

Chapter Eighty-Three
Wherein We Return to Peril

“It is wholly within the fickle nature of the Gods that we will arrive and find nothing untoward has occurred in our absence, and my father has sent a letter of apology,” I said with some amusement as we raced the sun to reach Port Royal. I reckoned the date to be somewhere in the last week of May, 1669. We had been gone nearly six months.

“Our people will not be happy with what we have learned or planned, even if nothing has occurred,” Gaston said and rolled onto his back.

As I was on my belly, watching what I could see of our wake beyond the cabin windows, his movement pulled me closer to him in our hammock and twisted my spine, compelling me to move. I turned toward him and found a more comfortable position, bracing my knee against his hip to keep from slowly rolling atop him.

Despite its sagging, and its often inconvenient proximity to the ceiling, I was pleased we still had Pete and Striker’s hammock. Even though Striker had long since healed and could once again use what was now our nest, they had chosen to remain on our old mattress on the cabin floor. I had not wished to question them on it, as discussion of the matter might induce them to change their minds. For all its faults, no one stepped on this bed, and with a blanket stretched across the netting, it afforded us a great deal of privacy. Of course, upon waking, we always had to peer over the edge to see who else occupied the cabin before we began to speak or tryst.

I realized with dismay that in light of our plans, we would not have this cozy nest for the next leg of our travels: the women and children would need to be housed somewhere for the voyage to Tortuga, and it would likely be this cabin: there was none other on the *Virgin Queen*.

Though I had spent nights worrying about their safety in our absence, and knew for the good of all they must leave Port Royal, I was not anticipating their joining us with any relish. These last months roving against the Spanish had been peaceful – in a manner of speaking – in comparison to our last weeks in our home port amongst women, children, and the trappings of civilization. That had ever been the way of it for us in these West Indies. Going to war against and amongst men, though it involved much violence and peril, was far safer in regards to the comfort and well-being of our hearts and souls than living within the bounds of society with all its rules and expectations.

At least we were alone for this moment in the final hour of our approach. I savored it. All others were on deck peering at the coastline of Jamaica as it drifted by to starboard. We had already reached the peninsula known as the Palisadoes – where Port Royal squatted on the tip – and, according to the Bard, our Master of Sail, we would make port by nightfall. After roving for half the year, most of our men foolishly wished to disembark and spend some, if not all, of the hefty sum we had stolen from the Spanish at Maracaibo and Gibraltar. To them, Port Royal was home, and they feared nothing awaiting them there but the occasional lurking unpaid debt and the ever-present specter of drunken boredom haunting them until they could rove again.

Our cabal had far larger concerns. We were sailing into a port full of enemies, where we had left a number of loved ones and cherished friends. That our roving had proven necessary to flush out our assassins, or that we had not known the full extent of the intrigues marshaled against us until after we sailed, would do little to assuage our guilt if any ill had befallen our people. It had weighed heavy on us these last weeks, as we repaired the storm damage to our ship and sailed home.

I could see it wearing on my matelot even now, as he lay staring at the ceiling with a concerned frown. I ran a finger down his high, intelligent forehead, finely-wrought brow, straight nose, lips that were neither too full nor too thin, and strong, handsome chin. He turned his head to face me, and emerald eyes met my gaze.

“We should trim your hair,” he muttered, and ran his fingers through the straw upon my scalp.

His red hair was over a finger’s-width long as well; and it stood on end, pointing every which way, as it was ever wont to do. And three or four days – I could not remember when last we shaved – of stubble adorned our jaws: his as red as that on his head, mine golden brown.

“What aspect of the matter are you pondering with such concern?” I asked.

He sighed and returned his gaze to the ceiling boards. “Death. Even if your father and the governor have done nothing, little Jamaica could still have died.”

I suppressed a sigh as I considered the possible death of our poor pickled child: the sickly infant I had claimed, though she held no relation to either of us; the get of her drunken mother, my wife, by way of some unknown buccaneer.

“I wonder if Vivian has returned to the rum, or whether she has remained sober under Mistress Theodore’s watchful eye,” I sighed.

So much could have occurred in our absence, even without the tribulations unearthed and stirred to life during our most recent stay there. Despite our loved ones being seasoned to the tropics and practicing measures purported – by my matelot and not some damn-fool English physician – to increase their health, they could still have contracted any number of ailments and died. And if not some tropical malaise, the Spanish might have swept in, raided our port and hauled them off to the dungeons of the Inquisition on Cuba, as they had once done to the families of Tortuga’s buccaneers. But I doubted such events had befallen our people: if the Gods wished to ladle trouble upon people unfortunate enough to be connected with us in the skeins of the Fates, there were more than enough trials available without the Gods stooping to pedestrian forms of calamity such as war and pestilence.

The last six weeks we spent in Port Royal had been quite tumultuous. It was the longest I had spent in the place in the two and a half years I had been in the West Indies; I had likely spent longer in the assorted Spanish towns we had raided. Our brief stays in our purported home port were always rife with excitement and stirred up changes in the lives of those we knew. Whenever we arrived, they usually seemed to be fairly calm; and then the storm that seemed to be ever in our wake would strike, and all would be forced to scurry about and make the best of it until we left again. I fancied they settled back into their usual calm, daily regimens in the peace of our absence.

Yet was that hubris born from my only seeing what was before me and not knowing truly what occurred when we were not present? I should not be such a fool as to think their lives revolved around us, as if we and our problems were the sun. Or was it hubris because we were not the true cause of the turmoil? Was not my father responsible? Had he not ever been the catalyst for our change? The roiling clamor of our visits was always predicated by some announcement of his: him sending me to Jamaica: his demand that I marry: his sending a bride: and in this last visit, our discovering that he had put a price on Gaston’s and Striker’s heads and colluded with the governor to see that I did his bidding and put the drunken wife out.

Gaston was regarding me with curiosity, and I gathered my thoughts were apparent.

“I am wondering if they would be better off without us – me,” I said and shrugged. “This is surely not your fault. I weave your being with mine in every thought, because I so truly feel we are one now, but...”

He grinned and rolled to face me. “We are one.”

I did not seek to gainsay him, even in my heart. We were so truly entwined now that all arguments concerning our being separate entities in the face of the matters at hand were moot. The Gods knew I would not exist without him. And I knew – though it made my heart yet swell with emotion I was at a loss to express – that he believed the same of me.

I found myself frowning with a new thought. “We are better men for having troubled one another, are we not?”

He frowned and nodded. “Do you doubt it?”

“Non, non, I am profoundly moved by how little I doubt it. Non, I am thinking of the others: the lives we have troubled for which we do not have... perhaps, the balm of love – such as we share – to ease the rub and irritation of our presence.”

He chuckled. “You wonder why they tolerate us?”

I grinned. “Oui.”

“Perhaps we do share the balm of love with them,” he said thoughtfully. “I too, find it difficult to believe, yet... How often have you told me I am worthy of love? And are you not the same? They choose to stand by us. Perhaps we should not question such beneficence on the part of any person or divinity.”

“It is my nature to question,” I sighed. It would likely be my undoing. I imagined that if I could have learned to just sit in the cave and be happy with the shadows of truth upon the wall like everyone was supposed to do, I would be a happier man; but nay, I was ever yearning to turn my head and see the light at the cave mouth, even when I was too young to know of Plato or his allegories.

Gaston nodded as if I had made some sage pronouncement. “You would not be you if you did not.” He frowned. “Do you worry that they will have a change of heart? Or do you worry that we have doomed them?”

I frowned at his choice of the word *doom*. “Is that what you worry we have done?”

He sighed. “Sometimes.”

“Do you feel this will end in ruin for all?” I asked.

He shook his head quickly. “Not for all. Some will escape unscathed, but... Surely there will be tragedy.” He sighed and looked away. “There has already been tragedy.”

I knew he meant Christine. We did not speak of her, but I knew he still carried the guilt deep in his heart.

Despite his once saying that he could have escaped her attempts at seduction and not succumb to his madness and raped her, I did not blame him. Nor had I ever blamed him for his sister’s death; or would I ever blame him for any act he committed while mad. Whether he had knowingly willed himself into, or allowed himself to succumb to, that madness was immaterial to me: his doing such things, his seeking it, was merely another form his madness took, was it not? Or, as I had decided when last we were in Port Royal and insanity seemed on the breath of everyone we met, were we the sane ones and all the rest the world mad? In which case, the supposedly horrible things he had done under the auspices of his madness – loving his sister and then ending her suffering by her request; and doing as Christine had bid, though poorly and cruelly – were actions of truth shorn of all the pretty lies and shadows of the cave. His sister had

ceased to suffer. Christine had undoubtedly been cured of her sudden resolve to abandon her dreams and settle down and marry.

I truly doubted she would ever thank him for this, though.

“Is not a good tragedy one in which all the characters suffer for their sins?” I asked.

He snorted. “Who says this is a good tragedy? It could be a poor one, suitable only for street players and the common mob.”

I laughed. “I pray the Gods do not trouble us so only to cast us as pearls before swine.”

Gaston grinned and kissed me, showing me with his tongue and hands, and eventually his cock, how very beautiful a pearl he thought me to be. Except for a brief glimpse to show myself what I knew I should not think of, I cast all thoughts of women and babes and my father aside, and twined and strained with my love in storming the gates of Heaven in what were surely our final moments of privacy. I soon did not have to try to forget all else, as he wrung every other thought from my mind, casting me into a cistern of pleasure to fill myself with him and love so that he could wring even that from me and leave me lying like a well-washed rag upon the hammock: thoughtless, warm, and sated beyond measure.

Our post-coital cuddling was ended by Striker and Pete entering the cabin, tussling as they often did before they trysted. They were followed by guffaws from some of the men and a comment or two about them getting theirs before going back to the missus.

Dickey dove into the room behind them with a shout, “Let me get the charts before you get to it.”

Their feigned humor fled as the door closed. Gaston and I exchanged one last private look and a sweet kiss before dropping down from our hammock to meet serious gazes in the small space. Dickey’s fine features were tight with excitement, such that one might think he was accompanying us. As he rarely went ashore since becoming the Bard’s matelot, I supposed his participation in the intrigue necessary to enable our evening’s little adventure had been quite entertaining for him. Striker appeared somber, his dark eyes black and unreadable, though the set of his strong jaw said much. Pete’s blue eyes were filled with mischief and none of the ancient wisdom that often made me liken him to a golden god of old: though leaning as he was with his arms raised upon a ceiling beam, and thus displaying the handsome musculature of his chest beneath his bronzed skin in the lamp light, I thought he looked to be a sculpture of something more than a mere mortal man.

“YaBeReady?” Pete asked with a teasing grin.

“I still say this is foolishness,” Striker said.

“We have had this argument,” I chided with a smile. “We do not know what we face here, and so it is best we do not make ourselves available to be detained, or have the ship seized upon anchoring in the Hole.”

“An’WeSurprise’Em!” Pete added with a clap of his matelot’s shoulder.

“LessYaThinkYaCan’t.”

Striker made a disparaging noise. “I can swim with one arm.” He raised and lowered what remained of his right arm in emphasis, and I could well imagine him awarding his matelot his middle finger as he once had.

Striker had proven he could swim when we careened. He had actually proven that losing his right arm at the elbow was not an impediment to his doing many things, and even taken to practicing writing with charcoal upon the deck with his left. I supposed that if one always thought he might lose a limb in his endeavors – as apparently Striker had always assumed, as he

came from a long line of pirates and seamen – one could accept it readily enough and learn to make do.

“Well, we should be drawing abreast of the Palisadoes Wall soon,” Dickey said, and went to stick his head out the window. “This is as close as we dare pass, and Francis has slowed us somewhat, but if we slow much more, the men will wonder at it.”

“All right,” I said grimly as I peered out the window. The shore sliding along to starboard seemed very far away when I considered that I must traverse the distance; but I knew I had swum farther on many occasions.

“The Bard and Cudro are feigning speaking of the matter now,” Dickey said, “and when I leave the cabin, Cudro will step away from him and address the men, telling them that we will not anchor in the Chocolata Hole tonight because the sun has set and we do not wish to haggle with the governor’s men on matters of what they might tax until the morrow. He will arrange for the men that wish it to go ashore on the boats.”

“And him delivering that news and their grousing should keep any from seeing us swim away,” Striker said.

“Excellent,” I sighed, and considered the darkening waters. I spied a shark fin far back in our wake, the yellow triangle glinting for a moment in the last rays of the setting sun before slipping beneath the waves. The damn creatures followed ships everywhere, seeking whatever men dropped over the sides: and we were going to drop ourselves over the side.

Striker and Pete were already wearing only their breeches as was ever their wont. I doffed my tunic, as I disliked swimming in it; telling myself I had more in my sea chest at Sarah’s. Then I snorted at my foolishness: here we were planning to sneak ashore as if the whole colony of Jamaica might want our hides, and yet I expected to find all I might need at the house. I quickly prayed to the Gods that the former was the flight of fancy. Of course, I didn’t want my things to be missing from Sarah’s, either.

“Let this all be a lark at which we will laugh over wine this night,” I muttered quietly in French by way of prayer.

Gaston regarded me sharply.

I grinned at him reassuringly and shrugged.

He donned his tunic and breeches and strapped on his sword belt, without his baldric or much in the way of his usual assortment of weapons. We had indeed discussed this many times: much like the matter of clothing, we would either not need our pistols – which would take great effort to get ashore with dry powder and the like anyway – or we would discover such trouble awaiting us that it would be best to avoid conflict and return to the ship to plan what we might do next. I joined my matelot in equipping my sword belt with a few knives and nothing else.

When all were prepared, Dickey shook our hands to wish us fortune. “Do not forget to come and tell us if all is well,” he admonished. “If we do not see you by the dawn, we will assume some evil has befallen you and sail farther from shore to give us room to maneuver.”

“Aye, aye,” Striker told him with a grin, and pulled the slender man into a one-armed embrace. “Tell Cudro and the Bard we will not be so happy at being home that we’ll forget others worry.”

I chuckled at the irony: Striker was by far the most accomplished worrier of our number.

Dickey slipped out the door. Striker pulled Pete to him for a quick kiss. My matelot did the same with me, and I chuckled against his lips.

Scant moments later, we heard Cudro's magnificent voice boom from above, where he stood at the fore rail of the quarterdeck to address the men. We turned to the windows, and one by one, dove out into the sea.

The water seemed cold, and it drove away all thoughts of our plan and what we might find ashore, invigorating my senses and setting my muscles and skin afire: no matter what else we might face, at this moment, there was only the sea and its imminent dangers. The sun had truly set now, and I could see nothing beneath the water, even though the sky still shone dully with dusk's light. I bobbed to the surface, pushing my fear of the sea's natural denizens beneath me, and tread water while seeking my matelot or the others. I saw Gaston a few yards away and swam to meet him. We located Pete and Striker nearby, and all began to swim to shore.

It was indeed an easy swim. My fears of sharks, and other things unknown to man that might lurk beneath nighttime waters, drove me to make fast work of it; but when I at least reached the shore I had little regret for the endeavor: I felt more alive than I had in weeks, and I saw this sentiment mirrored upon the faces of my friends. Gaston bowled me over to kiss me exuberantly in the sand, and we laughed like boys.

After a short rest, we took stock of our surroundings and discovered the Bard had indeed timed our escapade well. We could just see the torches on Fort Rupert at the wall to the west, placing us out of sight in the palms and bracken of the Palisadoes: an area inhabited only by buccaneers who could not afford habitation within Port Royal.

"If we are truly so damn concerned as to who might see us," Striker said as we stood and stretched, "we should not enter by the gate. Someone will surely recognize us."

With grudging sighs of agreement, we returned to the surf, making our way through the waves toward the wall and fort until we were just beyond the light of their torches: at which point, we took to deeper water to swim out and around the defense works and return to the surf along Port Royal's southern shore. Twilight had passed, and night was illuminated in silver by a nearly full moon. We could clearly see the nearest buildings, yet I doubted that anyone could see us as we walked ashore, unless they were standing beyond the light of their cheery yellow torches and lanterns and their eyes were well-accustomed to the moonlight.

Though Port Royal was growing, lot by lot, nearly every day, the new dwellings had not yet reached the southern edge of the cay; and so we crossed a small field before being able to slip into an alley between buildings. Once in manmade shadows, we made our way quietly to Sarah's. As we neared our destination, I saw the lot upon which my wife's house had once stood: still vacant save the charred and twisted remains of the three-story structure. In the moonlight it did not look so much like the remains of a house, but more the blackened bones of some monster of old.

That it had not been rebuilt reinforced the quandary I felt as to whether we were being overly cautious. The property belonged to my father and had been designated as the site of my wife's home: that would be the wife of the Viscount of Marsdale. As I had renounced my claim to that title, even though I was still married to Vivian, there was no Lady Marsdale, and the property now served no purpose to my father. Yet, though six months had surely provided ample time for him to be notified of these things in England, and ostensibly to reply to them – outside the storm season, it only took eight weeks or so for a ship to sail between here and England – he had apparently not instructed anyone to do anything with this valuable piece of property. Or he had, and they had not had a chance to act on it, yet. Or he did not care. All options that applied to his thoughts and reaction to my conduct as well.

Despite having gained a deeper understanding of my father's motivations and feelings this last year, I despaired I would ever know what he truly thought on any matter. My relationship with him was much like that charred debris: a thing burned down and now awaiting someone to clear it away and allow something new to be built.

My reverie was abruptly ended by the bark of dogs as we approached the back gate to Sarah's house. The gruff warnings of the pack of Spanish mastiffs thankfully changed to yips of glee as one of them caught our scent and remembered us. Surrounded by bounding great beasts, we entered the large yard and threaded our way between the stable and cook house and into the atrium within the horseshoe of the house, where we were met with squeals of delight from the women and embraces from the men.

Liam looked as he ever did: nose crooked in a half dozen places, and skin tanned darker than his pale blonde hair. My sister Sarah greeted her husbands with delight and did not notice Striker's missing arm for a surprisingly long time. My former tutor, Mister Rucker, was uncharacteristically gleeful in his greeting: embracing me tightly; and in such close quarters reminding me yet again how short he was now that I was a man. Bones, our lanky musketeer, was as laconic and lazy as ever, being the last to rise in greeting, but his smile was warm and sincere. Nickel seemed both delighted and alarmed at our arrival, and I wondered at that. But then I got my arms about Agnes and all other thought was driven from my head.

Agnes was pregnant. The bulge of baby was huge on her slender frame.

"Gods," I breathed as she looked up at me with a happy smile.

I turned to Gaston and found him regarding her with a mixture of wonder and terror.

"Surprise," Agnes said with a grin.

Gaston pulled her to him and held her close.

"Are you well?" he asked.

"Aye, aye," she assured him and pulled away far enough to gaze up at him. "I thought... I was quite surprised when... Well, I did not think... I did not think I wanted one so soon. But, now that he – or she – is here, I am very happy. It is good, isn't it?"

"It is wonderful," he said softly. "I am very pleased."

Her wide mouth smiled such that she was teeth nearly from one ear to the other, and her dark eyes glistened in the lamplight. She looked at me expectantly.

"I am delighted," I said with great sincerity. Gaston would have the puppy he always wanted: a healthy one from a fine dam. And perhaps we could accomplish the whole matter of producing an heir quickly, and then I would no longer need to share him, and Agnes would be free to find some woman who would accept the love she so eagerly wished to bestow upon one of her own number.

I kissed her forehead and then his mouth. His gaze found mine as I began to step back, and I lingered to whisper, "A good healthy puppy."

He smiled with relief. "Oui."

"You are happy and healthy," I said to Agnes. "How is everyone else?"

We were somewhat alone: the whirling storm of greeting had moved from us a bit, save for two calming dogs: Bella and her mate Taro, who seemed happy to flank me.

"Well enough," Agnes sighed. "There is news, but..." She looked past my shoulder and her lip twitched in a crooked grin.

I turned and found Nickel hovering nearby. He met my gaze and the shadow of a flush came over his handsome face. He did not seem to have aged in six months, and I wondered if he would ever appear to be other than the planter's son escaping the priesthood we had first met.

“And how are you, Nickel?” I asked.

He gulped and nodded. “Very well, my... Will. Should I go and tell the Theodores you are here, and... your wife?”

“Aye,” I said. “Is there something the matter, Nickel?”

“Nay!” he appeared even more stricken and looked away quickly. “I will be back at once.” He hurried out.

Liam was suddenly at my side. “Silly lad. You’ll ’ave to sit him down over a bottle and talk some sense into ’im.”

“Why?” I asked.

“’E be in love with your wife, an’ ’er with ’im, it would appear,” Liam said with amusement. “Ya ’ave my word nothin’ improper ’as ’appened. But ’e be all up in arms about it. I tol’ ’im ya were a member o’ the Brethren and yur matelot come first – an’ that be the thing ya might duel a man o’er – but ’e would na’ listen.”

It was difficult not to laugh. “So they are truly in love. I suppose that is... wonderful. And how has my wife been? Sober?”

“Oh, aye,” Liam said.

“And how is her babe?” Gaston asked.

Liam frowned a little. “Right enough, but not like Pike.”

“Pike?” I asked.

“Yur nephew. None of us liked callin’ ’im little Pete or some such thing. So ’e became Pike.”

I thought that a good name, but as I thought on Jamaica in light of Liam’s news, I wondered how we would sort that matter out. I had promised Vivian I would not stand in the way of her happiness in matters of the heart if she should find someone. Of course, divorcing her would be difficult with all the fighting I had done to keep her in the face of my father’s insistence that I put her out; but did that really matter now? I was done with him. His opinion, or any other man’s, did not truly matter. But what of Jamaica: did Nickel wish to raise the child as his own, since she was his beloved’s; and would Gaston be happy to surrender her to another father? I glanced at Agnes: Gaston could well be more accepting of such a thing now.

“Um,” Liam said and pushed his floppy leather hat up to scratch his head distractedly. He looked over his shoulder. “Nickel not be the only one o’ us to fall prey to the wiles o’ women as it were. Though, I don’t think it be a bad thing.”

I followed his gaze and saw Henrietta, the housekeeper, standing near the cookhouse regarding us intently.

“You too, Liam,” I teased.

“Aye, aye!” he cried. “An’ we be married,” he said with a grimace. He waved Henrietta over.

She hurried up and hooked her arm in his and beamed at us happily. “’As ’e tol’ ya?”

“Aye,” I said. “Congratulations, truly, that is wonderful.”

I tried to keep my concern at Liam’s seeming reluctance from my face – though I thought I well understood his concern. He was the ardent defender of Brethren propriety and comportment: ever preaching about how a man should always stand by his matelot in the face of female interlopers. Yet, he had been alone after his beloved Otter died, and he was not a man like me: one who preferred men.

He looked down at Henrietta and smiled in a manner that erased all my fears about whether or not he was devoted to the endeavor.

“I am pleased you have found someone after Otter,” Gaston said for us, and I nodded my agreement and embraced our old friend.

Liam nodded sheepishly. “Aye, I just been worried that there might be those that think I be plannin’ on becomin’ a planter or the like now. Na’ that I want ta rove, mind ya, but...”

“I understand,” I said.

He grinned and looked at his wife again. He frowned. “Well, ya canna’ see it like ya can on Lady Montren, but... We be expectin’ too.”

Henrietta laughed merrily even as she smacked her husband on the arm. “Aye, ya lout, I na’ be a skinny thing. An’ I na’ be as far along, neither,” she added to Gaston and me.

Agnes joined us, and I realized she had been gone. Rucker and Bones were hovering nearby, happily watching our exchange with Liam, but Sarah, Striker, and Pete were missing and I guessed they might have gone to look in on a child dear to their hearts.

“While we wait for the Theodores to arrive,” Agnes said quickly, “I have a thing to show you.” She waved a folded missive with a seal.

We took our leave of the others and followed her into the parlor with a lamp.

“It arrived months ago, but the Marquis sent a note for me saying I should not open it, but I should give it to you as soon as you returned,” Agnes said as Gaston broke his father’s seal and began to read.

I was soon alarmed as my matelot’s composure slipped and then disintegrated to such extent that when he finished the letter he threw it on the floor and went to pace at the other end of the room.

Agnes regarded me with concern, and I stooped to pick up the pages and took the seat Gaston had vacated and began reading. She perched on the edge of the settee and watched me.

“It is bad news, isn’t it?” Agnes whispered. “Is he well?”

It was not good news: it was awful. Christine was pregnant. Gaston’s father believed it to be his son’s: the get of Gaston’s one unfortunate and violent pairing with her. And that was not the worst of it. Christine’s father, Sir Christopher Vines, had contacted her mother’s family in France: a noble house headed by her uncle the Duke of Verlain. Vines had told them his daughter was married to Gaston, the Comte de Montren, the son of the Marquis de Tervent. Christine was apparently not willing to contradict her father, and apparently sought Gaston’s name in retribution for... well, our handling of her. She was seeking what we had once offered her, a man’s name – without the man attached to it – so that she could do as she would.

Gaston’s father was willing to go along with this if Christine produced a son. To that end, he advised Gaston to wait before trying to get an heir upon Agnes, prayed his son would understand, and apologized profusely for asking such a thing.

I gazed up at Agnes and saw her belly. It was a damn good thing my matelot had not been inclined to dipping his wick in women prior to last December: he might have populated the island.

“Have you written him – the Marquis – about the baby?” I asked Agnes.

“Nay,” she said. “I thought... Gaston should. And, though Mister Rucker has been tutoring me in French since you left, my French is not so very good, yet. I could have had Mister Rucker write it for me; but, I wanted to do it myself, so that the Marquis would think well of me.”

My matelot let loose a guttural moan of despair.

“What has happened?” Agnes asked.

“Christine is with child.” I quickly related the rest of the letter.

She buried her face in her long fingers and sniffed back tears. “Oh damn it all. I... It matters. There was a time when...” She dropped her hands away and met my gaze. “My mother told me when I was little that my father came from a noble family, but then she said... She told me that I would never ever benefit from it: that I could never expect to ask them for anything. She told me that on her death bed: that I am dead to them because my father was dead to them. And I told myself it did not matter. Why did I need to be noble? I watched Christine, and I told myself at least I did not have to be like her; but, secretly...” She shook her head and looked away with her lips between her teeth. “I’ve grown accustomed to being the Comtess de Montren,” she finally added.

Gaston crossed the room in two strides and dropped down in front of her to growl fiercely, “You are the Comtess de Montren! I will have no other. I am not married to that bitch!” It was his Horse talking; that part of him which was truth and instinct.

She did not flinch. She nodded sadly.

There was a knock on the door, and I opened it because I did not know what to say to my matelot or his wife. Theodore embraced me before I could even speak a greeting. His pleasure at our presence was buoying; but sadly, we quickly stripped him of it and brought him down to stand in the muck with us once he turned to see Gaston and Agnes.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

I handed him the letter, and then realized he could not read French.

“My French is not adequate to this, I’m afraid,” he said quickly before I could retrieve it from him.

“You are all studying French?” I asked dully. I vaguely remembered some talk of that before we left.

“Oui,” Theodore said quickly with a tight smile. “But perhaps you should tell me of this, or read it to me.”

I read it to him, translating as I went. He sat and his pleasant features stiffened into the mask of a barrister’s concentration as he listened.

“Well, this is a fine mess,” he said when I finished.

I was reminded of my talk with Gaston this evening. “We bring little else to this world but fine tragedy,” I said sadly.

“Nay, nay,” Theodore said with a friendly smile. “As I have ever told my wife, you merely make life interesting.”

The anger gripping Gaston had departed, and he had slumped down to sit with his back to the couch on which Agnes sat and drape one arm across her knee. He looked up, and his Horse smiled at me.

I smiled back. There was a time when his Horse being so evident might have scared me, but we had come so very far. It was a pleasant thought: we had come so very far, and we would endure and conquer whatever this brought, as we had everything else the Gods had flung at us.

“There you are!” came from the doorway, and I turned to find Vivian hurrying in the door, a drowsy little baby in her arms.

At the sight of the child, my matelot’s more animal self fled, and he stood and peered at the girl who regarded him with sleepy interest.

“Um,” Vivian said as she regarded him. She glanced at her daughter who was, of course, too young to understand any of it. “This is your... papa.” That solution in naming seemed to please Vivian, and she promptly thrust the now-frowning infant into my matelot’s arms.

She turned to me, and surprised me with an embrace. “I am so glad you are alive.”

I smiled in spite of all else I had been thinking. It was amusing to hear those words from someone who had wished me dead on many occasions – and I her.

“Aye, we lived, and you look well, as does the little one.”

My wife did indeed look well. She appeared to have lost most of the weight she had gained while pregnant. Sobriety had made her beautiful. Her creamy complexion was clear and bright, her hazel eyes shone, and her long honey-colored hair glistened in the lamplight. She smiled winsomely at me, and I could well see how Nickel had become enthralled.

“We need to speak,” she said.

“Nickel,” I said and grinned. “You have my blessing if it is a thing you want. We will have to sort through...”

She cut my words short with a squeal of delight and embraced me anew. “I knew you would not be angry! I told him. But he is so... proper.”

“Quite a change from the noble boys you were raised around,” I teased.

She laughed. “Aye. Or married.”

She looked to my matelot, who was cooing over her child, and her happiness dimmed.

“He is not so... enamored with our little Jamaica, though, as he is with me.” She sighed.

“Good,” I said. “Go and have other children with him; we will raise her.”

She frowned at that. “Aye, but... Well, we will all live together, won’t we: in some fashion?”

“I suppose,” I said, contemplating how or where we would all live in light of the Marquis’ letter and... everyone, and... I felt very tired and old. I thought of the allegory Gaston and I shared of our being two centaurs hitched to a wagon into which we heaped all that we owned. When we roved, it was a chariot filled with our love. Here, it was a great dray filled with women and babies and titles and all manner of heavy things. And the road ahead of us was long and seemingly steeper by the moment.

“We will find some way through the thickets,” I said as much for my benefit as for anyone else’s.

“You will have to speak with Nickel,” Vivian said and pulled me deeper into the room, away from the others. “I love him, truly, as I have never thought I would; but his sense of propriety is quite entrenched. It is the only thing we have fought over. It is as if... Well, he will not take my word on the matter: that you will set me free. I have felt quite insulted. It is...” She sighed and searched my face.

“He does not trust you?” I asked kindly.

“Aye,” she sighed. “I feel... It is complicated. All here do not trust me when it comes to a bottle. I have become inured to it. I have told myself that it is for my own good. And there are times when Rachel is quite... annoying, about worrying that my behavior will be improper when about a man. They all decided that Nickel should sleep here and Julio and Davey should guard the Theodores. I wish to... be beyond all that, but I suppose my misdeeds will always haunt me, will they not?”

I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Our past sins have a way of haunting us, aye. I thank the... I feel I am quite fortunate that I am not surrounded by those who knew me before I journeyed here.” Alonso had been the only one, and that had ended in tragedy. “It must be trying for you.”

She nodded.

“You look quite lovely, and I am very proud of you,” I added.

She smiled. “Thank you. You were very wise in much of what you said before. I am learning... How did you put it? Who the girl was beneath all the rum.”

“Good for you,” I said.

Jamaica let out a plaintive squawk and her mother glanced to her with a small smile.

“She has woken enough to discover she does not know the man holding her,” Vivian said with amusement.

“They will have time to become better acquainted,” I said with surety. “We will sort this through, I promise. But first, there are other worries.”

“Aye” she said brusquely, “We must leave this damn island.”

I was surprised. “Aye, that is the conclusion we reached. What has occurred here?”

She shook her head. “I will let your sister tell you of it, and Mister Theodore.”

“All right, then,” I said.

Jamaica burst into a full-throated wail; and with a quick peck on my cheek, Vivian went to rescue her. Gaston seemed both relieved and reluctant to relinquish the squalling girl.

Vivian swept out of the room with the same aplomb with which she had entered, and Gaston and I were left alone again with Theodore and Agnes. Theodore closed the door this time.

“I suppose you wish to divorce her now,” Theodore said with some amusement.

“Aye, is that possible?” I asked.

“She can cite sufficient cause to divorce you, but that would cause other complications. And it would require that she remain on English soil.”

“We were planning to tell you that we think we should all relocate to Tortuga. I take it that you have all had similar thoughts.” I said with concern.

Agnes nodded gravely.

“Aye, we have been awaiting your arrival,” Theodore said. “But we will all discuss that in a moment, I believe.”

“Well, as we will be changing countries, and France and the Catholic church give not a whit about a Church of England marriage unless it involves royalty, can we not merely say that I am divorced, or the marriage was annulled, and allow Nickel and her to marry on Tortuga?”

“Spoken like a good heretic,” Theodore said with a smile. “Nay, Young Nickel is a devout member of the Church of England, and believes in the sanctity of the marriage between you and Mistress Williams, even if the two of you do not. He came to see me about this matter.”

“Oh Bloody...” I sighed.

“Agnes and I will need to be married at once in the Catholic Church,” Gaston said thoughtfully.

“Aye,” Theodore said with concern. “If you wish to... ignore your father’s wishes.”

“I do not wish to, but I will not be married to that bitch,” Gaston said. “I chose Agnes, and I will stand by that decision.”

“So be it, then,” Theodore said with a shrug. “I hope the two of you are prepared to deal with priests.”

We sighed in unison.

I imagined they would be the same priests I had threatened over dinner at Doucette’s – and told I was an atheist. We were doomed.

“Have either of you heard from my father concerning matters of my legal competence?” Gaston asked.

“Aye,” Theodore said. “Your father wrote me that the matter would best be addressed on French soil. Someone, either a member of the Catholic Church, or a representative of the French government, needs to observe and interview you, and write a report concerning the matter to be delivered to the courts in France.

We sighed in unison again.

Theodore held up his hand. “Until the matter of your competence has been resolved, however, I am in possession of documents naming Will as your guardian.”

We sighed with relief.

“Thank the Gods,” I said.

“And you will have to stop saying things of that nature once we on Tortuga,” Theodore chided.

I smiled grimly. “Aye.”

“You’ll get yourself burned at the stake,” he muttered and turned to the door. “Now, let us all go and exchange the rest of our news. I assume you do not wish any others to know of this.”

“Nay,” Gaston and I said.

Agnes’ slim shoulders sagged in relief.

“All will be well,” Gaston assured her as he helped her stand.

As she followed Theodore from the room, I put a hand on Gaston’s shoulder. He nodded for Agnes to go on without him, and turned to me.

“How are we?” I breathed.

“Well enough for the moment,” he sighed tiredly. “If I dwell upon it, it will consume me.”

“Then I am sorry to distract you,” I said lightly.

He smiled sadly, and hooked an arm around my neck to pull my mouth to his and kiss me with desperate fervor. I returned it, and held him a brief time after our lips parted, wishing I could embrace and soothe his racing heart.

“We will endure,” I whispered.

“And conquer,” he sighed and released me.

We joined the others in the atrium. Mistress Rachel Theodore came to embrace us warmly. The Theodores’ negress, Hannah, was climbing the stairs with their daughter Elizabeth. Henrietta swooped in and offered to take Jamaica from Vivian and up to join the other children in the nursery. I spied the ever-incongruous couple of calm, educated, maroon, Julio, and his argumentative and stupid English matelot, Davey. I shared an embrace with the former and a handshake with the latter. Then we all gathered around the tables, where Sarah was seated and wine had been set out. Gaston sat next to Vivian, and I went to stand behind Agnes and wrap my arms about her slim form. She stiffened at first with surprise, and then quickly sighed and relaxed against me.

“Well, it appears we have all survived. Shall we exchange tales of woe?” I said lightly to all.

“I have been hearing the tales already,” Sarah said with a smile and sad glance at her husband’s missing arm. “But other than wounds, there is little we here have not learned on our own.”

“How did you lose your arm?” Theodore asked Striker.

“Aye,” Liam added.

“Spanish ambush on Hispaniola,” Striker said quickly with a dismissing wave. “I will tell you all of it once we sail.”

“We’re all ready ta leave,” Liam said. “Where be the *Queen*?”

“Out beyond the Passage, so that she can run if there is trouble,” Striker said. “Were you expecting us?” he asked with surprise.

“Aye and nay,” Sarah said. “We have been arranging passage on the *Belle Mer*.”

“The *Belle Mer*? Savant?” Striker asked. “Why is he here?”

I sighed as I remembered Captain Savant, the square-headed man who had hated Gaston so when last we sailed with the French. We had won him over somewhat, but I still did not like him.

“They took an ugly ship off Cuba and came to sell her quickly,” Julio said. His matelot chuckled, and Striker eyed them curiously until Julio added, “A truly ugly and un-seaworthy vessel: if she had not been filled with dye wood she would have sunk.”

“Savant has agreed to take us to Tortuga,” Theodore said. “We were going to leave a note.”

“Oh, thank you,” I teased.

“Aye, we were goin’ ta leave it with Belfrey or Massey, an’ then write another note on the walls in paint ta let ya know where the real one be,” Liam said. “We were goin’ ta be clever an’ all and not say their names, but let ya know in some other way. What with bastards burnin’ our warehouse and Theodore havin’ ta take down ’is shingle, we didna’ want ta bring trouble down upon them, but it’s likely these houses would be sacked as soon as there weren’t a loaded piece behind the doors. The damn bastards would na’ leave a note ’ere even iff’n they couldna’ read it. Probably ’ave orders to take it all ta the gov’na’.”

I was surprised, and I looked to Theodore and Sarah for confirmation and found sad and resigned nods.

“It has been made clear that we are no longer welcome in Port Royal, or allowed to conduct business here,” Sarah said.

“We heard as much from Morgan,” I said.

“It be a damn good thing ya asked us lot ta stay,” Liam said.

“Aye,” Theodore said bitterly. “I do not cut a figure so imposing that I can prevent my wife from being harassed in the market.”

Striker sighed and took his wife’s hand. “We should not have left you.”

Pete grimaced and scratched his head before releasing a lengthy sigh of his own.

“AyeAn’Nay. AllThatBeBehindUsNow. WhenCanYa’beReady?”

“On which ship?” Sarah asked with a teasing smile. “We were almost prepared to sail a week ago, but then Morgan and another ship arrived, and Julio learned that if you survived the storm you should be along soon. So we agreed to wait another week, and paid Savant good coin to do so. He has already been approached by several captains and told not to take on any passengers. Thankfully, he gives not a damn for what our fellow Englishmen think. He is quite impressed with Gaston’s title, and Agnes has done much to charm him as Lady Montren – even convincing him to take the dogs.”

“I am not leaving without the dogs,” Agnes said.

Gaston smiled at her with great regard, and I chuckled.

“Aye, we could o’ all left on the flyboat we got stashed up the Palisadoes a month ago if na’ fer the dawgs,” Liam said with a teasing smile.

“Nay!” Rachel said quickly. “Even without those beasts, we could not all fit upon that little boat.”

“You have a boat hidden away?” Striker asked Liam and Sarah.

“Aye,” Sarah said, “we developed battle and escape plans for every scenario. Pete should be proud.”

“We drilled,” Rucker said. “And practiced with arms.”

Pete was grinning. “IBeRightProudO’Allo’YaThen.”

“I have even trained the dogs to behave and follow me instead of running amuck,” Agnes said.

“Aye my lady, but they’ll still be shittin’ on Savant’s decks,” Davey said.

“Nay, now they will be shitting on the Bard’s decks,” I said.

“Maybe you all should sail with Savant,” Striker said as if giving the matter serious thought until Sarah smacked him playfully.

“OneO’UsShouldGoAn’TellTheBardSomethin’,” Pete said seriously.

“ShouldGoTonightIffn’ItBeAsBadAsYaSay. PeopleBeKnowin’WeBeAboutByMornin’.”

“Aye,” I agreed. “If they have approached Savant and told him not to take you on, then they do not wish for you to leave.” I was chilled anew with our reason for wishing to sneak ashore.

“We have thought it likely they could be waiting on our return.”

“They most assuredly have been,” Theodore said. “They could have done whatever they wished to do months ago; but instead, they ruined our businesses and then prevented us from leaving, but took no further action against us.”

“Then let us slip away in the night,” I said.

As if the Gods mocked us, the dogs began to bark viciously in the back yard, until a shot rang out and one of the animals yelped piteously.