it to always be with me in some fashion. And I feel disappointment, in that I will never achieve my original goal; but, I feel the end I now strive for is attainable, and the other was not."

I smiled and embraced him.

He shook his head with wry amusement. "I know it pleases you. You have always thought I should take that path, have you not?"

I nodded.

"And what of you?" he asked. "If you will not allow that I have driven you mad, will you allow that you are madder now than you were when we met?"

I wondered at that. I surely had not had episodes of thinking one man another, or bouts of anxiety, fear, or other emotion such that I could not contain them in a rational fashion. Yet, had it not lurked within me? Had I not felt such things, sometimes without much reason? And though I had not expressed them as I seemed prone to do now, what had I done in their name? Had I not drowned them in wine? Had I not run from them like the Devil himself was at my heels? Had I not told myself this man or that was no longer my friend for reasons I could not name? Had I not challenged others to fight for their lives over some slight I had felt toward my person? Had I not lied to justify them or keep them hidden, even to myself, on those darkest days when I could not

face the light at the mouth of the cave?

I shook my head and wrote, *I hid it well then, even from myself.*

He frowned thoughtfully at that, and at last nodded. "I have merely revealed it, then."

I wrote, *It is good it is in the light. I may examine it now.*

"Centaur's cannot live in caves," he said with a smile.

I found that to be profoundly true, but before I could consider it at length, we saw Striker and Pete walking around the wall toward us.

Tell them what you will, I scrawled hurriedly, and then I folded up the page I had been writing upon and prepared a new sheet in case I might have to communicate with them. Though Gaston's side of our conversation had not been recorded, and mine was most likely nonsensical without the other, I still regarded my jottings as part of a private matter and I did not wish to see Striker's curious eyes upon them.

As it was, I found Striker's speculative gaze as he approached quite annoying.

"Will has remembered," Gaston said without preamble.

Striker squatted in front of us with an expectant look. Pete settled in amiably to sit, and rewarded his matelot an annoyed glance.

I could see that there was much that need be mended between Striker and us, on our side of the matter as well as his; but apologizing did not sit well with me. Once again, I was confronted with an old and deep anger at ever being the one who need apologize. Yet, I found myself viewing Striker from afar, as if the closeness between us had already been severed. It was a thing I had felt before, usually prior to my abandoning one set of friends for the next. That was not acceptable now. I could not hide from the light.

"I was suffering my madness that day, as a result of the battle," Gaston was saying. "I... attacked Will, such that he felt the need to defend himself."

Pete and Striker were frowning.

"That is much as we thought," Striker said slowly. There was doubt in his eyes.

Gaston's eyes locked with Striker's. "Will went mad for a time. You know that; others must not, and you know that, too."

Striker sighed and looked away. "Aye, aye, but I would know it...from you." He looked to Gaston again. "What now? Will is the only one who has a chance of calming you, and now he is mad too? You do not wish for us to separate you when you are... that way. What are we to do?" he finished with frustration.

I could well see his dilemma. I was not sure what I would do if confronted by the problem we presented, either.

"You must trust... me, at times," Gaston said, as if it were surprising to him as well. "I was sane when Will came at me. His drawing on me and looking at me as if I were another made me very sane. We know deep in our hearts that one of us must always be sane,"

he added thoughtfully. "And so I was well enough, until... All of you jumped upon me as if I were the villain, which in ways I was, but not at that moment – and then I realized you would not allow me to tend to Will, and I was in pain, and... it drove me mad again." This last was said with more sadness than ire.

Striker and Pete were suffused with guilt.

"ItWillNa'HappenAgin," Pete said solemnly. "WeWillNa'GetInTheMiddleO'ItAgin."

I shook my head.

"Nay," Gaston said. "You... saved my life. I could not hold Will off without fighting him truly, and I could not do that. He, in his madness, would have killed me and..."

"ISawIt," Pete said. "ISeenYaWeren'tFightin'ImTrue. SoIHit'Im, ButThen..." He glanced to his matelot and gave a sigh.

"It's my fault," Striker said and finally moved to sit, instead of squatting as if he might leave. He rubbed his eyes and sighed before meeting Gaston's gaze again. "I'm sorry. I told them to keep you back."

"I know," Gaston said. "And you would not listen: to me, to Pete, to Cudro..."

"I know, I know," Striker said irritably. "It's... It's me," he sighed. "I don't know what to make of madness. It bothers me... deeply. I have difficulty accepting it... that you are sometimes mad and other times sane. I couldn't... Truly, if you weren't with Will I would have nothing to do with you. I'm sorry. You're a good friend, you've proven yourself to be a... fine friend, truly, but... that merely makes it all the more baffling to me when you're a great threat. I know you two love one another, any... damn blind man could see it, but I can't fathom it, and... if you were mine, and I loved you so, I would lock you in a nice safe place and visit you often and not..."

"Inflict me upon others," Gaston said sadly. "That is what my father did with my mother," he added with a thoughtful frown. "I understand."

I was near the point of ripping the bandage from my head yet again; instead, I slapped my palm on the planks between us and captured Striker's startled gaze with mine.

"I know!" Striker said. "You would never, ever do that. I know."

My anger took on words, and I snatched up the pen and paper. *You think me a fool!*

Striker did not flinch, but the sadness in his eyes pulled me in. "Aye, I do. I think it's as Cork said, you know no better and therefore you might succeed. I have hope of that."

I glanced to Pete, and found the Golden One scratching his beard. He shrugged. "EStandsAloneOnTheMatter. 'EBeThinkin'AllMenBeSane. An'ENaUnderstandTheWayO'SinTars." He smirked. "NaThatAnyLikelyDo."

Striker snorted disparagingly. "There you are with that business again." He looked to us. "He says you two are centaurs, and he's a lion, and I'm a wolf."

I shrugged and nodded. Gaston was smiling wanly and considering the planks.

"What the Devil does that mean?" Striker asked.

"The world is comprised of wolves and sheep, those that rule and those that follow," Gaston said.

Striker sighed and said, "Many men see that as the way of the world. What of this other?"

"Some men are neither wolf nor sheep," Gaston said with surprising patience. "Will and I, and Pete, are neither wolf nor sheep. We do not think like other men. Pete is a great king of the forest and feels no need to snap at other men or run about in a pack unless it suits him. Will and I fancy ourselves mythical creatures, part man, part horse, which come from a time of olden Gods to deliver wisdom unto men."

I thought Striker might scoff, but instead he looked at each of us in turn and then sighed. "I can see that," he said with great resignation. "So are centaurs mad by nature?"

"I think they are," Gaston said seriously. "Or at least that is how we are often perceived."

Striker was thoughtful. "That may well be, and I can see it and... You're not like other men, 'tis true, but... What the Devil am I to do the next time you take swords to each other? We were damn lucky this time. All know you to be mad, so they assumed the matter a bout of madness and made little of it. But... many saw more of it. They saw Will was mad too, they know he was raving for days. I'm sure they talked. I told Morgan he took a blow from a Spaniard, but a dozen men would doubt that tale and I've had several make comment that you two had a lover's quarrel, about a Spaniard: which would almost be a fine thing for them to think, as long as they don't think the two of you were actually fighting, because you well know that is a punishable offense while on a raid. I can't have it getting about that you two are better than any other and that I won't keep you in line. And if all think Will is mad... Damn, I do not know where that will lead."

"Blame it on my madness," Gaston said. "And... I do not feel that particular situation will occur again. I cannot guarantee that we will not have some other issue in the future, but..."

Striker was regarding him with narrowed eyes. "How will you prevent it?" he asked sincerely.

"I was jealous that night," Gaston said, "And I goaded Will such that we argued. He became very angry with me, so angry that he... thought I was another because... he could not countenance fighting me."

I thought that a very interesting interpretation of events, and I felt there might be some truth to it.

"We know what occurred, now," Gaston continued, "and understand it somewhat, such that we can seek to avoid repeating it."

Striker shook his head. "You talk as if this was some battle you waged in a war, and you couldn't take the field in one manner so you'll attempt another. I don't understand how you can..."

"TheyBeSinTars," Pete said.

Gaston smiled.

Striker snorted and sighed. "Aye, fine, so... Whatever may occur, I'm not to assume you're the one mad at the time, and..." He sighed again and looked away.

"I am changing," Gaston said earnestly. "And so is Will. In time we will not be so difficult to be around. I am gaining control of my madness, and Will is..."

"Going mad," Striker said.

Gaston shook his head and considered me for a moment before turning back to Striker. "Non, nay, he is... We are treating an old wound of Will's. It has festered, and we are draining it. The stench and fever will pass, and when he heals he will be far stronger than before."

Striker looked to me and I nodded: I supposed it was an apt metaphor.

"Does this all have to do with your cousin?" Striker asked.

I nodded.

He frowned thoughtfully. At last he shrugged. "I'll think on... centaurs and wounds and all." Then his gaze met Gaston's. "I'm sorry that I said what I did."

Gaston shook his head. "It is best we heard it. Things cannot stay hidden in caves." He smiled ruefully at Striker's frown.

Striker looked to me. I too was glad I had heard his true thoughts on the matter; but they still angered me, and I found I was not willing to let them go as of yet. I was actually surprised at how quickly my anger rose yet again. I looked away.

"Now what?" Striker asked Gaston with concern.

Gaston looked to me and I pointed at the last words I had written to Striker. He smiled glumly and said, "Will is very tired of being called a fool."

"I'm sorry, Will, for feeling that way about the matter," Striker said. "I truly am. I wish that I didn't. I wouldn't lose your friendship."

I shook my head. I would not lose him as a friend either, yet... I wrote, *We are still friends, but I am still angry. I will forgive you.*

Striker grinned and teased hopefully, "But not just yet?"

I sighed. There were some things I was quite foolish about, and I ever thought far too much for my own good. I embraced him and he held me tightly with great relief.

They left us, and went into town with most of the men. We remained behind to watch over the fort and harbor as I had hoped. Liam, Bones, Nickel, and oddly, Alonso, were to stay with us. I was not pleased about Alonso's presence, but I supposed there was little that could be done for it; and I should speak with him, anyway.

As I expected, he seemed quite keen to speak to me as we approached. As he stood to greet us, I noted he was unarmed, and had removed his coat, perhaps to be more in fashion with the company he planned to keep. He had not shorn his hair or taken to wearing earrings

as of yet, though.

Alonso bowed to Gaston, and asked, "Might I speak with... Will?" in English.

I was pleased he had deigned to use the name I had taken here, but I was displeased by his asking for me as he had.

Gaston's eyes had narrowed. "I do not own him," he said coolly.

"I meant no offense," Alonso said with a graceful shrug.

I considered refusing to walk away with him, and taking the stance that anything he need say to me could be said before my matelot; but I knew he would not speak openly in front of Gaston, and I wanted to know his mind.

I left Gaston to talk to Liam, and I walked away down the wall with Alonso, clutching my paper, ink, and quill.

"I have been told that you have not been well," Alonso said quietly in Castilian once we were well clear of the others. His tone implied that he knew far more than that.

I have heard you will sail with us, I wrote.

Alonso shrugged. "I have given it great consideration. As I told you that night, I have little to return to, and this way of life you lead, though rough, seems to offer many possibilities. Your captain, Striker, was telling me of this merchant company you are party to."

I nodded and motioned for him to continue, as I sensed that that was not the entirety of his reason.

He glanced casually back the way we had come. "I am concerned for you. I have heard several things that alarmed me greatly."

I sighed and wrote, *Si, he is mad.*

"Uly..." he began to chide.

I glared at him.

"Will," he sighed. "What is this fascination you have for madmen?"

Though it was a question of merit, perhaps, I was not going to explore it with him. I shrugged and wrote, *He is my matelot.*

"For all of the differences we might have had, I never drew a blade on you," he said.

True, I wrote. *I would not have forgiven you.*

"But you will forgive this man, this madman? Why, because he is mad?" He asked with frustration.

He thought me a fool, too. My newfound anger over that smoldered again, and I sighed. I shook my head and regarded the small amount of paper before me. I did not think a mound of it would suffice to contain all of the words I would have to spill in order to explain the matter to Alonso, or Striker, or any of them. So as there was no giving Alonso the information he supposedly sought, we might as well address the matter I was concerned with.

Do you think I will ever return to you? I wrote.

He was quiet for a time. "The last madman you loved, hanged himself," he said carefully.

And you think I will return if he is gone? I wrote.

"It is a thing I have thought on," he said after another pause. "I feel that there was much between us," he added earnestly, "and that... I can change. I can address the matters that drove you away."

I shook my head, as much from wonder as in refutation. How could he love me so, or rather, think that he did? Was this truth, or the desperation of a bored and lonely man?

I am flattered, truly, but do not sail for me, I wrote. The last was in plain blocked letters that I hoped appeared emphatic.

Alonso sighed. "No, no, Uly, I will not do it for you alone, but..." He leaned closer to me than I liked, so close I thought he might kiss me. "I will continue to hope."

I sighed and gathered up my ink and walked back to Gaston. Once there, I composed a lengthy paragraph. My matelot leaned on my shoulder curiously and read as I wrote.

He truly and sincerely still feels he loves me. I am baffled by it. I do not know if it is truth or desperation due to his recent circumstance. I have told him not to sail with us in hopes of gaining me, but I fear he is a fool about the matter, and though he might have other valid reasons, the hope that I will someday return to him is high upon his listing of them.

"Will I have to duel him someday?" Gaston asked uncomfortably.

Possibly, I wrote, *or I will kill him due to annoyance.*

I regarded him, gauging his mood, which seemed more sad and distant than jealous or angry.

If you feel at all jealous of him, I wrote, *I will kill him now and be done with it.*

Gaston's eyes narrowed as he studied me. "You would truly?"

I nodded solemnly. I was not exaggerating or lying, I would rather see Alonso dead, despite what I once felt for him, than have him come between Gaston and me again in any fashion.

"Do you feel he would strive to make mischief?" Gaston asked.

After careful thought, I shook my head. I had seen Alonso thwarted before in matters of romance, and he had taken it well enough unless there was other money in it; but then, he had not professed to harbor the depth of feelings he purportedly held for me for those others.

I chose a fresh sheet of paper and wrote in Castilian, *If you do anything to come between Gaston and me, or cause us any harm or grief, I will kill you.*

Gaston frowned at this, and I thought he could puzzle through most but not all of it. I wrote the same thing in French on the bottom of the other page I had been writing on. He nodded thoughtfully upon reading that.

Then I delivered my note to Alonso, who had joined Bones and Nickel in perusing the harbor.

He frowned ever so slightly as he read it, and then looked up to regard me with grave eyes. "Do you truly feel this is necessary?" he asked softly in Castilian.

I shrugged and gave him a questioning cock of my head.

"I am not a fool," he said. "I know you well enough. Once you feel you have great purpose about a matter, you will not be swayed. You are a very romantic soul, and you love this man, despite his madness, despite his scars, or perhaps because of them, and thus he rules your life. I see that."

I did not like his choice of words, I knew him well, too, though: well enough to know he felt there was a caveat to that. I motioned for him to continue.

He frowned.

I smirked.

He sighed. "You will not be swayed until you grow bored," he said with an apologetic shrug.

I snorted and left him.

I wrote for Gaston, *He is content to wait us out. He feels it will not last.*

"Then he is a fool," Gaston said coldly.

I kissed him.

"And you are not a fool," he added sweetly when our lips parted. There were equal parts sadness and resolve in his eyes.

My heart ached, and I held him and nuzzled his neck.

"Ah," Liam said from nearby, "Thar ya go agin. Ya two will ever be at it."

Gaston grinned, and asked him, "Do you need us before dark?"

Liam shook his head. "Go on."

We took our things and slipped down to the officer's room. I bade Gaston lie flat upon the bed, and soon I was firmly impaled upon him with great joy in my heart. We stormed Heaven, and the gates opened for a time, so that we drifted in nothing but light and love. And when that passed, we drank a little laudanum and lay side by side as comfortably as we could to nap.

Gaston was quickly asleep; but as is my way, despite the laudanum, I could not let the matter of Alonso lie – or that of Striker. I chewed on it for a time. In the end, it was obvious we could do nothing but outlast our critics' predictions in order to prove them wrong.

And I could see no possible way I could ever become bored with Gaston, unless of course we both became sane; but then, I truly did not believe the Gods would allow such a thing, as I was sure They derived great amusement from us as we were.

Denouement



July, 1668

As expected, I was summoned to meet with Morgan the next day. Morgan watched me translate with a keen eye, and I felt he was not the only one gauging my behavior. I was thankful I now knew the truth of what had occurred, and no longer faced the prospect of episodes of supposed dizziness or other demonstrations of my being addled.

The President of Panama said he would not raise the ransom for the town, and that it rested upon the good citizens of Porto Bello to call in debts and beg their friends and relations for the money. The President implied, though he did not state it, that he would give them and us the time necessary for this to occur, and allow the passage of letters and messengers to and from Porto Bello by land in order to facilitate the matter.

The President ended the letter by inquiring of Morgan how he had done so much with so few men. Morgan was very amused by this, and explained in his return note that the matter was made easy by fine men and their fine weapons. He then sent a musket and cartouche to the President, telling him that it was merely a loan and he would someday soon go to Panama to retrieve it.

I was not pleased to commit that last to writing, as I did not wish to go to Panama, and I told the Gods that it best not be this year that Morgan planned such a thing. Later, when I complained of Morgan's plan to Striker, he expressed interest in it, and said that Panama was where all the gold truly resided. Gaston noted that Drake had done well enough in his own attack on Panama: it was Porto Bello that had killed

him.

The next day, the President responded with a large emerald ring in exchange for the gift of the musket, and said he had weapons every bit as fine as the piece Morgan sent him and saw nothing special in it; and, that Morgan would be best advised to reconsider coming to Panama, as he would not be so well-received there as he had been at Porto Bello.

With that, we settled in to wait on the citizens to produce their ransom. To our dismay, this took a fortnight. Some of our men were beginning to sicken before the wait began; during it, fully half our number became ill with one malady or another, and a quarter of our number contracted grave fevers that Gaston said would haunt them for life. Many of those so afflicted died. Thankfully, the men up the defile on the road – the ones holding Panama at bay – remained the healthiest of our lot.

Gaston insisted that he and I move to the ship, both to care for the ailing men being brought there and to get us as far from the pestilent city as we could manage. We boiled our water and ate only salted beef, boucan, or fruit from our vessels. We implored our companions to do the same: some listened, some did not. Thus, all of our cabal save Julio and Davey stayed well enough: as for them, our beloved maroon got the flux, and our damned stubborn sailor nearly died of the fever.

The citizens of Porto Bello did manage to produce a surprising amount of money, and at last we left the accursed place. The *Virgin Queen's* deck held only three-fourths the men it had before: our men had fared relatively well, due to Gaston and Farley's vigilance, and concoctions of teas, and liberal doses of laudanum. In comparison, the *Mayflower* carried home only half as many as she had arrived with. I felt the loss would have been far more keenly felt – by myself as much as any of us – if death had been visited amongst the seasoned Brethren as heavily as it was upon the new men: most that died would likely not have survived seasoning even on Jamaica, and they did not have matelots to mourn them.

Despite Davey and Julio's sicknesses, I was please to see the rest of our cabal had survived little the worse for the wear of the entire adventure – except for Otter, of course, but his death now seemed to have occurred in some other time and place. He was still with us in spirit – though it be a sad one – in the empty space at Liam's side. We all toasted him as Porto Bello slipped away behind us in the haze.

Liam was doing as well as one might expect, actually better than I expected. He had not drowned in a bottle as so many other grieving men I had known had done; instead, he chose to combat his grief by assisting us with the ailing and by taking on a surprising pupil in the art of almost all things buccaneer: Alonso. To my former lover's credit, he had proven an apt pupil. As he was already well-versed in all manner of arms, this meant he had taken well to learning the Ways of the Coast – and to my never-ending amusement, Liam's attempts to instruct him in "Learnin' the King's English good an' proper". I did

not foresee their ever becoming matelots – and I looked for any telltale sign – but I did see them becoming friends, and this friendship, along with Striker’s commendations and Cudro’s support, was what led our other men to accept a hated Spaniard as a new member of the Brethren – provisionally: Alonso still needed to do much to earn their trust.

I knew it would be long before he earned Gaston’s or mine, especially given the way he continued to gaze upon me: one of the reasons I knew he would take no other as matelot until he had laid the matter of my unavailability to rest. Still, he kept his distance and did nothing to anger us.

As for the others, Dickey and the Bard were quite hale and very keen about discussing smuggling options with Alonso. In watching our shipbound pair, I witnessed great ease and confidence between them, such that I was sure the Bard had overcome all of his reservations as to the sincerity of Dickey’s youthful commitment.

Bones and Nickel were ever together, though there was still nothing more than friendship between them, and I thought it likely that would ever be the way of it.

Perpetual Platonic friendliness did not seem to be the only avenue chosen by all, though. Ash was ever at Cudro’s heel, and I saw much promise of future matelotage in the way Cudro behaved around our beaked – and now somewhat less sallow – youth. For his part, Ash did not blanch or make denial if some goading or teasing comment was made concerning the two of them; occasionally, he flushed.

Since I could not talk, and there was much to do, I found no opportunity to approach our Dutchman or the others – even with paper and quill – and discuss the matters with them, as I was so very wont to do. Gaston found some amusement in this. Initially I found irritation in that, but as time passed, I discovered I was actually relieved at not being the one expected to speak. Not constantly spewing forth words forced me to consider how much really and truly needed to be said. Though there were times when my need to mend was truly tested, as it had been with the matter of Otter going to Hell, and at those times I carefully committed words to paper and left Gaston to the dispensing of them.

I did not write him such a missive concerning Striker, though: I still did not know what needed to be said. Striker went about acting as if nothing untoward had occurred, except for those moments when he thought no one was looking and I found his gaze upon me filled with guilt and regret. For my part, my anger and ill-will did pass, but I still felt betrayed and confused as to the how and why of it. I spent many an hour watching the sails and wondering if the lie I blamed him for was told in all the kindnesses and loyalty he had shown Gaston and me since my arrival on Jamaica, or if the lie was the words he had spoken that afternoon in Porto Bello on the wall. He obviously regretted his words; but was it because they were truth, or was it that they were ill-considered? I could not fathom the workings of his soul, and was not

sure if he could on this matter either. I did not know how I would ever know what he truly felt, except through witnessing his actions over the passage of time.

And thus, that matter was as unresolved as Alonso. In the end, I resolved that it was quite true that a man's actions spoke far louder than his words. Striker loved us – both Gaston and me – and in time, Alonso would discover how very much I loved Gaston.

As for Gaston and me, we were well together: our cart seemed stronger for all the jostling we had given it, and I thought perhaps it had settled a bit and found the true places of all its parts. I ruminated on the nature of anger and love as much as any other topic, and came to much the same conclusion as I had concerning Striker and Alonso: the actions of our hearts had always spoken louder than any other voice, and yet we were still together; and thus we must always strive to speak the truth of our hearts, whether they be angry or not. As we had discovered, all things must exist in the light; we could not afford to turn our backs to it.

And so we arrived at the large island of the Caymans with great elation. During our journey there, many men hale when we boarded had become sick, and now our ships seemed rife with the pestilence we had sought to sail from. We were all relieved to be reach land again – land free of fetid air, swarming insects, and foul water. Though the island surely had its bog, it was not near the pristine white beach we frolicked upon once we landed, and we could smell none of it in the evening breeze.

With my jaw as it was, I was relieved – both personally and by duty - of having anything to do with the sharing out of the treasure. Gaston and I went down the beach and built sand versions of the manor houses in which we had been born. I stomped all over mine once it was complete. We discussed slipping away and marooning ourselves on this fair isle. There was ample fresh water, and fish and other small game, including the cayman lizards it had been named for. We at last decided against it, but we knew without doubt we would not return to Port Royal with the others.

When the treasure was shared out, all the men who had survived Porto Bello were wealthy beyond their expectations. It was the most treasure many of them had ever seen. The fact that this was due in part to there being far fewer of us now than had first sailed was simply overlooked as a thing that there was no remedy for, a cost of battle and glory: Morgan made a speech to that effect. The men laughed and drank and ridiculed or pitied the French for not remaining with us. There was so much love of life and money in the air that I was sure they would have sailed to the Rome and requested Morgan's beatification had they been Papists. As it was, I knew it would take much to shake him from their hearts, and I drank to solace my melancholy over that matter. I saw the ruin of all about me in it.

Finally, after days of debauch, we sailed for Jamaica. Gaston and I

informed Striker of our wish to disembark at Negril Point. Our captain was distraught but accepting of it, and asked what he should tell those waiting for us at Port Royal. Gaston informed him that since Sarah was Striker's wife, Striker could tell her what he would; that Theodore knew where to find us; that Rucker and Agnes were welcome to visit, with the dogs; and, that if she were truly with child, the Damn Wife should be told I saw little need to see her until after the babe was born – and if she were not laden, that she should be told I was wounded such that I could not perform my marital duties for a time. We knew that last might cause complications later; truly, all of it could lead to unforeseen problems, but we had resolved not to care for a few months. The future could wait.

At last we returned to our home upon Negril Point. The roof was in need of repair, but little else seemed amiss: the few chickens left about had obviously found it a safe and dry place to roost. With great relief, we deposited our bags and weapons inside and made our way to the rock overlooking the sea to watch the sunset.

As the golden light lit Gaston's hair so that it appeared to be afire, I was minded of the first time I had sat upon this rock, nearly a year ago. It was the day Gaston had told me he would leave me alone whilst he disappeared into the forest to contend with his madness.

Now, Gaston wrapped his arms about me, and nuzzled my neck before whispering, "I will not leave you, my love."

With a happy smile, I settled into his arms and watched the sun sink into a golden sea. I wanted to be nowhere else in all Creation. I did not see portents in the shining waves, or hear a siren's call from the gulls swirling in silhouette against the fire-hued clouds. Nay, instead I felt as if the glorious light was the beneficence of the Gods shining upon us. For though They were surely not done with us, for this moment we were at peace, and all was right with the world.

End ~ Volume Two

Continued in

Raised By Wolves, Volume Three

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The following titles do not represent the entirety of my studies; but they were the most useful, and the ones I would recommend for anyone interested in doing their own reading about the buccaneers and this period of history. To that end, they are ranked in order of usefulness to my research.

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About the Cover

The illustration used on the cover of this book is a detail of Howard Pyle's *Marooned*. The piece was painted in 1907, as part of a series of paintings and illustrations for Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates.

Howard Pyle is regarded by many as the father of American illustration. There are numerous books and web sites devoted to his work and legacy, so I will not waste words here saying what many others can tell you. I do have this to say, though. Pyle seems to be one of the few illustrators who have ever read Exquemelin or Burney (see bibliography). In his art and writing, he accurately depicts what we know of the buccaneers in terms of dress and tactics. He essentially represents buccaneers, circa 1630-1680, and not romanticized notions from later centuries about "pirates" from the Golden Age of Piracy, 1680-1720.

