

VALENTINES DAY ON A TROPICAL ISLAND
~AN OUT-TAKE FROM 'CAPTAIN'S SURRENDER'~

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The rain drummed on the keel of their upturned boat, sluicing into the coconut shells, the half barrel and the clay lined sink hole they had dug over the course of four sweltering days. It soaked the grimy clothes they had left over palm branches in the cove, washing out the harsh abrasive salt. They laughed and pranced in the downpour, naked and joyous as savages, tipping their heads up to drink and drink, to feel cool, soft water slide over their skin, instead of sand and sweat.

"I think we'll make it!" Kenyon shouted into the roaring waterfall, trying to make himself heard over the thunder of a rainfall that was beating the waves flat, making the palm trees' fronds lie down against their trunks like furled umbrellas.

"What?!" Andrews stopped worshipping the skies and looked at him - his hair lying brown and sleek as an otter's over a face scarlet and blistered with sunburn.

"I said *I think we'll make it!*"

They had been returning from the Admiral's flagship when a squall hit, filling the day with screaming darkness, driving the small boat God knows where until she was driven with a grinding smash onto this small, uninhabited island. Since then they had been taking her apart, fixing what could be salvaged, and laboriously hacking and shaping replacement timbers from the palm trees using their swords and the single boarding axe they had managed to save.

Nothing to eat nor drink but severely rationed coconuts, working at night because the heat from the Caribbean sun on the white sand of the beach was enough to drop a man within an hour. Kenyon had cut his hand when the axe slipped on a knot - and washing it in sea water had made the wound fester. Before they erected the mostly whole boat as a sunshade, Andrews had slept through the day and woken with his bare arms bleeding from burns, and for a while Kenyon had almost begun to believe they might finish here, dying of thirst and sickness before they could finish the repairs.

Not now.

"Pardon?!"

He laughed, overcome with elation, and dragged Josh into the dim, damp coolness of their nest of fronds beneath the overturned boat. Lying down, they wriggled together, and he rested his hot, swollen hand against Josh's cold, wet hip, suddenly aware as he had not been for days of the touch of Josh's body against his; the chill giving way to

companionable warmth, and the ghost of something sweeter - had either of them had enough energy left.

Shuffling up a little, feeling Josh gingerly rest a painful cheek against his shoulder, the sound of rain now a booming slap against the timbers above them, he put his mouth to Josh's ear and said again "I think we'll make it."

The 'yes' in reply was more deduced from the shape of the smile that drew itself up against his skin than heard, but it made him smile in return. He lay back and listened to the world outside rage, while within the mattress of fronds yielded pleasantly beneath his weight, and the pressure of arms about his waist, the boneless lassitude of Josh's body, pressed confidently against his own, made him feel so very... comfortable, so very content, he even contemplated staying here. Wherever here was. Staying forever, where one could dance like a savage, and paint oneself whatever colours one might choose, and declaim love poetry aloud, if one liked, even to one's exhausted First Lieutenant.

The thought made him smile again, brush Josh's drying curls out of the way and murmur

"Thy fatal shafts unerring move,
I bow before thine altar, Love.
I feel thy soft resistless flame
Glide swift through all my vital frame."

It did not have quite the effect he had hoped - Andrews gave a convulsive heave, raised himself on his elbows, and gazed down at Kenyon with the wary, cynical eyes of someone who has just discovered he has embarked on a long carriage journey with a madman.

Peter smiled.

"For while I gaze my bosom glows,
My blood in tides impetuous flows;
Hope, fear, and joy alternate roll,
And floods of transports overwhelm my soul."

Josh bent his head as though to return the tender words, but what he actually said was, "Are you feeling all right, sir? How many fingers am I holding up?"

Lifting an exasperated eyebrow, Peter refused to be defeated. Reaching up, he tugged gently until Josh surrendered to his whim and lay back down. And then he went on.

" My faltering tongue attempts in vain
In soothing murmurs to complain;
My tongue some secret magic ties,
My murmurs sink in broken sighs."

This was all too true; he had rarely said anything of what he felt, it was little surprise that borrowed poetry sounded unconvincing on his lips. He dragged his fingers through rain-softened, rufous hair, as though he could untangle Josh's resistance with as much ease. For if he had spoken rarely, it was partly because Josh never seemed to want to hear these things, always pushed them away, as though it frightened him to hear them. How fitting then that the last verse was;

"Condemned to nurse eternal care,
And ever drop the silent tear,
Unheard I mourn, unknown I sigh,
Unfriended live, unpitied die."

He sighed and turned over, and there was a silence for a while - if the great torrents of pouring water could be called silence. Then, with a soft huff of amusement, Josh spooned himself up against Peter's back, drawing him possessively close. And in a murmur, barely to be heard above the din he said, "I love you too, sir. Goodnight."

Love poem by Smollett, published in 'Roderick Random' 1748 and based on a poem by Sappho.