

Chapter Eighty-Four
Wherein We Are Cast Into Hell

“Women an’ babes to the boat!” Liam hissed as all erupted into motion.

Agnes twisted from me and began to whistle shrilly.

I did not have a pistol; nor did Gaston, Pete, or Striker. I wanted to ask for a piece, but everyone was already racing about in pursuit of his or her assigned task. We four new arrivals, who had not been given a role in their well-conceived and -drilled battle plans, began to scramble about looking for weapons.

There was pounding at the front door: not the knock of someone demanding entry, but the widely spaced booms of a battering ram. Pete went upstairs, and passed Henrietta and Hannah scurrying down with the children. Gaston slapped my shoulder, and I turned in time to see him running for the stairs leading up to what had once been our room. I followed, only to dive back as men fired upon him from the yard. Gaston threw himself flat. Davey and Julio were using the stable and cookhouse for cover in order to fire on these attackers. Sarah and Striker emerged from her office with braces of pistols, just as the bar to the front door cracked, spraying splinters and then men into the foyer. I snatched two pistols from Sarah and tossed them to my matelot. Then I snatched two more from Striker and began firing at the men pouring into the atrium.

Striker and Sarah retreated toward the room next to her office. Gaston and I stood back to back and began to hack about with blades. There had been no time to reload, and no ammunition. I could see no one else we knew in the press of men, and they were not buccaneers: not an earring among them. They were dressed like good common Englishmen, in boots, coats, and hats. My father had sent an army to take us. I was not sure if I was pleased they were not attempting to kill us. Dozens surrounded Gaston and me.

It is actually easier to fight men who wish you dead under such circumstances. Then, each man will assume he can strike the killing blow and attack as he feels able: making himself an easy target and thus removing him from the battle. When capture is the objective, they ring around and fight as a unit. We were like baited bulls.

I finally stood with three men bleeding at my feet, the reassuring presence of Gaston’s back behind mine, and ten leering and barking faces before me.

“Lord Marsdale,” a voice boomed from my right. “It is done. Drop your weapons and surrender.”

I felt Gaston move behind me and heard the *gack* of a weapon hitting home. I turned my head and saw the speaker begin to topple from the table he had stood upon, with Gaston’s blade in his chest. Then the wall of men surged forward and we went down.

There was little for it. They bound us and dragged us to the center of the atrium, where a tall man stood.

He was not my father – or Shane. I thanked the Gods for that.

He was a handsome fellow, with fine attire and weapons. We were thrown on the paving stones before him. Gaston was lost to his Horse, and I yearned to follow him, especially as the tall man planting one booted foot upon my snarling matelot’s chest to keep him from rolling around. Gaston grunted and lay still. Then our captor stood there and surveyed the atrium as if this were merely the end to a day’s hunt.

I had to keep hold of my reins. My Horse wanted to run with terror in His heart.

I rolled over and looked about. I was immediately dismayed. Sarah and Striker were being brought to join us. At least they did not throw my sister to the pavement, but forced her roughly into a chair. Striker was not so lucky, and his head already sported a deep gash.

As the wall of legs about us retreated somewhat, I saw other bleeding figures: Theodore and Rachel, Julio and Davey, Vivian, and an unconscious Bones. Not all were trussed as we were – the women were not restrained at all – but there was nothing they could do against trained and orderly men. I did not see Pete, Agnes, the dogs, Rucker, or Liam and the servants and children. My heart was gladdened by this, though they could all be dead or captured elsewhere.

Then I saw Nickel, standing apart from the other prisoners, unbound. He was not looking at us: his troubled gaze was firmly on the stones. A rage to swamp my fear roared through me, and at least gave me clarity, though it could do little else. We had been betrayed.

I rolled onto my back to gaze up at our tall captor. “My father’s foolishness never ceases to amaze me,” I growled. “To send an army to wage war on women and children and his own kin.”

The tall man snorted, and one side of his lips curled in amusement. “He did not feel you would accept his invitation, my lord.” His voice was as blandly handsome as his face.

“I renounced my title, and I renounce him,” I snarled.

The man regarded me as if I were a foolish child. “Nobility grants many privileges, my lord, but that is not one of them. You will accept the consequences of your birth as any man must.”

“Fine, I will see this through with my father. Take me to him. And Sarah if you must, but let the others go. My father does not need them”

“Aye,” Sarah said fiercely. “Leave them be. He does not want them.”

Our captor made a humming sound of consideration as he surveyed his prisoners. “Nay, he does not.”

His meaning chilled my heart and burned my bolstering anger away. Only years of lying at cards kept it from my face: or so I hoped.

“Mister Jeffries, who is missing?” our captor asked. “I do not see Striker’s *matelot*.” He pronounced the word properly, but with great disdain and mockery. “Nor do I see any children.”

A stocky but well-liveried man stepped from the crowd of mercenaries and regarded a list. “Striker’s paramour, the Frenchman’s girl, the old tutor, the Scotsman, and the three babes and the servants all be missing, sir.”

“We can assume, can we not, Mister Nickel, that they have gone to that boat you mentioned?” our captor said.

Nickel recoiled as if struck, and his gaze darted frantically to the friends he had betrayed. “I...I’m...I’m not... that was not part of our bargain! I was to tell you when they returned. You said you would take Will and Mistress Striker and they would not be hurt. You said nothing of...”

“Oh, hush,” our captor said disparagingly. “They will all hate you anyway. It is too late to defend yourself.”

“Nickey,” Vivian said plaintively. “You did this?”

“It was for us,” he protested frantically. “Will’s father will make him divorce you and...”

“He was going to do it because I asked him to,” Vivian wailed. “I told you he would if I asked him. I told you... I told you... But you. Damn you!”

She dove at him, a flurry of flailing fists. He stepped back and another man stepped forward and backhanded her to the ground. We all roared in protest, and Rachel struggled to go to her, but her captors did not release her.

My wife sat where she fell and fingered her split lip. There was horror and a distant thing not quite herself in her eyes as she regarded the blood on her fingers. Her gaze cast about until she found me. She was a scared little girl: the child who had turned to a bottle to hide from cynicism and cruelty.

“It will be well, Vivian,” I tried to assure her, though anyone hearing my voice knew I lied. She shook her head. “I cannot go back,” she wailed. “I will not.”

Our captor scoffed. “I was not employed to secure your return, you little trollop.”

She gasped and collapsed to sob in her skirts.

“There is no need to be cruel!” I yelled.

“Is there not?” The man seemed to seriously consider the question. “Well, perhaps no need, but I have found I derive a certain enjoyment from it.” He turned back to his men. “Speaking of needs, any who wish can do what they will with her. She is not necessary.”

I roared such that I could not hear the protests of the others. I saw Nickel’s mouth open as he stepped forward and drew his pistols and began to aim at the tall man. I could not count the retorts that took him down; and he crumpled, wounds blossoming everywhere.

A muffled pistol retort broke the following silence, and everyone, including our suave captor, started and cast about for the source.

One of the mercenaries stepped forward and pulled on Vivian’s shoulder. She flopped over, blood running from under her chin. The small pistol she clutched fell from her fingers.

A ragged cry was torn from our throats yet again, and even the mercenaries seemed surprised she had taken her life.

Guilt covered me like a pall. We should not have gone. We should not have left them. So much could have been averted if we had stayed. We could have sailed for Tortuga before my father ever sent instruction to Modyford – or these men.

The tall man went to gaze upon the bodies. Rachel clung to Theodore and her sobs resounded off the walls. Striker was swearing in a steady, breathy stream beside me.

I looked to Gaston and found more scared man than raging Horse in his gaze.

“I love you,” I mouthed.

He took a ragged breath and mouthed the same.

Knowing I would die loved did not ease my heart, though: I knew I would see Gaston die first: either quickly and callously as Nickel had, or with slow agony for my father’s or Shane’s amusement. My Horse screamed in my heart. It sounded as I imagined the screams of my great black charger Goliath must have. I never heard them; I only saw the animal wheezing with suffering in the aftermath of Shane’s torture. I had not hesitated to pull a blade and release the great beast from his pain. I envied my poor wife: the need to release Gaston and myself from the cruelty that was surely our only future gripped me, and I wanted very much to plunge a blade in the both of us. The sure knowledge of the evil incarnated in the men we faced eclipsed any possible glimmer of hope and faith in our friends who were not captured.

“Well, that is troublesome,” the tall man said of Nickel. “Now who will tell us where the children are?” He moved to stand before Sarah. “Miss Sarah, do you not wish to be reunited with your son?”

“I am Mistress Striker to you,” she spat.

He smirked and shrugged. “Your father does not recognize your marriage.”

“My father is not God, Whose eyes I was married under,” she snarled.

“That remains to be seen.” He paused and smirked anew. “Not the God part: the sanctification of your marriage. I do not believe the church here has any record of it.”

“Is nothing sacred?” Theodore asked with vehemence.

This amused the tall man greatly. “And that from a barrister.” He closed on Theodore and Rachel. “You know where that boat is, do you not? Would your Jewess not like to see her darling daughter again?”

“Go to Hell,” Rachel spat.

Sarah stood and yelled. “Why do you want the children?”

The tall man turned to her again. “Your father wishes to see your son.”

“If he does not recognize my marriage, why would he wish to see a bastard?” she asked.

“I do not ask my employers such questions.” He shrugged. “I will say he was very particular that you and your child not be harmed. I would say he favors you yet.”

Sarah snorted. “I would say I am an embarrassment to him, and that he wishes to use my son to control me. And as for not harming me: I lose my value as a marriageable pawn if I am scarred.”

“Well, now, the lady is a cynic,” our captor said with amusement. “It may very well be as you say. It does not matter to me; my only concern is procuring the child. And I will do so – with or without your aid. I have men along the Palisadoes’ coast already.”

“North or south?” Sarah asked.

Our captor arched an eyebrow; and our friends frowned for but a moment before schooling their faces – except for Davey, who continued to appear confused. Thankfully, our captor was intent upon my sister.

“My dear,” he said. “The north coast of the Palisadoes is the bay, am I right? If you escaped to a vessel there, it would have to sail past the wharfs, forts, and militia through the Passage to the sea.”

Sarah shook her head and sighed as if he were a fool. “That is if the objective was to reach the sea. The northern side of the bay – which is very large – is quite shallow: too shallow for a large craft to follow. And it is fed by several rivers; up which a small craft can navigate with ease. Once far inland, fugitives would have several paths they could take to the northern coast of Jamaica and the smaller ports there.”

Our captor appeared concerned.

I thought it a damn fine bluff: worthy of me. I was quite proud of my little sister. The boat they had spoken of was a small sailing craft, and they had clearly mentioned sailing in it to Tortuga, not across the bay.

I gauged our friends’ reactions: Theodore and Rachel had appeared surprised once again, only to quickly frown in an attempt to appear concerned that Sarah would speak so, and thus play along with her ruse. Julio did the same, but his damn *matelot* still appeared confused.

Our captor was not blind: he was on Davey in two steps. “Was that the plan?”

Davey shook his head in defiance, and then realized that perhaps that was not the correct response. “I don’t know,” he blurted.

“He only knows of the boat on the sea coast,” Sarah said with confidence. “We did not tell everyone everything. We thought we might have a traitor.”

“And I be stupid,” Davey added earnestly. “They don’t tell me most things anyhow.”

“Ah, aye, I see that,” the tall man said with a smirk. “They tell your *matelot* though, do they not?”

He kicked Julio’s wounded leg. Julio grunted with pain, and Davey cringed and cursed.

“He will kill us, Davey. He will kill us anyway,” Julio hissed and received another vicious kick that left him gasping.

“Leave him be!” Davey roared. “This not be our doin’. It be theirs. It be a thing o’ lords.”
I cursed ever rescuing him from the *King’s Hope*.

“Then if it is not your concern, why should you attempt to protect them?” the tall man asked.

“Cause we agreed to watch over them. It be a job for friends,” Davey said.

Our captor sighed and chuckled. “Now. Why are you trying to protect them, now? Why will you lie for them? I will cause your man here great agony until you tell me the truth. If it is not your concern, why not simply tell me what I want to know and save your friend the pain?”

“You arse! Because I don’t know nuthin’ ’bout a boat on the north coast!”

“Aye, good. Do you know where the boat is on the southern coast?” our tall captor asked with glee.

“Aye!” Davey spat. “I know that! We all know that! “

Our captor fought laughter. “Good! Where? Tell me!”

Davey shook his head in frustration. “Nay! I can’t tell ya. I would have ta show ya.”

“Aye, aye! Excellent. Then you will show us.”

“Nay!” Davey said.

“Why not?” Our captor kicked Julio again.

“You bastard! I can’t! It be wrong! He would never forgive me!”

I gasped with surprised relief.

The tall man was no longer amused. “Why? It is a thing of lords, as you say. Why should he care?”

“He does!” Davey yelled back. “That be the way of it. They be our friends. We stand by them. I don’t like this business none, but I stand by him.”

“A loyal idiot!” the tall man spat, and began to kick Julio ferociously.

Davey roared incoherently and tried to throw himself between them, but the tall man’s mercenaries restrained him.

The abuse was only stopped by the stocky man named Jeffries gingerly approaching and tapping his employer’s shoulder.

“What?” the tall man asked angrily.

The stocky man spoke quietly, and I could not hear him, but Theodore could. I saw my friend’s eyes dart to first the front and then the back of the house.

Movement caught my eye from above, though. There was a man silhouetted against the stars on the roof, and then another, and another. All aimed muskets down into the atrium.

I was not the only one who saw them. The mercenaries scrambled for cover under the balconies, and aimed at the men on the roof that they could see. The tall man dove across the atrium to wave a menacing pistol at Gaston, Striker, and me.

Morgan and Savant pushed their way through the front doors: looking like a two headed porcupine for all the muskets poking out around them to aim at our captors. I was extremely happy to see them, but I was not yet relieved: we were not yet saved. I was nearly disappointed that they had not entered shooting: it would have been our best chance of escape, but the courtyard filling with random gunfire would have surely resulted in many deaths – including ours.

“What is this?” Morgan roared.

“Who the Devil are you?” the tall man asked.

“Admiral Henry Morgan.”

“Admiral?” the tall man scoffed. “Truly, does His Majesty’s Navy know?”

“Of the Brethren of the Coast!” Morgan said. “And I am leader of the militia. Who the Devil are you?”

The tall man smirked. “Ah, aye, well, I am also not a representative of Britain’s fine army or navy. I am the Earl of Dorshire’s man, and my business here is my lord’s, and it has been approved by your Governor.”

“Your name, sir,” Morgan demanded.

“Thorp,” the tall man said with a sketch of a bow. “Jebediah Thorp if you must know. I will not say I am pleased to meet you. Now, why are you interrupting my business here?”

“You have abducted a French lord,” Savant said in French. The man who had been interpreting for him repeated the words in English.

Hope flared in my heart. I could not save us all, but perhaps we now had the leverage to push our earlier offer into place.

Thorp gave a disparaging snort – and to my ire and fear – aimed his pistol squarely at Gaston. “I will reserve my comments on what you French are calling a lord these days... But I have no reason to believe this man is as you claim.”

“Then how did you know which one was the lord?” Morgan asked.

“I know it is claimed he is a lord. I have not seen proof of this, however,” Thorp amended.

“It does not matter what you think he is. We know what he is, and you cannot have him,” Savant said.

“Is that so?” Thorp asked after Savant’s words were translated.

I joined the fray and hoped my sister would once again follow. “You will not get all that you came for. Let him go. And I will go with you.”

“Non,” Gaston gasped.

“Oui, it must be this way,” I said in French. “They will kill you. He does not want me dead, yet.”

“Aye, let them all go, and Will and I will accompany you,” Sarah was saying. “Our father can demand our presence, but he has no damn right to the rest.”

“Miss Sarah,” Thorp said with a slow smile. “No matter what your supposed rescuers do, people will die. Who are you willing to lose? Who are your rescuers willing to sacrifice?”

There was movement above, and a body flopped limply on the floor a foot from my head. A shadow followed it to land next to our captor. And then Pete had Thorp by his clubbed hair with a blade to his throat.

Pete hissed in his ear. “YaKillThem, YaDie. TheyKillMe, YaDie. IKillYaFirst, IDie. YaDiesNoMatterWhatComes.”

“I see your point,” Thorp breathed. “You are correct, I would rather face a disappointed employer than death; but, I will not leave empty-handed. If you wish to spill blood – mine and yours – know that you will also cause the deaths of those you care for. My men have orders to leave no one alive if all goes poorly.”

“YaThinkTheyFollowYurOrdersWhenYaBeDead?”

“Aye, I do,” Thorp said. “I am not the one who will pay them coin in the end.”

“Will? Sarah?” Pete asked.

“I’ll go without a fight,” I said, “but only if everyone else is safe.”

“Aye,” Sarah said.

Striker swore quietly.

Gaston dropped the reins. “Non!” he howled as loud as his broken voice would allow and began to thrash about.

“Hold! Hold!” Thorp called to his men as Pete pulled him farther away from my matelot. “Let the damn French take him.”

Thorp’s men pulled back, and some of Savant’s surged in to pick Gaston up and carry him cursing and thrashing out the door. My eyes filled with tears of relief.

The Brethren, both French and English, plucked the rest of the captives away until only Sarah and I remained. Then Pete backed to the door, towing Thorp with him until Pete stood as the head of the musket hedgehog. Only then did he spit Thorp back into the atrium.

Pete looked to Sarah and me. “IKnowWhereYurFatherLives.”

“Take care of Striker and Pike first,” Sarah sobbed.

I knew not what to say. Pete’s gaze met mine and I knew I need say nothing. All would be done that could be done: I only need have faith in the Gods, a great golden lion who was their avatar, and my matelot.

Then the Brethren were gone, and we were left alone with a house full of disgruntled mercenaries and Thorp, who stood staring at the doorway with a touch of awe.

“Well, damn,” Thorp said at last. He gathered himself and turned to Jeffries and the rest of his men. “Let us get them to the ship, quickly, before those damn fools regroup and try to rescue them again now that we have no other hostages.”

“What of the boat and children?” Jeffries asked.

“Hah,” Thorp said. “We cannot pursue it now – whichever direction they went.” He looked pointedly at Sarah.

She pawed her tears away and thrust out her chin to smile. “Pete told me to delay you.”

Thorp laughed with sincere amusement. “Well, I hope to meet him again someday.” He pointed at the balcony from which Pete had dropped. “Do we have any men there?”

“There be three dead, sir, and Wally there,” a man reported from the stairs and pointed at the body that had preceded Pete over the rail.

“They did say that one be the worst, followed by the Frenchie,” Jeffries said apologetically.

Thorp gave a disgusted snort. “I do recall that. Thank you, Jeffries. If I ever deal with this motley set of colonials again, I will try and remember that occasionally they are a good judge of a man’s talents.”

Two men hauled me to my feet; Thorp instructed one to hold a pistol to my head as we walked, and the other to keep a knife at my throat. Thorp snatched Sarah to her feet and held his pistol to her jaw. The rest of Thorp’s men packed closely about us as we made our way out the door and down the street. I could not see anything beyond the press of men and their torches as we made our way to the wharfs on Thames.

I was not resolved in my decision to go with them. My fear mounted with every step, and I nearly told the Gods that I wished for someone to ignore the agreement and rescue us, even if it meant my life. But that was a coward’s recourse. Was I not a better man than that? I reassured myself with the faith I had felt when I looked into Pete’s eyes. The Gods were with me, and my love and my friends would find me.