

Excerpt of Treasure: Raised By Wolves, Volume Three
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Fifty-Three

Wherein A Wolf Comes Calling

A muffled retort split the hazy afternoon air, carving a little notch in my hearing somewhere amongst the occasional pop of the fire, the distant crash of the waves upon the rocks below, the pecking of chickens, the cud-chewing of goats, and the omnipresent buzz of insects. I stilled my hand and cocked my head to listen, glancing at Bella to see if I heard phantoms or if it had been a thing a dog could corroborate. Her great brindle head was raised and her eyes peered north toward the beach. She did not seem alarmed, but as she was gravid with pups she longed to whelp, I felt it would take much to rouse her from the shade where she lounged and I worked.

I was not alarmed, either: merely curious. We had very few neighbors this autumn: many of our cabal were off smuggling to the Spanish, and the rest had stayed in Port Royal. Of the men with whom we did share Negril Point, most were far inland, hunting, as there was little game to be had on the promontory itself. So it was likely – if it were truly a thing that had occurred – that the retort had issued from the beach below. It had become customary for our vessels to alert the denizens of the Point of their arrival, so that we could join them on the beach and help them carry up anything they might have brought.

“So you heard it too, Bella my girl,” I said lightly, as I wiped the excess paint from my brush.

She looked quickly my way, and opened and closed her mouth with a nearly silent huff of annoyance, before slowly rolling her bulk onto her legs so that she could push herself erect.

"I concur," I said.

I set the chair I had been decorating aside, and carefully closed the lid on the jar of paint. I placed my tools on the high shelf made by the top of the rock wall of the house, and stuck my tongue out at the goat eyeing them hungrily. The damn animals had not managed to reach anything I placed under the eaves yet, but they were often upon the thatched roof seeking a means to do so. Sure enough, the matriarch of our little herd began to make her way to the hill that formed one side of our home. From the hill she could climb onto the roof with ease. I rather hoped she would fall through the thatch and we could dine on roast goat.

I followed Bella to the front of the house, but whereas she continued on to the edge of the promontory, I stopped by the cook fire, where Gaston was brewing medicinal concoctions. I found him staring into the distance in the same direction the dog now headed. He did not seem to be listening, though; just deep in thought.

I took time to drink in the sight of him, as it was seldom that he was in such repose and unaware of my gaze. As always, I marveled that my love would find such a fine form. I would have taken him even if his eyes were hooded, his jaw weak, or his nose beaked; but his features were truly finely wrought: handsome without prettiness; strong without crudeness. In the deep shade of the awning we had erected beside the fire, his eyes were the color of a pine forest at dusk, and his red hair was reduced in magnificence to the hue of dried blood. I could barely see the small gold hoops at his ears that marked him a buccaneer, or the scar upon his forehead that spoke of so many others. His lean muscular body – the physique of a man who ran two leagues and sparred for over an hour every morn – was folded beneath him in a way that seemed uncomfortable but was surely not, as he was not coiled or poised to move, but relaxed and at peace: like a cat who seems boneless and not prone to ever move again until it stands and stretches with the grace of a dancer.

He finally felt my gaze and squinted up at me curiously. I knew he sometimes watched me when I was not aware, and I wondered what he thought. He always said he found me handsome: but I am not like him, as I am somewhat more lanky than sculpted, in feature as well as physique. I feel I would not remind anyone of a cat, but rather a lean hound with an amiable boyish smile and hair the color of straw never to be spun into gold. By all accounts, I have remarkably blue eyes, though.

"I thought I heard a shot," I said, and scratched the wheat stubble of my jaw. We had not shaved in days.

He did not reply for a time, and then he turned to peer around our land with a slight frown and a slow nod. "Oui."

I looked about. We appeared to be alone atop Negril Point. To the south and east, nothing moved for as far as the haze allowed my gaze to travel, except for the breeze upon the grass and bushes. And in the other directions, there was only the endless sea meeting an endless sky.

“Bella did too,” I added. “I will investigate.”

“I should stay with these,” he said, and indicated the little pots he had boiling on the fire. Then he cursed quietly and looked about him with annoyance.

I smiled as I headed to the door to the house: neither of us had a weapon within reach. I fetched our sword belts, ammunition pouches, and a pistol for each of us.

“We have grown lax,” he muttered as he accepted the pistol.

“We are living well, with not a care in the world,” I chided as I loaded my piece. “But oui, you describe the other side of the coin quite well. Let us see how it has landed this day.”

He sighed as he loaded his. “If it was a shot from the beach, do not go down without telling me.”

“Of course not.” I leaned down and kissed the scar upon his forehead.

He snorted with annoyance, and then his hand snaked around the back of my neck and he nearly pulled me to the ground as he brought my lips to his.

I left him with a jaunty grin upon both our faces.

Bella sat at the head of the path leading down to the strand of beach that ran due north of us between the wide bay and the great bog. I did not see anyone upon the steep winding trail, but I did see a flyboat landed upon the sand below. Three men were working about it: I could not truly ascertain their identities at such a distance, but as one wore a shirt and was in the process of doffing shoes and hose, and the other two were nearly-naked bronzed buccaneers, I thought it entirely possible Striker, Pete, and Theodore were paying us a visit. I saw nothing else upon the sea or sand.

I returned to our abode and told Gaston of what I surmised as to the identity of our guests.

“Do they have much that must be carried?” he asked with annoyance.

I shrugged. I could not recall seeing them unloading anything at all. “Nor goats to herd.”

He snorted. We had viewed the arrival of the goats at their last visit as a mixed blessing.

“I will stay, then,” he said. “If it pleases you,” he added.

I shrugged again.

I called for Bella to remain with Gaston. I saw no reason for her to waddle down to the beach after me and back up again. I wished our big black male, Taro, were about so that he could accompany me, but he appeared to be off hunting, or perhaps avoiding his grouchy mate.

This thought minded me that our dog was not the only one heavy with child this autumn; and I wondered if our visitors were here to avoid their own surely grumpy wife. Or perhaps it was later in the year than I suspected, and they came bearing news of new relations.

Our visitors were indeed Theodore, Pete, and Striker. My dear

friend and barrister appeared as he always did, his dark eyes calm and serious, the hint of a smile playing about his thin lips. His somewhat stout body looked no wider or thinner than when last I saw him – in May, I believed, or was it April? Our favorite lion and wolf, one gold, the other dark, both bronzed to copper, appeared as scuffed and bruised as they ever did when they spent time in Port Royal amongst so many bored buccaneers and taverns. So their marriage to my sister had changed little in that regard. As always, my matelot not withstanding, they were two of the handsomest men I have ever beheld.

“What is the month?” I asked them when at last we were close enough to speak.

My inquiry was greeted by confused stares on the part of two of their number, and a chuckle from Pete, who then lifted me off my feet in an exuberant embrace.

“October,” Striker said, as if I were daft. “You look well and it is good to hear you speaking again.”

“It is good to speak again.” To my ear my voice still sounded a trifle rusty after two months of having my jaw bound so it could heal; but I still sounded better than my poor matelot, whose voice was permanently husky and rough, having been broken such that it would never heal.

“We are well,” I said, and embraced Theodore. “And how is everyone? And to what honor due we owe this visit?”

Theodore appeared caught between answering my question truthfully – a thing that seemed to pain him – and uttering the usual pleasantries.

“We?” Striker queried doggedly as I turned to him. He glanced past me and up toward the promontory with curious concern.

Annoyance flared in my heart. There was still much to be mended between us, though I understood his concern.

“Aye, we.” I let the annoyance be heard in my tone, even as I embraced him. “Gaston is brewing some concoctions from the bark of various trees in the hope of producing a cure for malaria, since no one but the damn Spanish can yet locate quinine. The pots could not be left.”

“Malaria? Are you both well?” Theodore asked with alarm.

“Nay, aye, we do not ail,” I said quickly. “We lost so many returning from Porto Bello that the physician in his soul has become obsessed with finding another means to combat the damn malady, though. Some of our men only live because we did locate quinine in an apothecary in that damned cesspool of a port. Gaston knew of it because the Jesuit that Doucette often dealt with had it.”

“Considering what the Spanish are said to sell the substance for in Christendom, if he does locate another cure, you would be very wealthy men,” Theodore said thoughtfully.

I shrugged. “We are wealthy men, and I feel my matelot would simply give it away anyway. I would not feel right in turning such a thing to coin, either.”

Theodore smiled indulgently. "Nay, because you are wealthier in virtue than in gold."

"Or perhaps common sense," I said with a grin. I turned back to Striker. "We are quite well, as we were when last you visited." I met his eyes with a strong gaze that he at last turned from with a sheepish mien.

"We worry," Striker said.

I glanced to Pete: his expression told me his matelot was the only one engaged in the activity.

"You are fond of worrying," I told Striker. "Now, what news have you? Or did you come to escape my sister? Or has she birthed yet?"

Pete and Striker looked to Theodore and frowned in unison.

"EKnowsTheWhyO'It," Pete said with mock annoyance.

"An"EWillNa'Speak."

Theodore was now the one appearing sheepish – and poised to speak. His gaze darted up the hill behind me: to where he could envision Gaston, I presumed.

I felt Theodore could be little but the herald of doom, so I sought to delay it.

"So you have news?" I said quickly. "How is Mistress Theodore? And your babe?"

He seemed relieved and amused by this change of topic. "Mistress Theodore is quite well indeed. And our child, Elizabeth, is also doing well by all accounts. She has taken to sleeping through the night, and I am greatly pleased."

His happy information was accompanied by a chorus of frustrated groans from the other two members of his audience.

I chuckled and turned on Striker. "And how is my sister, Sarah, your fine wife? Is she not due?"

"She is well!" he shouted with amusement. "She has begun her lying-in. She is quite miserable between the heat and the size of her."

Pete was indicating a truly gargantuan size indeed with his hands before his belly; but as my sister was such a small thing, I thought it likely she merely appeared far larger with child than an average-sized woman would.

"ItBeKickin'AnRollin'About," Pete said proudly, as if he alone were somehow responsible for this miracle.

"She is doing well," Striker reiterated softly, his regard for my sister showing in his dark eyes.

"I am pleased to hear it," I told him sincerely before turning back to Theodore. "And all others? Have the men returned from their smuggling ventures? And Agnes, is she well? And Mister Rucker, and my uncle?"

There were chuckles and sighs all about.

"Agnes, Rucker, and your uncle are well," Theodore assured me and began to say more.

"And the Bard and Cudro only left a fortnight ago, after the storms," Striker said before Theodore could say whatever had parted his lips.

"And I will bet you worry over that, too," I teased Striker.

Striker rolled his eyes. "You're damn right I worry!"

"Naw," Pete huffed with amusement that evolved into mock sorrow.

"EBeBoredAn'Angry'IsShipSailedWithout'Im. An'EBeStuckInTownWithNuthin'TaDoButBallsAtTheGovners."

Striker swore. "Just one!"

I laughed.

"As they most certainly told you, the new houses were completed this summer," Theodore said. "And your plantation, Ithaca, will be having their first harvest after the New Year. Your uncle has taken up the management of the endeavor; but true to his word to you, the men are being educated, even the Negroes. And they are growing some small amount of food there, though it is mainly for the Negroes."

"At least those poor souls shall be healthier," I sighed, remembering how gaunt Fletcher had been when last I saw him. He had suffered from malaria, contracted most probably because the plantation was well inland and away from the clean breezes of the coast. Fletcher's health had been further injured by his refusal to eat the native foods, though; and the ignorance responsible for that was not a thing one could cure with a tonic.

"And my Damn Wife, Lady Marsdale, does she yet live?" I asked. "Is she well? Is she still with child?"

The three of them shrugged.

"She lives, by all accounts she has begun her lying-in and should birth before the end of the year," Theodore said thoughtfully. "We have actually heard little of her of late. Since she moved into her home, she has behaved in a ladylike manner and deprived the gossips of further fodder." He frowned at me curiously. "Do you still truly not intend to put her out if she bears a boy?" Theodore asked.

I shook my head. Gaston and I had discussed it on occasion these last two months. We had determined that we probably did not wish to claim – as it was not mine – any get she might produce, even if it were a boy and thus the heir my father wished for. But could we be so uncaring – even to the get of her womb – as to send any child off to live with my father? That was a fate best reserved for enemies: and the poor child, whatever its sex, had done nothing wrong.

"I know," I sighed. "I should seek an annulment no matter which she produces. But... What will become of her? I feel some sympathy for her in the matter. She did not wish for this. And now, due to her foolish indiscretion, she is truly ruined."

"You have more than adequate funds to set her up with a house somewhere in England," Theodore said.

I shook my head. "Send her off to England where she will spread tales of my perfidy with few about to tell of hers? That plays well into my father's hands."

"Then petition for annulment and ensconce her at Ithaca," Theodore said with a shrug.

"Perhaps." I nodded. I knew it was what must be done, but I had little taste for it.

"Speaking of wives, or rather those who are not," Striker said. "At the one damn ball I had to attend this week." He glared at his grinning matelot. "I saw that girl you wished to marry."

"Christine Vines?" I asked with true surprise.

"That be the one." Striker shrugged. "She asked of you. We could not speak much. She has a stepmother now, who doesn't let the poor girl out of her sight."

So Sir Christopher had married. And Christine had been caught and returned to him. As angry and distraught as he had been at her running away to Gods-knew-where after my proposal, I was not surprised he kept her under guard. I felt sorrow in that, I had rather fancied she had been traveling about Christendom all this time, dressed as a boy practicing what little swordplay we had had time to teach her.

"Is she married?" I asked them. "Betrothed?"

Theodore's eyebrow rose.

"Nay, nay," I quickly assured him. "I will not attempt to beat my way up that wind twice." Gaston would not stand for it.

"Not that I have heard," Theodore said.

I nodded. Perhaps she had dodged that thrust for a time, but it was a blade ever at her throat.

As this information had done much to diminish my mood, I thought perhaps I should hear Theodore's real reason for coming, as it could not now make me feel worse. "And what other news?" I asked him.

"Well," he said with a thoughtful mien, "The King has sent Modyford a Man of War."

"Oh Bloody Hell!" Striker yelled.

Pete groaned and laughed: and I did, too, as Theodore shot Striker a triumphant smile.

"Aye, aye," Striker said. "Our King sent our governor a Man of War to guard the colony, the *Oxford*. She's a true war ship, all right. Thirty-four guns and two hundred aboard her."

He shook his head, and it was obvious there was something tempering his glee over this ship, which to my ear sounded like a boon for Jamaica. Then I remembered he had been raised as a pirate, and the presence of an English Naval vessel was likely not a thing he wished to countenance, even if most of his current pursuits were legitimate business ventures.

"The Governor gave her over to Morgan," Striker said. "And now our admiral wishes to sail against Cartagena or Havana. Though the *Oxford* might be able to face the guns of their forts, she's still only one ship."

Now I truly understood his concern. I did not like the sounds of it either, and we well knew *Admiral* Morgan's ambitions. And then I could see other problems with the matter.

"Hold," I said. "Modyford passed the ship, an English Naval vessel, to Morgan? How does the captain of this fine ship feel on the matter?"

“His name is Collier, and he seems accepting of it, for now,” Striker said with a shrug. “He’s the one they threw the ball for. And Morgan’s hauled him off to his plantations, and every other damn fool of any import has been quick to curry favor. But that good and proper naval officer has not seen the rest of our fleet, or our crews. I think he’s in for a bit of a surprise.”

I doubted the composition of the English Navy and the buccaneers were dissimilar. Both contained all manner of men from bondsmen to nobles, from all the nations of Christendom: all rakehells and ne’er-do-wells of some fashion. But whereas the Brethren of the Coast were comprised of free men who had escaped some enslavement of the spirit or body – and free armed men at that – the English Navy was comprised of conscripted men well-accustomed to the lash. It was likely this good Captain Collier would not understand how such a rabble could be commanded. I found amusement in that, and wished I would be about to see his face when the concept of the Articles was explained to him.

“So the fleet will sail in the new year?” I asked, though I well knew the answer. The Brethren, whether French or English, had been sailing against the Spanish in some manner every winter for over thirty years.

“Morgan wishes to sail to Cow Island to provision this next month, but it will be December before we can get the lot of us together,” Striker said with a sigh.

We would be some of the laggards, as our ship, the *Virgin Queen*, was off on a smuggling expedition. Or rather, perhaps Pete and Striker and the rest of our cabal would be the laggards: I did not wish to sail. Gaston and I had been doing well enough alone here, so well we no longer kept a weapon in reach even in our sleep; and I liked living as we did now.

And then Striker’s words struck me with amusement. “Morgan wishes to provision?” I asked.

Striker snorted. “The colony has agreed to provision the *Oxford*, so there’s no need for it for that vessel. He wishes to gather as many men as possible, though; and that takes time, and those men must be fed.”

“He has at last come to this conclusion?” I asked.

Striker snorted again. “After many a night drinking with us captains, aye, he’s decided to humor us.”

“NowEnuffO’ThisShite,” Pete grumbled and turned on Theodore. “WhyBeWe’Ere?”

Theodore awarded him a patient smile and turned to me. “I am here to meet with Gaston and you.”

“Concerning?” I asked, my stomach already constricting. Though I could not know what the matter was, I could imagine a great many things I would not wish to hear. And though we had already covered almost all of the possible sources of news, there was one we had not. “News from my father?”

“Not unless he’s French,” Striker said.

“What?” I asked.

Theodore sighed and dug about in the satchel slung over his shoulder.

“A French frigate sailed into port a few days ago,” Striker said. “And a couple of gentlemen came ashore and asked about for Theodore.”

Theodore handed me a thin missive. It was addressed to Gaston, or rather to Gabriel Denis Michel David de Sable, Gaston’s christened name. I recognized the arms in the seal. The letter came from Gaston’s father, or someone emboldened or empowered to speak for him.

“Gaston’s father, the Marquis de Tervent, wishes to see his son,” Theodore said.

I could not breathe for a time: the air did not enter my lungs.

“He’s here?” I gasped at last.

“Aye, he commissioned a ship and sailed here,” Theodore said.

“Hold,” Striker said. “Gaston’s father? Bloody Hell! Isn’t he the one who...?”

“Aye,” I muttered, and left them. I ran up the promontory. Fury gripped me. We had been doing so damn well. What kind of fool was I to think the Gods would let us be? Though never would I have envisioned this, even in my wildest nightmares. *My* father shattering our idyllic existence I could grasp readily enough, but this... this was not a thing I had ever expected.

Gaston found alarm in the rapidity of my approach, and stood to meet me, pistol in hand.

“Will?” he queried.

I could not breathe enough to speak. I thrust the letter at him. He read his name without taking it: his only movement was to touch the seal with a fingertip.

“From your father,” I gasped foolishly.

He nodded, without derision that I should say a thing so obvious.

“Read it,” he whispered, “and tell me of it.”

Though, I was, of course, greatly curious, and I had thought he would make such a request, I still waited to compose myself somewhat before breaking the seal and perusing the contents of the single page. It was addressed to “My beloved son, Gabriel,” and ended with a simple, “Your Father”. However, the words between thankfully did not gush with such confusing sentiment. The Marquis’ language was succinct, if not somewhat timorous. As there was not a single letter out of place, or wavering pen stroke, I thought it likely this was a much-rehearsed final draft, or else the Marquis was a very organized man. As for the actual gist of it, the Marquis had indeed sailed halfway round the world to meet with his son. He hoped that Gaston still felt the forgiveness he had expressed in his letter from a year ago, and that they could at last lay the events of the past to rest.

“He is on a ship anchored off Port Royal,” I told Gaston, “and he wishes to meet with you and lay the past to rest – and he hopes, one could assume sincerely, that you still harbor forgiveness for him.”

Gaston collapsed to sit heavily where he had been standing. All

pretense of control disappeared along with the strength in his legs. "He is here?" he asked with amazement.

"Oui, Theodore said as much. I do not think he has seen him though."

"He came here, he came here..." Gaston repeated dully while looking at the dirt and beginning to rock very slowly back and forth. He had retreated into the mask of the Child.

I cursed at the Gods and went to hold him. We had been doing so well.

"Hush, hush," I murmured in his ear. "He can never hurt you again. I will not let him."

But my words were a lie. The damn man was already hurting him.

"I will not let him hurt me," Gaston growled, and his shoulders tightened beneath my hands.

Resigned to the wild ride I knew would be my life until this matter was eventually behind us, I pulled back and regarded his face. He had not fully given the reins to his Horse: there was still some of the Man about his eyes.

"Do you wish to meet with him?" I asked calmly. Though I felt it was a thing he could not know with great certainty at this early juncture, I was curious as to his response.

My question brought the Child back to his eyes. "I am afraid," he whispered.

"Of what?"

"That he will still hate me."

I smoothed the letter, which I had crumpled in holding him, and held it up before his eyes. "I feel he is more afraid of you in that regard. And damn well he should be."

Gaston shook his head and looked away. He was chewing on his lip such that I thought he would draw blood.

I heard footsteps behind us. Theodore cleared his throat.

I did not turn to face them. "We need to be alone for a time," I said firmly. "Perhaps you could make use of one of the other homes. I am sorry for the..."

"Think nothing of it," Theodore said quickly. "We will await your decision as to what is to be done about the matter."

"Aye," Pete added. "WeBeFine. WeGotRum, AnNoWomenfolkAboutTa TellUsNaTaDrinkIt."

Theodore chuckled appreciatively.

Striker said nothing as they walked away, but I could feel his gaze upon us. I wished I did not feel such anger towards him over the matter of his undying concern for us, but it was one of those feelings that come of our Horses and hearts and not our thinking minds. I turned my attention back to Gaston and his wrestling with his bucking and frightened animal.

I did not know what to say to comfort him, or whether, indeed, he could be comforted. I tried to imagine the state I would be in if my

cousin Shane, the one who had caused my scars, were to arrive here on Jamaica and express a wish to apologize. I could not envision it, though: if such a thing were to occur, it would surely be a ruse, and I would know it as such and not be lost and floundering in feelings of surprise or pain over the incongruity of his attempting to set things right. I looked at the letter I held. Was this, too, a ruse? Did the Marquis have some ulterior motive?

Our fathers were among the wolves of the world: they countenanced any necessity if it enhanced their survival or stature. What motives would a Marquis have for sailing across the sea? He had not heard from Gaston since exiling him here to the West Indies twelve years ago. Just as my father had not heard from me in the ten years I spent roaming Christendom. The Marquis had known of Gaston, though – that Gaston lived – from Doucette. He had sent a great amount of money to see that Gaston was well cared for. He had sent letters expressing regret. My father had been concerned I would return, which is to say I believe he wished I would not; and when I did, he had not known what to do with me, as I had upset his plans. The Marquis had already disinherited Gaston, though: had him declared unsound of mind and delivered him into Doucette's legal custody. Gaston was no threat to him. But now... Now the Marquis had received word from his son that the arrangement with Doucette was no longer acceptable, and that his son had gone off with some English Lord. Perhaps the Marquis felt his plans were now in danger if his eldest son were not where he had left him and was now running about in the company of another wolf. Gaston had made it very clear in his letter to his father that we were lovers. Perhaps I was the threat the Marquis sailed around the world to face. Perhaps he was afraid I would urge Gaston to attempt to reclaim his title and inheritance.

Gazing upon my distraught matelot, though, I did not feel I should voice this new suspicion. He had been sincere when he told his father he forgave him. He did not hate the man, despite what had occurred. He blamed himself as much as anyone. He wanted his father's forgiveness, and I daresay held hope of being loved by the damn man. I understood that well enough. I had journeyed here to Jamaica to curry favor with my damn father, on the mistaken notion that such a thing could be done at all. I had since learned otherwise, or at least I felt I had: much of my father's motivations remained a mystery. Yet, there was still some little part of my soul that wished to grant him the benefit of doubt, that harbored a tiny flickering hope that perhaps all of the wolfish machinations we ascribed to him were products of our fancy.

I let that hope cling to life, but I would not fan it to flame. I felt doing that would be foolishness of a high order, and I refused to be hurt yet again. Yet I let it remain, flickering there.

Would we be fools to assume Gaston's father meant what he said in his letter?

"What are you thinking?" Gaston asked with great worry.

I cursed myself for not schooling my face. I had not thought he still had his wits about him enough to be concerned with my frowning.

"I am puzzling why he is here," I said.

"You feel he lies?" Gaston asked with sudden ire.

"Non, non, I do not know. Hush. I am ascribing things to him as if he were my father, and perhaps that is not fair. Perhaps he is sincere in ways I feel my father could never be."

He calmed a little, but the Horse's words were hard. "My father is a good man."

He spoke such truths of his soul when he was thus, yet I felt compelled to voice my surprise. "You truly believe that?"

"Oui," he said firmly. "He was angry that night, very angry... and he had great cause," he added softly and looked away. He began fidgeting again.

"Oui," I sighed, "that night, but... My love, he sent you away, he kept you in schools all those years, he..."

"That was what is done!" His eyes were glittering emeralds again: sharp and hard. "It is not his fault I am mad!"

"Oui," I conceded and looked away. "You are correct." I sighed as I folded the letter. "But he hurt you, and I cannot forgive him for it. I am sorry."

He gave a sob and threw himself about me. "I am sorry. I love you. I love you. I am afraid. I am... Do you truly feel he is insincere?"

I rubbed his back and held him. "Non, non, my love. I do not know. I think it is my own fears speaking. I think, though, that we should at least be cautious."

"You must meet with him," he breathed against my cheek.

"With you?" Though I surely was not going to allow him to go alone.

"Non, first. Read him," he sighed, "and tell me of it."

I pulled away enough to see the small, sad smile on his lips.

"Whatever you wish, my love," I breathed.

"I wish for you to care for me and never leave me." He buried his face in my shoulder again.

I held him for a time, and then at last I roused us and we moved under the awning. The contents of most of his pots were quite boiled away, and in a few instances I felt a chisel would be necessary to chip out the remaining sludge. He set them aside without comment. I heated the chicken stew we had made the day before, and we carried a bowl of it to the rock on which we always sat to watch the sunset.

I sipped broth, and watched the golden rays upon him, and not the sea. His eyes glowed a pale green in that light, his skin shone like bronze, and as always, his unruly cropped hair looked as if flames licked his scalp. Unbidden, curiosity about his father's visage crept into my thoughts. How similar were they, or was there any similarity at all? Had all my matelot's madness truly come from his mother, or was there some in his father's blood as well?

"What else did they say?" Gaston asked quietly, his gaze still upon

the sun. "Is there other news?"

He did not sound sincerely curious, and I wondered at his need to make conversation.

I sifted through what I could remember. "The King sent the Governor a Man of War, and the Governor gave it over to Morgan. Of course, the idiot now wishes to sail against Cartagena or Havana. He has called for all to meet him at Cow Island this winter. Striker thinks Morgan a fool for wanting to attempt so much, but he chafes as he wishes to sail; yet their babe is unborn and our ship is out smuggling."

Gaston nodded thoughtfully. "How is Sarah?"

"Well enough, she is as big and uncomfortable as Bella from what they say."

He smiled at that, and then frowned. "We cannot leave here until Bella births."

I had not thought of that, but he was correct. I would not dream of abandoning our dog, though I thought it likely she needed us not at all for the endeavor. And I surely would not leave without Gaston having a chance to find some solace in the innocence of puppies. He found them very calming.

"Could we not take her with us?" I asked.

"Do you wish to sail?" he asked. His gaze met mine.

"To Port Royal to meet your father, or to Cow Island to raid against the Spanish?"

"To rove and raid," he said, his gaze still earnest. "The Devil with my father."

"I have been quite content here this autumn with you. We do not need the money it... might bring. I do not feel we need the trouble it always seems to bring, either. But..."

Last year we had sailed because of Gaston's madness, because he needed to unleash it on occasion against enemies.

"I do not wish to go," he said suddenly. "To Port Royal or elsewhere. But, I cannot have him here. And..."

He gave a ragged sigh and rubbed the heels of his hands upon his temples, as if he were trying to massage the dark thoughts away, or squeeze them into the back corners of his skull where he claimed they always lurked.

"Let us go to Port Royal," I said softly, "and tend to the business that must be tended to there, and then let us return here."

He took a deep breath and nodded. "What other business?"

"We must..." I sighed. "I must make some decision about the Damn Wife and act upon it. She is also soon to birth."

"Could we not live here forever?" he asked hopefully with a childish mien.

I smiled. "As long as the Gods will let us. We have more than enough money buried in that bog yonder, and... I am sure we can find some suitable woman to bear children so that you might revel in them. I do not see where I need my inheritance. Even Theodore's concerns

of... Well, I do not see where I must be my father's heir to accomplish anything else here. I feel many of those concerns shifted when Sarah arrived and married Striker. The plantation will be as it is and I do not feel I can rescue them as I once intended. I have not felt that I could in a long time. And we have the R&R Venture Company to make us all good merchants. I say the Devil with it all."

This seemed to please him.

It did not please me: I felt great unease, as if I had forgotten something, and I wondered at it until his kiss drove my dark thoughts away. Soon we were naked as babes and cuddled together in our wide hammock. We made love tenderly, seeking more reassurance than passion in our caresses and kisses. We eschewed the act of sodomy, choosing instead to hump against one another fitfully, belly to belly, until we at last found our pleasure. And as I drifted to sleep, I could not imagine anything better than spending the rest of my days at his side in our little corner of the world.

I woke to him hissing in my ear, "Will, I wish to ride."

It was dark, and at first the words seemed a distant thing, devoid of meaning. Then his mouth covered mine while his hands woke my flesh with increasing urgency. My cock swelled and, ears pricked and tail raised, my Horse pranced into the light to play with his. Our common need for such games was a thing born of the demons that haunted us, and not a thing we indulged often, but when we did play, I embraced it with fervor and gave myself over to it and him with abandon.

With nips and licks he traced a path of fire down my jaw and neck until he was somewhat below my ear, and then the nips became biting and he sucked and chewed until I mewled and rocked under him in an ecstatic mix of pleasure and pain. He guided my hands to the netting above my head, and with touch alone, bade me tangle myself there so that I was bound after a fashion. Then his torturous teeth moved away from my neck and down my chest. I writhed and uttered harsh cries and growls, more animal than human. He was silent except for the occasional rumble of mirth I felt somewhere upon my body. To my gratification and amazement, he left little of me in peace, chewing upon my back, buttocks, thighs, and belly such that I feared for my manhood several times. At last I could run beneath him no more, and the ever-peculiar cessation of the pain came as it always did. I slumped beneath him, sated beyond sex alone, and drifting on a cloud that felt like laudanum, only so much better.

He covered my face in gentle kisses and moved us such that he could truly mount me. I smelled the almond of our favorite salve and then he was within me. I was run out, but he was far from finished. He rode me with hard thrusts that set the hammock to creaking. I felt as if I were the rocks being pounded by the waves of the surf, and then I was the waves and he was the rocks, and then we were both the water, rushing in and out. When at last he came, it was as if he did it for both of us, and I cried out with the joy of it as I felt him spasm within me.

He withdrew almost before his cry had finished echoing off the stone walls of our tiny abode. He kissed me lightly on the lips and he was gone. He always did that after we played so. His reason returned in the aftermath, and with it, shame.

I did not wish to move, yet I knew if I did not, it would be that much worse when I did. Sleep would not be a balm for the aches I would suffer for the first day or two. I took my time in stretching and rolling out of the hammock.

I found him standing by the cook fire, staring pensively at the glow on the eastern horizon. He was still naked. I went and relieved myself around the side of the hill. I ran curious fingers over the now-darkening marks he had left. Aye, I would be very sore this day.

When I returned, he winced at my appearance as I approached, and despite the dim light I could see him flush. I sidled up in front of him, to press the right of my chest to the right of his and rest my head atop his shoulder in a way horses sometimes stand together in a pasture. I cupped his balls playfully and he hissed with surprise.

“Why do you tolerate me?” he asked.

“Tolerate? Hmmm?” I chuckled. “I believe the question is why do I delight in you when you are thus? Non, tolerate is not the word. Trust, that is the word. I trust you. You are the only one I will ever allow to call the pieces of my soul I wish to keep hidden into the light.”

He sighed and his arm stole about my waist. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I know,” I said succinctly. “And I love you, and I wish you were not so troubled over the matter.”

He shook his head. “I am not troubled over that... If you are not. Which in that regard, you are truly as mad as I. Non, I am troubled that when things trouble me I... need to run so. I wish my damn father had not come.”

“So do I,” I sighed.

“I feel I will have to sail, Will. I am sorry. I feel seeing him will...”

“It will bring much into the light, my love, I know. But, perhaps, that is for the best. Because truly, would it not be best to lay that night, and your sister, and mother, and all else that lies between the two of you, to rest?”

He nodded. “Oui, it will. But it will be as if I undergo a complicated surgery. I will need much time to convalesce.”

“I feel you are making light of it. If you feel you must sail, then you expect that this visit will open all those wounds and leave you draining noxious fluids upon the world for some time.”

“Oui,” he said softly. “I am afraid much will be drained upon you, and I cannot...”

I put fingers upon his lips and moved so that I could meet his tearful gaze.

“You will do what you must to heal, and I will assist you,” I said firmly. “We can weather any storm as long as we hold to one another.”

“It will be a very bad storm, Will,” he said seriously, and then the words began to tumble out in an ever-faster torrent. “I have not had to be as I was before here, without you.” He shook his head with frustration. “I have not had to wear a mask. I cannot imagine meeting him without... He has become tangled with Doucette in my mind, and I cannot... He must not see me as mad. I do not wish for him to see me as mad. Yet, I know I will not be able to help myself. I cannot hide it away any longer. I cannot wear the mask as I once did. He will see. He will see and he will hate me and... And that angers me. That he should judge me so. That he should be allowed to judge me so. It is not my fault! I cannot make it go away!”

I held him tightly with tears of fear and frustration in my eyes. He did not need to tell me how bad the storm was going to be. It was already upon us and I saw no end in sight. Only the Gods could know what shore we would eventually wash up on.