

Chapter Eighty-Five
Wherein I Battle Demons

We were placed in a longboat and rowed to two ships anchored in the harbor: one a fine twelve-gun frigate, and the other a nimble-seeming sloop with eight guns. Despair and fear blossomed anew: the frigate would not be easy for the *Virgin Queen* to take with the sloop as escort. My father, or perhaps Thorp, had prepared well for facing pirates.

And then a new chill gripped me as we drew alongside the prison that would carry us to England.

“Is my father here?” I asked Thorp.

Sarah’s breath caught at my words.

Thorp regarded me with incredulity. “Nay, of course not. A Lord does not travel to the New World for matters of this type.”

“Lord Montren’s father came to collect his son last year,” I said. “And he is a Marquis.”

Thorp snorted and shrugged dismissively as he stood to take the ladder. “I have never understood the French.”

“And is our cousin here, Jacob Shane?” I asked: pleased my voice remained level.

Thorp paused in leaning down to pull Sarah up. “Your cousin does not travel.” His tone was curious.

“Good,” Sarah said softly.

Thorp looked to her. “I understand you are responsible for that.”

“Good,” Sarah said firmly.

Thorp seemed to find amusement in this.

We were soon aboard. Thorp led Sarah toward the cabins, and I was escorted below by Jeffries and several of the mercenaries. Once in the hold, I was taken to a room of sorts: formed by the hull, a bulkhead, and stacks of crates and barrels that reached to the ceiling. There was a thin pallet in the corner, with a big hoop for a chain bored into a beam. Jeffries passed me to two bald, ugly, and burly men equipped with clubs; one huge and older; the other younger and smaller, but quite muscular. The big one was introduced as Watkins, the smaller as his assistant, Lots. I was told they were to be my gaolers.

I was thankful for Sarah’s sake that she would have a cabin. Then I was annoyed that – as she was a woman – they would not consider her a sufficient threat to keep in chains. Then I realized that was possibly to our advantage. Thorp did not appear to be a stupid man, and he had seen her mettle, but many of the other men aboard this craft could surely be swayed by feminine wiles.

Watkins and Lots removed my bonds and replaced them with manacles and leg irons which were attached to the iron hoop in the beam. They were indeed gaolers, or perhaps slavers, as they seemed experienced in the handling of a man as if he were a piece of livestock; and were quite cautious in insuring that I was never free to strike one of them without the other being in a position to exact retribution and prevent my taking advantage of a chance at escape. I saw nothing to be gained in earning their ire at this juncture, so I behaved docilely and sat on the pallet when they finished.

They seemed curious about me, though they would not meet my gaze or address me. They had examined my scars while they worked, and then retreated to sit at the room’s table and discuss me in quiet whispers I could not decipher above the noises of the ship. I decided I really did not wish to speak to them, either, nor hear what they might think of me. It was likely we would have at least two months to become acquainted.

I could not sleep, even when my gaolers turned down the lamp and Lots took his turn at watch while Watkins slept in a hammock strung in the other corner.

I listened hopefully for any sound of a rescue, and knew it was foolishness. It was quite possible I would see England before being delivered from imprisonment. The *Virgin Queen* might have been pursued, or the Bard and Cudro might have heard of the trouble at Sarah's and sailed to safety to await the outcome. It could be days before all who would want us saved might rendezvous and devise a plan. And it was entirely possible that this vessel and her escort would sail on the morning wind. If she did, and the *Queen* was not in a position to observe her leaving the harbor, she might have to search for us; or race ahead and lie in wait in the most obvious straits we would traverse. I knew how bloody hard it could be to find a Spanish fleet with a dozen buccaneer vessels looking for it. One ship seeking another could be a fool's errand, even if the pursuer knew the routes the quarry might take.

I was alone. I must accept that and make the best of it. I had spent most of my years as a man alone: and in truth, most of my childhood and adolescence alone as well. It was only in the past few years – since coming here – since meeting Gaston – that I had become accustomed to constant companionship and not just the constant presence of other men. My matelot was safe, and that was worth any discomfiture of heart or body I might experience on this journey. And I doubted I faced death – even upon reaching my father. If he wanted me dead, I would already be dead. So, truly, other than what awaited me at its end if my friends were not able to rescue me first, I had nothing to fear. My Horse agreed with me in theory, but it did not like being in chains in the company of strangers. Such circumstances had always signaled our demise in days of old; even though I had been rescued in those instances, too.

Through worrying about myself, I commenced gnashing my teeth about Gaston. If I was surprised at my sudden loneliness, I could only imagine how he must feel: he who had never known companionship prior to me. I hoped he would recover quickly from the bout he had succumbed to, and if not, that Agnes could care for him and he would allow it. I had faith in his ability to control himself now, even if I were not present, and especially if I was in need as I most surely was. Yet, this was quite the test and he must face it alone.

And Agnes could very well have been on the flyboat with Liam and the children, and not where we needed her. I told the Gods that Liam could sail, and he would meet up with the others before running afoul of inclement weather or other vessels. Of course, if the *Queen* spent her time looking for them, she would not be following this ship. The more I thought on all our children being adrift in the sea in a little boat, the more I hoped our friends would see to the children first. We would be well enough.

I was still awake, though calmer in spirit, when I heard the sounds of the sails being raised. The ship began to move as dim light from the hatch seeped around the barrels of the wall. I told the Gods I would survive this: nay, I would endure and conquer it.

My gaolers offered me a pot and rag, and then a tankard of water and porridge. I saw to my body's needs and settled in to wait.

Sunlight streamed in through what I could see of the hatch, and the ship was definitely under full sail in open water by the time Thorp arrived. He was followed by a small, moist man with pinched features and a fine suit of black wool tailored an inch or two too small in nearly every dimension but height. Thorp wore only a loose linen shirt, fine linen breeches, and high boots, and appeared confident and comfortable. This new man was stuffed into enough wool to keep a small flock warm in winter, and sweat marred the uniformly austere charcoal of it at every place an extremity met his torso. He was mopping at himself continuously with a lace handkerchief,

and I was minded of Sir Christopher Vines at his most distraught – though this man seemed eager and not angst-ridden.

“Lord Marsdale, may I present Mister Collins,” Thorp said.

“I suppose,” I answered literally.

“How very pleased I am to meet you, my lord,” Collins gushed and then frowned with consternation and turned to Thorp. “Where are his clothes?”

“He was wearing no more or less when I made his acquaintance,” Thorp said with amusement. “I am told many of the buccaneers – as the privateers are styled – dress in this manner.”

“I usually wear a tunic in addition to the breeches,” I said helpfully, “but as this hold will be quite hot until we clear the tropics, I am pleased with my lack of attire.”

Collins was peering at me intensely. “And what is that on his ears? That will not do,” Collins told Thorp, and then turned to someone I could not see beyond the doorway. “Hedley, fetch Lord Marsdale a shirt.”

“Do not bark at me,” Thorp was saying. “His attire is not my concern.”

“Nay, it is not in this matter,” Collins said. “You are correct, but it is the duty of every Christian man to insure propriety.”

Thorp seemed to have a great number of thoughts on the matter, all of an amusing nature judging by the tight smile he displayed, but he voiced none of them.

I said, “I feel that no impropriety will occur unless someone here cannot help but look upon a man’s naked chest and experience lust.”

This elicited a bark of indignation from Collins, and a guffaw of laughter from Thorp. Watkins and Lots studied the ceiling with perplexed frowns.

“Do not flatter yourself,” Thorp said.

I was tempted to tell him to find flattery in my gaze in order to observe his reaction. And my comment would not be totally disingenuous: I did find him handsome and his manner charming, even if he was the Devil. I found ironic amusement that my cock’s taste in men was often so poor.

“I do not,” I assured him with a smile. “If I for one moment thought any man here might view me with lust, I would gladly cover myself in as much sweat-soaked wool as Collins. I would even don his suit – that is how very appalling I would find that situation.”

Thorp looked to Collins and grimaced for comic affect, and Watkins even fought a smile.

Collins puffed his chest out. “Propriety, gentlemen, is far more important than comfort. I would rather swelter in this Hellish heat than burn in the fires of damnation.”

I grinned. “I think it very likely, sir, that by the *judgment* of such a proper man as yourself, I will burn in the fires of damnation no matter what I do, and thus I might as well enjoy what comfort I can find while caught in this mortal coil.”

“Nay, my lord, I will not allow it,” Collins said earnestly. “Your father sent me here to save your soul, and save your soul I will.”

My Horse bridled, and alarm crept through my balls and bowels, but I kept a pleasant smile on my face. I could very well guess why my father had sent this man, but I was determined to play it out. “Did he now? Well, I assure you, Mister Collins, I am well with God and He with me; and if we have anything to say to one another, I am sure He is more than capable of addressing the matter. I need no arrogant little parson involved.”

Collins flinched and frowned. “I am not a parson, but I am a man of God. And sometimes men of God are God’s instruments in the instruction of his wayward children.”

“And sometimes God grants little men enough rope to hang themselves for the sin of hubris come Judgment Day,” I countered. “If you are not a priest, then you are of little use to me in absolving my sins.”

“My lord, you have lived too long amongst Papists,” Collins spat.

I sighed. “Perhaps, but in truth, I do not feel those arrogant *men* have the right to speak for God either. So, if you cannot absolve me of my sins, but you are to save my soul, what are you going to do? Instruct me in Bible passages and a gentleman’s attire – which, let me assure you, I will take no instruction from you on that matter.”

“I am not to absolve your sins,” he said, “but to pull the Devil’s hooks from your soul, and steer you onto the path of righteousness so that you are no longer compelled to sin.”

I gave a snort of contempt. “I have broken all ten of the commandments; and as a lord, I will be expected to continue to do so if I am to maintain any standing with my peers. I can assure you, God knows my father breaks most of those commandments in spirit if not the flesh. And if my father has truly gone to all this effort to bring me back to his fold, I do not see where he would be so delusional as to expect me to behave in a manner unlike him or other lords. So what are you on about?”

Collins was appalled, even more so because Thorp was laughing. “Mister Thorp, how can you...”

“Laugh? Easily, my good man, quite easily,” Thorp assured him. “You should try it.”

Collins swung his bulk back to me. “And my lord, how dare you...”

“Break a commandment so?” I teased. “I assure you, my father has given me little reason to honor him these past years, and I have failed to do so with abandon.”

He mopped his brow frantically and sputtered, “This is not... You are not... My Lord!”

I was not sure if he was referring to me or the Almighty in that utterance and I laughed. “You come here with orders from my father to kill all I hold dear and you expect me to honor him?”

“Kill?” Collins sputtered and looked to Thorp before frowning and looking quickly away.

“Aye, kill,” I spat. “My father wished to have my matelot and my sister’s husband killed. And my wife, I suppose she was to die on the voyage. Thorp was handing her to his men. Thank the... I am glad she escaped such as she did. Tell me, Thorp, were there to be hangings once we were at sea, or were the unwanted souls to be poisoned or beaten to death and slipped over the railing in the night so the crew would not talk? Or did my esteemed father want all alive so he could witness the deaths himself?”

Thorp regarded the table with bemusement. “Your father wished for all to reach England alive – if that could be managed. He expressed greater interest in being given the chance to meet some more than others.”

I had known that, and hearing it admitted did nothing except make me thank the Gods fervently that Gaston was safe.

Collins had collected himself and pasted a wan smile on his thin lips. “My lord, I was told you were quite quick-witted, but you shall not tangle us in things that did not occur.”

“Nay, let us not worry over those who were delivered from this evil,” I spat and glared at him. “So, Collins, did you think the son of your employer would be dim-witted?”

“Nay, my lord, I did not. But I have met many men of excellent intellect, and they do not possess the Devil’s tongue such as you.”

“Were they lords?” I chided. “Do not misunderstand me, I have met many dim-witted lords in my travels, but I have found that all men who do well in a monarch’s court have this

Devil's tongue – as you choose to call my facility for debate. I feel you do not comprehend what you were sent here to do, because you cannot comprehend who and what you are dealing with when it comes to lords and their sons.”

Thorp found quiet amusement in that, and watched Collins expectantly.

Collins flushed and balled his fists. “You are wrong, my lord. I do know. And I should not bandy words with the Devil in your soul. I am here to cure you of the affliction that mars you in the eyes of any man of worth, lord or not.”

The chill returned to my belly, but I was very much devoted to the game now. “Truly, and what might that be?”

“Your sodomiactal tendencies,” Collins spat.

Despite my assurances that this was a matter we could handle, my Horse started and reared. I stood. “And how do you propose to do that, geld me?” I roared.

Collins jumped back, and Watkins waved a club at me menacingly though I could reach none of them.

“Nay, nay!” Thorp called and stepped between me and the others. “There will be no gelding, my lord; or any other damage to your privates. Your father specifically forbade that.” He shrugged. “He wishes for heirs. However, Mister Collins is empowered to do whatever else he feels necessary to convince you to become a good Christian man with no interest in other men.”

I stared into his eyes and saw that – as he had shown – he obviously thought this was foolishness; however, he would do as he had been paid to do with little thought of me.

I calmed myself and returned to my seat on the pallet. Thorp stood before me still, regarding me with more concern now than he had when he had come to stand before me in my sudden ire.

I ignored him, and looked around his legs to address Collins. “How much did my father pay you, Mister Collins?”

“That is not...”

“What value did you place on your life?” I added.

“My lord?”

“If all of this is being done to bring me back into my father’s favor, then it is assumed that I will become the next Earl of Dorshire, is it not?”

“Aye, my lord,” Collins said with confusion.

Thorp sighed heavily and returned to his seat with a knowing smile.

“Well, Mister Collins,” I continued calmly. “If you do anything to my person other than bore me with Bible verses in your attempt to rectify my deficiencies of propriety, I will kill you at the first opportunity: be that on this voyage, or ten years from now when I can use my position as Earl to hire men such as Mister Thorp to do it for me.”

Collins’ mouth fell open, and he stammered for a bit before marshaling his convictions. “You will not, my lord, because I will succeed in freeing you from the Devil’s influence, and then you will not wish to do such a thing. You will thank me.”

I snorted disparagingly and looked to Thorp. “And how much is your life worth?”

He smiled. “My lord, I asked for a great deal of money from your father for this business, enough for me to disappear. Please understand, when I was first contracted, I thought you to be some little fop sodomite, and I rather thought Mister Collins could not help but be successful. But now...” He shrugged and met my gaze levelly. “I see I was wise to ask for the sum I did.”

I smiled. “Even if I die: even if Collins is successful in breaking me such that I will not seek your head: there are those who will not forgive you.”

He looked away. “I have come to realize that.”

“And so... You are a fool, or you fear my father more?”

Thorp smirked. “I like my job.”

I recalled his words about deriving pleasure from cruelty and I smiled grimly. Though Thorp dressed and acted much as Alonso once had, this was a man much as Hastings had been: a man who enjoyed the pain of others.

I looked to Watkins and Lots, and they looked away quickly.

I gave yet another disparaging snort. “The excuse that you are merely doing a job you were paid to do, by men who will bear the responsibility in this life and the next, will not save you, either.”

This seemed to give Watkins pause, but it angered Lots.

“Cease your foolishness, my lord,” Collins said. “We are doing God’s work. Your threats will have no effect on us.”

I sighed. “Well, Mister Collins, it is not for me to *judge*, or *you*, but *God*.”

“I have no fear He will judge me harshly for this,” Collins said.

“And I have no fear He will judge me harshly for the things you judge me for.”

“My lord... that is...”

I smirked. “Heresy? Or Blasphemy? Make up your mind quickly, Collins. You dance with the Devil, remember?”

“Aye, aye, I do,” he said with conviction. “And you shall no longer call the tune. We will commence with your instruction.” He frowned at me anew. “But first, you will don a proper shirt and we will remove those heathen hoops from your ears.”

“Nay,” I said. The shirt I was willing to bend on, the earrings, no: Gaston had placed them there. “Fuck off.”

Apparently they had discussed such an eventuality beforehand. Collins stepped back, and Watkins and Lots hauled me to my feet, looped my manacle chain over a hook on a beam, and gave me five sharp blows with a cane across my shoulders.

The suddenness of it drove the breath from my lungs: I inhaled fire. At another time in my life I would have feared the helplessness and been stunned by the treatment such that I would have sought to appease my captors and said some droll thing in capitulation before withdrawing to lick my wounds until I could determine what course of action to pursue to foil them. Not this time. My Horse would have none of it. It raged, rearing and nearly unseating me such that I knew I best appease it or lose myself to madness. So I let it have its head.

“Now my lord,” Collins was saying, “we do not wish to...”

I twisted in my chain and spat on him. “Fuck you!”

I soon found myself wearing the shirt, gagged, my earrings removed, and my limbs fixed in a pair of iron stocks such that I was nearly bent in two with my wrists between my ankles. To my credit, they had to call two additional men in to accomplish this. I was bruised and battered, and still angry beyond reason. Thorp had laughed through the whole of it. Collins had withdrawn.

All I could do was fervently thank the Gods yet again that Gaston was spared this.

At last Thorp withdrew, and my gaolers retreated to the far side of the room to sit at the table and play cards. I tested my bonds and found they were designed quite cruelly: the loops of metal holding my ankles and wrists were aligned along one flat surface and did not move such that I could draw my legs up a little and find some comfort. I would shortly be miserable as my

muscles cramped at such an awkward position, and if I struggled I would quickly bloody myself on the rough metal.

I held still and tried to think. I knew a sane man, a man who believed there was order to the world based upon lies, would have vowed to alleviate his suffering at their hands by whatever means he could concoct, until such time as he could be rescued from them. I could come to lie convincingly enough for Collins' feeble brain: never giving him all he wanted, but allowing him to feel there was no need to resort to torture: and thus spare myself a great deal of trouble. But I was no longer such a sane man. I was committed to truth. It was all I had. That and faith: faith in my love for Gaston and his for me, and faith that the Gods would not be so cruel or misguided as to let men such as this or my father triumph.

I vowed I would accept the pain. I would fight them, and every ache served to reinforce my anger and indignation such that when Collins returned and ordered my release I had a great army of resolve at my disposal. I fought. My gaolers were fast, but Lots would have lost an eye if my back had not been so stiff. I ended up tied down over a barrel, the silly shirt torn from me, and my back striped by the cane until I bled. I wanted more. This was akin to my Horse running beneath Gaston. I had the bit in my teeth, and the pain receded as if blown away by the breeze of my passing.

In the morning, I did not attempt to fight at once: I could barely stand from the stiffness when they released me. They left the remains of the shirt flapping on my arms, and warily offered me water and a pot. I drank the one and used the other. Then they led me to the table to sit until Collins and Thorp arrived.

"I heard I missed something," Thorp said as he crossed behind me to sit.

"My lord, it does not..." Collins was saying.

"Spare me," I snapped. "How is my sister? What atrocities have you heaped upon her?"

"None, my lord," Collins said. "She is a lady and has been most cooperative."

I sighed. So Sarah was sane: good for her: there were enough madmen in the family.

"You shall be allowed to visit with her if you are cooperative," Collins said.

I shook my head. "She is a grown woman. There is no aid she can offer me or I her in this. She will face it her way, and I in mine."

"And how will you face this... endeavor?" Collins asked.

I spit on him and grinned.

Watkins raised his arm, but Collins waved him off.

"My lord, do you truly intend to test us so?" Collins asked with a troubled frown as he dabbed the spittle off his cheek.

"I will not cooperate," I said flatly, "with this *endeavor*. I will pray for deliverance, and I will suffer as necessary."

Collins puffed up to say something and paused. "Wait, you will pray for deliverance?"

"From evil. From my father. From you, you imbecile."

Collins appeared sincerely perplexed. "How can you say such a thing? I am not evil. Your father is not evil. It is you who exist in a state of sin. Are you truly possessed?"

I paused to consider my words. It was one thing to have them torture me to correct my moral deficiencies; it was another for this man to think he must exorcise me or some such rubbish – or to announce in England that I should be burned. My father might have none of it – but the Church, either Catholic or the Church of England – could override the wishes of a lord. Oddly, I found I was willing to die for love, for being a sodomite even, but not for heresy. To that end I

decided I would watch my tongue, and perhaps risk angering the Gods by referring to Them in the singular.

The thought caused me some amusement and I smiled. “Nay, I am not possessed by any spirit or demon. You gave me much to think on last night, and I thought on it with great fervor.”

“And you came to the conclusion I am evil?” he asked with wonder.

“Nay, I knew that before. Nay, last night I came to resolve that I will live as a man of truth, though it take me to my grave. It is all I feel I can offer God as to the truth of my convictions and the integrity of my soul; that despite whatever sins I might have committed against my fellow man, that I will walk in the Light of Truth.”

He shook his head. “But... that is... What is this light of truth? Is it not God?”

“It is love.”

“Love? For God?” he asked hopefully.

“Aye, and for... man, or rather, one man in specific.”

“But... My lord, God views man loving man as an abomination,” he said.

I had been quoted the Bible verses involving my purported perfidy before. I smiled. “The Bible says that man lying with another man as with a woman is an abomination. I have never lain with a man as if he were a woman. I have no interest in such a thing. If I lie with a woman, it is because she is a woman and I want to treat her as one. If I lie with a man, it is because he is a man and I want to treat him as one.”

Thorp began to chuckle.

Collins frowned with confusion. “But... but... Do you not wish to place your prick in a man?”

“Aye.”

“Then that is what is meant,” Collins countered. “A man should only wish to place his prick in a woman. So if you wish to place your prick in a man, then you wish to use him as you would a woman.”

I shrugged. “I see your argument. I do not agree with it.”

“But, my lord, you... *must* agree with it. It is the Word of God,” he said.

“Nay, it is *your* interpretation of the word of God.”

“But Mister Collins’ interpretation is the generally-accepted one,” Thorp said.

I shrugged again. “Aye, I know. I think it is wrong nonetheless.”

“So you would place your opinion above all others?” Thorp asked.

I smiled. “Why should I not? Martin Luther did. Henry the Eighth did. I assume neither of you are Catholic.”

“So you are saying you are their peer?” Thorp taunted.

“Why not? I am a nobleman by birth, and it is a thing I cannot escape – as you noted. They were men. I am a man. We are entitled to our opinions. Granted, it helps if one can marshal an army to defend one’s position when it threatens the politics and power of others.”

Thorp looked to Collins. “You will not win this argument.”

“Why, sir?” Collins asked.

“Well, for one thing, you are too stupid,” Thorp said with a shrug. “But nay, you will need to break his will before he will hear your words.”

Collins took a deep breath. “I had hoped to avoid...”

“Of course you did,” Thorp said dismissively. “Unless you are entirely successful – such that Lord Marsdale *thanks* you – you will have to explain your methods to the Earl. You have been

told what will likely trouble him the most – short of our having his lover on hand – and I suggest you employ it.”

I tensed at his sly smile, and felt Lots heavy hands close over my shoulders and press down to hold me in the chair.

Collins sighed. “Very well, then.” He looked to Watkins. “We will employ the harsher measures as we discussed. I do not wish to...witness such things.” He stood and left us with a wave of his handkerchief.

My gaolers dragged me out of the chair and threw me over the barrel I had occupied in the night: gagging me and tying my wrists and ankles to rings in the floor once again. I was afraid I knew what they intended, but I frantically maintained the hope that I was wrong, and my father had included the thing I feared in the list of proscribed injuries to be delivered to my person. The hope died when they tore away my breeches. Why had I hoped he would proscribe it now when he had allowed Shane to perpetrate it before?

I lost myself to my Horse’s rage and panic when I felt the grease on my arse. I was only barely aware that the thing occurring was not what I expected. Instead of raping me, they stuffed a large object in my hole and left it there. The initial penetration hurt immensely, but once that passed, it was merely uncomfortable and humiliating. I hung there on the barrel, struggling to breathe against the pressure on my chest and the desire to cry.

I prayed. Not in my usual manner of telling the Gods what I desired. Nay, I begged the Gods that I would be rescued from this night terror; and that none I cared for would be harmed in the doing of it; and that all involved in this atrocity against me would die horrible deaths at my hand; and I thanked Them fervently that Gaston was spared this.

When darkness fell, the object – which I was at last able to see resembled a carved wooden turnip – was removed, and I was released from the barrel, given a small cup of water, and placed in the damnable stocks and dumped on my pallet. I spent the night in misery. I no longer felt the need to run. I was full of anger, and pain, but surprisingly, not fear or uncontrollable madness. Old memories of Shane’s abuses had not surfaced, nor did I feel the storm of insanity circling me as I had last winter in Port Royal. My mind was calm and sure.

At dawn, I was released and allowed to stretch and attend to my needs. Once again I was given only water, and my stomach knotted in disappointment at the empty intrusion, even as my mouth and throat delighted in drinking it. I was light-headed when they sat me in the chair. I reveled in sitting with my back straight and tried to think about what tack I should take this day. I supposed it depended on what winds I was presented with.

Thorp seemed amused at my appearance for some reason. “Is it comfortable to sit?” he goaded.

I ignored him, and he sat at the table with a bottle of wine I could smell. It made me ill.

When Collins arrived, he had the gall to gaze upon me with apology and sympathy. I glared at him until he mustered words.

“My lord, was that pleasant? Do you truly find pleasure in such treatment?” Collins asked.

“Nay, you damn fool,” I growled.

He grimaced. “But is that not the pleasure you find in other men: impaling one another in your nether holes?”

Watkins was behind me, but his hands were not about my shoulders. My chained hands rested upon the table. I lunged. I knew they would not give me time to strangle the bastard, so I chose to do as much damage as one plunge would allow. I got two fingers in Collins’ right eye.

They pulled me off him and clubbed me to the floor, but I had been successful: my fingers were coated in jelly, and Collins was screaming and holding his bleeding socket.

I laughed as they dragged me to the beam and chained me standing with my hands above my head. The beating that followed left me hanging limply from my wrists.

I woke in the stocks, not remembering being taken down from the beam. There was light, but whether it was the same day or the next, I could not tell. I ached so that I thought another beating might have been a relief. I was released and allowed to relieve myself. Then I was given a cup of gruel and another of water. I drank them greedily. Then they chained me standing again and beat me with a knotted rope until I passed into unconsciousness again.

I woke over the barrel with the plug in my arse and they caned me. I woke in the stocks. This went on for days. I could not tell how many. I did not see Collins, and even Thorp soon found my pain boring. There was gruel and water here and there. Sometimes they allowed me to relieve myself in a pot. Sometimes I pissed and shat when the need struck me and let them beat me for having to clean the mess.

Collins finally arrived one day when I was tied over the barrel. He was wearing an eye patch. I laughed at him. He asked if I wanted to speak to him. I laughed harder. He left, and things continued as they had.

I woke to someone whispering, “Will,” and opened my eyes to see Sarah. I was lying on my pallet, chained to the wall but not restrained in other ways. I was wearing a shirt and breeches. She was wearing a fine dress with stays. Her hair was prettily coiffed atop her head.

Someone was in the room behind her. I ignored them and met her teary gaze.

“Why are you letting them do this to you, Will?” she whispered. “There is no need.”

My Horse eyed her warily, but I smiled. “I am not wrong.”

She sighed. “That is unimportant. Their silly ideas are unimportant. You surviving until we can see Father is important.”

“That will not make things right. He is the cause of this.”

She sighed again and leaned close to breath in my ear. “There is a ship following us.”

At first I could not understand why that was important, and then hope exploded painfully in my heart such that tears sprang to my eyes.

She had pushed herself to standing and turned to address someone. “I am sure our father will be displeased if you kill him.”

“I will not let them kill him,” Thorp said. “He is doing precious little to keep himself alive, though. Can you get him to cooperate with Mister Collins?”

“I will see what I can do,” she said tightly. “We Williamses are a very stubborn people.”

I thought on his question. “Nay,” I gasped.

“Will!” Sarah snapped and stomped her foot. “Be reasonable!”

“I will not forsake Gaston,” I said calmly. “Though it means my death.”

“Will!” she implored, her gaze searching mine.

“I heard all you said, my dear sister. But if I forsake him, then that is meaningless.”

She squatted beside me again. “Will, do not do this. Collins is...” She glanced over her shoulder at Thorp.

He shrugged. “I care not whether your brother is sincere or not with that unctuous twerp. My job is to deliver you both, alive, to your father. Matters of sin and propriety are Collins’ concern.”

She turned back to me. “Lie, Will. It is all lies. It does not matter. No one will judge you on what you say to avoid...”

“I will,” I interjected. “The... God will. Centaurs cannot live in caves, watching the shadows of lies upon the wall.”

“Oh, Lord,” she sighed. “They have beaten you senseless.”

She caressed my cheek sadly with a gloved hand and stood. “Can you not see that he is in such a state as to be bereft of reason?”

Thorp sighed heavily. “I can see that. I will talk to Collins.”

Sleep called, and as I was so comfortable lying on the pallet, I followed. I dreamt of ships, and my matelot.

I woke to insistent prodding, and Watkins had to hold me up as I used the proffered pot. Then he had to feed me the gruel: my hand shook so badly I could not hold the cup. I discovered Collins watching from across the table and could not remember how I came to be sitting at it.

“I will not forsake Gaston,” I told him. The words seemed somewhat indistinct, and at his frown I began to repeat them.

He held up his hand. “I do not ask that you forsake anyone. A man is allowed to love his fellow man... with great devotion. Many men have fierce friendships and loyalties. But... a man must not lie with another man, even if he loves him. Can you not love this man, but not lie with him? Can you not satisfy your carnal needs with a woman?”

He sounded reasonable, but I did not trust it. There was something wrong with that reasoning. It involved truth, and pleasure, and carnal lusts, and... “My cock is... part of my Horse. And my Horse is my heart. And I ride my Horse. If I love, then I should be able to love the object of my love in all ways. Even if my cock wishes to go elsewhere... It should follow my heart. And cleave to my heart.”

Collins regarded me as if I were mad.

I did not care, I was confused. There was something wrong with my words. Gaston’s cock wished to go elsewhere, and though it came to me because he willed it so, it still wished to go elsewhere; and, I did not hold that against him.

That was not the reason. There was some connection between lust and love, though.

“My cock prefers men,” I said. “Women are merely interesting diversions.”

“But your cock must not prefer men,” Collins said.

I wanted to say that my cock could bloody well prefer what I would, but there was that specter of Gaston’s cock preferring women again. It mocked me.

The cock did not have a mind of its own. The heart was the Horse. Gaston’s Horse loved me. Mine loved him. There was no confusion there.

“The heart rules,” I muttered. “The cock is nothing.”

“Aye, aye,” Collins said enthusiastically. “There can be love without carnality.”

I nodded. I had to admit that was true. There could be love without carnal desire: there could be love without succumbing to carnal desire. But I liked my carnal desire, and felt I was entitled to it; and if I was to feel it and enjoy it, I should be able to share it with whomever I chose.

“I love Gaston, and he loves me,” I said.

“Aye, but you need not lie together,” Collins said.

I shook my head. “Nay.”

Collins smiled happily. “Just so, my lord. You need not.”

I shook my head again. The man was stupid. “Nay. We do need to lie together.”

Collins sighed with disappointment and leaned forward to pat my hand. “All right, we will discuss it again on the morrow. I feel we have made great progress today.”

He did not understand a damn thing I had said. I was not sure if I did. Yet, he was so very close, and he still had an eye. I found the strength to relieve him of it. The room resounded with Collins' screams and Thorp's laughter as they pulled me off the fat bastard. Then a cudgel struck my head and all was darkness.

I woke naked and tied over the barrel – with no turnip in my arse. I adjusted my position as best I could to get the weight off my chest so that I could breathe, and discovered they had whipped me with something while I was unconscious: my back was a mass of weals that cracked and bled as I moved. I wondered at the anger of men who would beat a man bloody when he could not feel it. Did they truly value Collins' eyes so very much, or were they angry I had bested them? I chuckled, and heard the sound echoed by another in the dimness beyond the lamp.

Thorp stepped into the light and came to squat near my head. "I had to stop them from using a cat. Poor Collins will never see again," he said.

I could smell wine on his breath, it wafted over me and made my stomach clench.

"You are indeed a stubborn man," he continued. "As your sister said." He stood. "Did she tell you of the ship following us?" He chuckled and slapped my arse when I tensed. "Ah, she did. Well..." He leaned down to whisper in my ear. "It sailed past when we slowed to repair a sail." He stood again and chuckled at the dismay I could not keep from my face. "It was a two-masted brigantine flying a red flag. Your *Virgin Queen* perhaps? It seems this ship and our escort were too much for them, and they have decided to wait for you in England." He slapped my arse again. "I care not. It just means we will have more time together. And now that Collins has washed his hands of you, it is my turn."

My mind spun in turmoil at his words. Why would they have sailed by? Was he telling the truth? And, though I was already in agony of both spirit and flesh, his words and tone filled me with dread. And I cared not for his drunken arse-slapping.

He had walked away, but he returned and leaned over my head again. I could see his shiny boots and nothing more, and then he slipped the gag in my mouth.

"I have been wondering what it would be like to fuck a lord," he said.

I roared into the gag as he fondled my arse.

"I got my hands on a lady of noble birth once, but I've never had any interest in lords per se. However, you, my dear Marsdale, are far too tempting a target."

I screamed and struggled to no avail, and he laughed and slapped my arse as he plundered me. Though he had greased his member, it hurt every bit as much as Shane's depredations, and it seemed a million times more humiliating. I fought the urge to vomit into the gag.

Then I found myself fighting my traitorous member as it sought to rise with every thrust. I knew it was not from lust, but from the sensation alone. He was not hitting the little hump of flesh inside me at an angle that would cause pain as Shane had done, or pleasure as my matelot did, but just enough of the latter to cause my cock to raise its head in anticipation. I concentrated on willing it away – to no avail until he began to speak.

"Ah, see, that got your attention," he taunted hoarsely between grunts. "I thought as much. Your father said if nothing else worked to break you, this would; but Collins would not ask it of his men."

My cock withered and shrank as it should, and I cried with relief.

At last he finished, and made slow work of fastening his breeches. "That was actually quite pleasant. You are far tighter than my usual whore. We shall have to make a habit of it."

He came to lean so that he could peer into my face and laugh at what he saw. "Ah yes, we will make a habit of it," he whispered in my ear. "I will break you before England. If it takes

inviting every sailor on this ship to take a turn. When I give you to your father, you will never want a man to touch you again.” He kissed my ear.

Then he stood and emptied the remainder of his wine bottle across my bleeding back. I yelped with renewed pain, and he laughed as he took up the lamp and left me alone in darkness. My Horse plunged about madly as the winds of madness swirled around me, throwing rancid memories and new fears in my face. The Gods help me; I believed he could do as he said.