

Chapter Eighty-Six  
Wherein We Cross the River Styx

Sometime in the darkest hours before dawn, Watkins and Lots came and released me. I flinched at their touch. This amused Lots. They directed me to my pallet, and affixed my chains to the loop. I was left to listen to their snores with an ache in my soul that was not tied to any part of my body, and fear that threatened to swallow me whole.

I tried to gain some modicum of control by pondering it. I did not feel I would have the fear that now gripped me if Watkins and Lots had raped me instead of impaling me with a wooden turnip. It was Thorp that brought the terror, not the act itself. Thorp took malicious delight in my misery. Thorp was not some lowly cretin doing his job. Thorp might not have been a lord, but he was a wolf. Apparently I found it more humiliating to be raped by a wolf than a sheep, or pig, or dog.

I would have thought my Horse would have viewed it the other way around. I turned it this way and that, examining the angles and my Horse's feelings. A wolf was worse because a sheep raping a wolf – in any form – was an anomaly: a thing of a sheep's wildest fantasies: a thing wolves allowed sheep to do on occasion to punish other wolves or reward sheep. There was always a wolf behind it, though: it was a thing of wolves even if the members involved belonged to the sheep. Watkins and Lots raping me would have been the work of my father. They would not have been the ones humiliating me, because in my heart I would always know they were not capable of doing the deed themselves. They were beneath me: mere tools of another's evil. There would be humiliation there, to be sure, but not to the degree a wolf engendered.

But Thorp: he was my peer, even if I no longer considered myself a wolf, but a centaur. I supposed I considered centaurs equal with wolves, but different. And Thorp considered himself my peer, even without a title. He stood beyond Collins' small-minded values, as I did. He was his own man. He was a man I could respect. He was a man I could find attractive. His flagrant disrespect of me by committing rape upon my person was truly humiliating as a result. He was not belittling me because of what I was; nay, his insult to me was personal and triumphant. And, because of his status as a peer, Thorp was not the instrument of my father – and Shane – but a new enemy in his own right.

I did not feel my father could break me; unless he possessed some leverage over me, such as Gaston, but I had once given Shane the leverage to hurt me and bend me to his will. I felt that was now long departed, too, though – unless he had Gaston. So what of Thorp? What did this bastard have over me? He did not have my matelot. He did not have my love.

Yet, did he have my future pleasure with Gaston in his fist? How very long had it taken me to recover from Shane's depredations? Thorp's parting words about making me not wish to be with a man ever again echoed coldly in my heart. Thorp understood some of what he was about. But, I felt – nay, I knew – my father and Shane, and even Thorp, did not understand that Shane had been able to do as he did, not because I was weak, but because I loved him. They thought me a thing other than I was. They did not understand love, only lust. They thought to deprive me of my lust, but they could never deprive me of my love.

That was my weapon, or at least my armor. I would not let him win. I already did not want just any man to touch me. I only wanted one man. And nothing Thorp did could make me fear Gaston. Even if Gaston did exactly the same thing as another man did to me, it would not be the same: it could not be the same in my heart: to my Horse.

My Horse was very sure of this. I had a great deal of faith in the judgment of my Horse.

I was fed a little porridge and water in the morning: not enough for a grown man, but it was something. I ate, and slept, and waited.

Watkins and Lots sat at the table and played cards, or took turns going above deck. After the savagery of the beating my gaolers had given me as punishment for Collins, I found it disturbing that they seemed content to ignore me now.

Thorp arrived with the darkness. Watkins appeared to greet his arrival with resignation, but Lots grin lit with cruel anticipation. I hated them, and I tried to let that hatred fuel anger that could protect me, but I found myself curiously resigned. He would do what he would, and all I could do was defend my heart.

He instructed them to gag me and place me in the stocks. I fought them, and let the immediate pain of their blows distract me from whatever might come next. Eventually they were, of course, successful. He then had them tie a rope about the contraption and run it over the beam so that I could be hoisted up to hang by wrists and ankles in a manner that left my backside, privates, and thighs totally exposed; and me with the choice of looking between my legs to observe his leering anticipation, or throwing my head back and regarding the ceiling and my bleeding extremities.

“If he hangs like that for long, sir,” Watkins said diffidently, “it could damage his hands such that his fingers won’t work proper.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” Thorp said as if he would not mind that at all. He cast about. “Here, let’s push this under him and lower him a bit.”

He shoved the table under me and they lowered me until my buttocks rested upon the edge of it. It did take some of the weight from my wrists. I did not care. It left my most vulnerable parts at a very fine height for him to damage me in ways I thought would scar me more.

Thorp sent the other away. Lots appeared disappointed, and Watkins relieved. I kept my head up and watched my tormentor. He was not ashamed to meet my gaze; on the contrary, he seemed amused I would meet his.

I tried not to flinch – and failed – when he ran cold fingers down the inside of my right thigh. He watched me as a cat does a mouse, waiting to see which way I might run, as he continued to stroke my thighs. Then his fingers gently probed my member, and I jerked again: both from the sensation, and the surprise that he would deign to do so. He found much amusement in that.

“Did that hurt?” he teased. “I don’t want to hurt you, yet...”

He deftly caressed and cajoled my member, as if he handled cocks other than his own quite often. My confused cock hovered on the edge of stirring: like a dog looking to its master to see if it should give chase. I was pleased it had not yet gone off yapping in pursuit of pleasure, but I was afraid it would at any moment. I thought of horrid things: a whore I had seen with her pubic hair full of crabs; a rancid pussy I had once encountered; a cock with a boil upon its tip; the bodies Hastings had left for us to find; the stump of a prick of a man emasculated by his lover; the face of a man ravaged by the pox; Goliath wheezing in pain with his legs broken; Shane, drooling and drunk, telling me I wanted him.

“Nay?” Thorp teased. “Perhaps this will help.”

He shed his clothing. He was indeed a handsome man: sleek muscle on a lean frame: the type of body my cock favored. His member was flaccid but pretty.

I jerked on my left wrist until the pain bit deep and blood began to trickle down my arm.

I stared him down until he smirked wryly and cocked his head. “You do favor men? Or have we been completely misled?”

I snorted and smiled around the gag.

“Perhaps you favor another form of encouragement,” he said, and turned to unwrap a bundle he had arrived with. I could not see the contents. He selected an item from it and brought it before me. It was a finely crafted ivory dildo. If I had not been gagged I would have remarked that it was an odd thing for a man who pretended to be so very virile to carry.

He applied grease to it from the pot they had used to prepare the turnip. I tried not to regard it with trepidation. Given my traitorous organ’s behavior when stimulated even in the worst way yesterday, I feared what would occur if he should apply the dildo and touch my member.

It was odd: my Horse knew this was wrong; and it wanted no part of Thorp. Yet, it wanted the pleasure, and it showed a depraved interest in the circumstances. If Gaston had stood before me at this moment, I would have sprayed all over my belly just looking at him. I had often been afraid my Horse would react thus if anyone offered to ride it wildly as Gaston sometimes did. That angered me. If I could not trust my Horse, what could I trust? I had been so damn proud of it: of myself: when Alonso had come at me and I had fought him; but I could not fight this night.

Shame gripped me. Unfortunately, I knew that emotion would not be enough to keep me down. But it did give me a path of escape. I imagined what I would feel if Gaston were to see me rise for this bastard. I recalled what I had felt when I had risen to Shane’s abuse. I recalled a great many times when my wayward member had not been my friend.

When Thorp impaled me with the dildo, I was already writhing with self-loathing: hating my cock and myself: angry with my Horse: angry: disgusted: shamed. Thorp’s other hand closed over my member while he applied the phallus with remarkable dexterity: showing he knew exactly what he must touch and entreat. I thought it very likely he was much like me in other ways, and I tried to cling to hypocrisy to give myself purchase, but it was too slippery.

My cock stirred beneath his fingers. He grinned triumphantly. I could not bear it. I focused all my will and told my Horse that if my manhood rose now, I would never have any use for it again. I envisioned cutting it off and throwing it into the sea. I envisioned leaving my Horse alone in a stall with this bastard: with Shane – and burning its ruined body later as I had Goliath’s.

Grief and fear and shame welled within in me until I could not contain them, and then something popped in my head, and heart, and soul. It was the sound of a thing breaking, followed by an aching feeling of dismay and loss. And my cock no longer stirred. And I felt nothing at all.

Tears ran down my face and I gasped around the gag. Thorp redoubled his efforts, but I dropped my head back and hung limply. The irony was literally crippling. I had just broken myself to save myself.

Thorp found this change in my demeanor arousing, and the dildo was cast aside. I felt his cock as if from a great distance. I raised my head to regard him with disgust. My fear was gone. He slammed into me with abandon until apparently my gaze troubled him, and he stopped and studied me with curiosity.

“You’re surely not enjoying this,” he taunted, “but you’re not hating it, either. Hmm... What shall we do to make you miserable again? Well, for one thing, I am tired of you glaring at me.”

He withdrew and fetched a cloth with which he blindfolded me. I cared not, but then he did indeed change his tack.

“So now that you cannot see me, I can be anyone,” he whispered suggestively in my ear and gave my earlobe a little nip.

In the wake of the other, I was annoyed more than troubled – even when his fingers began to explore my chest and play about my nipples. I snorted with disdain. This seemed to annoy him. He began to pinch and twist until I grimaced and twitched. That seemed to please him, and he returned to murmuring in my ear.

“I have heard you surrender to your Frenchman with abandon, and allow him to do anything to you.”

My heart skipped a beat and my Horse stood trembling. How could he have heard such a thing?

He chuckled cruelly. “Ah, there we are,” he purred.

His fingers returned to my member. I no longer feared its involvement in this atrocity.

“Does he tell you that you are tres jolie when helpless? Or do you prefer him grunting like an animal. He does that quite well from what I saw. What does he call you? Does he call you Will as your sister does? Is that it, Will?”

His words were insidious but dismissible; but his hands were all over my body: gentle and intimate, punctuating the flow of their caresses with pinches and twists that made me gasp. I could not tell where he would strike next. They reminded me of... Gaston.

I howled into the gag in frustration.

Thorp howled in triumph, and then he was in me again, slapping and humping and riding me with abandon. My Horse took the bit in its teeth and ran: carrying me into the howling winds. I had been this way before with Shane upon my back. I could do nothing but hold on, and then I realized I need not do that. I let go, only to scream as I fell: as we fell: as we plunged into oblivion.

Sometime later I found myself face down on my pallet, the stocks still about my ankles, the gag and blindfold still tight about my face, and my hands bound behind my back. I was numb and distant. I could only cry.

When next they came for me, I was pulled upright and the gag removed only long enough to pour water down my throat so that I felt I was drowning. Then my hands were bound before me and pulled above my head until I stood on my toes. My ankles were still in the stocks. I balanced there, devoid of emotion, until I smelled Thorp: all stale wine and rosewater. He began his game of caressing and pinching, and I could not control myself: I began to scream and buck.

Then it stopped.

He was gone. I stood poised once again on the brink of hysteria, listening intently for his return.

Someone uttered a strangled cry, and then there was thrashing and dull meaty sounds. I smelled blood.

And then He was there: Gaston: his breathing: his smell: his presence.

“Will?” he whispered.

The blindfold was pushed from my eyes, and I beheld glittering green orbs as familiar to me as the sun and the moon. I did not see love in them, only fury incarnate. My Horse recoiled, and I gasped as tears filled my eyes anew.

He pulled the gag free. “Quiet!” he hissed. He stood still and cocked his head to listen. I heard the thunder of men running about the deck above, but little else.

Gaston had a beard. I did, too. That was important somehow.

He dove atop a bloody body on the floor. It was Lots: little of him had not been stabbed. My matelot found the keys and released the stocks first. Then he slashed the rope holding my hands aloft, and I fell against him. He lowered me to the floor with care.

There was movement in the doorway, and Gaston whirled, cocking the knife he still held to throw. It was Pete. I smiled weakly in greeting. The Golden One did not return it. He cringed at the sight of me, and shame blossomed in my heart. It seemed a small thing compared to the guilt I saw in our lion's eyes, though.

I knew not what to think, and I gave a hoarse sound and tore the gag and blindfold from my head. When I looked up again, Pete was gone, and Sarah and Striker stood in the doorway. Their expressions showed the same guilt, but deeply hued with pity.

I looked to Gaston, willing him to meet my gaze. He did, and still all I saw was fury; but his arm was tight about me, as if he would never let me go. I found comfort in that.

"Can he walk?" Striker whispered.

Gaston spit on Lots' body. "I will kill them!"

"And us, aye, aye," Striker said hoarsely. "Damn it, there's no time. Can Will swim? God knows what we'll do if he can't."

"I will care for him," Gaston snapped. "See to your wife in that skirt."

"Swim?" Sarah whispered frantically.

"Aye, strip," Striker hissed and slipped out of the room.

"I can swim," I breathed.

Gaston turned back to me. "Like Hell you can!" He doffed his baldric and strapped it around my chest. "I know this hurts, but I will need it to hold you."

I did not understand, and I did not care: I trusted him. I touched his face. "I knew you would come."

He hissed, and then his hand was at the back of my neck and our foreheads were pressed tightly together. "Do not make me cry!" he gasped. "Do not! Do not!"

I understood.

He took a deep breath, his gaze boring into mine, and then his mouth was upon mine. His kiss said everything I needed to know: I was loved: I was loved so much it drove him mad to see me as I was.

When he pulled away, his eyes were more Man than Horse, and he held me fiercely for a moment before standing and pulling my protesting body with him. I tested my legs and found they could barely hold me. I wrapped my arm about Gaston's shoulder.

Sarah had shed her dress and was now waiting anxiously in the doorway wearing only her shift. She glanced at me with worry. "Should we not find him some clothes?"

"Non!" Gaston snapped.

She regarded him with alarm. "There is no need to be angry with me."

He glared at her and snarled, "You look well."

She flinched and backed away, her gaze steadfastly not on Gaston's or mine.

Striker dove into the room and looked at me and Gaston. My matelot nodded tightly, and Striker stuck his arm out the door and gave a "thumbs up" signal. Gaston lowered me down behind the barrel I had so often been tied over. Striker and my sister crouched nearby.

"How are we..." Sarah began to ask.

"Cover your ears," Striker said. "When the water comes, we must push our way up it. Getting out the hole will be the hardest part. Once we're clear of the ship, it should be safe to surface. The *Queen* is distracting them and it's night. Don't lose Pete. You'll have to hang on to him."

I looked to Gaston, and he nodded grimly. "I will hold you," he said in French and hooked his hand in the baldric to demonstrate.

I nodded mutely. Then Pete was diving into the room and Gaston pulled my head to his chest and covered his own with his arms.

The night was torn asunder by an explosion that rang in my ears despite their being covered. It shook the wall of barrels beside us, and the boards beneath my feet. The ship shuddered and groaned. I could hear the gush of water before Gaston stood and towed me out into the passageway that ran forward up the hold. Water was pouring in from the bow, and we waded into it. Pete laughed as he slung Sarah over his shoulder and pushed his way against the raging current that pulled my legs out from under me. Gaston towed me deeper into the darkness and water, and I clung to him as best I could. Striker shattered a lamp across the hatch stairs as we passed. I looked back and saw fire spreading across the dry wood above us. I saw Sarah's petrified face in the firelight, and knew I should be terrified, too; but my addled mind was elated. Pete had blown a hole in the hull and Striker had started a fire. The damn ship was going to sink.

We pushed into the dark. The water rushing in did not wish to give us passage out. I held my breath as Gaston dragged us through the hole. My lungs ached and my bruised ribs screamed anew as if the bastards were at me again with the knotted rope, and my lacerated skin burned as the water bit with cold and salty fangs.

Then we were through, and all was darkness in which I could feel the great behemoth of the hull rushing by. At last we broke the surface, and I saw stars and the moon. I gasped air and clung to Gaston and tried to tread water.

"Float," he ordered.

I thought finding the necessary calm would be impossible, but I did it: stretching out on my back and surrendering myself to the sea and him. The night seemed peaceful, with the moon shining brightly in a cloudless sky; but behind us, there was hell upon the water as the frigate sank: a symphony of explosions and flames, woven into a melody by yelling men.

Gaston began to swim away from the chaos and into the night. I knew he could swim a great distance, even towing me as he was by a hand hooked into the baldric beneath my back; but he seemed to be swimming into eternity and I doubted we could reach it. To my right, Pete swam with Sarah, and Striker was beyond them. I was afraid of sharks for but a moment, until I realized the animals must surely be too entranced by the insanity we were escaping to bother with us.

After what seemed a long time, Pete gave a whoop of triumph and we changed direction slightly. I craned my head back and let the water splash over my face in order to see what we neared. There was a low dark shadow on the water, and it resolved into a dark boat with two men draped in black aboard her.

Their hands reached for me, and I flipped over and away from them. I did not wish to cross the Styx.

Gaston was at my side. "Will, get in!"

"I am not dead," I protested.

"Will, trust me!"

I nodded reluctantly, and moved to the boat. The hands reached down and pulled me aboard by the baldric and whatever limb they could grasp. I was afraid Gaston would not follow, but he dove out of the water and tumbled aboard. Sarah was hoisted in next, and then Pete and Striker followed her. The little craft was crowded. I clutched at Gaston, and he pulled me to sit between his legs.

"Afraid ya wouldn't see us," one of the boatmen said. "We were gonna light the lamp, but then the damn sloop slowed."

“The bastards should be busy enough not to come looking for us,” Striker said.

“Let’s hope,” the boatman said, and began to row. “How ya be, Will?”

I shuddered against Gaston: knowing the man speaking was flesh and blood and someone I knew, but not being able to free myself of the fantasy he was Charon, either.

“He has been poorly used,” Striker said.

“Truly, why?” the other boatman asked.

“I was in Hell,” I said.

It was true: I had been in Hell, and now the boatmen were taking me back to the land of the living.

“Thank you,” I said to all.

No one spoke for a time, and I looked about and saw a much larger dark shape ahead of us. It was not land, but another ship.

“The *Queen*?” I asked Gaston, hoping I truly had a grasp of the situation.

“Oui,” he breathed.

“He lied,” I said. “The Devil lied.”

“What?” Striker asked.

“Thorp said you sailed by,” I said.

“We did,” Striker said. “We had to get ahead of them in order to drop us over the side in this boat. We drifted close in the night and then swam to the frigate.”

“Ah,” I said. I did understand, but I pictured them crossing the Styx with knives in their teeth, and the souls of the damned swarming all around them in the black water.

We were challenged by Cudro’s magnificent voice as we approached, and our friends hooted with joy. All were elated to see us as we were pulled aboard. I wished to be elated, too; but when confronted with the wall of hands and grinning faces, I chose to hide behind Gaston. And then they stopped smiling and a hush came over them; and pity and guilt pinched their features; and I felt very naked and exposed: my shame a thing for all to see.

“God, Will,” Cudro said quietly. “Here we were thinking we had to rescue you from sitting on the quarter deck drinking tea. I’m sorry.”

“Why would you think that?” I asked. Did they not understand my father and his ways?

Gaston was a statue of cold fury. “Seven days!” he spat. “Seven days you waited!”

The Bard swore. “I will not take the blame for three of them! Go hate Savant! We caught them as fast as we could.”

“Stop!” Pete roared. He turned on Gaston. “You! YaSaidYaWouldBeCalmIffnWeWeGot’Im. NowWeDo. AnYouWereRight. IShouldNa’O’Let’EmGo. IShoulda’SlashedThatBugger’sThroat. ButWeCanna’ChangeWhat’AppenedNow.” He shook his head with anger. “SeeTaYurMan.”

Gaston nodded glumly, and put an arm around my shoulders and led me to the hatch. I did not wish to go into another hold, but that was where we went. I did not argue. Once below, he took up the lantern near the stairs, and we stooped – as the *Queen*’s hold was much shallower than the frigate’s had been – and went to a small space next to the cabin bulkhead. It was bounded by crates and barrels much as my prison had been, and even had chains and a loop drilled into a beam; but it contained Gaston’s medicine chest and our bags.

Gaston regarded the space with a dismay to mirror my own. He took several ragged breaths and pressed his hands to his temples as he often did when suffering a bout: to massage the dark thoughts away. Then he dove into motion. He snatched up the chains and ejected them from the hold. I heard them clatter on the deck above. Then he began pushing the barrels and crates into different arrangements. I sank to the floor and watched as he fashioned a low, covered alcove of

sturdy things, and lashed them into place so they would not collapse. It was a den, and I crawled into it without question. Gaston shoved our things in behind me. I noted our weapons were missing. We only had the knives he had possessed during my rescue. Then he went back out amongst the provisions and returned with dried fruit, boucan, water, and the lantern.

I touched his beard when he knelt before me. “How long?” I asked. How long had I been captive? How long had he been mad?

“Nearly three weeks,” he said with a ragged sigh.

Then the tears came, and we were in one another’s arms. I held him as if my soul would be sucked from my body if he did not anchor me. He clutched and clung as I did, until the wave of sobbing and mutual reassurance passed.

I finally slid down to lie with my head in his lap. I was exhausted beyond measure, but I was afraid to sleep, lest this be nothing but a dream.

He pulled the food and water closer, and offered me little pieces and sips. Once my belly finished clenching with surprise at the first pellet of sustenance, I found the strength to chew and swallow until I felt full for the first time in... three weeks. I found it difficult to believe so much time had passed. I must have been unconscious more than I knew.

He was gazing at me pensively. He was still not himself; but truly, I could not say who we were at this moment. I had not seen him so lost since his visits to me when he ran wild beyond Negril. Had that really been two years ago? Two and a half years, I supposed.

He touched my empty earlobes sadly, and I sighed. He extricated himself from beneath me, and turned about to lean down and kiss my left ear sweetly. He stayed there, and sniffed. I thought I must not be pleasant, and then I remembered Thorp’s wine-steeped breath billowing over the same skin. I cringed with shame. Gaston pulled back and gazed down at me again. This time I could see the Child battling with his Horse behind his eyes. I started to speak, knowing not what I would say, but his fingers were quickly on my lips.

He leaned down to kiss me lightly again, and then left me to rummage through our bags and his medicine chest. He cast about for a moment, and considered the contents of the water bottle, before motioning for me to stay as he slipped out of our den. His actions were reminiscent of his Child, but I did not see that earnest innocence in his eyes.

My concerns about his sanity could not hold mine in check. The small space seemed vastly empty and cold without him, and I had to fight the fear-driven compulsion not to push to my knees and crawl out after him.

He soon returned, this time with a pail of water. I allowed myself to melt to the floor again. He wet a rag, and slowly and carefully began to bathe me, starting with my face. Each swipe of the cloth was both loving caress and absolution. As he finished each patch of skin, he placed a gentle kiss upon it. When he came to the weals on my back and chest, he bathed them, kissed them, and then treated them with unguents.

When he worked on my wrists, I touched his: they were nearly as torn and bruised as mine. I pushed myself to sitting despite his silent protest, and tended them. Then, with little tugs upon his tunic, I bade him remove his clothes. I ran my fingers over his flesh to insure myself he had not been beaten. There were old bruises, but they appeared to be the rewards of his struggles and not the result of cruelty. I kissed each yellowing bruise I found in the dim light, and then took the rag, and bathed him as he had done me; until I had cleaned him in all the places I was now clean.

He took the rag back, and cleaned my feet and legs. I did the same to him, and then we dressed one another’s wounded ankles. There was only one area we had not touched, and I

wondered at his reticence, though I was greatly relieved he had not examined me to find the wounds that must surely be there. And then, belatedly, I understood that that was his reason.

I snatched the cloth up and bathed his privates and buttocks with care. He rose in response to my ministrations, but his eyes were filled with guilt. I was afraid he would dismiss his arousal, as he had always proven able to do. I grasped his manhood firmly and met his gaze with pleading eyes. He regarded me with wonder and then slow capitulation, before moving closer to nuzzle my neck.

His hand closed over the cloth, and I knew I must surrender it. He carefully washed and examined my privates. I did not rise for him: I felt no need. This was not the emotion-addled loss of desire I felt from time to time, but a profound emptiness. I had truly broken myself.

He fondled me and met my gaze. Tears welled in my heart and spilled out my eyes, and he nodded with patient understanding. I kissed him and buried my face in his neck.

Then the rag was upon my buttocks. Every muscle in my body tensed, and I held myself rigid as he began to rub toward my nether hole. He stopped, and put a hand aside my neck to push me back enough for our eyes to meet. I pressed my forehead to his, but held his gaze. The question I did not wish to answer was in his eyes. I nodded. He hissed with pain and his Horse eclipsed all else with a rage that made my Horse wish to flee. He crushed me to him before I could.

I could not speak. I did not know what I would say if I could. I was drawn and pinioned in purgatory. I wanted his forgiveness, but I knew there was nothing for him to forgive. Except... I had banished my cock. Except that my Horse had been traitorous – as had my cock – and thus made me do such a thing. I was an animal. I lacked the conviction of a man. Yet I had acted with the conviction of a man.

Shame held me under, and my Horse began to plunge about, trying to breathe. I did not realize I was moving, struggling with Gaston, fighting to escape, until he pinned my weak and battered body to the deck.

He held me still and covered my face with kisses. I could taste his tears and hear his sobs as well as my own.

“I love you,” he began to repeat over and over again, until at last it drowned out all else and the words took on meaning.

I stopped trying to struggle and surrendered, to lie boneless and gasping beneath him. His mouth covered mine, and I opened for him and accepted the truth of his tongue: he loved me, no matter what had been done to me, no matter what I had done.

With a hoarse cry, I wrapped my limbs around him, and kissed him with abandon. Nipping and licking his jaw and neck. He responded ardently at first, only to stop and push up and away. I sprang up after him, and we crouched facing one another. His eyes were full of his Horse, and I knew mine were much the same. Though his beast was hungry and regretful, and mine was hungry and pleading.

I needed him. I wanted him. I... Words finally came. “Make it all go away,” I croaked, and held out my hand.

He sucked in a great breath and wonder lit his eyes, and then understanding. He took my proffered hand.

My belly was least wounded, so I threw my weight upon it. He was a welcome presence on my back; the smell of oil the blessing of angels. I closed my eyes, knowing I would never mistake him for another. I would have known him at my birth; I would know him at my death.

He entered me, and my new festering wound of shame was lanced open to bleed into nothingness as he filled me with his love. With limbs entwined, we stormed heaven; and as I had

done before when I had no pleasure of my own to reach, I saw the gates through his soul and felt his release as if it were mine.

In the aftermath, I lay absolved. He placed the knives in reach, covered us with our blanket, and curled about me protectively. I no longer felt the need to cry. I told the Gods things They already knew, and thanked Them for things They had already granted.