

Excerpt of *Matelots: Raised By Wolves*, Volume Two
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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 comportsment, 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 jocularitas 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. Peirrot 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 absentmindedly, 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 questioned 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."