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Seven

Wherein I Meet Many Important People

The next morning, I gingerly ate the bacon Ella prepared for us and washed it down with stale wine. My stomach roiled almost immediately. I decided to fast for a time, to see if it would settle.

The four of us took a ferry out to the *King's Hope*. The men were delighted to see us.

I still did not see Davey, and this concerned me once again. Belfry was not aboard for me to ask; neither was the captain. I considered asking about, but Theodore saw me looking around and slipped to my elbow to ask what was amiss.

"I do not see the sailor I wish to rescue."

He sighed. "They likely have him locked below, due to fear of him jumping ship. Many captains do that so that all of their men do not run off and become buccaneers."

"Oh, for the love of..."

His glare silenced me. "Follow your original plan, Marsdale. But do not, whatever you do, let anyone know you are involved. Not if you wish to befriend anyone."

"Aye, sir," I sighed.

He snorted. "Now speak to your flock."

I stood on the quarterdeck and looked down upon the forty upturned faces. I was not used to addressing so many and I felt my cheeks warm. I smiled as best I could. "Well, men, we have land."

They cheered.

"How soon can we stand on it?" Humboldt asked.

"Today."

They cheered even louder.

“However, it is virgin land. Your first order of business will be building a shelter. We will get all of you ashore, and then the cargo. The well-dressed man there is Mister Theodore, my barrister and my father’s agent in this endeavor. He is a good man, and you may trust him with your concerns if there is need to speak of anything away from the plantation and... I am not available.”

Theodore nodded thoughtfully. I was relieved. I had not discussed that bit with him in advance and had merely hoped he was conducive to it. All of the men eyed him curiously.

“The man next to him is Kevin Donoughy. He will manage the plantation for us. I have also found him to be a good man. He has managed sugar plantations on Barbados.”

This last was greeted by many a nod and Donoughy actually smiled at them. In fact, I had seen him talking to several of the men, and despite his words about not befriending any, he did not seem to be holding them at bay.

“Fletcher, as he is a miller and we have need of his skills, has been promoted to overseer.” That I had discussed with Donoughy and Fletcher. Thankfully this was greeted by nods and several hearty congratulations and no complaints.

“Now, let us all go ashore. I will not be accompanying you up to the plantation as of yet. There is still business I must attend to in town.”

None seemed inclined to argument with this, or even to have concerns. Fletcher coordinated getting them into boats and across the bay to the Passage Fort. From there, they would walk up to the plantation. Donoughy would see to the cargo. I rode back to the wharf with Theodore. Thankfully, he did not pester me about leaving or staying.

He left me at the house and went to see to the business of other clients, after admonishing me to remember the party this eve. Once he was gone, I slipped out to wander about the town alone, with only a pistol and sword for company and nothing on my person other than a hat, a shirt, and breeches. No one noticed me. Only the quality of my attire separated me from the few buccaneers conducting their business about town: that, and my hat and lack of earrings. To become even more in keeping with the local fashion, I retired my heavy headgear, and replaced it with a kerchief to protect my broiling scalp.

I still felt a little ill and often found myself squatting in the bushes. Even with the ocean breeze, the heat was oppressive in the extreme, and I was sweated dry. In the market I found a fruited drink of rum and pineapple juice, and purchased an onion bottle of it. I had discovered I liked pineapple, a strange sweet fruit native to Jamaica. I had not experienced rum before, and to my amusement, the concoction made me far lighter-headed than a similar amount of wine or beer. It was pleasant and made the heat disappear.

So I wandered about the market and surrounding store fronts, looking for nothing in particular and feeling beckoned by all, until I spied a little place selling a variety of interesting articles: including, to my delight, books. The offerings were small, and primarily consisted of recently printed

romances, poetry, and religious and political treatises from London. However, they had a box of odd books in many languages, and I perused these with anticipation. I almost toppled with laughter when I found a copy of Plato's *Republic* in German. I immediately purchased it and located a nearby shady place at the mouth of an alley, to collapse with my bottle and book. I proceeded to read in peace.

Some indeterminable amount of time later, I felt eyes upon me, and looked up with a small amount of annoyance to discover I was not merely being gazed at in a casual fashion. Nay, I was being stared at with an intensity I supposed, once it seeped through my rum-addled brain, a sober man might find alarming. I studied my watcher with blurry concentration that became sharper as I sensed danger about the fellow.

He was dressed as a buccaneer, but darkly. Whereas most wore ecru or linen-colored canvas and gaily-colored cotton on their heads, his loose breeches, tunic, and kerchief had been dyed a deep maroon that appeared black unless directly in the sun. Black lacquer and gold adorned the grips of his pistols, of which there were two, and the hilts of his swords and knives: of which there was one rapier, of fine quality, two cutlasses, as I had learned the buccaneers called their heavy long knives, and three dirks. All of them looked well-used. There was a musket slung across his back. The baldric and belt this wealth of armament suspended from was likewise black leather. He wore no footgear, but if he had, I was sure they would have been boots and ebony.

He stood maybe a dozen feet away, with his arms crossed and his feet firmly braced. I doubted any could move him from the spot; and indeed, the people passing by parted around him like water round a rock. From the hang of his clothes, his stance, and the cords of muscle in his calves and forearms, I judged his build to be muscular yet lean. His bone structure was fine, as his hands seemed almost delicate. He was clean-shaven and his face was attractive: not handsome, not pretty, but somewhere in between. He appeared to be of an age with me. I could not tell his hair color, but his skin was browned the nutmeg of a fair-skinned man. He wore gold hoops in his ears.

I noted all of this, but what really held my attention were his eyes. They were wide-set and the whole of the socket around them was painted black as coal, like a mask that ran from one temple to the other, even across the bridge of his nose. From within those pits of shadow, two blazing emerald orbs regarded me. And I was at a loss as to their motivation or emotion.

"Who are you?" he asked in a husky voice that barely crossed the distance between us.

I blinked. The question had been in German, but his accent was French. Maybe I was more inebriated than I thought. Why was a strange man addressing me in German?

I chose not to bridle at his tone, as there seemed more curiosity to his query than rancor. And then I was at a loss as to how best to answer his query. I was loathe to use my title, for I did not wish to be known by it amongst the buccaneers. For a moment I toyed with using my old alias of Ulysses, but that was the moniker of someone I was no longer. And then too much time had passed to be considered polite.

I quickly used my true surname. "Williams. And you are?" I replied in German.

"I am called Gaston the Ghoul."

I pushed myself up the wall and stood.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," I said politely. I made sure of my legs and approached him, transferring the bottle to my left hand to reside with the book, leaving my right free. He was just shy of my height. He had not uncrossed his arms but I sensed the change of his balance as he brought his weight to the balls of his feet. I fervently hoped he meant me no mischief, as I was too drunk to fight him. His eyes were still unreadable.

"Why are you here?" he asked in the same tone as before.

At the moment it seemed as esoteric a question as my name, and my mind flailed about in the grasping of it. An abundance of answers presented themselves, leaving me at a loss as to what he truly wanted to know. I switched to French. "Begging your pardon, but you will have to be more specific. And I would prefer speaking French or English if it pleases you, as my German is somewhat underused and not suitable for a discussion of merit in my current state of intoxication."

He nodded and frowned in thought for a moment before speaking French.

"You read it." His eyes darted to the book in my hand. I remembered it was in German.

"Oh, oui, I am literate in German, but this work is taxing my skill with the language. Thankfully I am familiar enough with it in Latin."

Green eyes studied me. "Why are you in Jamaica?"

I supposed the correct response involved saying something of the plantation, but it seemed hollow, somehow, and disingenuous in its specificity. Perhaps this was the result of reading Plato while intoxicated. "I came here to try and make amends with my father and shoulder the yoke of family duty, or something of that ilk I suppose. I think I shall fail."

He was taken aback, and his face froze for a moment with incredulity. Then he apparently judged me sincere, and his features settled into a mild grimace of confusion. "Why?"

"I have never had the man's respect and goodwill; and in truth, I am not sure what value I place on it in comparison to my own desires."

"Which are?"

"Adventure and romance as opposed to duty and diligence. I enjoy traveling and learning new things. However, I find myself harnessed to duty here by my own choice."

"Are you a philosopher?"

"On occasion. I take great delight in the perils of sophism. Plato here is not one of my favorites, though I took great delight in finding this book. I would not wish to live in his republic."

"Why?"

"I was raised without a great deal of nurturing and found it not to my liking. And I feel the education of a youth should contain far more than music and athletics. And though I agree with his conceit that any man should be able to love as he sees fit, I find his overall presentation of utopia to be somewhat loveless and far too regimented for my taste. And I cannot

see loving a nation over one's fellow man. Truly, if I have to read ancient Greeks, I far prefer Homer."

"Do you prefer mythology over philosophy?"

"Only in the reading of it. I prefer the exercise of reason over superstition."

He smiled, and then sobered and looked me over again. "Do you wish to become a flibustier?"

At my confusion, he smirked and rolled his eyes.

"You English, you call every man who sails under the Jolie Rouge a boucanier. I know of only five men in this port who ever hunted on the Haiti and made boucan. On Île de la Tortue, we call the ones who rove flibustiers and the ones who hunt boucaniers. Most men do both, at least they used to. Not so many boucaniers anymore."

I turned it over in my mind a couple of times, until I realized that flibustiers was the French pronunciation of freebooters. "I can see where a distinction could be made about such a thing." Some vague thought stirred and slowly made itself known. "Are we not at war?"

His body tightened and his eyes narrowed with suspicion. "You have done nothing to anger me... yet."

I smiled affably. "I should hope not. I meant our nations."

"I have no nation," he said with a trace of amusement.

"Forget I said anything."

He smirked again. "You will learn wars only cross the Line when there is gold involved. The same is true of peace. I have been sailing on a French ship under a marque from your governor. Yet if he could muster the men and ships, he would retake Île de la Tortue from the French."

"But all he has of a military force are the buccaneers, excuse me, freebooters, and I take it they are not in agreement with that."

"It serves the interests of all to play one against the other as necessary. A year ago your Governor Modyford was seizing prizes. So everyone went to Île de la Tortue and Port Royal lost all of the booty. Now he is issuing marques to any who want one, especially the French."

I grinned. "I truly adore public servants. They are always so... predictable."

"So you think you will become a flibustier?"

"Possibly. I met a Captain Bradley two days ago, and he said he could possibly use a man who spoke Castilian and had a fondness for steel. He is planning on sailing, soon, though; and I am not sure if the affairs I came here to handle can be left alone as of yet, though my father's agent would have me sail."

"Why?"

"He feels I will be a detriment to the endeavor." I smiled.

"And why is that?"

"I do not have it in me to callously enslave men, and I care little for farming."

His eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Do you have it in you to kill men?"

"Oui, with great celerity and regularity as the need presents itself." I shrugged.

He smiled. "So you would rather kill them than own them?"

“Quite possibly, oui.”

“And you have a fondness for steel?” His eyes flicked to my blade.

I smiled. “We have more than a passing acquaintance, as it has both saved my life and attempted to relieve me of it on many an occasion.”

“We should spar. When you are sober.”

I grinned. “I am sure I would enjoy that immensely.”

His eyes flicked over me critically. “If you are going roving, you will need a musket.”

“I have two at my disposal.”

“Lighter attire.”

“I plan to remedy that.”

“And earrings.”

“Why? I am truly curious,” I chuckled.

He shrugged. “I do not know where the tradition started, but they make it easy to spy another fliebuster in the smoke of battle.”

“That is useful to know. I will consider it. May I ask a question? Why do you paint your eyes so?”

“The Carribe. One of the Indian nations that lived here used to paint their faces thus. The Carribe ate people. The Spaniards were terrified of them. Several of my party did this when we attacked Saint Jago on Hispaniola. It bothers the Spaniards.” He shrugged and smiled thinly. “It bothers the English. And the French. Everyone really.”

I chuckled again. “How long have you been in the West Indies?”

“Ten years.”

If he was truly of an age with me as I surmised, that meant he came here at about the same time I left England the first time. But whereas I had spent the years wandering the known world, he had made his home in this wilderness. “Why did you come here, to seek adventure or fortune?”

He frowned briefly, and I felt him withdraw from me even though he moved not an inch. “My father bade me to,” he said quietly, and abruptly turned to leave.

I felt an immediate sense of loss and fought the urge to follow him. Instead I called out, “Where shall I see you again?”

He paused and turned to regard me. “We will meet again.”

Then he left, and I stood alone on a dusty street, with a book and bottle in my hand. There was hope in my heart, though. I had met an educated man who I thought I had much in common with. I returned to Theodore’s with a smile on my face.

“You look pleased with yourself,” Theodore commented as I entered. I decided against mentioning my meeting and told him of the book and the rum concoction and reading in the shade. Theodore shook his head as if he had already consigned me to a life of piracy and drunken debauch. He sent me upstairs to dress for the party.

As I donned clothing I did not wish to wear ever again, I thought of Gaston the Ghoul. In a few brief minutes he had become my savior. By the time I was ready to go, my head stuffed into a wig and my feet into hose and shoes, I realized I was quite smitten with him; and here I thought I had long outgrown schoolboy infatuations. I vowed to approach him with all the sophistication and nonchalance I possessed. And not to play the

eager puppy begging for a bone of kindness, as I was always so wont to do on the rare occasions I found a person I wished to know.

My pleasant thoughts of my meeting dissipated as I finished dressing. By the time I joined Theodore in his office I was steeped in the misery known by the common name of sweat. Theodore pronounced me pleasing to the eye, and my innards knotted and clutched at my lower spine. I assumed that, since the gentry here sought to imitate all things English, there would be some unfortunate servant stationed near the latrine to hold my coat while I shat. Needless to say, my mood was as foul as my imagination.

"Hmmm, it looks as if it may rain," Theodore commented as we walked to the King's House.

"Will it bring cooler temperatures?"

"Sometimes. Primarily it will turn the streets to sandy mud filled with filth," he said. "Be thankful you will not experience the full glory of the rainy season until late summer."

Upon witnessing the expression on my face, he laughed uproariously; and I silently vowed that when it rained, I would trip him on the walk home.

And then we arrived. But for the heat and foliage, it would have been difficult to tell this party from a similar function at my father's manor. The ladies were quite lovely in the finest gowns, and the men were well-dressed in the latest styles. The servants were in sharp livery and circulated with silver trays proffering refreshments. The decoration was tasteful, if perhaps a little musty. All in all, it looked like many a fête I had attended over the years.

I drank wine and Theodore introduced me about, and I smiled and nodded and said witty things, or at least they laughed politely. My snide remarks about the climate were always well-received, though they said that one grew accustomed to it in time. I realized this might be true, as I seemed to be perspiring far more than the people I was speaking with.

I met Governor Thomas Modyford, who seemed a witty man himself. He looked me over with a delighted smile but a shrewd eye. I smiled in return, and decided he was a man one did not give ground to, lest one lose his respect.

After the introductions were made, Theodore said, "Lord Marsdale is delighted with that acreage near yours, and we have taken the liberty of sending his bondsmen there."

"The one with the hill? Oh, wonderful," Modyford said. "I will have my man draw up the papers tomorrow. My Lord, have you given any thought to where else you may want land?"

"Not as of yet." I shrugged. "I feel I will need to take some time to make that determination, as I am not familiar with the island. I hope the delay will not prove to be troublesome."

"Not at all, my Lord. I can make suggestions, as I am sure Theodore can. But it would be best for you to take your time and perhaps even venture about."

"I will do that."

Theodore surprised me. "Lord Marsdale wishes to go roving. So I

imagine he will not see to it until he returns.”

To my amazement this did not seem to surprise Modyford at all. “Truly, my Lord? On what ship?”

“I have been invited to sail on the *North Wind*.” I wondered what ship Gaston sailed on.

“Good, good, my Lord. Bradley is a fine captain, I am told. Of course, I have never sailed with him.” He guffawed at his own joke. Then he stepped closer to whisper, “Roving with the buccaneers may not be to your liking, though.”

“How so?”

“Well, sir, they are a rough lot, and may trouble a man of your breeding,” he said with sincere concern.

I shrugged. “I have traveled before.”

“As a man of wealth or poverty, my Lord?”

I understood the point he wished to make, and I did not wish to give it to him, though he was correct to assume I had always journeyed as a moneyed man in some fashion. “Both. Sometimes it behooves a Lord’s son not to be known as one.”

“Ah, very good then, my Lord. You may do well. I wish you the best of fortune. The rest of the land can be settled when you return.”

Another man approached and Modyford beamed a smile at him. “Ah, Morgan. This is the Viscount of Marsdale. Lord Marsdale, this is Henry Morgan, the admiral of our buccaneers.”

I fought frowning at that. The only credence I could give to this statement was the man’s earrings and his overall mien, which was predatory and wary despite the fine clothes and proper young bride at his side. He looked me over, and I knew he thought me weak, much as Bradley had initially done. I chose to ignore it for the time being.

I wondered how one became the admiral of the buccaneers, and whether or not the buccaneers were aware of this. He was not much older than I, and I wondered a good many things about him, but he did not seem inclined to talk in my presence; and so Theodore and I graciously excused ourselves to mingle with other guests.

My official duty for the plantation done, Theodore abandoned me to speak to his other clients. I thought this wise, as I wished to berate him somewhat over his announcement to Modyford. Left alone, I stood and looked about.

Upon arriving, I had been surprised at the number of women present. Though the men still outnumbered them two to one, I had not even expected that many. Apparently the proof of money and power on Jamaica was the possession of a wife. The few single daughters of marriageable age were in demand, and I did not even attempt to force my way through the knots of men surrounding them to get a glimpse. So it was with real amazement that I spied Bradley and Siegfried exiting one of these clusters of courtship.

In truth, I almost did not recognize them, as they were as formally dressed as I. The earrings gave them away, though; and I had to chuckle, as I had discovered another battlefield where gold at the ears could allow buccaneers to recognize one another. Of course I did not have a set yet, so

they almost failed to recognize me.

Bradley grinned when he did realize my identity. "I expected you here."

Siegfried shook his head and smiled. "It is in his honor, you fool."

Bradley shrugged and grinned. "All the more reason to expect him."

"That makes one of us," I said. "I was dismayed when I learned of it yesterday."

"You don't like parties?" Siegfried teased.

I thought about that for a moment. "Nay, sir, I do not. I have had my fill of them. In truth they have come to represent work and not play for me."

They regarded me curiously.

"How so?" Bradley asked.

I sighed and shrugged. "There have been periods of my life when I could be considered a duelist by vocation."

"Ahhh," Siegfried said. "So you are quite good with a blade."

"Aye," I grinned. "Good enough to live this long."

"Have you given any more thought to joining us?" Bradley asked.

"A great deal," I said. "You said you would be sailing soon?"

"In two days."

"That soon," I sighed, thankful I would have a good excuse as a result. I could not see where everything could be settled to my satisfaction, even if I wished to rove by then. And there was also the issue of Gaston. I shook my head at my own stupidity. One chance encounter and I was going to make decisions based upon him. I was pathetically lonely.

"I will have to see where my affairs are by then," I said with a regretful tone. "And my health. I seem to have a touch of the flux."

"It'll either pass or you'll die," Bradley said with a shrug.

I laughed. "Easy for you to say, I see."

"I'm just saying it should not be an impediment to your decision. When we first leave port, we need to provision; and then we'll need to careen. By the time we actually start looking for the Spanish, you'll either be well or over the side." He clapped my shoulder with amusement.

"Ahh, I see your argument clearly. Now if you will just explain it to yon Theodore."

To my delight, Tom joined us. I made introductions and looked him over critically. Dressed as a gentleman of quality, he was exceedingly handsome in a boyish way. Yet there seemed to be something lacking in his presence, actually two somethings. "Where are Dickey and Harry?"

"Harry has fallen quite ill and Dickey is tending him," Tom said sadly.

"Truly? With what, pray tell?" I asked.

"The flux."

I looked at Bradley who started laughing.

"I was just complaining of having a touch of that myself," I quickly told Tom, in order to smooth the frown he was giving Bradley. "How ill is he?"

"Grievously, I am sorry to say. The physician has bled him twice already. He says there is hope, though, and he has recommended a treatment of brandied oats and no drink of any kind, in order to reduce the level of... well you know, liquidity of the stool."

This remedy made a good deal of sense to me, and I eyed my wine

suspiciously. It had been doing little to slake my thirst or ease my suffering. I either required a far stronger drink or none at all.

"I would be with them, too," Tom said. "But my uncle insisted I accompany him and meet the local gentry. He also wished to gain your introduction, as he feels I was fabulously fortunate to have the honor of traveling with you," he said with a sarcastic flourish.

"Will there be fawning?" I asked with a grimace.

"As if you were in the forest at springtime," Tom said.

We all laughed, but I sobered quickly. "Well, perhaps we should get this over with, then, so that you may return to Harry."

"My uncle is yonder, speaking with Morgan," Tom said.

At the sight of the so-called admiral of the buccaneers, I turned to Bradley with a smile. "Did you know you have an admiral?"

Bradley sighed. "Aye, of sorts. He was a favored student of Mansfield and his uncle was the Lieutenant Governor – and well, Modyford adores him. So he has the job of organizing and leading the buccaneers as a whole; not that anyone wants to listen to him as yet. Don't be fooled by all of that. He's a good man, and a smart one. He has a talent for leading and for battle. He's also a friend."

I nodded respectfully. So Morgan did possess a degree of credibility amongst his peers. We joined Morgan and Tom's uncle, a florid man of great girth and thick lips. He did indeed fawn in quite an embarrassing fashion, and I had to pull free of his grasp several times. Morgan was initially annoyed with this, until he spied Bradley and Siegfried in my wake.

"Don't tell me you two have taken to worshipping the nobility too," Morgan said, as the uncle babbled on contentedly about something I was not listening to.

I glanced back in time to see Bradley smirking. "Marsdale may be sailing with us."

"What?" Morgan scoffed. "Do you think that wise?"

Thankfully, Morgan's poor bride had met the eyes of the uncle and was now caught in his trap. This left me free to take a half step back and engage in the other conversation.

"Why would it not be wise?" I asked innocently.

"It's a hard life," Morgan said.

"Ah yes, so I have been apprised. I was told I may have to curtail my usual entourage, and the accommodations are quite poor, and there will be none of the little crullers I so enjoy."

He glared at me briefly before hiding it behind a pleasant chortle. "You have quite the sense of humor, Lord Marsdale."

"Aye, I should hope it will serve me well as I lie dying of the flux while the ship is being careened."

Bradley and Siegfried were laughing now, and Morgan realized he did not know how to consider me; though he obviously liked me even less.

"I hope it will serve you well, that and courage, the first time you face the Spaniards."

"Are they so horrible?" I asked. "I have never harbored a particular dislike for them."

"They will kill you if you let them," Morgan said.

"As long as they die when I shoot them, we shall get along famously. I have never feared the dead, or had quarrel with them for that matter."

"So you feel you possess the proper mien to become a buccaneer?"

Morgan asked.

"From all that I have heard, aye."

"There are no women on the ships, and we do not offer commissions."

"Excellent and excellent."

His gaze narrowed and I felt all eyes upon me. "It will be interesting to hear your opinion this time next year," he finally said.

"It is always interesting to see who Dame Fortune favors over time."

He took his leave. As he walked away with his little bride I labeled him a wolf, albeit a self-made one. There was a roughness about his manner and speech that told of an upbringing without nannies and tutors. He assumed I was not someone who could ever affect him greatly. He was not the first of his kind I had encountered. Coming up from the realm of sheep as they do, they often make that mistake about the wolves they seek to emulate.

As I looked about, I was pleased to note the uncle had been distracted as well. I was left with Tom, Bradley, and Siegfried again. I bid Tom farewell for the evening, and bade him carry my best wishes to the ailing Harry. Once he was gone, I turned to Bradley and Siegfried.

"All duties now done, I wish to retire from this place. What plans do you gentlemen have for the remainder of the evening? There is actually a matter I wish to seek your advice and aid on."

Bradley was regarding me with amusement. "We were going to a tavern; you would be welcome to join us."

"I would be delighted." As I turned, I discovered Belfry hovering at a socially polite distance. "As soon as I talk to this man."

Siegfried indicated something across the room and I glanced in that direction along with Bradley, in time to discover one of the eligible young women beginning to escape from her knot of admirers.

"We'll meet you outside," Bradley said, and they were off in pursuit. I wondered at this, but there was obviously no time to question it.

I joined Belfry. "And how are you this fine evening? I am glad you were able to attend the party."

"As am I, my Lord. It is a blessed relief to step on dry land sometimes. Tonight I will even sleep in a real bed."

"You are staying in town, then?"

"Aye, my Lord, I have to prepare the cargo for loading tomorrow afternoon. We have a limited time at the wharf."

So Davey's rescue definitely had to be affected this very night. My stomach clenched and roiled, and I felt sweat bead on my forehead anew. I hoped fervently that Bradley would agree to aid me, as my body was going to be an unwilling participant in any endeavor I mounted.

"So did all of the officers come ashore?"

"Just the captain and I for the party, then he will return to the ship."

I exchanged further pleasantries with him and bid him farewell once more, even though I harbored the suspicion I would see him again. I was

actually grateful it would not be this night, though, as I wished poor Belfry no ill.

I located Theodore, and he followed me outside. His man Samuel was waiting, with an urgent note from another client. I began to shed clothing and accoutrements at a speedy rate and hand them to the unfortunate Negro, until my attire was reduced to shirt and breeches. At which point I strapped my sword back on and stuffed my pistol in my belt. I handed Samuel a small coin. "Please return those to the house, or toss them in a midden heap. I care not. I am not feeling particularly charitable towards them at the moment."

Bradley and Siegfried had joined us and witnessed this exchange. Samuel regarded me with wide eyes, and Theodore had to give him approval and shoo him away.

"You don't understand the basic principles behind slavery, do you?" Bradley asked. "You don't have to pay them."

"True, true; but what I do not understand about slavery is why he does not kill us in our sleep. I would."

Theodore was sighing heavily, with his head thrown back in supplication to the heavens. We left him there. Several blocks down Thames, as the main thoroughfare running parallel to the bay was named, we turned left through an archway and entered a short alley between two buildings. I spotted a likely shadowed spot that reeked of urine, and asked which tavern they would be in. They said they would be in the Three Tunns, the building on our left. Once I finally made my way inside, I found them at a table in the back with two other men. I resigned myself to waiting, and shook hands with a Captain Searles and a Frenchman named Pierrot, who I assumed was another captain, though he was not introduced as such.

Pierrot was a big man of middle age with dark Gallic coloring, expressive eyes, and a Roman nose. He possessed one of those visages that could change from the melancholy of an old dog to the jocular of a court jester in the blink of an eye. I supposed that was why he was called "clown."

Searles was even brawnier, with a square face, small eyes, and a forbidding attitude. At the moment he was ranting in a booming voice. He barely slowed down to receive my introduction; Bradley quickly handed me a tankard and waved me into a seat as the man continued.

"And they're off at the King's House celebrating the arrival of some damn Lord's whelp," Searles was saying. "And I've got men to feed. Not that I even know I want to risk bringing another prize in. That bastard Modyford. Oh, the King said this and oh, the King said that. And that fucker Willoughby. Oh, we're here to claim this victory for the King. And Morgan's a good man, better than his uncle at being a buccaneer, but for Christ's sake he's a whelp. The French won't sail with him. Will ya?" He turned on Pierrot, who gave him an amused shrug. Bradley and Siegfried were laughing.

"What's so damn funny?" Searles demanded.

Bradley pointed at me. "The English Lord's whelp."

Searles looked me over and took a swig of beer. He snorted and

shrugged. "Doesn't look like I expected."

"He's going to sail with us," Bradley said. I was interested in noting that we had progressed quite handily from the potential of my sailing with them being merely discussed to it being a known fact.

"Listen, Searles," Bradley said. "I know you've been ill-used by the local government, what with them seizing the prize last year and all. But I have faith that business has all changed to our benefit, especially with the war." He shrugged apologetically at Pierrot. "And Modyford not wanting us to take our prizes to Tortuga. So I'm going hunting the Flota this summer. You will do whatever you wish. When the war clears up, we will sail again for bigger plunder, under Morgan, whelp or no."

Searles sighed heavily and looked distantly across the tavern, as if seeing rolling waves and not a wooden wall. "Aye, aye... All is as you say, but damn it man, the life is hard enough without..." He nodded to himself and looked Bradley in the eye. "Damn it all, I want to trust my government, or have none at all."

Bradley nodded sympathetically. "That's why we buccaneers have to stick together. As one, there's not a force on this sea that can stand against us. Separate, we're just pirates running from port to port trying to stay off the gallows."

They all looked thoughtful for a moment. Then Pierrot toasted, "To the Brethren of the Coast!"

We all drained our tankards.

I was, as always, plagued by questions and further bothered by the lack of opportunity to ask them. Thankfully, Searles took his leave shortly thereafter, and I was able to give the other men a questioning look.

Bradley said, "The King has not always been sure how to address the issue of war in the West Indies with the Spaniards. Or more specifically, he's not sure what his ambassadors should be telling the Spanish court as opposed to what he wants from his own colonies. So the governors here have received contrary orders, sometimes only months apart. All in all, they want us here to defend them, but they don't want us to draw Spanish wrath; and then they want the prizes, but they don't want to condone piracy, and so on. So when Modyford arrived in sixty-four, he thought his duty involved putting an end to privateering, and he seized several Spanish prizes brought to port, including two of Searles'. Then England was at war with the Dutch, and everyone was issued marques against them, and Searles and Stedman sailed for Tobago and took it. Three days later, the governor of Barbados shows up and claims *that*. They had to argue to keep the booty. The man has good reason to be angry."

I grasped the situation quickly, as I had seen others like it. "So there is a chance you will sail, and while you are away, the rules will change and you may not have a safe port to return to."

"Aye, we often take that risk when we're roving for months at a time."

"And how fare the French?" I asked Peirrot.

He shrugged. "Our leaders are somewhat more consistent. But Île de la Tortue has changed hands many times. I think it will remain French now, and our King will support privateering without second thought or doubt. But who can truly tell? If a treaty is needed...." He held his hands up to

indicate it was in the hands of the fates or at least the powers that be. "Of course, we take a risk whenever we sail here. I was amazed when Modyford offered us a marque, but we've been sailing out of Port Royal for a year now, prior to the war."

"There are French buccaneers on many of the ships. Dutch, too," Bradley added.

I nodded. "So in some ways the Brethren of the Coast truly transcends nationality, and perhaps national loyalty?"

"Oh, by all means." Bradley grinned. "Most men here have no love of the nation of their birth, or often it of them. That's why they're here."

"Are you loyal to your King?" Pierrot asked.

I shrugged. "I grew up during the Reformation. I have traveled Christendom for the last ten years and seen no consistency of government, other than it is always controlled by the powerful for their own ends and they use the weak to do their fighting."

Pierrot nodded approvingly. "You will do well here."

"Aye, I feel so, but I am somewhat dismayed to hear that some things are very like where I have already been."

Bradley frowned, but Peirrot shrugged and grinned. "Here the weak have weapons."

I smiled back, but I was thinking that armed sheep can still be herded: it is in their nature. The talk turned to other things, and another ewer of beer was ordered. Eventually Pierrot bid us adieu. I quickly seized the opportunity.

"I have a matter that requires urgent attention this very night."

Bradley and Siegfried regarded me with surprise.

"We are at your service," Bradley said curiously.

I explained about Davey. They exchanged a long look and Bradley spoke. "We have no qualms about helping a sailor jump ship, but it would present a real hornet's nest if the ones doing it were apprehended."

"Aye, I was thinking a tactic of distraction might be in order if that were to occur," I said.

"How important is this man to you?" Siegfried asked.

"He is merely an acquaintance; one I feel some responsibility for, wholly of my own making. I know it may seem quite the endeavor for an acquaintance but..."

Bradley waved me off. "That is your own concern. However, in the name of our concerns, we cannot be directly involved. What my men do is another matter, however."

"As long as you do not know of it?" I asked. I was somewhat dismayed at his attitude and caution.

"Aye, if asked now, I can say you approached me about helping a sailor jump ship."

"I see, and if I am ever questioned about such things, I should perhaps say that you told me you could and would not be involved in such endeavors."

He winced, though I had not tried to sound harsh. "We will... Aye, you should say that, if the need should come to pass to explain such a thing. It would be best for all if it did not. Marsdale, you have to understand, in

depredations against the Spaniards I have no scruples; in what amounts to a depredation against the English I am a property owner now, and a member of..." He glanced at Siegfried, who looked uncomfortable. "We can't be pirates forever, and we have to think about the future. We have concerns. I am somewhat surprised that you do not share them, especially considering your birth."

Bradley was a tame wolf indeed. The only thing that would stop a wolf from engaging in this endeavor was the possible loss of money or life or the angering of bigger wolves. In his defense, I suppose those reasons could be considered here, but they were not his reason alone. I could see it in his eyes and hear it in his words. He was not a rule maker, but a rule follower.

I was disappointed, and it sat heavy in my heart. I endeavored to keep it from my countenance.

"My relationship to the station of my birth is my own affair," I said with an affable smile. "What aid can you give me, if any? And I blame you not. I fully understand."

He sighed. "Go to my ship and ask for Striker and Pete. Explain yourself; tell them I suggested you speak with them. It will be their decision as to whether or not they wish to take the risk. Knowing them, they'll do it for a bit of fun and damn the consequences."

With that, I drained another tankard and departed. I felt tired and light-headed, and it seemed damnably hot again. With some alarm, I was beginning to suppose I was feverish. By my reckoning, I was halfway to the Chocolata Hole when my bowels directed me to the shadows of an alley. I was beginning to feel both furious and determined. If these men of Bradley's would not help me, I vowed to steal a small boat and row out there myself. Concerns, whatever they may be, English law, and the flux be damned.

I staggered out of the shadows.

"Drink this," Gaston said with his husky whisper in French, and handed me a wineskin.

I started so badly my heart pounded in my chest and my vision wavered for a moment. I was delighted to see him, but I wondered how long he had been following me; and then I wondered why.

"What is it?"

"Water. Boiled."

I attempted to ponder his meaning. "I was told just tonight that the local physicians prescribe a lack of liquid for this ailment."

He blinked at me once and frowned slightly before sighing, "No wonder there are so many deaths." He shrugged. "I heard my remedy from a physician of the Arabian schools. Think of it thusly, what would you do if you had a vile lump of something lodged in a pipe?"

"Flush it out." I took the water and began to drink. In between gulps I asked, "What does boiling have to do with anything?"

"Nothing lives in boiled water."

I stopped drinking and frowned at him. "What?"

"Have you ever looked at water through a lens that magnifies?"

"Non." I grinned and drank more water to hide my excitement. He was either well educated, possibly better than I, or he possessed a more

curious mind than mine, as I had not thought to look at water through a lens or been in the company of anyone who had.

"There are all manner of little things swimming in it," he said.

"Like very small fish?"

"Non, like very small shrimp or slugs."

"That is disgusting. So they are not there after it has been boiled?"

"Correct."

"Did you make this discovery or were you taught it?"

"Monks, and I performed the observation myself."

"I never got to learn from monks."

"You are not a Papist, and I only received the blessing of their wisdom after I was expelled from every other proper school in France and Austria."

He smirked.

"Are you a devout Papist?"

"Only by birth. And you; are you a devout heathen?" He crossed his arms, but there was an amused cock to his head.

"Non, nor any other faith."

We grinned, as we had established another degree of commonality. And his mention of school had confirmed my guess about his education, and also a suspicion I had been harboring as to the station of his birth. I believed us to be peers.

"I am off to cause mischief," I said. "Are you otherwise engaged?"

If I had still believed in God, I would have prayed Gaston was a wolf so that I did not suffer a truly crushing disappointment this night. If Gaston were not a wolf, considering what I surmised of his birth, then my entire theory of wolves and sheep was at risk. Not only would I lose this most excellent possibility of a true friendship of equals, but I would also be in danger of losing my perception of order in the universe.

He shook his head.

"Of what nature?" he asked as we resumed my course.

"At the very least, it will involve the breaking of what surely is a maritime law of some sort; and at the worst, it may involve the taking of property and life."

"If we are seen," he said.

I grinned. "Non, prior to that. If that were to happen, the incidence of the first two would grow exponentially." I quickly explained about Davey and relayed my plan.

He was silent even when we were standing on the beach of the *Chocolata Hole* and regarding the *North Wind* anchored beyond. Her deck was well-lit and appeared to be hosting a party. I was alarmed that it might not bode well for the night's mission. I was also concerned that Gaston had not made comment, considering what I had proposed.

"Are you with me?" I asked carefully.

"Excuse me?" he said, and looked at me curiously. "I am sorry, I was trying to decide if any of them appear sober enough to be of any use to us."

The tension drained from my shoulders, and I smiled. He was a wolf. I was truly smitten.

We borrowed a small boat from the beach and rowed to the sloop. I was sure we could have slipped on board and caused mischief for all the

attention their watch appeared to spare us. That was, until we reached the side, and the head and shoulders of a man were immediately silhouetted above us.

“WhoAreYa?” the voice boomed, with a heavy brogue which had no respect for the separations usually awarded between words and syllables of the King’s English. The question had been an eerie blur of sound that only became understandable words after I concentrated and used my wits.

“WaitIKnowYa,” soon followed.

Gaston smiled.

“Greetings, Pete,” he said in English, without raising his voice above his usual husky whisper. I was surprised he could be heard with all the ruckus occurring on deck behind the listener.

“AyeYaBeThatMadFrenchie. YaBeTheGhoul. Gaston.” There was a note of triumph in this, as if Pete were proud of himself for remembering. “YaBeGood.”

I was somewhat surprised that Gaston did not take offense at being referred to as a mad Frenchie. Of course, perhaps I had mistranslated. I was also curious as to why he was known as The Ghoul.

“Correct,” Gaston said to Pete. “This is my friend... Will. He needs to talk to Striker and you. Bradley sent him.”

I blinked at the shortening of my surname.

“Will?” I whispered.

Gaston shrugged apologetically. “The Brethren prefer names that can easily be shouted in battle, and no man uses his real name across the Line.”

“Ah.” I nodded. I spared it a moment’s more thought, and decided it would do nicely. I had not used a variation of my surname as an alias before.

Then I thought on what else he had said. So the man greeting us was one of the men I sought. And here I had thought I would have to do all of the talking.

“So you know them?”

“Oui.” Gaston nodded. “Our ships sailed with Mansfield. During the raids, I fought beside these men.”

We threw up a line to secure our craft. Gaston whispered to me before we climbed on board, “Striker thinks for both of them most of the time, but Pete is not as stupid as he appears. He is a genius at combat, as long as it does not involve fencing, and that is only because no one has taught him.”

We climbed aboard with that, and I got to see Pete as more than a silhouette. I managed to keep my jaw from falling agape by a sheer act of will. To say that Adonis had blessed the man would have been an unjust understatement. Adonis was personified in this man. Pete was a tanned, golden-haired god, with a long, lean muscular body and a powerfully handsome face graced by azure eyes. And it was all too evident: he was only wearing a loose pair of breeches held up by a rope belt tied low on his hips, so that golden curls could be seen at the base of his rippled stomach. The only things marring his flesh were a number of scars here and there: the type any man engaged in combat will obtain over his life. They were not detracting features. His beard, which I usually detest, was not even a

detracting feature, in that it was well trimmed and curling and served to outline his jaw. At the moment, he was rewarding us with a boyish grin so intense in its radiance that I expected to hear the holy host singing on high.

"WeGotRum. GotCakeToo. WantSome?" Pete asked.

"Cake, truly?" I asked.

"Naw. NoFlour. Cheesecake."

"That will do," I said. Pete ran into the midst of the partying men.

"He is gorgeous," I whispered.

"Oui, I have never even seen statuary that could equal him."

"Oui, the great masters would have given anything to have him model."

Another man was approaching, and he momentarily drove Pete from my mind. This is to say he had an equally strong impact on my consciousness, as driving images of Pete from my mind I would have thought nigh impossible at the moment. It was only because this man looked a great deal as I supposed Shane would look as a man and not a boy, only better. He was as tall as Pete, with an equally muscular build; however, he lacked the perfection of conformation Pete possessed. The same was true of his face, which while handsome, was a little too strong in some areas and not others. His hair was ebony and hung over dark eyes; but he had light golden skin. He did not wear any more clothing than Pete.

He studied us as he approached, the trace of a frown upon his brow.

"Gaston," he acknowledged politely and they shook hands.

"Striker. This is Will."

I shook hands with the man. "Bradley suggested I talk with you."

He raised an eyebrow. "Concerning?"

Pete returned with a bottle and a plate of goop, which he proffered.

"Cheesecake."

The goop did indeed smell like cheesecake, and I ate it readily. It proved to taste like cheesecake, too; and it had been months since I had eaten anything so good.

"That is truly delicious," I said. Pete appeared pleased and offered me more. We retired farther astern, to the *North Wind's* low quarterdeck, and sat to finish the cake and pass the bottle.

"I need assistance rescuing a sailor," I said. "I have a friend on a merchant ship in the harbor. He would like to become a buccaneer. I have offered to help him. The captain has judged him at risk of fleeing and had him locked below deck."

"Could we assume this was a close friend?" Striker asked with a knowing grin.

"Nay, we could not. I have developed a pastime of availing myself as a philanthropist or benefactor of sorts. He is spirited and ambitious, and I admired him for that and decided to help."

Striker appeared to be somewhat incredulous, and he glanced at Gaston for his reaction. Gaston shrugged.

"When?" Striker asked.

"Tonight."

"You are in this?" Striker asked Gaston, who nodded. "If we are seen?"

"That will not be acceptable," I said.

“Will the bodies be missed?”

“Aye, most probably. As I will most likely kill the bo’sun even if we are not seen, my thinking is thus: She is empty of cargo. The only other person of her crew I have grown fond of is ashore tonight. I cannot see where the rest of her crew would be harmed by her loss. I harbor no true ill-will toward the captain, yet he does not own her. And the owners benefit from the selling of pressed men, which I find abhorrent. So I am considering burning her as a diversion.” I was keen to see their reactions. As I had already relayed this to Gaston, I was not concerned about his.

Pete and Striker smiled like wolves, and I was relieved.

“LikeBurnin’Ships,” Pete grinned.

“You realize if we become lost on this path we’ll end at the gallows,” Striker said. He did not seem to think this was likely. “Is there any money? If we’re going to burn her, we might as well rob her.”

I smiled. “If it is still aboard, the captain has a good forty pounds of my money and possibly more.”

“What did you pay him for?” Striker asked.

“A man’s contract, which I then destroyed.”

“Who the devil are you?” he asked with more suspicion.

I sighed, but met his gaze levelly. “I am the Viscount of Marsdale. My father is the Earl of Dorshire, and he sent me here to oversee the establishment of a sugar plantation.”

The wolves studied me with unease, and glanced as one to Gaston and back again to me. Striker frowned at whatever he found on Gaston’s face, but by the time I looked to see my new companion’s reaction, his face was schooled, and he appeared to be idly watching the men at the bow. I cursed under my breath. I felt quite comfortable with him, as if we were old and true friends; but in truth I knew less of him than he probably did of me.

“WeNotBeAidin’Planters,” Pete said and slid the cheesecake beyond my reach.

“Bradley sent you to us?” Striker asked, as if he could not fathom why.

My ire flared: not necessarily at them, but at the situation I found myself in. I would not have these men think ill of me because of my damn father.

“Aye, Bradley sent me. He invited me to sail with him and I am considering it wholeheartedly. I asked for his aid, and he said he wished to have no part in this endeavor as... I believe he is concerned for his respectability. As for my being a planter,” I snorted derisively. “I have little interest in it. My father wished for me to come here as his agent because he thought I might die and save him a bit of trouble, and there was no one else he wished to risk. There is no love lost between us, and I have not lived under his roof but for two months these last ten years. I came because... I will inherit. When I do, I can do much good with the title, or so I tell myself. In the meantime, acting as his agent, I can at least see that those he has contracted are treated well.”

They seemed somewhat taken aback by my vehemence. I glanced at Gaston and found his eyes large upon me. He quickly regarded the deck.

“WeBeBondsmenOnce,” Pete said, so that I shifted my attention to him.

He scratched his head and pushed the cheesecake back toward me with a guilty smile.

"I am sorry," I said quietly.

A slow smile spread across Striker's face. "Let's get your man."

I shook my head and smiled sadly. "The entire point of the endeavor is that he be no one's man."

"Aye," he grinned. "Let us get our weapons." They slipped off the quarterdeck to the deck below.

I hazarded another look at Gaston and found him studying me intensely. Once again, he looked away quickly when our eyes met. I wished to speak but did not know what to say, and the wolves were still within hearing.

He stood abruptly and took his musket to Pete, who stowed it in the area from which they were retrieving their weapons.

"So, that forty pounds, you willing to share it out?" Striker asked.

"Aye," I shrugged. "I already considered it well spent. Recouping a fraction of it will be an unexpected pleasure."

"Were Bradley and Siegfried at that party tonight?" Striker asked as they returned to the quarterdeck. They now wore no more clothing, but they were wrapped in belts and baldrics laden with as many weapons as Gaston carried, but no muskets. Striker chuckled before I could respond. "Damn, you're the Lord it was to welcome, aren't you?"

I sighed and took another pull on the bottle. "Aye. And I met all of the important people I was supposed to meet and promptly escaped."

"So Bradley doesn't have the balls for it anymore, does he?" Striker said with a lopsided grin. "Getting all respectable. Were they chasing women at this party, proper ladies?"

"Aye," I said with a raised eyebrow.

Pete and Striker exchanged a look.

"I feel sorry for Siegfried," Striker shrugged.

"YaEverDoThatI'llFuckin'KillYa," Pete said with a look that made him appear anything but the affable idiot he seemed previously.

Striker blew him a kiss, and they smiled with sarcastic sweetness at one another.

I suppressed a laugh. As I looked about at my three new companions, I realized the Gods had tipped their hand; and I was momentarily in awe of their magnanimity.