

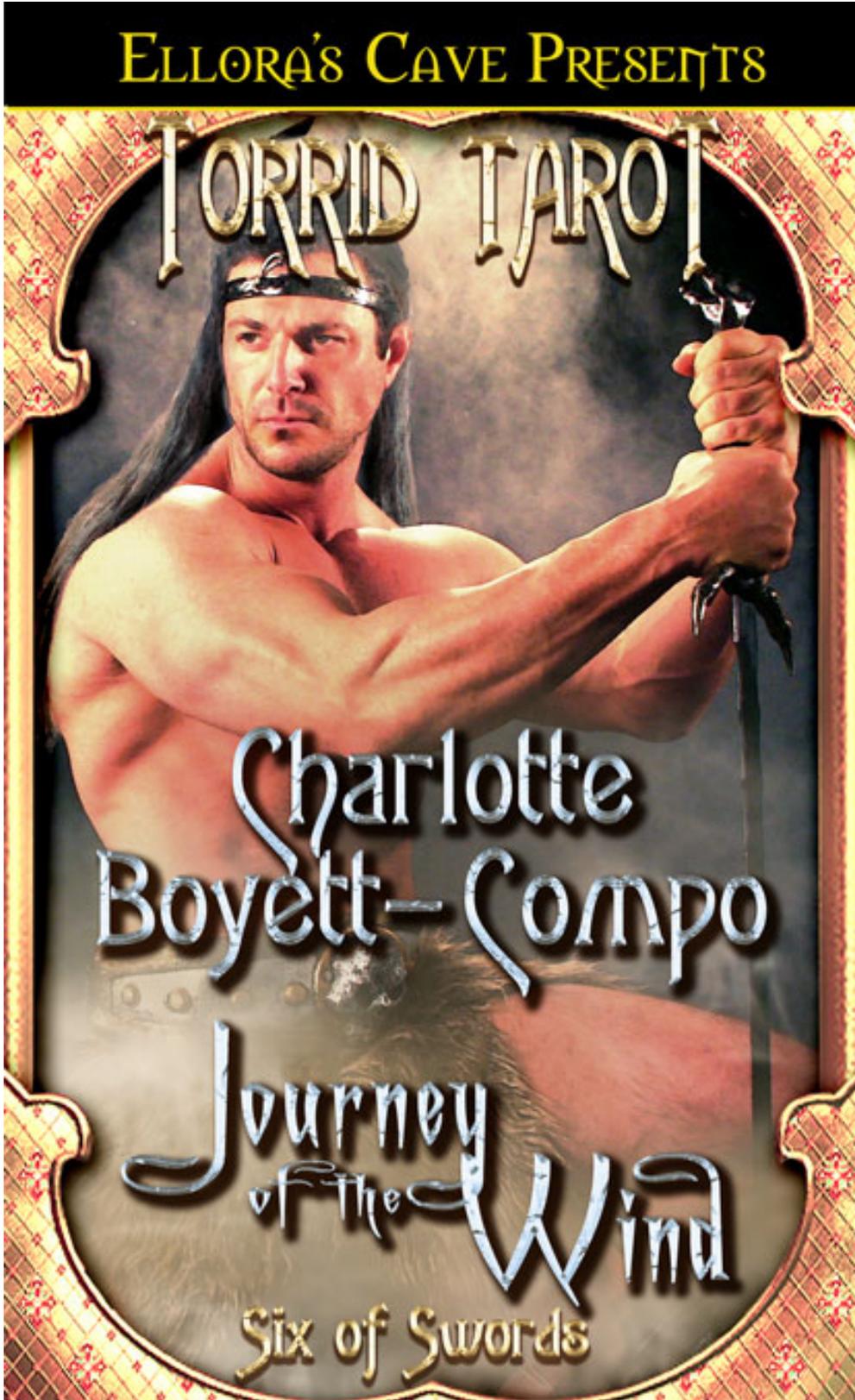
ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

Charlotte  
Boyett-Compo

Journey  
of the Wind

Six of Swords



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Journey of the Wind

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# *JOURNEY OF THE WIND*

**Charlotte Boyett-Compo**

## **Author's Note**

### *The Six of Swords*

This card signifies changing locations, taking a journey, entering a new phase of life but it is also known as the Slough of Despond. A slough is a depression into which one may fall and that is why this card often represents a feeling of sadness, listlessness and functioning at a level that just barely keeps one's head above water. Nothing is truly wrong but things are not necessarily right either. The boatman appears to be trudging through the water in a state of low-level sadness, but at least he—and his passengers—are moving forward. The card points the seeker toward a more positive place, a place where he or she can pick up the pieces of their life and start anew. The water on the right of the card is turbulent—signifying bad times—but the boat is moving away from those bad times and into calmer waters where the future looks abundant as evidenced by the tree in the distance.

In its reversed and negative state, the card suggests insurmountable problems, obstacles and deliberate lies, verbal outbursts that will embarrass the seeker and make him or her even more depressed.

As this card was read for the hero of *Journey Of The Wind*, it advises him to realize there is a problem in his life and that he must take steps to correct it if he is to live in peace and find happiness. He must undertake a journey to find not only himself but his destiny.

## Prologue

Dipping his fingers into the honeyed heat of his lover's body, Alsandair Farrell twisted them gently to get all three inside her, seeking that elusive special place where his touch would give the woman lying beside him the greatest of pleasures. Hooking his fingers upward, he felt the slight series of ridges and stroked her vaginal wall, knowing he'd reached his destination.

"Oh yes!" Rylee McCourtland moaned and wriggled her shapely butt on the sheet. She was panting with her eyes closed, her hands gripping the iron posts of his headboard.

"Easy, wench," he said. "We've all night."

Rylee whimpered. He was already turning her inside out with his knowing hands. She doubted she'd last until morning at this rate. She let go of the headboard and snaked out a hand to clutch at his shoulder—digging her fingernails into the fabric of his shirt. "Sandair, please!" she begged.

Alsandair grinned. "Please what? Please don't do this?" He pressed his fingers deeper inside her. "Or this?"

Bucking beneath his assault, Rylee slammed both hands down on his wrist to hold him immobile inside her. Her vibrant green eyes fused with his dark brown gaze and the first tremor of release shook her.

He licked his lips for her hot channel was milking his fingers—tugging, squeezing, vibrating around them and oozing juices. When the last pulse left her and her hands fell away from his wrist, he slowly withdrew his fingers from her, pulled his hand out from under her skirt and brought them to his mouth.

Pure, unadulterated lust drove straight to Rylee's belly to make her womb leap as she watched her lover licking her juices from his flesh. Her heart was pounding and her blood rushing in her ears as he splayed his three fingers to lick between them.

"Sandair," she moaned. "You are killing me here."

He was leaning on his left elbow on the bed—facing her—and when she sat up and tugged at the hem of his shirt, he cocked a dark eyebrow. "What is it you want, milady?"

Rylee's eyes darkened with passion. "I want you and well you know it!" She started jerking his shirt upward.

"All right," he said on a long sigh and sat up. He allowed her to tug the shirt over his head, obediently lifting his arms for her to undress him.

As it always did, the sight of her lover's muscular body drove Rylee McCourtland to higher heights of desire. With his broad shoulders, thick mat of crisp, dark hair

between his chiseled pectorals and dipping down past an abdomen as tightly ridged as a washboard, he was one hell of a male specimen. If one discounted the sheer male beauty of his face—cinnamon brown eyes, long sooty eyelashes, perfect nose, full lips simply begging to be kissed and twin dimples that gave him a mischievous look—the viewer still had to contend with thick, sleek black hair falling in waves to his shoulders and a body made by the gods for a woman to stroke.

And stroke him she did.

Rylee ran her hands over the taut expanse of his chest, threaded her fingers through his chest hair, massaged the rock-hard pecs with the hardened little nubbins that were his nipples and then smoothed her palm over the steely muscles around his deeply indented bellybutton.

“I never tire of touching you,” she whispered. “Do you know that?”

“I never tire of you touching me,” he replied, “but you are entirely too covered, wench.”

It took but a few moments to divest her of her long cotton skirt and drawstring blouse she wore when she came to visit him. Dressed more like a peasant than the daughter of a lord that she was, her attire added to her allure. Often barefoot, she brought with her an earthy quality he knew damned well she hadn’t been taught in her mother’s house. Tonight—because the weather had turned cold—she had worn slippers and they were the last things he removed, bringing her small foot up to brace it upon his shoulder. He massaged her shapely calf, his eyes on hers.

“Do you have any idea what looking at you lying there naked does to me, Rylee McCourtland?” he asked. He lifted her foot to nibble at her toes.

“I know you are being unfair to me,” she said with a pout. “You have your britches on still.”

He was kneeling down at the foot of the bed with the top button of his britches undone, his feet bare—his boots and stockings having already been removed from him by the delectable morsel reclining on his bed when she first arrived. He shifted his body, feeling the strain of his cock against the tight fabric. As she writhed on the bed, his balls drew up and felt as though they were about to explode.

“Then take me, you sorry wretch,” she said. “I don’t have all night to tarry with you. I have other customers, you know.”

Her saucy playacting never failed to spur Alsandair to action and he dropped her foot, spreading her legs wide as he stretched out atop her, sliding his chest over the hot apex of her thighs before letting his full weight press her down into the mattress.

“Other customers, is it?” he growled, and lowered his mouth to her neck, nipping at the succulent flesh. His hands molded to her breasts, squeezing lightly.

“Paying customers at that,” she said, and spiked her fingers through his thick waves. She smiled when he growled low in his throat and moved his lips from her neck to her shoulder to the soft rise of her breast. Her hand in his hair tensed as his teeth grazed over one straining nipple.

“You are a witch,” he said as he began suckling her.

His mouth was hot and wet, and his teeth sent spirals of sheer delight coursing through her as he took her nipple between them.

“But I am your witch, Commander,” she reminded him.

Without answering, he worked his way down her lush body while he still kept possession of her breasts – running his thumbs over the swollen tips. He paid homage to her bellybutton with tiny little flicks of his tongue and a deep kiss that made her wiggle beneath him. By the time his lips slid over the wiry red curls at the top of her fiery triangle, she had grabbed hold of the sheet to either side of her and was twisting it.

The man had a sinful mouth, she thought as he dragged his tongue around and around her mound. With each circuit he went lower until one such trip had him graze her clit and she arched up as though poked with a hot stick.

“Ah-ha!” he said with a grunt. “Methinks I’ve found your goody spot, wench!”

A wicked laugh escaped him and he hooked his thumbs under her knees and pushed her legs up and apart, leaving her completely vulnerable and open to his view. He met her gaze and she shivered as one dark brow slowly moved upward. “Shall I torture you now I’ve discovered it?” he asked.

Reaching up behind her, Rylee took hold of the iron bars of the head post once more and held on as though for dear life. From the moment his tongue touched the base of her slit and lapped upward, she closed her eyes and gave herself over to the absolute delight he wielded.

Licking her over and over again with the broad expanse of his tongue, he could feel her juices flowing ever freer. The taste of her was like pure, warm honey and he never seemed to be able to get enough. Even though he paused to stab his tongue into that honeypot, he couldn’t get as much of that sublime taste as he would have liked. Sometimes, he thought as he latched his lips upon her clit, he wished he could climb inside her and feast until he was gorged.

“Sandair,” he heard her purr, and drove his fingers into her again.

Rylee tensed and felt the stirrings of release pushing at her lower belly. Her blood was pumping quicker there and settling in that region. She wanted her lover in her, wanted to be impaled on his large cock when the next wave of orgasm struck.

“Sandair, hurry,” she warned, writhing as he fingered her, his mouth toying with her clit.

He heard – and understood – the urgency in her voice and moved so he could lower his zipper enough to free his erection. It sprang out of his britches and unerringly nudged at the entrance of her channel. He often wondered if the blasted thing didn’t have a mind of its own where Rylee was concerned. Like a homing pigeon, it flew straight up her sheath and he grunted as it came to roost at the very core of her being.

Throwing her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist, Rylee rode him, meeting him thrust for thrust as she arched her hips up for his penetration. Both

their bodies were soon slick with sweat and the sound of his balls slapping against her buttocks made her cry out with enjoyment.

Pushing into her as hard as he could—for she would have it no other way—Alsandair could feel his climax galloping on steely hooves. Hot sparks arced through his balls and his cock was one long, sensitive spike encased in hot silk. Each thrust now made him grunt with the force of it and he knew his ribs would be bruised come morning for Rylee’s knees were pressed so tightly against him.

The first ripple began in her velvet softness and with it his release poured out like hot cream. They clung to one another and pounded their bodies together until the last pulse faded away and he collapsed atop her—spent and drained.

Rylee held him to her, feeling his warm breath fanning over her naked breast as he lay there with his head on her chest. She could feel the runaway beat of his heart slamming against her own and the sound of his labored breathing made her very protective, very caring of this man and her arms tightened around him.

Alsandair was half asleep as her hand touched the sore spot on his back and he didn’t have enough energy not to flinch. He had been lying there with his eyes closed but now they flew open and he frowned, holding his breath as her fingertips slid over the wound.

“What is this?” she asked, gingerly fingering the puckered injury.

“It’s nothing,” he lied.

For a moment she said nothing but—as she always did—she uncovered the untruth in his tone. “Let me see,” she ordered, pushing at his shoulders.

“Rylee...” he began, lifting his body off her.

“Let me see,” she repeated, and this time her voice brooked no argument as she slid out from under him.

Alsandair could do no more than lie there on his belly as she sat up beside him. He heard her gasp then speak his name in that tone that always made him wince.

“Alsandair!”

He sighed deeply then turned over to his back, looking up at her stormy eyes with apology. “It doesn’t even hurt now, Ry,” he said.

“Liar,” she named him. “You flinched when I touched it.”

“Aye,” he said in a reasonable way, sitting up. “When you poke at it, it still has touchiness to it.”

“Touchiness, my ass,” she said through clenched teeth. “Who did that to you?”

“Does it matter?”

Tears entered Rylee’s eyes. To him, the wound was nothing. To her, it was another foul scar on his beautiful body and it hurt her very heart to see it.

“Ah, don’t do that,” he begged, seeing the tears forming. “I’m here and—”

“One of these days they’ll bring you back on your shield!” she accused, flinging herself off the bed. She snatched up her skirt, stepping into it with furious jerks of her legs. “I’ll be a widow ever before I’m even a bride!”

Alsandair hung his head – not out of shame but out of weariness. They’d had this conversation too many times over the years and he didn’t want to have it again tonight. He looked up as she jerked her blouse over her breasts. “Rylee, please don’t –”

“We’ve been betrothed for five years, Alsandair Farrell,” she said. “Five years! Every year adds another scar or two to your body and every year I worry that that scar might be your last.”

“I am careful, Ry,” he defended, his warrior pride stung by her words.

“Aye, you’re careful, all right,” she said, eyes narrowed. “Is that how you got that wound? By being careful?”

He held his hand out to her. “Come here, sweeting.”

“No,” she said, snatching up her shawl to throw around her shoulders. “I can’t take any more of this.”

Fear wriggled into his heart. “What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean!” she threw at him as she stooped down to retrieve her slippers. She stood there with them in her hand.

His anger surfaced to quell the fear. “You knew I was a soldier when we first met, Rylee. You knew what it was I did for a living.”

“Aye, and I know you told me that you’d not be a soldier until the day you died,” she accused. “It was you saying that, promising that, else I wouldn’t still be here seven years after we met, still betrothed to you five years hence!”

“I intend to ask for a training assignment eventually, Ry,” he said in a defensive voice.

She glared at him. “Don’t you get tired of the killing, Sandair?” When he winced, she pressed the point. “Don’t you get tired of making other women widows or of breaking their hearts and ruining their futures?”

“Aye,” he admitted. “The killing bothers me, but that is part of being a soldier. I knew that when I was commissioned. I –”

“Do not the faces of those men you have murdered disturb your dreams?” she asked, remembering well the nights he had awoken shaking and sweating, his eyes haunted, the nights she had to soothe him back to sleep.

“You are not being fair, Ry,” he said, looking away from her probing stare.

“And you are not being fair to me!” she threw at him.

He watched her stomp to the door. “Give me another year, Rylee. In another year –”

She stopped with her hand on the doorknob, her back to him. "In another year you could be dead." She looked around, meeting his gaze. "I want a man who will be there for me when I grow old. You aren't that man."

"I am the only man you'll ever have," he snapped, true fury prodding him now.

"Keep thinking that," she said, jerking the door open. "I've discovered you aren't the only fish in the sea, Farrell!"

Unable to believe she had said such a thing to him, he sat there staring at the door as she slammed it shut, feeling like his world had come crashing down around him.

## Chapter One

"I feel as though the rug has been pulled out from under me," Alsandair said softly as he sat in a tavern in Dellymal. "If Joining had not been what the wench wanted, why the hell did she agree to the match in the first place?"

Cowan Calhoun shrugged. He was already three sheets to the wind and having trouble keeping his eyes open. His words were so slurred the man beside him barely heard him and had to ask Cowan to repeat what he said.

"I said, 'lad,'" Cowan stated, carefully enunciating each word, "'ye're better off without Rylee McCourtland. All she'll do is break yer heart anyway. 'Tis all them pretty ones know how to do.'"

"The wench is pretty, I'll give you that," Daniel Brell, the third man at the greasy tavern table, said as he lifted his mug to his lips only to find it empty. He swung his head around drunkenly and bellowed for the barmaid.

"Pretty," Alsandair repeated. "Aye, she is that in spades." He slumped back in his rickety chair and stared morosely at his mug. He'd neither the energy nor the coin to have it refilled. "Mayhap it wasn't in the cards for me to have her."

From out of the smoky gloom of the tavern an old woman came hobbling over to their table. She was dressed in garish clothing that named her a Rom. With long, dark green velvet skirts rustling, her waist-length white hair frizzed out behind her, she came to stand beside Alsandair, her nearly toothless grin and steady black eyes locked on the young man's face.

"Sometimes fate be what ye make of it, boy," she said, and from the voluminous pocket of the brightly colored patchwork jacket she took an ancient deck of cards. "For a geal, I'll tell yer fortune."

"Get away from us, ye old crone," Cowan said, waving her back with his limp wrist. "We've no time for the likes of ye."

Alsandair squirmed beneath the avid stare of the old woman. "I've naught but a geal in my pocket, milady," he told her.

She held out a wrinkled hand – palm up – and winked at him. "'Tis all I need."

"Sandair, don't encourage her," Cowan snapped. "She'll rob us blind."

"Hard to rob a man with no coin in his pocket," Alsandair said and stuck out his leg to run a hand into the pocket of his black leather pants. He brought out the last silver coin he had brought with him this evening and dropped it into the old woman's waiting hand. He smiled at her. "You sell your talents short, milady."

The old woman cocked her bushy head to one side. "Would ye be paying me more for a reading if ye had it, boy?" she inquired.

Alsandair nodded. "If I had it, milady, I would, indeed."

Her toothless smile widened. "Ye are a good boy, Dolan Alsandair Farrell," she pronounced.

"By the gods, she knows you, Sandair!" Daniel gasped. "That ain't good!"

"I know all about him," the old woman said with a cackle as she pocketed the geal.

"And what is it you know of me, milady?" Alsandair asked as he stood up shakily and reached for a chair at the table behind him, swinging it into place at their table so the old woman could sit.

"I know ye are a gentleman," the Romney woman said as she took a seat.

"My mother would argue that point with you," Alsandair said with a laugh as he sat back down.

"I know ye are a fine warrior," she said, motioning the men to remove their tankards from the table.

"The sword he carries labels him such," Cowan said with a snort. He lifted his mug and put it on the tray of the barmaid as she arrived carrying Daniel's refill.

"Not to mention that lethal blade strapped to his thigh," Daniel added.

"Weapons do not a warrior make," the old woman denied. "Any fool can lash a sword to his back or a dagger to his leg. It is in the wielding of those weapons that a warrior is made."

"Another round for ye gentlemen?" the barmaid asked Alsandair, batting her eyes at him.

"Nay, wench," Alsandair said with a shake of his head. "We've no more coin for you."

"I'll spot ye both," Daniel said and took the last gilding he had from his vest and tossed it to the barmaid.

The barmaid caught the gilding, put it between her teeth to test it. Satisfied it was real, she swung around and headed back for the bar, grunting beneath her breath.

"That barmaid knows ye ain't got the coin with which to hire her cunt for the night," Daniel told Alsandair.

"Shut your mouth," Alsandair said, glancing up at the old woman. "You don't be talking like that in front of the lady."

"Lady, my hairy ass," Daniel mumbled, and took a long sip of his mead.

"A good man ye are, Alsandair Farrell," the old woman said as she handed him the deck to shuffle.

Like the expert he was with a deck of cards, Alsandair split the deck into two stacks then fanned the cards together a couple of times before handing them back to the fortuneteller. "Give me a good future, milady," he said. "By the way, what's your name?"

"They call me Niall," she said then met his eye. "Ye ready?"

“As I’ll ever be, milady,” he said.

She peeled the first card from the deck and laid it face up on the table.

“This is where ye be at this time of yer life,” she said. She studied it for a moment then looked up at Alsandair. “Ye be feeling about as low as a cur’s belly,” she said.

“You’ve got that right,” Alsandair said as he took the fresh mug of mead the barmaid had brought.

Niall looked away from Alsandair then laid the second card horizontally across the first. “And this be what stands in yer way.”

As each card was revealed and its meaning explained to Alsandair, the more depressed he became. He barely spoke—only nodded—and when the last card was read, he sat there staring at it, his head beginning to ache miserably. He put a hand to his temple and rubbed his fingers on the source of pain.

“Ye need to take a good look at where ye’ve been, boy, and then where ye wish to be going. This is a decision card, it is,” Niall said quietly.

“It is all in the interpretation, Sandair,” Daniel said to him. “Fate can be rearranged if ye are willing to do what is needed to make it so. It is not set in stone.”

Alsandair stared at the last card, the card that was his destiny as Niall foretold it. It was the Six of Swords and it lay there like a coiled viper with him unable to look away from its allure. He studied the boat, the ferryman with his long pole, the two obscure passengers in the seat before the navigator and the six swords sticking into the bottom of the boat.

“See this?” Niall said, tapping the card with a gnarled finger. “The waters here be choppy but the waters ahead of the boat be smooth. Ye need to leave behind the past and journey on to better times.”

“And leave the one I love behind as well?” he asked her, tearing his eyes from the card and looking into the old woman’s rheumy eyes. “Or is that her leaving me with my bairn in tow?”

“What ye see on the card may not be signifying yer lady at all,” she said. “Ye may be the ferryman who is taking the other two to safety.”

“Ever the gallant knight,” Cowan mumbled.

She reached out to lay her hand over his. “Where there is balance between the head and the heart, it is there when true happiness will settle upon ye. Look not at the past and the storms it has brought ye, but on the future and the smooth sailing it will bring.” She squeezed his hand then began picking up her cards and placing them into the deck.

“Milady,” Alsandair said. “I hurt.”

Daniel and Cowan looked at one another. It was obvious from their expressions that neither had ever heard their companion voice so personal an emotion.

“Aye, boy, yet when ye are in pain, ye know ye are healing.”

“If I don’t die from the hurt. She is breaking my heart,” he admitted, and his eyes filled with tears.

"Ye must distance yerself from that which is not good for ye," she stated.

Daniel started to speak but Alsandair waved him to silence. "Are you telling me to leave my lady and strike out on a journey to find myself?" he asked.

"Have ye not been thinking of going away for a while?" she countered.

"Are you telling me I should?"

The old woman shrugged. "I can not tell ye what to do, boy. Only ye can solve the problem of ye future. No one can do it for ye."

"Tell him something to take that agony out of his eyes, crone," Cowan snapped.

Niall ignored Cowan. "There be change coming, boy," she said. "The change be for the better but ye must go seeking it if ye are to find solace." She pushed her chair back and stood, her aged bones cracking as she stretched. "One word of caution though—there be six deaths hovering over this card. That be the six swords stuck in the bottom of the boat."

His face suddenly pale, Alsandair started to speak but the old woman held up a hand.

"Not your death, not hers, and none for those ye be close to, but death sails with this card so be careful of that what happens."

Alsandair made no move to stop her but he lifted his head and looked up at her. "Thank you, milady," he said. A stray lock of dark hair hung over his forehead.

The old Romney woman smiled at him. "Ye are a good boy, Alsandair Farrell, and the gods in turn are going to be good to ye," she said then ambled off, disappearing into the murky shadows of the tavern, blending in with the thick haze of smoke from the myriad pipes being puffed on by the patrons.

"Don't pay no heed to that stupid shit," Daniel said. "It's all mumbo-jumbo, it is."

Cowan was looking at Alsandair. "Ye ain't thinking of making no trip this time of year, are ye?" he questioned. "By land there'll be snow and by sea there will be vicious storms."

"I can't say either appeal to me," Alsandair said, "but I'm of a mind to put distance between me and Rylee for a while."

"Aye, well, it ain't always true that absence makes the heart grow fonder, Sandair," Cowan growled.

"That be right," Daniel agreed with a nod. "She might take it in her head to replace ye with another knight."

"She might already have done so," their companion said. He took a sip of his mead and winced for the brew tasted bitter on his tongue. Setting it aside, he folded his arms. "Something's got her knickers in a twist."

"And if it be another knight?" Cowan pressed. "What will ye do?"

Alsandair thought about it for a moment. "She asked for time and time is all I've got right now. If she has found another man, so be it."

“Ye’ll not fight for her?” Daniel asked, his eyes wide.

“She kicked me out of her bed,” Alsandair reminded him. “Would you wish to be somewhere you’re not wanted?” He shook his head. “No, I’ll not fight her or her new paramour, if she has one.”

“Ye be scaring me, Sandair,” Daniel said. “I’ve never known ye to run from a fight.”

“I’m not running,” Alsandair said as he scraped his chair back and stood up. “I’m walking.”

Cowan and Daniel watched their friend – and the commander of their small band of elite warriors – walk out of the tavern and into the fog-shrouded night. Neither spoke as they finished their tankards of mead. They sat staring at the table, the boisterous noise around them settling like a heavy cloak on their shoulders.

“This be a mistake,” Cowan finally decided.

“A mistake I hope the lad can live with,” Daniel agreed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alsandair felt the pebbly press of fog against his cheeks as he walked along the quay. The Spittin’ Cat Tavern from which he’d just exited sat out over the water and the waves were lapping against the pylons that held up the rear of the building. The scent of fish and rotting garbage assailed him as he strolled over the uneven boards, his boot heels making thumping sounds that bounced off the thick curtain of fog as he went. With his hands thrust into the pockets of his leather pants, he trod slowly, his agile mind worrying the problem of Rylee McCourtland over and over as he ambled. He was in no hurry to go back to his rented room over the bakery for there was nothing there for him but a cold, lonely and uncomfortable bed. Such was the life of a warrior.

For the last month, he and his men had been performing lightning raids into the countryside around Hamisch, attempting to break up a gang of bandits who had been preying on travelers to the port town. Just the day before they had managed to capture and take into custody the brains behind the thieving and their work there was done. General Braxton had applauded their actions and given them a month of leave for their hard and dangerous work.

“Take a month off, Commander,” Braxton had offered Alsandair. “You’ve been going at it hard and I know your Joining Day is fast approaching.”

“Not anymore, it isn’t,” Alsandair said as he stopped to look out across the heavy sheet of fog to the lighthouse out in the harbor. The ghostly yellow aura that surrounded the light was all that would keep arriving ships from going aground or breaking apart on the rocks of Drutton Bay.

It was chill standing beside the bay but no colder than the ache in his heart. He sighed deeply then hung his head, paying no attention to the men who clumped by behind him until their conversation intruded into his misery.

“We got one cabin left on the *Mary Constance*,” one man said. “Once ‘tis booked, we’ll be on our way to Sulan. Ye know Captain Andelton won’t weigh anchor until he’s got himself another paying passenger.”

“I ain’t never been through the Sinisters,” the other man said, his voice fading as he and his companion moved off into the fog. “What’s it like?”

Alsandair turned his head toward the departing men but though he strived to hear the answer to that question, the sound of the men’s voices was swallowed up by the dense fog.

“The Sinisters,” he said aloud, and drew his hands from his pockets to rest his forearms on the railing that ran along the quay. His hands clasped, he stared down at the dark water and thought about the mysterious section of ocean where it was said sea monsters lurked and strange, fantastical sights could be seen. Having spent his entire life in his native land of Anlusia, he had never sailed the South Boreal Sea and he had always been curious about what lay in the desert nomad lands of Midworld.

For a long time he just stood there, mulling over the wreck his life had become, the harsh words Rylee had thrown at him, the loss of her. His heart felt as though it had been ripped from his chest, thrown to the ground and stomped upon. He ached, he hurt, and he had no notion of how to remedy the situation. The longer he stood there the deeper the hurt became until – once more – it was anger at his situation that came to the forefront of his warrior’s mind and he refused to dwell on Rylee’s deliberate cruelty any longer.

“You need to get the hell away to think,” he mumbled. “You need to take charge of your life, Farrell. You’ve allowed her to dictate to you for far too long.”

“Don’t take that assignment, Sandair,” he mimicked the lady’s words. “My birthday is coming up.”

So he had begged off from going to the Deisceartach Province only to be given an assignment that was three times as dangerous as the first and he’d nearly died.

And...

“Can’t you tell them you’ll pass on this one? I’ve had the party planned for months now. You’ll ruin it if you leave!”

Instead of taking the assignment to Duffin, he had gone to Drogheda and lost two good men in a firefight that he’d won only by a thin thread. Telling the men’s mothers their sons weren’t coming home had been the hardest thing he’d ever done and something he hoped never to be forced to do again. There was a reason none of his men were married and the more he thought on it, the better he understood the wisdom of that.

Leaning there on the slippery rail, he made a choice that might have been on the spur of the moment but once conceived, took on a life of its own. He straightened up, pushed away from the rail and turned in the direction the sailors had gone.

It wasn’t hard to find the *Mary Constance*. The ship was ablaze with lights and men were loading cargo by the shimmer of torches.

"I'm looking for Captain Andelton," Alsandair said to one of the men carrying a heavy cask on his shoulders.

"He be in his cabin," the sailor said, hitching a thumb over his shoulder then giving Alsandair directions on how to get to there.

Such frenetic activity this late at night made Alsandair wonder if the ship's captain was anxious to put distance between him and Hamisch. He skipped down the aft ladder and knocked smartly on the door to the captain's cabin.

"Enter!" a voice snarled from behind the teakwood portal.

Warmth hit the warrior in the face as he opened the door. A squat man in shirtsleeves was standing in front of a desk piled high with papers. He glanced up at Alsandair and frowned.

"I've got all the ship's crew I need, lad," he said then returned his attention to the sheaf of papers he clutched in his hands, his nose practically touching the sheet as he squinted down at whatever was on the paper. "Try the *Molly Dee*."

"I'm not looking for a berth, Captain," Alsandair replied. "I hear you have a cabin available."

Captain Andelton looked up sharply. "You're a paying passenger?" he asked.

"That depends on the price of the fare," Alsandair said.

The seafarer swept his hawklike scrutiny up and down his visitor. "You're a warrior," he said, spying the sword strapped to the young man's back and the dagger thrust into a sheath at his thigh.

"I'm the Commander of the First Anlusian Guards," Alsandair replied, striding forward to put out his hand. "Alsandair Farrell, Sir."

Shifting the papers he held so he could take the proffered hand, Andelton's frown returned. "Not one of Fergus Farrell's boys, I hope." His grip was reluctant.

Alsandair shook his head. "Fergus is my uncle. I'm Trevor's eldest."

Andelton's grip tightened. "Never met Trevor but I knew his lady-wife Adair." He locked his gaze with the younger man's. "I'm sure Addie did not raise the same sort of boys Fergus' wife did."

"I have the belt marks to prove it, Sir," Alsandair laughed as he released the captain's hand.

"You're looking for passage to Sulan?"

"I'm looking for a bit of adventure," Alsandair replied. "I've a month of leave coming and I've a yearning to see Midworld."

"It can be a wondrous place at times," the captain said. "If you stay away from the Kanus chieftains and the slave traffickers."

"I think I can do that." He ducked his head. "How much is the passage, Sir? I'll have to go back to my room to fetch my belongings and –"

“Can you cipher a bill of lading?” Andelton interrupted. “I’ve been having a devil of a time with my eyesight of late and I’m in need of someone who can read and write to help me sort out these papers.” He shook the papers in his hand. “I need spectacles but who has the time to see the oculist?”

“I’ve always had a head for numbers,” Alsandair said, glancing at the papers. “I’d be happy to help and it would pass the time, I’d venture to say.”

“I’ve got the one cabin left and I’m not a man to weigh anchor with an empty berth, but I need to leave port tonight if we’re to make Sulan by the end of the week. My daughter is getting married come the Solstice and I promised her I’d be back in plenty of time.”

Alsandair nodded. “I see your need for haste.”

“If you’ll rush back with your stuff, we’ll be able to leave as soon as you return. I have two other passengers already aboard and the tide will be going out within the hour.”

Scratching his cheek with his cupped fingers, Alsandair inquired once more to the price of the ticket for passage.

Andelton waved his hand. “I’m not likely to find anyone needing passage at this time of night, so if you’re willing to help me with the ciphering, the cabin and meals are on me this trip.”

Alsandair grinned and stuck out his hand to seal the bargain. “I’ll be back in two shakes of a sheep’s tail,” he agreed.

“Don’t bring that sheep back with you!” Andelton said, chuckling.

## Chapter Two

After sending word to Cowan and Daniel that he would be sailing on the tide and giving them his intended destination, Alsandair packed his few belongings—he tended to travel light when on assignment—then headed back to the docks. Nestled down in a thick, black double-breasted wool peacoat for the November night had turned even colder on his trek back to his room, he had a duffel bag slung over his shoulder and wore a black twisted-rib watch cap atop his thick hair. He'd changed out of his leather pants into a more serviceable pair of black denims so in the thick fog, he was nearly invisible in his dark attire. Running up the gangplank, he was met on the bridge by the captain and Garnet Ruck, introduced as the *Mary Constance's* cabin boy.

"Ruck will show you to your cabin, Commander," Andelton informed him.

"It's just Sandair," the young warrior corrected, putting out a hand to Ruck.

"A pleasure, Sir," Ruck greeted him with a grin. "Right this way."

"We'll be leaving port momentarily," Andelton called after Alsandair. "If you are of a mind, I've Chrystallusian brandy in my cabin."

Alsandair stopped and turned around. "Much obliged, Captain, but I've had more than my share of the drink tonight." He tapped his head. "Best be turning in, especially if you want me clearheaded in the morning."

Andelton laughed and waved him away, calling out orders to his men in preparation for sailing.

The cabin to which Ruck escorted him proved to more comfortable than Alsandair had been expecting. Paneled in dark wood, the bunk was larger than usual with a white hobnail chenille spread covering it and a thick quilt folded at the foot. There was a handsome inlaid sea chest for his belongings, a ladder-back chair with a cushion, a small desk built into the wall and a corner screened off for the close stool—a lidded throne-like chair that held the chamber pot. A small cabinet with railing around three of its sides at the top held a pitcher and ewer and a couple of tin cups.

"I'll be back with some fresh water, Sir," Ruck said, tugging at his forelock before closing the cabin door.

Alsandair swung his duffel bag up on the bunk and pulled off his cap. Running a hand through his hair, he tossed the cap to the desk and sat down on the bunk to pull off his boots. As he did, he glanced up at the wall on which the bunk stood. Above and to the side of the bunk were several handholds jutting out from the wall in case the ship was tossed about in foul weather. A large swinging lamp hung over the desk and lent a mellow light to the otherwise dark room.

After Ruck had returned with the water and the ship was on its way out of Drutton Bay, Alsandair stripped off his clothing, pushed his duffel bag to the far side of the bunk and then pulled the covers back. He climbed into the bunk, stretched out, flinging the covers over him and turned on his side. Wriggling down into the bed, he pressed his cheek into the soft pillow, snuggling down until he was comfortable. Within moments, he was sound asleep, sinking into a dream that had him tossing and turning before the *Mary Constance* ever cleared the first buoy.

*Rylee was running ahead of him, looking back over her shoulder, her long red hair streaming behind her in the wind. The skirts of her pale green muslin gown molded around her legs and the ribbons bedecking her red tresses fluttered around her head.*

*"Go away, Sandair!" she shouted back at him. "Leave me be, you heathen!"*

*They were in a meadow of bright gold sunflowers and red clover and the smell of freshly mowed hay from a neighboring field wafted in the air. Overhead the sun was warm and bright, but its rays were cooled by a freshening breeze from off Galrath Lake.*

*"You can run but you can't escape me, Ry!" he called out to her as he crashed through the tall stalks of sunflowers, batting them aside.*

*It was up a slight hill they moved and at the crest he could see birds soaring on the thermals, hear their raucous cries to one another. The sound of wood being chopped echoed over the little valley through which they ran.*

*He heard a giggle and then lost Rylee among the tall stalks. Stopping, he listened but there was no movement close-by save the rustle of the sunflowers. He stood there like a predator poised for its prey – silent, unmoving, waiting.*

*Never one for patience, it was Rylee who moved first and when she did, a loud explosion of breath escaped her lungs as she began to fall, brought down by Alsandair's strong arms that had wrapped around her from behind. Laughing, she fell forward toward the clover-studded ground only to be turned at the last moment, landing with her back to her lover's front, his loud whump of air rushing past her ear as his muscular body met the earth.*

*"Let go of me, you oaf!" she trilled, wriggling her bottom against the swollen passion of his groin.*

*His arms shackling her to him, he wedged his chin into the softness where her neck met her shoulder. "Never," he whispered, running his tongue along her ear.*

*Squirring against the invasion, she felt his hands on her breasts, rubbing her nipples through the soft muslin, crushing the lush globes lightly in his powerful hands. She protested his liberties as she lay there on her belly with the sunflowers towering overhead, Alsandair pressing his weight upon her. He shifted so he lay beside her, his hand hiking up the hem of her skirt until his palm touched the soft, bare flesh of her thigh. He caressed her.*

*"Licentious man," she giggled.*

*"Horny man," he corrected. He shifted to allow her to turn over so she lay on her back, looking up at him with her vibrant green eyes sparkling with desire.*

*“What is it you wish for me to do to remedy that situation – in which you seem to perpetually stay?” she asked. She reached up to stroke his lean jaw.*

*“You need do nothing, milady,” he said, moving the hem farther up her leg. “Just lie there and enjoy the fruits of my labors.”*

*Rylee sucked in a breath as his nimble fingers slid over to the inner plain of her thigh, his thumbnail scratching delicately along the sensitive flesh and moving ever upward until he touched the moistness between her legs.*

*“Ah,” he drawled. “What have we here?”*

*She brought her hands up to push at his shoulders. “Get off me, you degenerate.”*

*Deliberately he pressed his thumb against the soft, wet heat and inched it inside her, turning his hand so his fingers slid deliciously beneath her, his middle finger grazing her anus.*

*Her hands tightened on his shoulders and instead of pushing him away, she was holding him to her, her fingers digging into the crisp cotton of his shirt. Her eyelids fluttered as he snaked his thumb deeper into her velvet heat and she sighed deeply.*

*“Like that, do you?” he asked, lowering his lips to the corner of her mouth.*

*Rylee lay at his mercy with her eyes closed, her hands dropping away so they lay to either side of her head. As a result, her breasts pushed upward, inviting his attention. Lowering his head, he caught one straining nipple and suckled it through the material.*

*“Sandair!” she gasped.*

*He withdrew his thumb from her silky sheath and rubbed his palm against the wiry curls at the junction of her thighs. All the while his teeth plucked at the muslin covering her breast until she was writhing.*

*“Beast,” she labeled him on a long sigh.*

*Lying there on his side facing her, he took only a moment to put his hand to the fly of his britches to release the aching erection there. As he sprang free, he was up and over her, nudging her legs apart with his knee and settling deliciously upon her as he paused with his throbbing cock seeking entrance into her moist heat.*

*“Want me?” he whispered.*

*She arched her hips upward in answer and as his thick tool slid firmly inside her, his mouth slanted over hers to claim her in a potent kiss that made his blood sing.*

*Beginning a slow thrust – pushing ever deeper inside her with each movement and withdrawing until he was almost all the way out of her – his tongue dueled with hers in the same deliberate rhythm. He nibbled at her bottom lip, flicked the tip of that wicked muscle at the corners of her mouth and dragged it over her teeth.*

*Rylee brought her legs up to imprison his hips and in the process gave him latitude to increase the pace of his thrusting and the deepness of his penetration. As she locked her ankles behind his waist, his rhythm increased along with the power he used to take her. With her short fingernails digging into his shoulders, he rode her hard with his balls slapping against her with each strong thrust.*

*“Aye, my warrior,” she moaned, and nipped him on the side of his neck as he lay there stretched out atop her.*

*It was the unexpected sting of pain that spurred him to an even faster and harder pace. He was pistoning into her with abandon, striving for the release that had drawn his balls into twin cauldrons of fiery heat.*

*Grunting against one another, the lovers felt the first wave of passion at the same moment. She was grinding herself against his steely erection and he was pumping into her with deliberate force. They came at the exact same moment, shouting out their mutual relief as tremor after tremor shook them – draining him and depleting her.*

*He collapsed atop her, panting and spent. She wrapped her arms around him as though she would never let him go.*

*"I love you," he whispered against her throat.*

*"I've used you," she replied sweetly.*

*Pushing himself up until he could look down into her passion-sated face, he found her grinning hatefully at him.*

*"What do you mean?" he asked.*

*Rylee looked past his shoulder and smiled. "Tell him what I mean, my love."*

*Slowly Alsandair turned his head. Looking behind him, he found they were not alone in the sunflower-bedecked field. A tall man stood there – blocking out the sun with only his dark outline in view.*

*"Mine," the faceless man said, reaching down to clamp a hard hand on Alsandair's shoulder to drag him up and off Rylee's lush body.*

Alsandair sat up in the bed – his face slick with sweat, his heart hammering in his chest. Shakily, he plowed a hand through his hair as he strove to slow his panting and the hard pumping of his heart. To his mortal shame, he realized his dream had brought a nocturnal emission that now clung wetly to his groin, holding the sheet against his nakedness. He groaned, tugging at his hair until the fiery pain became too much. He let go and flung the covers back, swinging his legs from the bunk, wincing at the sticky feel of his juices plastered to his body.

As he cleaned himself, he rethought the dream and no matter how it presented itself to him, he reasoned his subconscious knew what he had refused to admit in his wakeful moments – Rylee had another man and had been playing him for a fool. He had been sharing her and that thought galled him.

Angry with her, annoyed at himself for refusing to see the truth of the matter, he knew sleep would be elusive the rest of the night. Dragging on his black denim jeans, he snagged the duffel bag's handle and pulled it toward him, opening it to rummage inside for a thick wool sweater. Once dressed – minus his boots – he left the cabin and climbed the ladder to the main deck.

The glow of a cigar pulsing in the night drew Sandair's eye to a man standing at the railing, his elbows braced on the top. He sauntered over, nodding at the man, and took up an identical pose there at the side of the ship.

*"Nice night," the man said, blowing out a stream of smoke.*

"Still fairly cool," Sandair protested.

"I'm from Virago," the man told him with a chuckle. "This is warm for me." He stuck the cigar between his teeth then extended a hand. "Kyle Striker."

Alsandair took the proffered hand. "Alsandair Farrell," he said as they shook.

"You're Anlusian?"

Nodding, Alsandair turned so his back was to the rail, his hands behind him holding the sleek teakwood. "I've never been to Vind Gynr. Are the winter storms there as bad as they say?"

"Worse," Kyle replied. "It's not unusual to get eight inches in half an hour."

"Every woman's dream, I'm told," Alsandair said with a laugh, and his companion joined him.

The two were silent for a moment, each absorbing the peacefulness of the night.

"Is this a business trip or is it for pleasure?" Kyle inquired, puffing away on his cigar.

"Strictly pleasure. I'm on leave."

"Ah," Kyle said. "A military man, eh?"

"Practically from the cradle," Alsandair replied. "My father and his father and his father before him were warriors." He scratched his cheek. "Maybe even back as far as the Burning War the men in my family have served their country."

"The family business, so to speak," Kyle remarked.

"I suppose you could say that." He turned sideways, leaning his elbow on the rail as he looked at the man beside him. "What about you? Business or pleasure?"

"A bit of both," Kyle answered, and Alsandair studied him in the faint glow from a lantern used as one of the ship's running lights that was hanging on a spar.

Kyle Striker was as tall as Alsandair—a little beyond six feet—with broad shoulders and a slim build. His hair was the color of ripe wheat and he wore it long to his shoulders and pulled back in a queue. His eyes appeared pale-colored but it was impossible in the dim light to tell their true shade. He had a strong jaw, a deep cleft in his chin and high cheekbones. His voice was deeper than Alsandair's and the Vind Gynrese accent was strong. He looked to be fit.

"Are you traveling alone?"

Kyle shook his head. "I have my lady with me. She has a cabin of her own."

"You're not married then?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it," Kyle admitted. He flicked the remainder of his cigar out into the water, the fiery arc of its tip disappearing into the darkness. "What about you?"

"Single with no prospects of marriage on the horizon," Alsandair said quietly. "I am as free as the proverbial bird."

“Would you prefer it otherwise?” Kyle asked, no doubt detecting the sadness in his companion’s voice.

“To be honest,” Alsandair replied, “I don’t know at this point. A part of me longs for hearth and home, and the other part looks forward to the adventures provided to me by the soldiering.” He looked down at the deck. “It seems I can’t have both.”

“I know what you mean,” Kyle said with a long, heartfelt sigh. He yawned. “Well, I’m for bed.” He put out his hand. “See you in the morning?”

“Aye,” Alsandair said, and shook the other man’s firm hand.

Left by himself, Alsandair gripped the railing before him and stared out into the night-darkened waves. Sleep still eluded him and the thought of having another unsettling dream kept him where he was.

He was still at the rail when the first light of dawn spread chill fingers into the eastern sky.

### Chapter Three

Captain Andelton and his first mate Sedric Bonny were already seated in the common room when Alsandair came to the table fresh from a light bath and a change of clothing. He nodded to the two men, shook Bonny's hand and then nodded to Ruck, the cabin boy, that he wanted a steaming cup of coffee.

"Didn't sleep too well your first night out?" Andelton probed.

"I had a lot on my mind," Alsandair answered.

"Woman troubles," Bonny said with a chuckle. "I can always tell."

"Good morning."

Alsandair looked up from the plate of bacon, eggs and fried potatoes Ruck had set in front of him. He greeted the man he'd met the evening before at the rail.

"Where's your lady this morn?" the captain inquired.

"She's up but you know how women are," Kyle said. "It takes them longer to get dressed than it does us."

The men snickered at the remark and Kyle shook his head at the offer of food. "I've yet to get my sea legs but that coffee smells wonderful."

"It is," Alsandair agreed.

"Go ahead and eat, gentlemen," Kyle said. "There's no telling when she'll grace us with her beautiful presence. It may be half an hour yet, if I know her."

Digging into the fare, the men discussed the good weather they were experiencing and the fair wind that was pushing them gently toward the Sinisters.

"I've never seen them," Alsandair said. "Are they as dangerous as I've heard?"

"They're a trick to navigate through," Bonny admitted. "But a good sailor won't have any problems with the Sinisters unless he lets his mind wander."

"I've been through there many times before," Kyle admitted. "The going through is a lot less nerve-racking than the coming back out."

"That's because coming back out you're sailing against the wind. We sometimes run into fierce rain storms near the Sinisters," Andelton observed. "Bad lightning and the like."

Kyle paused as he was about to take a sip of his coffee. "My lady hates storms," he said. "Fears them something awful."

"We should luck out this trip and not encounter any, but should that happen, just keep her in her cabin and soothe her," the captain advised.

"She'll be practically hiding under me if the past is any indication," Kyle joked.

Alsandair looked up at Kyle. "I knew a woman like that," he said, and unease shifted down his spine.

"Don't let the fog horn scare her," Andelton told Kyle. "That's where the notion of there being a sea beastie comes from. That horn – if'n you don't know it's there – can be a frightening sound."

"Like the bellow of some giant, dangerous beast," Kyle said. "I warned Rylee about it already. She's not one for surprises."

Alsandair choked on the eggs he'd been about to swallow. Tears filled his eyes from the pain of the lodged food and he pushed back from the table as Bonny shot up to pound him on the back.

"Here, lad," Bonny said, slapping the palm of his hand between Alsandair's shoulders. "None of that now."

The hard thumping on his back managed to dislodge the egg from his gullet and Alsandair spat it out into his napkin, coughing and dragging in harsh breaths until Kyle leaned over with a tumbler of water.

"Drink this," Kyle said. "It'll help."

"Let him choke," came a heated command. "It will save me from having to strangle him later!"

All the men save Alsandair looked up to see the only female passenger onboard standing in the doorway with her hands on a pair of very shapely hips. Lovely green eyes were flashing fire and a pert little mouth was pressed into a taut, prim line as she glowered at Alsandair. One foot was tapping out a dangerous rhythm on the floor.

Coming to his feet along with the other men, Alsandair wiped his mouth on the napkin and finally turned his head to look at the woman he had thought he was escaping. Their eyes met and he let out a long, tired breath. He should have known fate wouldn't let him get away that easily.

"What the hell are you doing here, Sandair?" Rylee McCourtland snarled. "I thought I told you I never wanted to see you again. How dare you follow me!"

Kyle looked from Rylee to Alsandair. He set the tumbler of water down on the table. "This is him?"

"I wasn't following you," Alsandair managed to say, his voice husky from the choking. He reached for the tumbler of water.

"Liar," she snapped.

Kyle came around the table and held a chair out for her. "Let's discuss this later, shall we?" he said, casting her a stern look.

"He followed me!" Rylee accused.

"No, I did not," Alsandair said, and sat back down, a harsh frown on his face. "If I'd known you were onboard, I've have given this ship a wide berth, believe me." He couldn't look at her anymore for his heart was starting to ache all over again. "I've no wish to be savaged again."

“You –”

“Sit down, Rylee,” Kyle said sternly, cutting her off.

Alsandair looked up at the other man and was surprised to see Rylee doing as she was told. She threw him a hateful look but took her seat, her lips pursed tightly together.

“Ruck, would you bring the lady her breakfast?” Kyle asked.

“Aye, sir!” Ruck was quick to reply.

There was an awkward silence into which the diners were cast. The captain and his first mate exchanged an uncomfortable look but set about finishing their meal.

Rylee sat there glaring at Alsandair as her ex-lover ate, ignoring her own meal.

“It’s a long time to the noon meal, Rylee,” Kyle said reasonably. “Eat.”

Grumbling beneath her breath, Rylee unfolded her napkin, laid it in her lap and set about doing as her traveling companion dictated.

Amazed his ex-lover was obeying Striker’s orders, Alsandair glanced at Kyle. Whatever hold the man had over Rylee was firm and he couldn’t help but admire Kyle for it. He himself had spent years trying to get the hellion to do as he asked only to have her balk at every turn. Begrudgingly admitting the other man could handle Rylee far better than he ever could, he heaved a long, heartfelt sigh.

“No one is making you stay at this table, Farrell,” Rylee told him. “Please feel free to leave if you find the company so unbearable.”

“That’s enough, Rylee,” Kyle said, and this time his voice was filled with a warning. “Commander Farrell is attempting to make the best of this situation. I suggest you do the same.”

Alsandair raised his eyes to look at Rylee and watched as embarrassment crept into her cheeks at the reprimand. Her eyes became overly bright and he recognized a bout of crying coming on. Rather than exacerbate the situation, he said nothing but rather pushed back from the table and got up.

“Please finish your meal, Farrell,” Kyle said. “We’ve a long journey ahead of us and there is no reason to spend it being uncomfortable.”

Further admiration for the man nudged Alsandair and he looked to Kyle. “I thank you for your concern, Striker, but I have finished.” He bowed to the captain, nodded at the first mate and Kyle, muttered a soft “milady” to Rylee and then left the common room.

Once out on the deck, Alsandair cursed a blue streak beneath his breath. He was humiliated at the treatment Rylee had handed him and further annoyed that her new lover had come to his defense. He had no animosity toward Striker – though he realized he should have – and knew it was indeed going to be a long journey.

“Well, that was a mite prickly,” the captain said as he joined Alsandair at the rail.

“I apologize, Captain,” Alsandair said, turning to see the portly man picking his teeth with a golden toothpick.

"No need and call me Drake," his companion said. "I recognize a vengeful lady when one sits to my table." He chuckled. "What did you do to her, leave her at the altar?"

"It was the other way around," Alsandair said. "She left me." Not wanting to discuss the matter, he asked if the captain was ready to start going over the books.

"Now's as good a time as any," Andelton replied.

They passed Bonny on his way up to the bridge as they went below to the captain's cabin. The first mate asked if they wanted a pot of coffee sent to them.

"That would be good, Sedric," the captain replied. "Is there still frost a'sittin' on my table in the common room?"

Bonny grinned. "The gentleman looked as if he'd be taking the lady to task once Ruck and me cleared the room, so I imagine the air is either hot as Hades or cold as the Abyss by now."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyle leaned back in his chair after pouring his third cup of coffee and observed the woman across from him. Contrary to what Bonny had suggested would happen, Kyle had said nothing to his companion. He sat with his elbows on the arms of his chair and regarded Rylee calmly.

"I behaved badly," she said, squirming under his constant gaze.

"Aye, that you did," he agreed.

Rylee pushed her plate away. "It's just that I was stunned to see him here, Kyle."

"As stunned as he was to see you," he said. When she started to protest, he held up a hand. "I saw his face. He was not expecting you to appear so get the notion he followed you out of your mind."

Snapping her mouth shut, she folded her arms across her chest in a defensive posture and turned her face from him.

"Pout all you like but he did not purposefully track you down, sweeting. I'll venture to say he was running away from you, just as you were running from him."

Rylee flinched. "You don't think he got the note?"

"Nay, I don't believe he did. It is fate that he is here."

Once more tears filled Rylee's eyes, but this time it wasn't from embarrassment but from the ache that had settled in her heart.

Kyle finished his coffee and set the cup on the table. "When I met him last eve, I liked him right off. My instincts tell me Alsandair Farrell is a good man and I imagine we could become very good friends. That rarely happens, but when it does, I find my first instincts are always proven to be the correct ones."

"I never said he wasn't a good man," she protested, willing to give her ex-lover his due.

"I wish you'd told me his name when we began our association so when I met him last eve I could have saved us all the embarrassment we suffered this morn," he said. "I'm sure he would have preferred to find another ship upon which to sail rather than have you insult him as you did."

Rylee flinched. "It won't happen again," she mumbled.

"I pray not. If you want to settle this, Rylee, you'll have several days in which to do so," he suggested.

She looked around at him. "I've no desire to speak to that man just yet."

He nodded. "Then keep to your cabin and read. I'll stop in from time to time and we can play cards or chess. I would prefer not having to deal with your spitefulness again."

Her eyes widened. "Spitefulness?" she repeated.

"You wanted to hurt him, embarrass him, and you did," Kyle stated. "I won't have that happen again. I don't like discord and I particularly do not like confrontations. If you make this a sparring contest between you and him, I will be forced to take sides and I do not relish such a thing happening." He gave her an unyielding look. "You might not like whose side I take."

"You would side with *him*?" she gasped.

Kyle stood up from the table. "From everything you've told me, it was you who set this whole thing in motion and not the other way around. You wanted things just as you required them to be—to hell with what he wanted—and when he would not bow to your demands, you came up with this plan to leave Anlusia. As I see it, he is the one who was wronged here, not you. You knew what he was when you took up with him. The man is a warrior and no matter how hard you try to do so, you cannot make a farmer of a warrior unless it was his notion to become a farmer in the first place. So aye, I would side with him in the matter, although I pray it will not come to that."

Rylee's shoulders slumped and she hung her head. "Forgive me, Kyle. I can be a bitch sometimes."

"Aye," he replied as he walked to the door. "You can."

Long after Kyle had gone up on deck and Ruck had cleared away the breakfast things, Rylee sat where she was. She was ashamed of how she had reacted to finding Alsandair in the common room. Surprise—and hurt—was no excuse for how she had acted and she knew she would need to apologize to everyone involved, including Alsandair.

The thought of seeking out her ex-lover to apologize made her grit her teeth and dig her fingernails into her palms. It wasn't so much from an injury to her pride to be forced to ask his pardon but from feeling guilt that she had knowingly hurt him. She too had seen the bewildered surprise in his eyes when he looked up at her. She had known he was shocked to find her there but her pride had gotten the better of her and she had lashed out—something she was very good at doing when it came to Sandair. Why she felt the need to hurt the man had always escaped her. Perhaps it was because

he was so strong otherwise, or simply because he presented such an air of invincibility. Whatever the reason, she had refused to examine her behavior toward him until now.

*"If I'd known you were onboard, I've have given this ship a wide berth, believe me. I've no wish to be savaged again,"* he'd said.

She had heard the hurt in his voice, the pain, the confusion, and realized he couldn't look at her. Was doing so that painful to him, she wondered, or that embarrassing?

A part of her ached for him in a way she could never have anticipated.

Thinking back to the beginning of her association with Kyle, she had to be honest with herself. She had flirted outrageously with the handsome stranger and what had started out as just that—an angry way to get back at Sandair for not being there when she needed him—had become a challenge and the challenge had become a test of her ability to draw the handsome man to her like iron filings to a magnet. He didn't seem to be all that attracted to her at the start. She had had to work to gain his interest, but once she did, she realized he was like any other man—easily led by a pretty face and willing eyes. She had crooked her finger and he had fallen into step behind her, agreeing to what she had in mind.

At least that was what she had thought in the beginning.

The truth of it was the longer she knew Kyle, the stronger she learned he was and that he was less inclined to be led about as she supposed.

*"If you want me to help you, milady,"* he had said, his pale blue eyes searing hers, *"then it will be on my terms and not yours."*

She had viewed that as a challenge of his own and had taken him up on it, showing up at his apartment with portmanteau in hand, telling him she had broken her engagement to her soldier lover and was ready to take off to lands unknown with Kyle.

*"You are sure?"* he had asked.

*"I am,"* she had stated.

Putting her crossed arms on the tabletop, she lowered her head and closed her eyes, unable to banish the image of the sadness she had glimpsed in Sandair's dark eyes. Nor could she push the sight of him fleeing the table, his head down and shoulders sagging in defeat.

*"Oh, Sandy,"* she sighed. *"What have I done?"*

\* \* \* \* \*

Kyle had been waiting for over an hour for Alsandair to leave the captain's cabin. He was sitting on the forward ladder, biding his time. As soon as the man he'd been waiting for left Andelton's, he stood up. *"May I have a word with you?"* he asked.

Alsandair tensed. The last thing he wanted was a fight. *"Look, Striker, I don't—"*

“I haven’t known Rylee all that long,” Kyle interrupted, “but I know she likes to have things her way. I don’t mind indulging her now and again, but that said, I’m not about to allow her to pit the two of us against one another in an effort to salvage her pride.”

“I didn’t know she was onboard,” Alsandair said.

“I know you didn’t and I’ve already told her if I’d known who you were last night, I would have made sure that fiasco in the common room hadn’t occurred.”

“It would have been a bit hard to keep either of us from knowing about the other,” Alsandair said. “The ship had already left the harbor.”

“Aye, but I could have lessened the impact of the matter by informing her you were onboard and giving her the choice of whether or not to join us for breakfast.”

Shrugging, Alsandair crossed his arms and leaned against the bulkhead wall. “I’ve told the captain I will take my meals in my rooms so I don’t cause the lady any undue stress. He understood for he wants no problems on the trip.”

“If anyone should remain in their cabin, it should be Rylee,” Kyle said. “There is no reason for you to give up your comfort because she has her nose out of joint.” He took a few steps toward Alsandair. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you were striving to be a gentleman about the whole thing. She realizes she was a bitch and I’ll warrant she’ll come to tell you that when she’s calmed down.”

“No need,” Alsandair was quick to say. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be anywhere near Rylee for fear he’d either throttle her or pick her up, throw her over his shoulder and carry her to his cabin to ravish her. The way he was feeling, either situation would have made him feel surer of himself as a man.

“Let her apologize,” Kyle said. “Things need to be out in the open between the two of you.”

“It’s over between us and she’s free to move on as she likes,” Alsandair said.

Kyle smiled softly. “Are you trying to convince me of that or yourself?” Not giving his companion time to reply, Striker turned and climbed the ladder to the bridge.

## Chapter Four

It was raining lightly and Rylee listened to the plink of water against the porthole as she lay on her bunk. She could not sleep and the clock on the table told her it was almost midnight. Though she was tired, her nerves had been stretched thin all day for she'd not ventured out of the cabin since breakfast and was now feeling claustrophobic. Sitting up, she drew her legs into the perimeter of her arms and stared across the cabin, aware of the creak of wood and the wash of the waves against the side of the ship.

She could not stop thinking about Alsandair. Knowing he was right down the narrow corridor did not help. She looked at the door.

How easy it would be to get up, throw on her wrapper and go to him. There were unsettled issues between them and now would be as good a time as any to get them out in the open to discuss. Mayhap he would tell her he no longer wanted her.

Oh bother! she thought. Flinging the covers aside, she got out of bed, snatched up her wrapper and thrust her feet into her slippers. Before she could gainsay her intention, she unlocked the door and moved quietly into the corridor.

The light knock on his door did not surprise Alsandair Farrell. He'd been half expecting it all night. As the minutes had ticked away, he had grown less and less sure she would come, but as soon as the sound came at the portal, a grim smile spread over his chiseled features. He took his time in answering, letting the timid knock come a second time before opening the door.

She was standing there in a quilted lavender wrapper trimmed in pale green ribbon. Her hair was down, spreading out over her shoulders like a fiery red cape. Clutching the neckline of the wrapper with her left hand, her right was still raised, doubled into a fist for another knock.

"Aye, milady?" he said, sure to make his voice noncommittal.

She had the grace to blush and looked down, away from his gaze. "May I speak with you, Alsandair?" she asked so softly he barely heard her.

"Of course," he said, and stepped back to allow her to enter his cabin.

After hesitating a second or two, she moved past him and as he shut the door turned around to face him, the unsure look on her face widening the wound in his heart.

She lifted her chin. "I am with Kyle now," she said.

He had to steel himself not to flinch at her words. "I understand that."

"I don't want you to cause him any trouble, Alsandair."

Folding his arms over his chest, he just looked at her and did not respond.

"Kyle is a good man and —"

"I'm not," he said, a muscle working in his jaw.

Rylee shook her head. "That is not what I was going to say. Will you let me finish?"

He leaned against the door. "Go ahead. I'll not interrupt you again," he told her.

She took a deep, calming breath as her left hand twisted the fabric at her throat. Her right arm was hugging her waist as though she expected him to attack her.

"I met Kyle when —"

"I don't care to know when or how you met him," he growled.

"You said you wouldn't interrupt," she snapped. His stiff body language and the flash of his dark eyes drove all charitable thought she might have had toward him completely out of her mind.

He clamped his lips shut and stared at her, eyes narrowed.

"I want you to stay away from Kyle and me during the voyage," she said. "There is no reason to seek him out nor is there a reason to speak to me after tonight. What we had is over and done with. It is Kyle I want and —"

"Fine," he said, and unfolded his arms. He reached for the doorknob and pulled open the portal. "You've said what you needed to and now you can go."

"I haven't finished," she said.

"Aye, but you have," he said, and took a step forward to grasp her arm and pull her toward the door.

"Damn you, Sandair, I—" she hissed, trying to jerk her arm from his grip.

"Oh you've damned me all right, wench," he said as he tugged her out into the corridor. "The trouble is I allowed you to do it!"

Letting go of her arm, he shut the door in her face. The sound of the lock dropping into place made her blink with astonishment. Rylee's mouth sagged open and she stared with disbelief at the closed door. She was of a mind to kick the panel, beat on it until he was forced to open it again but her pride would not allow it. Cursing him beneath her breath, she turned and went back to her cabin, unaware of the misery showing in her eyes.

Throwing himself on the bunk, Alsandair hissed like a cornered cobra. He flipped to his back and covered his eyes with the base of his palms, brutally digging his fingertips into his scalp.

"Bitch!" he spat, and arched his hips up on the bed as though he were a spoiled child. He snarled and turned to his side, beating the mattress with his balled fist as brutally as he could. He hit the mattress again and again and again, harder and harder and harder, faster and faster and faster but could not stop the whimper of pain that escaped his lips or the hot prickle of tears that welled up and spilled down his cheeks. When the hits slowed and became softer and softer and softer until they at last stopped,

he gave in to the pain eating away at his soul and buried his face against the covers, crying as he had not since he was a small boy.

The ragged force of his tears wore him out and he went to sleep with Rylee's sneering look in the forefront of his mind. It was only inevitable that he would dream of her.

*He was stretched out on the ground, staked as naked as the day he had been born by iron spikes. The sun overhead was broiling hot and he was sweating profusely. Salt stung his eyes as the sweat rolled from his forehead. His tongue felt swollen, his throat parched and his body was a stinging mass of burning torment.*

*She looked cool and refreshed as she came to stand over him, parasol in hand to shade her from the merciless sun. She twirled the delicate lace and the movement brought a modicum of relief to his seared body.*

*"Are you ready to admit your defeat, Alsandair?" she asked him, her white gown fluttering around her legs though he could not feel the wind himself.*

*"Nay," he croaked.*

*She frowned and her pretty lips pushed into a pout that begged to be kissed away. "Oh pooh, Alsandair. What am I to do with you?"*

*It was unmanly and it wounded him deeply to say it, but his dehydration was fast approaching being unbearable.*

*"Untie me," he begged. "Set me free."*

*She cocked her head to one side. "Now why would I want to do that?" She twirled the parasol and pivoted her body back and forth like a little girl. "You've made me mad, Alsandair, and for that you must be punished."*

*Little red ants were crawling over him – drawn by the sweat – and were beginning to bury their vicious little pinchers in his flesh. He tried not to cry out although the pain was a burning, tearing agony.*

*"Those are fire ants," she said. "They must like the way you taste."*

*"Rylee, please," he pleaded with her. "Set me free."*

*She dropped down beside him. "Never."*

*And as dreams will sometimes do, it shifted so that he found himself stretched, not upon the wickedly hot furnace of sand, but on a slab of ice so cold it seemed to freeze the blood in his body. It burned him almost as much as the sun had, but instead of sweating, he was shivering uncontrollably.*

*She appeared to stand beside him wrapped in a luxuriant fur robe, the front held in her sweet little hands. "What about now, Alsandair? Will you admit your defeat now?" she asked.*

*"Set me free, Rylee," he said, his teeth chattering. "Why are you keeping me chained to you?"*

*She opened the robe to show him she wore nothing beneath. "Do you not want this?" she countered.*

His mouth watered at the sight of her lush curves and despite the humiliation such an admission brought, nodded eagerly. "Aye, wench. The gods help me but I do."

Her smile was like a ray of sunlight to chase away the chill and she bestowed it upon him with a slow, teasing stretch of her glorious mouth. "Too bad," she said, closing the thick fur robe. "You'll never have this again."

Once more the dream changed and he was lying on a raft in the water with rain lashing down on him as he struggled to free his wrists and ankles from the wood. She was sitting naked beside him with her hand on his cock, idly toying with his erection, running her hand up and down his rigid flesh.

"And now?" she asked as she smoothed the tip of her thumb over the slit of his penis. She stretched out so she was lying full-length atop his spread-eagled form. "Do you admit defeat now?"

He would have admitted anything to have the beautiful body that touched his.

He could feel the spiky curls between her legs mingling with his. Her nipples were pressing into his chest and her little concave belly rose and fell with the rhythm of his. Her thighs were clamped outside his own and the sweet length of one moved up and down his to entice him.

"Rylee, please," he said, and his vision blurred with moisture. "I love you."

Her smile was sheer evil as she looked down into his face. "Oh I know you do, Alsandair." She writhed atop him. "I truly know you do."

He could feel moisture gathering at the apex of her thighs and the dewy droplets were a musky scent that drove him nearly mad with lust. They were flesh to flesh, curls to curls, thigh to thigh with her sex on his, his cock sliding along her velvety folds. He had but to lift his hips and he knew he could impale her if she but allowed him to do so.

"Do you want me, Alsandair?" she cooed to him, tracing his bottom lip with her thumb.

"Aye," he said, his heart in his eyes.

She shifted so the tip of him was at her entrance and he could feel the heat of her traveling the entire length of his manhood. The fingers of her right hand moved down to his nipple and toyed with it, making him squirm beneath her.

"Would you travel to the ends of the Earth to have me?"

He licked his lips, anticipating the slide of her honeyed walls around him. "Aye." His voice was but a croak of sound.

"Would you kill for me?" She pinched his nipple but not hard enough to cause pain just pure, intense pleasure.

"Aye," he said, for he would agree to anything to have her.

"How many times over?" she asked.

"Six times over," he stated, pulling a number from the air.

She moved down until the head of him was buried just inside her and he could feel the pulse of her blood coursing through her vagina. It was such a sweet, all-encompassing sensation but when he lifted himself to thrust all the way into her moist folds, she withdrew, leaving him wanting, aching, striving to quell the hopelessness than had suddenly gripped him.

*"I have a man who will do all that for me and more," she flung at him as she got to her feet and stood there straddling him. "A man who does as I tell him to and not one who argues with everything I say! Why would I want you?" Her lips lifted in a scornful smile. "Why would I give myself to you when he lies waiting for me with open arms?"*

*He could see the pink heaven of her slit as she stood there over him. He could see the tiny drops of her love juices spiking the wiry red curls. He could smell her sex and to have all that snatched away from him was more than he could bear. He threw back his head and bellowed with despair, the cry driving him up and out of his dream in an instant.*

Alsandair propelled himself from the bed like a shot and stood there quivering, his heart racing, his hands opening and closing into fists at his side, his breaths coming in strangled pants. One look at the mirror hanging on the wall of his cabin and he saw a man he didn't even recognize, a man so angry his face had taken on the visage of a hell-spawned demon.

For the longest time he stared at that enraged image then turned his back on it, his eyes as hot as the flames of hell.

"Damn you, Rylee," he seethed, and reached for the nearest thing he could pick up and smash.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morning found Kyle and Rylee breaking their fast with Captain Andelton and Bonny, the empty chair across the table sitting there as a reminder of the turmoil from the day before. The conversation was stilted and no one felt it more keenly than Rylee. Now and again she would glance at the chair where Alsandair should be sitting and experienced a tug at her heart each time.

"We'll be nearing the Sinisters around midafternoon," the captain told them. "We've good weather for you to see the cliffs, milady."

Rylee smiled though the expression did not reach her eyes. There were dark circles beneath those usually sparkling green gems and shadows lurking in the verdant depths that had not been there the previous day.

"I'm sure the commander would like to see them," Bonny said, meeting Rylee's gaze with a steady one of his own. "Ain't no reason he can't come up on deck to see how white them cliffs be in the daylight."

Andelton cleared his throat as though in warning to his first mate. He frowned sharply when Bonny glanced at him and shook his head imperceptibly.

Kyle had never been a good sailor and was still feeling the roll of the sea, having eaten only a little of his breakfast. He sat back from the table with his legs crossed, his cup of coffee in hand. "The cliffs must have been something to behold before they split apart during the War and the sea bottom buckled to prevent navigation around them to the east," he commented.

"Aye, I've heard tell they were," Andelton agreed. "Our world lost so many treasures because of the War and the cataclysms that followed." He shook his head. "Mother Nature caused more destruction than did that hellish conflict."

"I'm curious, Captain," Kyle said, setting down his cup and waving away Ruck who stood waiting to pour him a refill. "Just how much space is between the cliffs? I don't think I've ever heard an exact measurement."

Andelton scratched his head. "Just enough for a ship the size of the *Mary Constance* to squeeze through with about a foot on each side of her. That's roughly twenty-seven feet."

Kyle whistled. "That's fairly close."

"That it is."

"Not much leeway for error, eh?" Kyle asked.

"You have to know your stuff, that's for sure," Bonny put in with pride.

"Has anyone ever hit the cliffs?" Rylee asked.

"Not exactly hit them, milady," Andelton replied, "but they've been scraped many a time." He smiled. "You'll see the marks as we navigate through."

"If'n there ain't no fog," Bonny said. "Most times the fog shrouds them so's we have to be extra careful."

"Seems a clear day today," Kyle said.

"Don't matter none," Bonny told him. "The Sinisters didn't get their name for being accommodating. That fog can come up out of nowhere. It's like it rides in on the back of a banshee."

Kyle chuckled and glanced over at Rylee. "Finished, milady?"

She nodded and picked up her napkin to wipe her lips. She waited until her companion had come behind her chair to pull it back for her before standing. She thanked the captain, nodded at Bonny and gave Ruck a sweet smile.

"Was I properly chastened today, milord?" she asked Kyle as he escorted her down the corridor with a firm hand to her back.

"Aye, and demure doesn't suit you, dearling," he replied with a teasing glint in his blue eyes. "Would you like to take a stroll on deck?"

She hesitated, wondering if Alsandair would be there.

"You have to face him sooner or later, Rylee. You can't hide from him forever," Kyle said gently, having no way of knowing she had spoken to Alsandair the night before.

She looked up at him. "You're right, of course."

The deck was alive with activity when they came onto it. Crooking his arm in invitation, Kyle laid his hand over Rylee's when she linked her arm through his.

"It is a gorgeous day," she said, watching the sailors work. Many were stripped to the waist as they went about their chores so she could not help but admire their rugged

physiques. One in particular caught her attention and she frowned, knowing that bare back anywhere.

Kyle saw where she was staring and stiffened. It wasn't the sight of Alsandair Farrell shirtless—his muscular torso glistening with sweat as he helped the crew—but the myriad scars that savagely crisscrossed the man's broad back. "Merciful Alel," he said in a low voice. "Are those whip marks?"

Rylee nodded. She remembered well the night Cowan and Daniel brought Sandair to her father's door unconscious, his shirt in tatters around his hips, his britches splattered with blood. It was the first time she met the brawny warrior and—without a doubt—the night she had lost her heart to him.

"He was drugged by a Diabolusian press-gang at a tavern in the Iartharach Province," she said softly. "They didn't know he was an Anlusian Guard and I have no doubt they would have beaten him to death had they discovered his rank. Luckily his men heard about it in time and managed to free him before the Diabolusians sailed out of Anlusian waters."

"The pain had to be monumental," Kyle said, unconsciously shifting his shoulders.

"He almost died from the beating," she said then forced herself to look away. "The healer truly did not expect him to survive."

"The will to live was strong in him," Kyle suggested.

"Aye," she said, and thoughts of the many hours she had sat beside Alsandair's bed—wiping his fevered brow, drizzling water down his parched throat, assisting the healer as he spread a stinging disinfectant over the deep cuts, helping to hold Sandair down as he struggled to free himself of the torment—came leaping back to remind her of all that had come before. She remembered cooing to him, singing to him, feeding him broth, helping him to bathe when he was strong enough to sit on the side of the bed.

She shook her head, the memories squeezing at her heart. Turning her back, she reached out to grip the rail and stared unseeingly at the rolling waves.

It was as she turned that Alsandair became aware of her presence on deck and he looked over at her, his attention shifting from her to the man standing beside her. When Kyle nodded at him, he returned the greeting, took another quick look at Rylee as though dismissing her and then went back to what he was doing.

Kyle leaned his back against the railing, still watching Alsandair work. "You know, not many men would pitch in as he is doing," he observed. "Makes you wonder if he's not working off his passage since I hear he is helping the captain with his books as well."

"I doubt that. Sandair comes from a very wealthy family," she was quick to tell him, not even realizing she was verbally defending her ex-lover. "His mother was an heiress of some note and he was her eldest child, inheriting her entire estate. He has more than enough coin with which to buy passage." She pushed an errant strand of hair caught by the wind from her cheek. "It is just that he is not one to sit idle."

"You mean like me."

She sighed. "No, Kyle," she said. "I wasn't referring to you."

Though he considered himself physically fit, Kyle had no illusions that he would be a match for the man upon whom he was spying. He watched the flexing of the muscles in Farrell's arms and marveled at the bulges rising there, the way his pectoral muscles jumped as he worked. There was no doubt whatsoever that the man was very strong with his broad shoulders more than capable of carrying the load under which they were currently pressed. Sweeping his gaze to his rival's thighs, Kyle could see the muscles straining and knew that it wasn't so much not wishing to be idle that spurred Farrell on as it was a desire to wear himself out—no doubt to keep from thinking about the woman who had cast him aside.

Glancing at Rylee out of the corner of his eye, he could see the indecision on her lovely face and knew at that moment she was making a comparison between Alsandair Farrell and him. He was not a man to play second fiddle to any rival nor did he have any intention of doing so. He picked his battles carefully—ones he knew he could handily win—and let the others slip away without another thought.

Once more his gaze shifted to Alsandair and stayed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The tight squeeze between the towering white cliffs of the Sinisters drew every eye onboard the *Mary Constance*. Though they had seen the sight many times over, the crew all came on deck to watch the slow, meticulous passage. The three passengers stood on opposite sides of the ship—Kyle and Rylee together on one side and Alsandair on the other—and marveled at the awesome sight of the chalky cliffs wafting through patches of sporadic fog. The cliffs were so close to the sides of the ship, a person could reach out to touch them if they wished.

Rylee jumped when the foghorn blasted and had practically jumped into Kyle's arms. Laughing nervously, she saw Alsandair staring at her, his wounded eyes sad before he turned back to watch the passing cliffs. Her excitement at seeing one of the world's most breathtaking sites lost some of its allure when she felt his hurt even from across the freshly scrubbed deck.

"Spectacular, isn't it?" Andelton asked Alsandair. The captain had come to stand beside the young man for whom he was developing a great affection.

"Beautiful," Alsandair agreed, but it wasn't the cliffs to which he was referring but the lovely woman standing at the rail on the port side of the ship. With her flowing red hair swirling around her and her ivory skin glistening with the slight spray of salt sprinkling over her from the sea mist, she was something to behold. His heart felt the squeeze of her loss all over again.

"I found that bill of lading I misplaced," Andelton said. "I left it on the desk for you."

"Oh good," Alsandair said, "I'll take care of it before supper."

"No rush," the captain said. He patted the younger man's back and strolled off.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was late and lightning was flashing off to the west. A storm was brewing out to sea and would no doubt reach them before the night was through. The musky scent of rain carried on the freshening wind that blew Alsandair's dark hair into his eyes. Spearing his fingers through the thick waves, he pushed it back and stood watching the light show that flickered in the distance.

"What is your opinion of a friendly game of poker, Farrell?"

Alsandair turned at the sound of Kyle Striker's voice and shrugged, shoving his hands into the pockets of his britches. "I can take it or leave it." He watched the man approaching, cigar glowing in the darkness.

Kyle smiled and tapped the ash on his cigar over the railing. "I make a goodly portion of my living with a deck of cards," he said. "I hardly ever lose."

"Is that brag or a challenge?" Alsandair asked.

"I am a professional gambler, my friend," Kyle admitted.

"Ah, I see. Thanks for the warning. I've been known to win a pot or two in my day."

Striker's smile widened. "Think you're savvy enough to win against me?" he countered.

"Where's your lady?"

"In her cabin reading," Kyle replied, "and likely to stay there the rest of the night." He took a long drag on the aromatic cigar then let his head fall back as he blew a succession of smoke rings into the air. "You know how she is with a romance novel."

Alsandair rolled his eyes and snorted. "Aye, only too well."

"It's just me, Andelton and Briarly, the ship's steward. We need a fourth to make it interesting," Kyle said. "The good captain has broken out a bottle of prime Chrystallusian brandy and Briarly brought along a tray of snacks for us."

"I don't know..." Alsandair began. Despite his strained relationship with Rylee, he really liked Striker, and the man was doing everything he could to be civil and friendly.

"Just a boys' night out, if you will," Kyle encouraged. "You worked hard all day and took your meal with the men. Don't you think you deserve a bit of relaxation before that approaching storm begins to toss our asses about like a cork in a whirlpool and I start puking without stop?"

Chuckling at the image that brought to his mind, Alsandair nodded. "All right, I'm in. Will there be a limit to the pot?"

"Whatever the economy will allow," Kyle said with a wag of his blond brows. "I intend to take every red cent you and the others have."

"You can try," Alsandair replied. "The cards are usually good to me."

“But they love me,” Kyle laughed, slapping his companion on the back. “Let’s go.”

The two men went below to the common room where Briarly had set up an octagonal three-in-one oak table with a thickly padded felt-playing surface.

“That’s some table,” Alsandair said, running his fingers along the deep carvings on the apron.

“Made it myself,” Briarly boasted of the fifty-four-inch-diameter table with its turned pedestal and beautifully detailed apron of oak leaves and acorns. “You can flip it over and it has two interchangeable inlaid pieces for backgammon or chess.

“The marquetry on those boards is a true work of art,” the captain complimented Briarly. “They’re over on the sideboard if you care to take a gander.” He seated himself as his ship’s steward busied himself putting out a new deck of cards.

Alsandair walked over to the sideboard where the inlays and several unopened decks of cards lay and whistled as he saw the superb craftsmanship that had gone into the inlays. He looked around at Briarly. “You could make a fortune making pieces like this for all the high-class taverns and brothels, Kell.”

Briarly beamed. “Might just do that when I retire,” he said. “I’d like me a nice workshop, you know?”

“I’ll back you if you decide to do it,” Alsandair said, and pulled one of the plush leather chairs back from the table. “Did you make these too?”

“Aye, Sir, I did,” Briarly replied.

“Very comfortable,” Kyle pronounced, settling in.

“I mean it, Briarly,” Alsandair insisted. “I could stake you a workshop when you’re ready.”

“I just might take you up on that, Sir,” Briarly agreed.

“Are we ready, gentlemen?” the captain inquired. He handed the unopened deck to Alsandair.

As the evening progressed, it was a pleasant few games with a lot of male banter being exchanged and a bottle or two of brandy consumed. Briarly had provided some tasty treats to munch on as the men told tall tales of their various adventures and threw in a bawdy joke now and again. The pots weren’t large and the captain took the first one with two pairs and the ship’s steward won the second with three of a kind and the third hand with a straight flush.

When after the third hour everyone had won several rounds a piece Alsandair fanned out a full house for his hand, he gave Kyle a knowing look.

“Spreading around the wealth, are you, Striker?” Alsandair asked as he raked the small pot toward him. He was holding the most money.

Kyle smiled as he shuffled the cards expertly then began dealing them to his opponents. “Hold on to your knickers, gentlemen,” he said. “I feel a winning hand coming on.”

In the distance thunder boomed and the ship pitched on a rolling wave. Overhead the lantern lighting the table swung slowly for a moment, casting halos on the green felt surface of the table.

After dealing two cards down then one card up to each player, Kyle looked to the captain who sat on his left.

Andelton checked his hole cards and found a king of diamonds and a five of spades to go with his up card, the king of hearts.

Alsandair's up card was the queen of spades covering his hole cards, the six of hearts and the six of clubs.

Barely picking up the corners of his hold cards, Briarly could not contain the grin that pulled at his craggy face when he saw the jack and four of diamonds beneath his up card, the queen of diamonds.

A seven of clubs and a queen of hearts were Kyle's hole cards. With the seven of spades as his up card, it was the lowest of those showing.

"Okay, Captain," Kyle said. "What's your bet?"

"I'll bet a prás," Andelton said, tossing a single brass coin into the pot.

Idly tapping his fingertips on the table, Alsandair called as did Briarly.

"I'll bump you a geal," Kyle stated as he slid a silver coin into the pot.

"I'll call," said Andelton.

"Me too," Alsandair and Briarly said, glancing at one another and laughing.

The next cards dealt face up were a five of hearts to the captain, six of diamonds to Alsandair, the five of diamonds to Briarly and seven of hearts to Kyle.

"Huh," Briarly huffed, squirming in his chair and attempting to hide a grin with his four flush.

Another boom of thunder shook the ship as the storm came toward them in the night.

Andelton shook his head. "Just hold off Mother Nature until I win this pot," he chuckled.

"Bet, Sandair?" Kyle said, and at Alsandair's grimace smiled wildly, daring the other man to say something about him using the nickname.

His face stony, Alsandair bet a geal, flipping the silver piece into the pot.

Barely able to contain his excitement, Briarly called, his left leg jumping.

Locking his gaze with Alsandair's, Kyle cocked a brow. "Let's see how proud you are of your hand, Farrell. I'll see your geal and raise you a geal." He put two silver coins into the pile.

After studying his cards and looking at his kings and fives, Andelton hesitated for a moment then shrugged. "I think I'll raise you a geal, Kyle," he said as he slid three silvers to the center of the table.

With triple sixes in his hand, Alsandair announced his intention to take the last raise by throwing three silvers into the pot.

Briarly and Kyle both called, as did the captain.

On the next round, Andelton was dealt the eight of clubs, leaving no more queens available from the deck. He looked up as a sharp shriek of lightning echoed overhead. "Storm's getting a mite touchy there," he said.

"Mother Nature ain't listenin' to you, Cap'n," Briarly joked.

Alsandair received a king of clubs.

Briarly nearly jumped out of his chair when the nine of diamonds was laid in front of him, completing his flush.

Kyle's face was expressionless as he dealt himself the queen of clubs for he now had a full house sitting at his fingertips.

"I bet a geal," Briarly was quick to say, his leg bumping the underside of the table.

"I'll raise you a geal," Kyle said.

Rapidly running out of coins, Andelton drummed his fingers on the tabletop. He was chewing on his bottom lip as he silently slid two geals into the pot.

Adding two silvers to the pile, Alsandair called.

Trying to curb his enthusiasm, Briarly called by placing a silver coin alongside the others.

Turning a cocky grin to the ship's steward, Kyle wagged his brows. "Guess we don't have that flush yet, eh, matey?"

Briarly kept as still as he could and made no reply.

Having a suck-along hand as the eight of spades turned up before him, the captain mumbled under his breath.

No help came to Alsandair with the showing of the jack of hearts.

As the ten of diamonds came into view, Briarly was forced to press his lips tightly together to keep from shouting. His eyes were like two live coals burning in his weathered face.

Nine of hearts to Kyle was of no additional value since he already had his full house—sevens over queens—and by not even a flicker of his eyelid did he give away his excitement.

Outside the portholes, light flashed and rain began drumming hard against the glass. The ship was rolling with the increasing waves and the creak of the timbers was loud in the common room.

"Well, I have to bet a geal, gentlemen," Kyle stated. He slid a silver to the pile.

Meekly shoving a silver into the pot, Andelton was able to stay in the game.

Alsandair cleared his throat. "I'm with you, Drake." He dropped a geal into the pot.

"Well, now," Briarly said. "I'm just gonna have to raise you." He scraped together two tin stáns and four brass prás that would equal two silvers.

"I hate to take your last coins, my good man," Kyle said, "but I'm going to have to raise you another geal," pitching in his bet.

Running through his small stack of coins, the captain managed to come up with the equivalent of two geals.

"I'm not sure why but I'll call you again," Alsandair said.

"I'm gonna have to call this time," Briarly said as he scooped up five tin stáns and added them to the pot.

Believing he had everyone beat, Kyle dealt the last card facedown. "Down and dirty, lads," he announced as lightning skirled over the heavens.

Much to his dismay, Andelton got the ten of clubs, offering him no additional help. "This may well be my last go-round," he said, "if this storm gets much worse."

Easing up his card, Alsandair was pleased to see the final six card from the deck. He eased up the other two hole cards then moved his hand away. All four sixes were now in his possession.

One more diamond – the ace – fell to Briarly but it didn't fill in the straight flush he was expecting. Still, with an ace-high flush he no doubt thought he was sitting in the catbird seat.

An eight of hearts meant nothing to Kyle with his full house and he barely glanced at it. "Your bet, Captain Andelton," he said softly.

Grumbling, Andelton said, "I'll pass to the power."

Alsandair looked into Kyle's eyes and bet a silver geal.

"I raise your geal," Briarly said, his voice too high as he pushed in a combination of coins equaling two silvers.

"Well, now," Kyle said, grinning. "I'm gonna raise you back, my friend," he said as he added three geals to the pile.

Andelton shook his head. "That's too rich for my tastes," he said as he looked down at his scant pile of coins. "I fold."

"Looks like one of you gentlemen has the winning cards," Alsandair said, and was about to pitch in two silver geals when a movement at the door caught his eye and he looked that way. He went completely still.

"Rylee, my love," Kyle greeted her as she came hesitantly into the room. "Did the storm wake you?" He held out his hand to her.

Unable to look at Alsandair, Rylee came over to Kyle and slipped her hand in his. "Are you going to be much longer?"

"Afraid of bad weather, milady?" the captain asked gently. At her nod, he smiled. "My wife is too."

"We're almost finished," Kyle told her. "Want to sit down?"

Rylee shook her head. "No, I'll just watch."

"The bet is to you, Briarly," Alsandair said, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

Realizing he had just enough to make the last raise with only a couple of tin stáns left, Briarly scooted his coins into the pot.

Kyle could feel the silent animosity rolling off Alsandair. He tightened his grip on Rylee's hand and brought it to his lips, watching Alsandair the entire time.

"Are you going to play or should we leave you two lovebirds alone?" Alsandair asked.

The captain and Briarly shifted in their chairs. Alsandair's tone hadn't been mean but rather playful, although the warrior's eyes were boring dark cinnamon darts into the man across the table from him.

"Since that's the last raise, I believe I'll just have to sweeten the pot," Kyle said as he pitched in another geal.

"Sweeten it how?" Alsandair asked.

Kyle let go of Rylee's hand and snaked an arm around her waist. He knew he had Briarly beat and figured there was no way for him to lose. He gave Alsandair a lecherous sneer. "I'll throw in milady's company for the remainder of the evening."

Rylee gasped. "You can't be serious!" she said.

"Easy, dearling," Kyle said. "Trust your man."

Captain Andelton frowned. "This is highly irregular. I don't think that's a wise bet."

"It isn't," Rylee said. "He simply spoke in the heat of the moment."

"Nay, milady," Kyle disagreed. "I know perfectly well what I was saying."

Alsandair sat back in his chair, as stunned by Kyle's bet as the other two men. "You are betting the woman you love?" he asked. "You don't mind losing her to another man?"

"Who said I would lose? I believe in my cards," Kyle stated.

"I won't stand here and —" Rylee began, but Alsandair's voice cut her off.

"What exactly does that entail?" he asked. "An evening with milady?"

"Nothing!" Rylee snapped, her eyes flashing. "Not a gods-be-damned thing, Farrell, and especially not for you!"

"An evening," Kyle replied. "And whatever milady is willing to make of it."

"I could use a haircut," Briarly said, his face beaming then flinched as Rylee threw him a disgusted look. He ducked his head.

"Kyle!" Rylee hissed. "I don't find this amusing."

"Were you trying to be amusing, Striker?" Alsandair inquired.

"Not in the least," Kyle was quick to answer. "I take all bets very seriously."

"Kyle, this is ridiculous," Rylee said, pulling away from his hold. Her face was livid with fury. "You have no right —"

"Don't you trust him, milady?" Alsandair interrupted her. He wasn't even looking at her but at his rival. "Not exactly the man you thought him to be?"

"Commander," Andelton cautioned. "We want no trouble here."

"And there isn't going to be any," Kyle said. "Alsandair and I are gentlemen. We will behave as such, won't we, Sandair?"

The air in the common room was so tense it was vibrating. As the storm raged outside, an almost constant strobing of light flashed at the portholes. The cracks of the lightning and the deep, reverberating booms of the thunder shook the entire ship as the rain lashed at the glass.

"You can't be playing for the lady if she is unwilling," Andelton reminded them. "I'll not have it said I allowed Miss Rylee to be forced into doing what she is dead set against."

"Trust me, Rylee," Kyle repeated. He looked up at her and winked. "Trust me."

"If I win," Alsandair said, "I won't be asking her for a haircut." He held Kyle Striker's gaze. "I think you both know what I will want."

"Something you won't get!" Rylee threw at him. "Not ever again!"

Captain Andelton's face turned beet red and he sputtered, nearly choking on his own saliva. Briarly was turning his head back and forth between the two men, almost chortling, for it was obvious he thought he was already the winner and was enjoying the byplay between the two alpha males.

"Don't be so sure," Alsandair said, still not deigning to look at her.

"Kyle!" she spat, stamping her foot.

"Trust me," Kyle told her still again. "I can't lose."

"Milady," Andelton said, "if you don't wish to be a part of this, I will not let them force you." He looked sternly at first Kyle then Alsandair.

Rylee's heart was racing and she shook her head, unable to believe this was happening to her. She looked down at Kyle and his face was so filled with assurance, she hesitated to complain again. Glancing at Alsandair's face, she saw what she thought was uncertainty, almost a hopeful look that he had the winning hand. Briarly she wasn't worried about for she knew even if he won, a haircut would be all he required of her. She bit her lip.

"Let them play their silly game," Rylee said, hoping Alsandair lost. "I won't soon forget this idiocy."

"You're sure, milady?" Andelton pressed.

"Aye," she said through clenched teeth.

Kyle crooked a brow at Alsandair. "Well, what's it to be? You in or out?"

With infinite slowness, Alsandair picked up a silver gael between his thumb and third finger. He held it—his elbow on the table, coin between his thumb and forefinger, rocking it back and forth. For a long while he held it before finally flipping it into the

pot. He leaned back with his arms folded over his chest, not once looking at Rylee. His gaze was fused with Kyle's. "Okay, stud. Let's see whatcha got."

The storm was raging in full strength now with lightning stair-stepping down from the night skies and thunder booming after each sharp crack.

Eagerly turning over his hole cards, Briarly looked from Alsandair to Kyle expectantly, proud of his seven diamonds. "Seven diamonds, my friends," he hooted. He winked at Rylee. "Not to worry, missy. I'll not hold you to the bet."

"Damned straight you won't," Andelton snarled. "I'll cut your hair myself before I let you cause such mischief."

Kyle shook his head. "I really hate to disappoint you, old man, but I'm afraid those little diamonds won't quite cut it." He turned over his cards showing three sevens and two queens to make a full house. He looked smugly at Alsandair. "I don't think you can beat that, Sandair," he gloated then reached for Rylee's hand again, bringing the back of it to his chest.

Rylee breathed a ragged sigh of relief. She reached up her free hand to shakily wipe at the perspiration that had formed on her upper lip.

"Commander?" the captain said, as eager as Briarly was to see Alsandair's cards.

Alsandair and Kyle watched one another for what seemed forever. Not even the raging storm could drown out the ticking of the clock across the room as they just sat there. No one dared speak—not even Rylee—then Alsandair unfolded his arms, sat forward and calmly began turning over his hole cards one at a time, never taking his eyes off Kyle. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I do believe four sixes beat a full house any day." His slow smile was nasty. "Isn't that right, Kyle?"

"Oh my god, Kyle, no!" Rylee said, her hand to her mouth.

A muscle working in his jaw, Kyle narrowed his eyes. "You son of a bitch," he said quietly.

"Now, gentlemen—" the captain began, but Alsandair held up a hand.

"No need to worry, Captain," Kyle said. "It was meant as a compliment."

Alsandair lifted a dark brow. "That was a helluva compliment, Striker. I doubt my mother would have been pleased."

Kyle could feel Rylee trembling, her hand jerking against his chest. He lifted it slowly and gave the back of her hand a soft kiss. "Seems I miscalculated, my love," he apologized.

"I won't do it," Rylee said. "I won't!"

"Would you have your man known as a welcher?" Alsandair asked in a hard voice. "That wouldn't be good in his line of—" he smiled brutally "—work."

Kyle let out a long breath. "I'm afraid I lost, dearling, and unless Commander Farrell foregoes the bet—"

"Which he won't," Alsandair injected.

Rylee snatched her hand from Kyle's and ran from the room.

Pushing back his chair, Kyle stood. He scooped up what was left of his holdings and pocketed them. "I hope you will be gentle with her, milord," he said then turned to leave.

Andelton was frowning brutally. He reached out to grab Kyle's hand. "You can't do this," he said.

"She was my woman before she was his," Alsandair said, drawing the captain's attention. "I'm only taking back what was mine to begin with."

Kyle stiffened, turning around to face his rival. "Make no mistake about it, Farrell. She's still mine. You may have her for the evening but it will be for nothing more than what she is willing to give." That said, he stalked out of the room.

Alsandair gave Andelton an amused look. "Don't worry, Drake. I've no intention of ravishing the lady unless she insists."

"You promise?" the captain asked. "I wouldn't want it known that I aided in a woman's mistreatment."

"That won't happen even if I'm more inclined to strangle her than tumble her," Alsandair assured him.

Briarly let out a long sigh as Alsandair left the room. "Lucky man," he said.

"And one whose heart rests in his eyes," Andelton said with a shake of his head.

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Kyle held up a hand to keep the tin cup from crashing into his head. "Now, Rylee..." he said, backing away from her door as the cup sailed past him and out into the corridor.

"How could you?" she shouted at him, picking up the pitcher from the stand to throw at him as well. She would have had not Alsandair appeared beside him. "And you can go to hell, Alsandair Farrell! I'll not have you manhandling me!" she hissed when she saw her ex-lover.

"I've no doubt that's where I'm going to wind up, Ry," Alsandair responded.

"I will not be a part of this lunacy," she snarled, and let go of the pitcher.

Alsandair and Kyle jumped as the pitcher crashed into the wall between them and shattered pottery shards over both of them. One ragged shard bounced off the paneling and struck Alsandair on the cheek just under his eye, drawing blood.

Rylee's eyes widened as she watched the wounded man put a hand to his face then look down at the blood smearing his fingers. His gaze jerked slowly to hers and she saw the disbelief in his dark eyes.

"Damn, woman," he said. "I wasn't the one who made the bet."

Realizing she could well have blinded him, she buried her face in her hands. "See what you made me do, Kyle!" she accused.

Kyle's eyebrow shot up. "I don't recall telling you to throw things at us, dearling." He gave Alsandair a jaundiced look. "Sorry about that, old man."

"What can I say?" Alsandair asked. "She has a temper."

"So I see," Kyle agreed. "Her bite is as bad as her bark."

Rylee's head shot up. "Don't talk about me like I'm not here!" she yelled. She flinched as she watched Alsandair trying to stop the flow of blood on his face.

"Here," Kyle said, "let me see." He reached out to take his rival's chin, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket to hand to Alsandair.

"It's nothing," Alsandair said. "I've had worse cuts shaving."

Rylee was amazed her ex-lover would let Kyle touch him and she stood there in silence as Kyle proclaimed the cut might well need a stitch to close it.

"Don't worry about it," Alsandair said, putting the handkerchief to the wound.

"Why are you here, Sandair?" Rylee asked. She was feeling guilty about hurting him so her voice was less strident than before.

"About the bet—" Alsandair began, but she cut him off.

"I do not recognize your gods-be-damned bet, Farrell!" she snapped.

"I'll say it again, wench," Alsandair said, his jaw tight. "I didn't make the bet. Your new man did."

"Mayhap not, but you took part in it," she accused. "And I wouldn't put it past you to have cheated to win."

"Rylee!" Kyle exclaimed. "There was no way he could have—"

Alsandair lifted his chin. "I came to tell you to forget about the bet, milady, but instead I think there's a better way to settle this."

"What better way?" Kyle asked, holding up his hand to forestall the angry retort Rylee had been about to make.

Alsandair shifted his attention to Kyle. "We'll cut cards," he said. "Winner takes the pot and the woman."

"The woman?" Rylee questioned, her eyes narrowed to thin, malevolent slits. "The woman? Why, you sleazy bastard!"

"We'll let it be the luck of the draw," Alsandair said as though she hadn't insulted him. "We'll let the Fates decide. What will be will be."

Kyle tucked his bottom lip between his teeth and considered the suggestion. "And what does the loser get?"

"Absolutely nothing," Alsandair replied. "But if I draw the winning card, I will get more than a haircut from her. I promise you that."

Her mouth dropping open, Rylee's face turned crimson, but when her gaze met Alsandair's she saw the anger lurking there and she snapped her mouth shut. She knew in that instant he would somehow manage to manipulate the cards to win her.

"Chicken," Alsandair goading, knowing well which of her buttons to push.

Rylee narrowed her eyes. "Don't call me a coward."

Alsandair merely cocked a taunting brow.

"I mean it, Sandair," she snapped, and when he said nothing, she had to clench her hands into fists to keep from slapping him.

"Mayhap you're not as brave as you think," he finally said. "Afraid Fate might rear up to bite you on your ass, Ry?"

"No," she said, shaking her head adamantly.

"Then I guess you have no faith in your new man's ability."

Rylee hissed. "I have every faith in Kyle's ability!" she fumed.

"Then prove it," Alsandair challenged. "Or are you afraid I'll somehow manipulate the deck?"

"If there is a drawing to be done, it will be done at my hand. I will shuffle and I will cut the deck!" she snapped.

Alsandair pulled the handkerchief away from his face and frowned when he saw the cut was still bleeding.

"It needs suturing, Sandair," Kyle said.

"Decide," Alsandair said, ignoring Kyle's words. "Do we cut cards or not?"

"I don't have any cards on me," Kyle said. "We—"

Alsandair spun around on his heel and walked back to the common room to fetch a new deck from the sideboard.

"Are you sure this is what you want, dearling?" Kyle asked.

Rylee just glared at him. She was as angry at him as she was at Alsandair and neither man was high on her list of those she'd save from impending horrific death and devastating disfigurement if given the choice.

Returning with the cards, Alsandair extended them to Rylee, who snatched them out of his hand with an unladylike curse. She opened the deck and tossed the box away, going to the desk where she sat down and began going through the cards, making sure the deck was legitimate. Satisfied she shuffled them then stood up, turned to face the men and gave them each an angry glance.

"His card first," Kyle said, and when she squinted at him, actually took a step back.

Rylee slapped the deck down on the desk, slid her fingers down it and cut the deck, lifting the card and holding it for the men to see.

"Three of clubs," Kyle said and his lips twitched. "Not a very good card, my friend. As you said, what will be will be."

Alsandair said nothing though there was a shadow of sadness in his brown eyes.

"Now yours, Kyle," Rylee spat, and cut the deck again, not bothering to look at the card as she held it up to the men.

"By the gods," Kyle whispered.

Rylee saw the color drain from Kyle's face and slowly turned the card around to see what she'd picked. As she saw the two of diamonds, her heart thudded hard in her chest.

"An even worse card than mine," Alsandair said quietly. "Imagine that."

Rylee looked up to see Alsandair walking out of her cabin. Almost at the same moment, the storm stopped raging outside, the silence almost deafening.

## Chapter Five

He opened the door for her and stepped aside for her to enter. His shirt was unbuttoned, hanging outside his britches, and he was barefoot. Neither spoke as he closed the door behind her then slid the bolt in the lock.

Rylee turned to face him and winced when she saw his injury was still oozing blood. "I think Kyle was right, Sandair," she said. "The cut needs a stitch to close it."

He shrugged, reaching up absently to swipe at the trickle. Walking across the room, he disappeared behind the privacy screen.

At a loss to know what to do, Rylee sat down in the ladder-back chair at his desk and folded her hands primly in her lap. She found herself more nervous than she could ever remember being in his presence. She tried not to listen to him relieving himself behind the screen. When he came back with his britches unbuttoned, she quickly looked away, feeling the heat gathering in her cheeks.

When he remained silent, she looked around to find him bent over the sea chest, rummaging around inside it. As he stood up, she realized he had a sewing kit in his hand. She watched as he opened the kit, took out a needle, a pair of scissors and a spool of what looked like fishing twine. Measuring off a length of the twine, he cut it with the scissors then began threading it through the eye of the needle.

"Do you want me to do that for you?" she asked softly.

He didn't answer her. After several tries, he managed to get the needle threaded. Then he took the glass globe off the lantern beside him and thrust the needle into the flame to sterilize it.

Without another word, Rylee got up and went to the washstand where a bottle of brandy sat, uncorked it and poured a small amount in one of the tin cups. She re-corked the bottle then brought the cup over to him, holding it out for him to drop the hot needle into the liquor. After he did, she pulled the cup back before he could fish inside it for the needle.

"I'll do it," she said, reaching behind her for the scissors.

He looked at her. "Just can't wait to hurt me again, can you?" he challenged.

Tears formed instantly in Rylee's eyes. "If you don't want me to do it, I'll go get the ship's doctor. I'm sure they have one," she said.

Alsandair moved away from her and sat down on the bunk. "Have at it, milady. I'm all yours."

It took every ounce of her courage to pierce the tender flesh beneath his eye to close the wound and when she was finished, Rylee realized her hands were trembling. She

laid the needle and scissors on the table beside his bunk and stepped back. "I'm sorry I hurt you," she said.

"Aye, well, shit happens, doesn't it?" he muttered, and stood up to shove his britches down his legs.

"What are you doing?" she asked, taking another step back.

He didn't even glance at her as he stepped out of his britches and tossed them onto the sea trunk. "It's been a long day and I'm tired," he said. "I'm going to bed."

She stood there watching him climb beneath the covers, nothing between him and the sheets but air. That in itself wasn't unusual for he always disdained wearing undergarments and sleeping in the nude was as natural to Alsandair Farrell as breathing. What surprised her was that he moved to the far side of the bunk, turned his back to her and pulled the covers up to his shoulders.

For the longest time she didn't move. It was hard for her to believe he wasn't making good on his threat to ask more of her than she was willing to give him. He was ignoring her and that brought the heat of humiliation to her cheeks.

"That's it?" she asked. "That's all you're going to do? Go to bed and turn your back on me?"

He didn't answer.

She fiddled with the sash at her waist that doubled as a belt. "Where am I to sleep, Sandair?"

There was no reply.

She glanced at the door as another five minutes passed.

Alsandair was staring at the cabin wall and when the lantern went out, the room plunging into darkness, he held his breath. Stillness possessed the room with only the tick of the clock breaking the silence. At last he felt the mattress sag, the covers tug behind his back then he heard the slide of her long legs stretching out beside him against the sheets and still he remained quiet. He was intensely aware of her and longed to turn over, take her into his arms and hold her but he lay as still as death as she settled down and eventually stopped fidgeting. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on listening to her soft breath and inhaling the intoxicating scent of her perfume.

"Good night, Sandy," she said softly, and when he did not answer, he heard her deep sigh.

The storm returned with a vengeance an hour later. Cracking sharply across the heavens, the lightning flared brightly at the porthole and the ping of hail hitting the glass sounded overly loud in the small cabin. Rumbling ominously, the thunder shook the very walls and rattled the hanging lamp chain. The wind howled like a banshee and the ship rolled dangerously from side to side.

He heard her whimpering and—pride and hurt forgotten—turned over to put his arms around her and draw her to him. She was trembling violently and each time

another loud split of lightning seared the heavens, she jumped, her keening that of a small child.

"Shh," he said, smoothing his hand down her hair. "It's all right. I'm here."

Violently raging, the storm drove her closer to him until she was wedged so tightly he felt they had become one. She was panting with fear and he could feel her heartbeat thudding heavily in her chest, her fingernails digging into his chest.

"It's all right, love," he told her over and over again. He pressed a soothing kiss to her brow.

In the undulating light from the lightning strikes he saw her lift her head. Her green eyes caught the flare of one pulse of light as she looked up at him.

She clung to him. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I know." He kissed her forehead again, her nose and then paused, looking down at her as the lightning continued to splay against the porthole glass.

It was as though nothing had ever pushed them apart. Slowly, hesitantly, he lowered his lips to hers, giving her ample time to deny him, to push him away. But she didn't. She opened her mouth to him and drew him into the sweetness there.

Groaning, Alsandair claimed her honeyed lips and thrust his tongue against hers—tasting her, branding her, needing her. His arms tightened around her and he moved over her, pressing her into the firm mattress. Through the material of her chemise, he could feel the straining points of her breasts pushing against his chest and he had to touch that lush globe, had to feel it in the center of his palm. Sliding his hand over her rib cage, he molded it to her and squeezed lightly, reveling in the feel. He moved his knee so he could push her legs apart, and when he lifted it to her center, she arched beneath him.

Their kiss deepened. Rylee's hands ran over his naked back. Her fingernails trailed fire down his flesh. Her body strained upward until she was moving against his knee, rubbing her sex on him through the cottony material.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he eased off her so he could pull down the drawstring neckline of her chemise to trail kisses along her neck until he could close his lips around her nipple. He felt her fingernails dig into his back. Cupping her breast with his hands so he could push that puckered bud farther into his mouth, he ground his erection against her thigh.

"Sandair," she sighed, and raked her hands through his thick hair to hold him to his suckling.

He shoved his hand down beneath the covers and tugged on the hem of her chemise, dragging it up until he could touch the moist curls at the apex of her thighs. Sliding the palm of his hand down over that fiery triangle, he stroked her—his middle finger just delving into her warm folds with each up and down movement. Drawing upon her nipple in counter rhythm, he clenched his teeth lightly around her stiff bud.

"Sandair!" she cried out, and writhed beneath him.

His finger slid inside her then withdrew. He put it in again – deeper – but brought it out again over and over, never staying long but feeling the juices of her sheath oozing around him with each thrust.

She was whimpering and wriggling her little ass against the mattress. Her hands were tugging at his hair but instead of hurting him, it goaded him on until he added a second then a third finger to his assault before going into her as far as he could and holding still there.

“Please,” she whispered. Already a thin sheen of perspiration was dotting her chest and making the chemise stick to her flesh.

He pulled his mouth from one nipple to ravish the other and as he did, he heard her begin to pant again but this time from desire instead of fear.

In and out went his fingers. Around and around went his tongue. Pressing upward to touch that mysterious area inside the ceiling of her vagina he knew brought her such extreme pleasure. Grating his teeth against her swollen nipple and stabbing it with his hot tongue.

She slammed her hand down to his wrist and jerked, wanting something more than his knowing fingers inside her.

“Milady wants her man, does she?” he asked around the little bud clamped between his teeth.

“Aye!” she hissed, tugging harder on his wrist until his fingers slid free of her. Almost as soon as his hand was out of the way, she was pulling him over her, spreading her thighs as wide as the restriction of her chemise rucked up around her hips would allow.

He moved over her again, insinuating his hips between her legs and the hot tip of him touched her moist curls before gliding down over them to press at her entrance.

“Is this what you want?” he asked, and moved himself to her honeyed slit.

“Damn it, Sandair, aye!” she moaned. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, twisting her body in an effort to impale herself on him.

“All right, milady,” he said, and thrust into her – going all the way to the very root of him.

She bucked beneath him as he took her. She could feel him nested in her all the way to her womb. He was thick and hard, steel under silk, and when he pulled out just a little then slammed hard into her, the first ripple of orgasm seized her.

He could feel the tremors beginning inside her and ground his hips, pushing into her as strongly as he could. As the little pulses became tight squeezes on his shaft, he started pumping inside her – hard and fast.

“That’s it, sweeting,” he said. “Come for me. Come for your man.”

Rylee’s thighs tightened on his waist. Her fingers dug into his scarred back and she arched her hips off the mattress as far as they would go as wave after wave of sheer gratification rocked through her. The muscles of her vagina milked his cock and at the

moment he spilled his seed inside her, her orgasm intensified until it was one long, vibrating pleasure that completely filled her lower body and she cried out with the joy of it.

Pumping into her one last time, Alsandair held himself steady as the last of his ejaculation shot deep into her willing body. His head was pounding brutally as he let it fall back and he roared his release.

She gathered him to her as he collapsed upon her. Her arms and legs were like steel bands—imprisoning him, refusing to let him escape. She held onto him with every bit of her waning strength, burying her chin against the top of his head.

His cheek was pressed to her breast and he was gasping for breath. Never had he had an orgasm that had rocked him as solidly as this one had. He was spent, drained, winded as though he'd just completed a long, grueling race. Incapable of moving, he just laid there with his full weight upon her, sweating and depleted.

Rylee had always gloried in the feel of Alsandair lying on her. It was a sensation that made her feel totally woman, completely taken. He was heavy, but it was a heaviness that thrilled her. Like a captive woman brought to ground by her vanquisher, she reveled in that hard, masculine weight. With his hips between her thighs, his cock slowly sliding out of her so that his juices oozed from her channel, with the mingled scent of their sex permeating the air, she closed her eyes and felt a contentment she knew she would never experience with any other man.

Easing himself off her despite her moan of protest and the tightening of her arms around him, Alsandair turned over to his back, his arm flung over his eyes.

"You sapped every ounce of energy from me, woman," he said, flinging the covers off them for he was burning up with the heat their lovemaking had generated. He pushed them down to the bottom of the bunk with his foot.

She turned to her side so she was pressed up against him, sliding her hand over his heavily muscled chest, spiking her fingers through the silky hairs that grew there.

"We have always been able to bring great pleasure to one another, haven't we?" she asked, twirling one wiry curl around her index finger. Beneath her palm she could feel his heart pounding fiercely.

"Aye, that we have," he agreed on a long sigh.

They were silent for a long moment as she smoothed her hand over his pectorals, down his abdomen and up again to finger one taut little pap.

"Is that all this was?" he asked. "A good fuck?"

Rylee's hand stilled. Although the storm had passed over them while they had been making love, there was a flare of light at the porthole and it lit his face and the sparkle of a tear sliding down his cheek.

"Sandair," she said, pushing herself up. "How can you think that?"

To his utter mortification, he was crying and couldn't seem to keep the tears from falling. It had been many, many years since he had spilled tears and now he'd done it

twice in just as many days. He felt foolish and unmanly and without hope, but most of all, he felt lost. He had to ask, though he knew the answer would hurt him far more than any lash he'd ever had applied to his flesh.

"Have you slept with him?"

He believed her silence was his answer and that silence went through him like a cold, dull blade.

She stroked him gently. "Do you want to know when we met?"

He wanted to yell at her that it didn't matter, that he had no desire to know anything about Kyle Striker and her connection to the gambler, but there was a part of him—a part that apparently liked to wallow in misery and self-torment—that ached to hear.

"Aye," he said through his clenched teeth. "Tell me."

Rylee lay down on her back. Though their bodies touched at the hip and shoulder, she felt he did not want her hands on him as she explained about Kyle.

"He showed up at our door late one morning," she began. "His horse had come up lame and he asked if we had a mount he could buy."

Alsandair pictured the door of her father's keep, the lush rolling green hills of the McCourtland estate, and knew any visitor would be welcomed with open arms. Such was the way of her clan.

"We were expecting rain and Papa invited Kyle in, asked him to eat with us until the storm had passed. Kyle seemed reluctant but he did, and as we sat at the table, he entertained us with tales of his travels." She turned her head to look at Alsandair. "He's been just about everywhere."

Alsandair nodded, unable to speak past the dry lump of hurt in his throat.

"The day passed into late afternoon and the storm raged on. The roads would be a quagmire. You know how it is when it rains."

"Aye," he agreed. It had been storming the night Cowan and Daniel had taken him to Ravendale, the McCourtland holding.

Rylee's voice lowered. "Kyle was flirting outrageously with me all day. He made me laugh and I was enchanted with the stories he told. He made the distant lands come alive with his descriptions." Her voice went even lower—a sign he knew all too well. "It was while we were at the evening meal that a messenger came with a note from you."

His eyes were closed beneath the obstruction of his arm and he squeezed them tighter together. He knew before she spoke what the note had said and when it had been sent.

"You wrote that your mission had been extended and you would not be home for another month at the earliest," she said. "I was heartsick at that news for Lily and Erylon's engagement party was within a week and I had wanted you to be there to escort me. It meant so much to me to go."

He could imagine her hurt and anger that he wouldn't be back to take her to her cousin's party. He'd known how she would react to his missive as he wrote it. He had apologized profusely, but even as he beseeched her on paper to excuse him, in his heart he knew she would never forgive him for not being there when she needed him.

"I left the table in tears and Papa followed me upstairs. He tried to comfort me but I was inconsolable. I was furious at you, and had you been there at that moment, I believe I would have slapped you until your ears rang."

"And Striker took advantage of your anger," he said softly.

"He and Papa discussed it over brandy that night and Kyle offered to be your stand-in. Papa must have been relieved that the situation might have a happy ending and gave his blessing to Kyle escorting me. I don't think he saw any real harm in Kyle taking me to the party. After all, he and the rest of my family would be there with us."

There was no need for him to ask her what had happened at the party. She would have been watched like a hawk by her father and brothers and cousins—not once allowed out of their sights. She would have behaved as the daughter of an earl and an engaged woman should, and not one hint of scandal would have been bandied about concerning her.

"After we came home that night and the excitement of the party had worn off, I became so depressed I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about how beautiful Lily had been and how proud Erylon looked every time I saw him watching her. Memories of them dancing together, laughing, smiling into one another's eyes made the heart inside me ache. I was furious with you for not having been there to dance with me, to laugh with me, to look down at me and smile as Erylon had with Lily. The more I dwelt on the party, the angrier I became. I had to work off that anger or I thought I'd burst." She glanced at him. "You know what I did."

He nodded, envisioning her pulling off her nightgown and putting on a pair of her youngest brother's pants. He could see her buttoning one of Brent's castoff shirts, thrusting her feet into a pair of her brother's old boots. He knew she had opened her window and silently made her way down the trellis outside her bedroom window. How many times had she come to him like that over the years?

"When I got out to the stable, I was shocked to see Kyle there," she said.

"About to steal a horse?" he growled.

"No," she said. "He was there checking on his lame horse."

"Sure he was, but he was dressed for riding though, wasn't he?"

Rylee sighed. "No, he wasn't. He had on a velvet robe Papa had loaned him and he was wearing a pair of Tyler's slippers. He was truly concerned about the horse, Sandair."

She said nothing more for a long time and when she finally continued, he could hear the guilt in her soft voice.

"We sat there in the stable and talked for over an hour. He knew about our engagement of course, but Papa had not told him your name and I didn't either. I don't know why it seemed important that I not tell him but it did."

"Then one thing led to another..." he said, his voice trailing off.

"It was a spiteful thing I did," she said. "I justified it at the time by reminding myself how angry I was at you, how much you had hurt me by not coming back for the party. All the resentment I'd ever felt about your job, all the fears I had for your safety, all the uncertainty of our future together just seemed to come at me at one time. I was tired of being left behind all the time and I wanted to travel, to see the world and not spend my entire life in Oirthearach Province."

"I had told you we would travel when we were Joined," he reminded her defensively.

"Aye, Sandair, you had," she said, her voice tight. "And when was that to be? You kept pushing the date forward every year. Your job always came first, me second and our Joining a distant third."

He flinched for there was truth in what she said. "So Striker offered you the travel you so desperately wanted."

"He asked me to run away with him, aye," she said. "He had booked passage on a ship docked at Dellymal. The ship was to sail for Sulan in a fortnight."

"And you agreed and sealed the bargain by giving yourself to him."

Rylee stiffened. "You make me sound like I'm a whore."

He let his arm fall to the pillow above his head and turned to glare at her in the darkness. "It was wrong, Rylee," he said. "You were engaged to one man and you slept with another. What else would you call it but sordid?"

"I was angry at you," she said.

"And that made it acceptable?" he snapped.

"I admitted my flirting with him was spiteful."

"Spiteful," he repeated. "Aye, it was that and a helluva lot more."

"I could have gone with him that night, Sandair, but I wanted to wait until you came home. I wanted to talk to you, to see if I could get you to listen to reason about our Joining and you quitting the military," she told him. "He said he would be in Dellymal and he'd book a passage for me if things didn't go as I hoped they would with you. When I went to Dellymal that night, I did not go there to see Kyle."

"No," he said. "You came there to fuck me, but wasn't it convenient he was already there to run to when I wouldn't prance on the end of your marionette strings the way you'd planned?"

The silence was telling. Rylee lay as though she were a board beside him and he stared up at the dark ceiling above him with eyes that he refused to allow to shed any more tears. He was grinding his teeth, the hand over his head opening and closing into a fist, his other hand digging into the twisted sheet beneath him.

He made no effort to stop her when she sat up and swung her legs from the bunk. He lay there listening to the rustle of her gown as she padded barefoot to the door. The slide of the bolt out of the lock sounded loud to his ears. When the door closed behind her, he turned over on his side with his arm crooked beneath his pillow and he spent the remainder of the night staring at the wall.

## Chapter Six

Three days passed as Kyle wanted desperately to ask Rylee what had happened the night she had gone to Alsandair's cabin, but the stony look in her eye kept him from doing so. She refused to speak to him at all and took all her meals alone in her cabin. He would have broached the subject with Alsandair but the man was keeping to himself as well, not even speaking when they sat at the same table together. Even the captain and first mate avoided him as much as they could. When he could no longer stand the strain of being ignored—for Kyle was a naturally outgoing man—he went in search of Alsandair, wishing to get things out in the open between them.

Taking a deep breath, he knocked on the Alsandair's door and when the younger man answered, Kyle held up a hand.

"Hear me out, and if you then wish to slam your fist into my face, I'll not stop you," he said.

Alsandair did not invite Kyle in but just stood there with his arms folded without speaking.

Encouraged that Farrell had not slammed the door in his face, Kyle took a deep breath. "I'm a bastard," he stated then grinned wryly.

Alsandair made no comment to Kyle's confession. Not once did he take his eyes from the other man's, making Striker squirm beneath the silent scrutiny.

"It was wrong to go after another man's woman," Kyle said. "I knew it then and I feel the guilt of it even more now that I've met you." He shrugged. "I don't have any defense of what I did, but I humbly ask your forgiveness for leading your lady astray. I—"

"I have always been of the opinion if a woman stays in her place, the man will be forced to too," Alsandair interrupted him. "She did what she wanted to do. You didn't force her."

"No," Kyle said, shifting from foot to foot like a small child caught in the act of misbehaving, "but had I left her alone and not encouraged her by reminding her you were taking her for granted and putting her last after your own pursuits—"

"Was that what you did?" Alsandair said, a muscle jumping in his cheek. "Told her I was taking her for granted?"

"It seemed like an end to justify the means at the time," Kyle admitted. He winced. "And to me—an outsider—it really did seem that was the case. Had she been my woman, I never would have left her to her own devices and at the mercy of an unscrupulous man who could lure her away from me."

“She had to have been willing to go before she would have taken the bait, Striker,” Alsandair said. “I don’t blame you nearly as much as I do her for the situation.”

Kyle looked down at the floor. “I like you, Farrell,” he said. “I really do. Had I met you before all that happened, I would never have flirted with Rylee in the first place.” He looked up. “But you were a faceless, nameless specter to whom I owed not one shred of allegiance. All’s fair in love and war as I see it.”

“There’s not one shred of allegiance or decency in you as I see it,” Alsandair commented. “Stealing another man’s woman is worse than stealing his horse and they hang those kinds of thieves.” He tilted his head to one side. “What should be done with a man who takes another’s most prized possession and runs off with her?”

Sighing loudly, Kyle removed his hands from his pockets and let them hang at his sides. “Some would say a sound thrashing is in order.” He stood up straighter. “If it will make you feel any better then—”

The warrior moved so fast Kyle didn’t even see the punch coming until it crashed into his jaw and he pitched backward, hitting the wall and sliding down it, his legs splayed in front of him as he landed on the floor.

“Consider it done,” Alsandair said, and slammed the door shut as hard as he could.

Putting up a hand to his throbbing chin, Kyle slowly – and painfully – wobbled his jaw back and forth, surprised the brutal blow hadn’t dislocated it. He tasted blood in his mouth where his bottom lip had been smashed against his teeth. He groaned – feeling lightheaded from the punch – as he pushed himself up the wall, turning his head to spit out the blood.

“God, the man has the kick of a mule in his fist,” he muttered to himself. Bending over, he put his hands on his knees and crouched there until the dizziness passed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning found the ship anchoring in the busy harbor at Sulan. Ships from every nation in the world were docked along the massive quay with the flags and standards of many a royal family fluttering in the stiff breeze. It was summer in Midworld and the heat was oppressive, the humidity high as the crew went about furling the sails and securing the ship. Raucous sounds reverberated over the water as vendors hawking their wares moved about the docks and undulated up the stone steps into the market square. The squeals and squawks of animals, the laughter of children, the trill of a snake charmer’s flute and the bark of pitchmen directing people to their stalls all warred with one another to draw Rylee’s attention. Bright splashes of color were everywhere and there were so many languages being spoken, Rylee couldn’t name them all.

“This is unbelievable,” she said as she stood at the rail and viewed the crush of humanity who moved about the docks.

“Stay close to me when we disembark,” Kyle cautioned. “There’s too many people milling about and we could easily get separated.” He put a hand to the small of her back.

Rylee jerked away from his touch and nodded but her mind was on the gay clothing some of the vendors wore and the mysterious black robes that covered the women from head to toe so that only their eyes could be seen behind a thick mesh covering. She marveled at the jugglers and magicians, acrobats and dancers performing right out in the open. The din was earsplitting but it excited her and she couldn’t wait to be out amongst these exotic peoples.

“I love acrobats,” she told Kyle. “They are so graceful.”

From his place farther down the rail, Alsandair was observing the boisterous throng on the docks. His soldier’s eye picked out those he knew were operating outside the boundaries of the law. It was with a sixth sense he’d been granted at birth that he could tell the good guys from the bad and he followed several he knew were dangerous until they disappeared amid the crowd.

“Be careful, my young friend,” the captain warned him as Andelton came to stand beside Alsandair. “There are many bandits about today since we’ve landed on market day. There will be pickpockets galore and pimps trying to get you inside one of their houses of ill repute.” He shook his head. “Don’t go unless you want to wake up on a Diabolusian galleon.”

Alsandair shifted his shoulders as though something had touched his back. “I’ve had my experience with Diabolusian press-gangs, Drake. I’ll make gods-be-damned sure I know what I’m drinking and who poured it.”

Having seen the vicious scars on the young man’s back, Drake nodded. “Disease is rampant among the whores so if you’re of a mind to dally your wick, make sure it is at a government-sanctioned brothel. You’ll recognize one by the gold star in the window.”

Alsandair’s eyes shifted to Rylee. The only dallying he wanted to do was with her but he doubted he’d ever be given the chance again. Since their night together in his bunk, she had not spoken to him – would not even look his way.

Feeling Alsandair’s gaze, Kyle turned and looked at the man he was sorry he had lost as a potential friend. He nodded but Alsandair did not return the greeting, only seemed to look right through Kyle. Releasing a long sigh, Kyle turned away. Rylee wasn’t the only one who treated him as though he were a fly speck on the wall.

“He feels bad,” Andelton said.

“He should,” Alsandair said, knowing perfectly well whom the captain meant. He pushed away from the rail and put out his hand. “It has been a pleasure meeting you, Drake.”

Andelton blinked. “You will be returning with me to Anlusia, won’t you?”

“I was planning on it.”

The captain took his hand. "You threw me there for a moment," he admitted. "I was afraid you'd decided to stay here."

Alsandair shook his head. "No, I still hold a commission and unless I want a military squad coming after my ass to drag me back in chains, I'll serve the remainder of my time. Hell, I might as well make it to the full twenty since I no longer have a reason to stop at ten."

Rylee heard Alsandair's words and a part of her withered. She loved him as much as she ever had, worried about him getting killed every waking minute of her day and dreamt of him being brought home to her on his shield every night they were apart. Being apart from him was breaking her heart but she didn't know how to breach the widening gulf that Kyle had dug between them. She glanced over at the gambler and had to be honest with herself. It wasn't Kyle who had opened that trench, it had been her.

"If you love him that much, why don't you go to him?" Kyle asked softly.

She felt the sting of tears prickling at her eyes. "Is it that obvious?"

"That you love him?" At her nod, he reached out to smooth a wayward strand of hair from her cheek, tucking it behind her ear. "Aye, dearling. It is."

She looked away from him. "It's too late. He hates me now."

"I don't believe that," Kyle said. "No man looks at a woman the way he looks at you with hate in his heart." He reached up to stroke his chin. "He belted me a good one when he could have very easily turned me into mincemeat. Why do you suppose he didn't?"

"He nearly broke your jaw, Kyle," she reminded him.

"He could have done that too, but I don't think it even occurred to him to try. He wanted to hurt me and he did, but he didn't do any real damage except to my male pride and I didn't have much of that left in the first place." He nudged her with his hip. "I think he didn't want to savage me because he thought you preferred to be with me and he wanted you in as good a brace of hands as could be found if they weren't his."

Rylee drew in a long breath, let her head fall back to stare up at the white heat of the bright day. "I hurt him, Kyle. I hurt him so badly and there is no way to make amends for that."

Kyle swung his head around to watch Alsandair taking the gangplank down to the quay. The young warrior never looked back as he melded into the crowd, standing a full head above most of the people he passed. He saw several women follow his progress then giggle amongst themselves. He also saw Alsandair shrug off the hands of several men who pointed at scantily clad women undulating their bellies in dance.

"That wench in silver looks like she could gobble Sandair up," he said absently.

"He has that effect on all women," Rylee said, spying her ex-lover strolling among the stalls. "I've seen whores practically shove their tits in his face to get him to notice them."

“But do you see how he walks right past those who look as though they are offering him their company?” Kyle asked.

“Aye, well, he knows enough to keep away from dockside dollies,” Rylee said dryly.

“Itching, scaling rashes and flesh-eating infections aside, a man will be a man, Rylee, unless he is an honorable man with a willing woman awaiting him at home,” Kyle said. He looked down at her. “Are you to be that willing woman?”

She reached up to swipe at the lone tear that eased down her cheek. “I would if he would have me and forgive the godawful thing I did to him,” she answered.

“We did to him,” Kyle corrected. He took her hand. “Let’s go after him and we’ll all three sit down and hash this out.”

Rylee stiffened, pulling back a bit, clearly hesitant to do as he suggested. “I’m not sure, Kyle. He is so angry with me.”

“We’ll make it right, dearling,” he said. “I promise.” He tugged at her hand again.

“Why are you still willing to help me?” she asked. “I thought you—”

“I know true love when I’m slapped in the face with it, milady, and that love tap Sandair Farrell gave me had the force of undying, eternal love in it. A man can’t fight true love and come out the winner—no matter how good a lover he is.” He cocked one shoulder. “Besides, I like the little bastard.”

Throwing caution to the winds, Rylee allowed him to lead her away from the railing and to the gangplank. She had to stand on tiptoe, craning her head left to right, to keep Alsandair in sight as he moved farther into the mass of teeming strangers.

“That man moves like a viper,” Kyle complained. He soon lost sight of Alsandair and pulled Rylee to a stop in the center of the bustling market. “Did you see which way he went?”

“No,” she said, wiping a hand across her sweaty face. It was stifling hot and the press of bodies—and often times the stench—was making her nauseous.

Kyle looked around them and spied what looked to be an inn. “Let’s try over there,” he said and tugged her behind him, her hand clenched tightly in his.

The building to which they went turned out to be a souvenir shop for lack of a better word. It was filled to overflowing with mostly junk and the man who ran it looked like a refuge from a trash dump. He did, however, point them to a building across the way that was indeed an inn.

Crossing the dusty courtyard, sidestepping animal droppings and skidding to a stop to keep from being ran over by out-of-control children, Kyle noticed a swarthy-looking man staring at them from an open doorway. He frowned and hurried Rylee on with him to the inn.

“Do you speak Jentu?” Kyle asked the innkeeper, referring to the international language spoken by most of the world’s population.

"I am pleased to say I do. How may I serve you, milord?" the young man behind the counter inquired.

"Has there been a tall Anlusian gentleman through here in the last few minutes?" Kyle asked. "He would be seeking a room."

The man smiled. "I might possibly have seen such a man." His hand was palm down on the counter but when he finished speaking, he turned his palm up. "Who can say?"

Kyle fished in his pocket for a golden óir and laid it in the man's hand.

"About your height, dark hair, dark blue shirt and black leather pants?" the innkeeper asked.

"That would be him."

"He inquired of a room," the man behind the counter stated, and plucked the óir from his hand, which was once again empty.

Frowning, Kyle put another coin in the man's palm. "Which room?"

"First door on your left up the stairs," the man said, pocketing both coins, "but he is not there at this time." His palm was once more empty.

Kyle dropped a third gold piece in the man's hand and arched a brow in question.

"He went to the tavern across the way."

"I thank you," Kyle said. "Have you more rooms to let?"

"Indeed I do, milord," the young man said eagerly. He looked from Kyle to Rylee. "Will one or two rooms will be required?"

"Two," both Kyle and Rylee said at the same time.

After Kyle paid for the rental of the rooms, he escorted Rylee to the door and back out into the courtyard.

The same man who had been watching them so closely from the doorway of a nearby building was once again staring openly at them. Rylee saw him and smiled.

Kyle had seen that smile out of the corner of his eye and he stopped right there in the middle of the courtyard and leaned down to put his lips to Rylee's ear. "Do not look directly into the eyes of the men here, dearling, and never, ever smile at them. They will take that as an indication that you are interested in being with them."

"Being with them?" she echoed.

"*Being* with them," he stressed.

"Oh!" she said, putting a hand to her mouth, her cheeks burning. "I understand."

"You are far too beautiful for your own good, milady, and there are men here who would pay a rather hefty price to have you as an addition to their seraglio, their harem."

Rylee's face drained of color. Such a fate would be worse than death, she thought, and moved closer to Kyle, tightening her grip on his hand.

When they arrived at the tavern where the innkeeper said Alsandair had gone, they found their quarry had left with a bottle of beer, a link of sausage and a loaf of bread—no doubt to make up his noontime meal.

“Did he say where he might be going?” Kyle asked the tavern keeper, who also spoke Jentu.

“Perhaps to the ruins above the city. There is a very entrancing view from there,” the man replied.

“He is a stranger here. Did he ask after the ruins?” Kyle asked.

“He seemed to know of them and inquired how to find the Wall of D’ron,” was the answer.

“We’ll try there,” Kyle said, and nodded his thanks to the tavern keeper.

“Alsandair has always wanted to travel,” Rylee told her companion. “More than likely he knows all there is to know of this place the tavern keeper mentioned.”

It was a narrow, winding flagstone pathway that led up to the older part of Sulan and the legendary Wall of D’ron from which the earliest settlers had defended their city against Kanus invaders. Far too many of the settlers had been slaughtered that day, but they had managed to maintain control of their city, pushing the invaders back into an uneasy co-existence in Midworld. A narrow strip of land separated the two cultures. On the Sulan side, the land was rich and fertile. On the Kanus, rolling sand dunes and miles and miles of nothingness marked the land as theirs.

As they climbed the path, Kyle felt uneasy. He was sure they were being followed but when he would surreptitiously look back, he found no one behind them. Still, the feeling persisted and he kept rubbing at the back of his neck, his well-honed sense of self-preservation kicking in.

They found Alsandair lounging on a flat slab that looked as though it might have been part of the famed wall. He was lying there propped up by his elbows and with one knee crooked. Beside him were the empty bottle of beer and a small chunk of bread.

Kyle helped Rylee up the last few feet of uneven ground and over to the spot where Alsandair lay. He gave the other man a quick smile. “Devastating view, isn’t it?” he asked.

Looking away from Rylee’s flushed face, Alsandair gazed out over the stunning vista the captain had told him was one of the loveliest in the known world. From the steep hill upon which he rested, he could look down to the dazzling white-washed buildings of Sulan that lined the waterfront, the verdant green palm trees swaying in the breeze and then beyond to the turquoise water that stretched out as far as the eye could see in the Gulf of Kanpor. It was indeed a spectacular view.

“What are you doing here, Striker?” Alsandair inquired as Kyle helped Rylee to sit down on the massive stone slab.

“Interfering in your life,” Kyle said in a good-natured voice. He dusted off his hands and drew his knees up, circling them with his arms.

"You seem to make a habit of doing that," Alsandair mumbled.

Kyle grinned unapologetically. "One of my finer talents, I believe."

Alsandair snorted in reply to that claim. His attention wasn't on Kyle but the one who had been shadowing the couple as they made their way up to the ruins. Though the man was stealthy enough, he had managed to catch the warrior's eye and Alsandair was watching him like a hawk.

"We decided the three of us needed to sit down and have a talk," Kyle said, momentarily dragging Alsandair's scrutiny back to him. He spread his hands. "Well, we're sitting so we might as well talk, eh?"

Alsandair looked away again. "And what exactly is it you think we need to talk about?"

"You and Rylee."

The man who had followed Kyle and Rylee had moved up a few feet and was reaching into his robes as he seemed to be keeping an eye on his targets. His entire demeanor smacked of being criminal. He was a thief if Alsandair had ever seen one.

Alsandair knew the man couldn't see him since the angle of the incline hid Alsandair from view lying there on the slab. He sat up and as soon as he did, the man stopped fumbling in his robes, his surprised eyes met Alsandair's and then he spun around and disappeared back down the pathway.

"Did you know you were followed?" Alsandair asked softly.

"I felt we were," Kyle said with a frown. "Short man, bearded, headpiece with a gold cord and a jagged scar on his right cheek?"

"From this distance I couldn't make out a scar but that same man was lurking in the doorway of the apothecary when I came out of the tavern," Alsandair explained.

"That's him. He was watching us earlier," Kyle said.

"Most likely a thief or a slaver," Alsandair stated.

"Or both."

"Or both," Alsandair agreed. "Whatever he is he's gone now, but I'd be cautious going back if I were you."

Kyle nodded. "So noted." He glanced at Rylee then cleared his throat. "About you and Rylee—"

"Sandair, I am sorry," Rylee blurted out. "Please forgive me."

Alsandair swiveled his head to regard her but remained quiet.

Rylee twisted her hands in her lap. "What I did was wrong," she continued in the face of his silence. "It was stupid and juvenile and I heartily regret accompanying Kyle."

"That makes me feel special," Kyle muttered.

"I love you and I want to be with you," she said as though Kyle hadn't spoken.

"Nothing's changed, milady," Alsandair told her. "I am who and what I am and nothing is going to alter that." When she would have replied, he shook his head. "You knew what I was and who I was from the start. You knew it when you agreed to Join with me. I never hid anything from you."

"I thought you would leave the military," she said. "I honestly believed you would cease risking your life and we could settle down to a normal life."

"What do you consider a normal life?" he countered.

"Being home every night to sleep beside me. Not riding out in the middle of the night to chase down a team of bandits and then be gone for over a month without so much as a by-your-leave."

"I couldn't always tell you where I was going," he said. "Such knowledge would have been dangerous for you."

"Aye, and you thrive on that danger, don't you?" she said, her lips trembling. "Why can't you be content to raise horses like my father?"

"I am not a horse breeder, Rylee."

"You could be!" she said. "Papa wants to retire and he could turn the stud farm over to us."

"A leopard can not change his spots, Rylee. I am a warrior and I always will be a warrior," Alsandair reminded her. "I know I'm getting too old to be at the top of my game for much longer but I have skills the military needs."

"You're not the only man with those skills," she declared.

"No and I was growing as tired of being away from you as you were of me leaving. After this last assignment, when I came back from leave, I was going to put in a chit to be a trainer."

"Even so," she said. "You know as well as I do they could still put you back in the field. A man with your abilities is like gold to them."

"I would have trained Cowan to take my place," he said. "I've given enough of myself, taken too many lives, been too loyal for the Guard not to reward me with something I want for a change."

"But, Sandair—" she began.

"Accept me as I am, milady. Stop trying to dictate what you think I should do and should be and let me decide how to run my own life. Otherwise, let's end it once and for all right here, right now," he interrupted.

Moisture filled Rylee's eyes. "I love you, Sandair," she said.

"I love you too, Rylee," he was quick to tell her, "but I won't jump to your manipulations. Don't you think I know why you slept with him?" He nudged a chin toward Kyle. "It wasn't just for spite. You thought to make me jealous and in achieving that make me do what you want."

"Did I instill the green-eyed monster in you, Sandair?" Kyle queried.

Alsandair was an honest man and though he hated to admit, told Kyle he had. "For a short while at any rate."

"It's good to know I'm good for something," Kyle laughed.

"Can you take me as I am, Rylee?" Alsandair pressed.

Rylee was chewing on her thumbnail. A part of her demanded she force him into doing what she wanted and yet another part of her deeply respected his decision to be true to his duty as he saw it. His steadfastness and loyalty, his warrior's abilities were a large part of why she loved him as much as she did.

"I would be miserable if I neglected my obligations, Rylee," he said quietly.

Rylee hung her head. "And I would be the cause of that misery."

"Why don't you two think on it overnight?" Kyle said. "Weigh the pros and cons, and if you still wish to be together, go on ahead and have the good captain say the vows over you when we are at sea again."

Both his companions turned to stare at Kyle. He shrugged. "I recognize a couple who should by all rights be together. You may have differences but what couple doesn't? Think it over then decide tomorrow. Nothing need be cast in stone today."

Alsandair followed Kyle's movement as the gambler stood up and held out a hand to help Rylee to her feet. "I'm starving, dearling, and that chunk of bread he has left is starting to torment me."

Picking up the bread, Alsandair tossed it to his rival. "Never let it be said I went through this life without feeding the hungry," he quipped.

"You are a good man, Sandair Farrell," Kyle said as he caught the bread. He tore off a piece and offered it to Rylee, who shook her head as she stood.

She was looking down at Alsandair—her heart in her eyes—and couldn't speak past the lump that had formed in her throat. Had they been alone, she would have thrown herself into his arms. She had already made up her mind about what to do and she suspected Alsandair had as well.

"Go back with him, milady," Alsandair said. "Let's take the time he suggests to think on this."

Rylee nodded, still unable to say what was in her heart. She smiled gratefully at Kyle.

"Shall I make reservations for the two of you at the tavern across from the inn this evening?" Kyle inquired, threading his fingers through Rylee's.

Alsandair squinted. "You seem much too eager to give up all claim to milady, Striker," he said. "You'll not fight for her?"

"I never bet on anything save a sure thing, Farrell," Kyle answered. "I am not a dense man. I see the lay of the road." He brought Rylee's hand up to his lips and kissed it. "I was but a momentary, poor substitute for you."

Alsandair knew at that moment Kyle Striker had realized he was going to lose the card game on the ship and had wagered Rylee—not as an afterthought—but

intentionally. The gambler had thrown them together in the only way he knew neither could back away from. His reluctant liking of the man grew.

Kyle arched a thick blond brow, his lips twitching with humor for it was obvious he knew he'd been found out. "You've a comment to make, Farrell?"

Alsandair shook his head. "No. Just be careful as you go back down the pathway," he cautioned. "Your stalker may still be about."

"I'll be on my guard. Come along, dearling," Kyle said, tugging at her hand to lead her back to the pathway.

"And make that reservation for three, Cupid," Alsandair called out.

## Chapter Seven

Alsandair had not come back to the inn until around four in the afternoon. Rylee and Kyle were sitting in the gathering room playing a game of backgammon when the Anlusian warrior stopped at the desk and asked about the inn's bathing facilities.

"Through yon door," the innkeeper's elderly father directed, pointing to a gaily painted door with a high arch. "I will have the water drawn for you, milord."

"We dine at nine of the clock, Sandair," Kyle called out to him.

Not having seen Kyle and Rylee when he had entered, Alsandair turned toward them and nodded. "I'll be there." His gaze flicked to Rylee then away.

"He looks tired," Kyle commented as he watched Alsandair climb the stairs to the rooms above.

Rylee frowned. "He looks like he has one of his headaches," she replied.

"Migraines?"

"Very bad ones," she told him. "I have known bouts to keep him abed for several days."

"They say such maladies are worse in men," the gambler observed.

"His are terrible, indeed."

"There is a very potent medicinal that helps," Kyle said.

"Aye, tenerse," Rylee agreed, "but he will only take it when he realizes he can no longer control the pain." She sighed as she dropped the dice into the leather cup she held and shook them. "He can be a very stubborn patient."

"I can believe that," Kyle laughed.

## Chapter Eight

Alsandair opened the door to his room and stepped inside, wincing as the light from the sun shone directly through his windows. Squinting against the debilitating pain that was tapping out a brutal rhythm above his right eye, he walked over to pull the curtains together. The nausea from the pain was a steady burning in his throat and he feared if he didn't take a short nap to try and sleep off the attack, he wouldn't be able to eat with Rylee and Kyle later. But he was sweaty after his foray through the ruins above the city and wanted to bathe before lying down. He was pleasantly surprised and relieved when a servant came up fifteen minutes later to tell him the bath was ready for him.

Rylee and Kyle were no longer in the gathering room when Alsandair—a clean set of clothing draped over his arm—came downstairs to take his bath. Upon asking the innkeeper's father if he knew where they'd gone, the old man indicated he did then held out his hand, indicating for a price he'd tell Alsandair where they went.

"I'll see them later," Alsandair said, not having brought money downstairs with him.

Going into the bathing chamber, Alsandair stripped off his sweaty clothing and climbed into the large, tiled sunken bath. As he stepped down into the water he sighed as the warmth enveloped him like a silky cocoon and he sank down until the water was lapping at his unshaven chin. Laying his head on the bath's rim, he let the water soothe his tense body and laid a wet cloth over his eyes to block out the light that was playing hell with his headache. When the door to the bathing chamber opened, he snarled, realizing he hadn't locked it, and reached up to drag the cloth from his face. The angry words died in his throat when he saw Rylee entering the room. In her hands she carried a tall tumbler of what he thought might be lemonade.

"I brought you some tenses," she said, reaching into the pocket of the skirt. She pulled out a purple glass bottle.

Alsandair winced at the mention of the strong drug. "I don't have a headache," he lied.

She came over to the tub. "Truly?"

"I'm fine," he lied again.

"I apologize then," she said as she put the frosty tumbler of lemonade down on the tile coping that ran around the perimeter of the bath. "I misread the signs." She put the tenses back in her pocket.

He could feel her gaze settling on the sudden erection that bobbed in the water, the head of his cock lifting to get a better view of the beautiful woman so close at hand. He shoved the washcloth down in the water to cover himself.

"Would you like me to wash your back while I'm here?" she asked softly.

He licked his lips. "Aye," he said, heat creeping into his cheeks at the thought of her washing another portion of his anatomy.

She smiled at him and turned back to the door and shot the barrel bolt on the lock so no one would interrupt them. When she faced him again, she was rolling up the sleeves of her gown.

He watched her kneel down by the bath and hold out her hand. His eyebrows drew together. "What?" he asked.

"The cloth?" she prompted.

His face turned redder. "Oh. Right." Feeling the warmth stinging his cheeks, he lifted the cloth and placed it in her hand.

"You act as though I've never seen you naked before, Sandy," she chided him as she reached for the soap and began lathering the cloth. "How many times have we shared a bath, do you imagine?"

"A few times," he managed to say. His headache was a tight band around his head and the hot pulsing of his blood only added to his discomfort.

"More than a few, milord," she stated. "Lean forward."

It was all he could do to comply for now every movement of his body brought fresh agony to his temple. He didn't want her to know, didn't want her to leave him. He willed his treacherous body to stave off the pain spearing through his temple and closed his eyes as she began to run the cloth over his shoulders.

"So many scars, Sandy," she said in a sad voice.

"Rylee—" he began, but she shushed him.

"I don't need to wait 'til tomorrow to tell you what I've decided," she said.

He held his breath.

"I want to be with you." She moved the cloth down his backbone. "I'll make every effort to put my fears aside if you will but meet me halfway."

He turned so he could see her face. "What does that mean, Rylee?"

"Swear to me you will put in for the training position when we get back to Anlusia," she said, her eyes leveled on his. "Speak with Captain Andelton first thing in the morning and ask him to say the words over us as soon as we are on the high seas again."

He let out a wavering breath. "Rylee, there are priests here who can Join us tomorrow if you are truly sure you want to be my wife. The *Mary Constance* won't leave Sulan for nigh on a week as they gather cargo for the return trip and I would just as soon—"

She reached out to lay her fingertips over his lips. "Then find us a priest tomorrow, Alsandair," she said. "I have no more desire to wait than you do."

He searched her face. "You are sure?"

Rylee nodded. "I am very sure, milord." She dropped the washcloth into the bath behind him, got to her feet, put her hands on the buttons of her gown and began undoing them. "Shall we seal the bargain, Commander?"

In the little hut near Dellymal that he had bought for them to share their secret times together, they'd made love many times in the big brass tub that was his prized possession. He'd taken her in private ponds and secluded lakes and once out in the pounding surf after a late-summer storm. He had even slipped into her father's house and into the white porcelain tub in her bedchamber on occasions too numerous to count. It felt natural for her to step out of her gown to reveal she wore nothing beneath it, to step down into the water with him and slide her shapely body over his.

"You are a brazen woman, Rylee Lanelle McCourtland," he said, using both hands to smooth the hair back from her face.

"I am your woman," she said. "Never again will I risk losing you."

He enfolded her in his arms and they lay there in the soothing water with her buttocks bracketing the hot steel of his shaft.

"I'm curious," he said as he rubbed his hand over her breast.

"Umm? About what?"

He squeezed her lightly, ran the pad of his thumb over her nipple. "How much you had to pay Striker for him to be a part of your little plot to make me jealous."

He felt her stiffen against him. "What do you mean?"

When she would have pulled away from him, he locked his arms around her, his lips to her ear. "Any man who would stand aside as easily as he has doesn't have any emotional investment in the woman with whom he is supposedly running away with. You two aren't even sharing a cabin." He lightly clamped his teeth on her earlobe. "How much did you pay him to escort you and why to Sulan?"

"Why would you think—?"

"Rylee," he said. "I am not as dense as you seem to think I am."

She heaved a long sigh. "Kyle said you'd eventually put two and two together."

"How much did you pay him?" he asked again.

"I didn't pay him anything," she said. "We gave him one of our horses to replace the one that came up lame."

"We," he repeated. "We as in you and your father."

She pulled free of him and turned so she was facing him. "It was Papa's idea," she said. "He thought you needed some competition and—"

"I can well imagine what he thought," Alsandair said. "Why Sulan?"

She thrust out her bottom lip. "I remember you once saying how you'd like to come here and we figured once you found out I was here, you would come after me."

"And just how was I to learn where you were?"

"Papa sent a message to you, telling you he was concerned for my safety and to ask you to come fetch me. You left Dellymal before it ever reached you, I guess."

It was Alsandair's turn to sigh. "The gods save me from interfering fathers."

"He loves you," Rylee protested. "He wants you for his son-in-law and it was the only way he saw for you to stop waffling about the Joining. He thought if you believed you had a rival for my affections—"

"You could better manipulate me," he said.

She ducked her head. "Something like that," she agreed.

"And Kyle was more than happy to help in the endeavor."

Rylee shrugged. "He had a few suggestions about what we should do."

Alsandair put a hand to his head. It was throbbing again—much worse than before.

"You would have come after me, wouldn't you?" she asked.

"I suppose I would have, Rylee," he answered.

She ran her hand up his chest, spreading her fingers through the thick mat of hair. "You know you would have," she said. She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his.

Although his temples felt like they were being squeezed inside an ever-tightening vise, another portion of him was reacting to the soft hands caressing his chest and the silky body that pressed against his side.

"No more fighting, Sandy," she whispered against his lips. "Make love to me." She moved over him so her body slid along his. "Take me."

He wrapped his arms around her as she slanted her mouth across his, slipping her tongue past his lips. His cock was between her legs—straining to move upward to impale her—and the warm tips of her breasts were tight upon his body. Her thighs were outside his and the sweet cleft of her ass was sheer torment touching his rock-hard shaft.

Swirling her tongue inside his mouth, she wriggled against him, feeling the solid force of his erection sliding alongside her ass. Withdrawing her tongue, she nibbled at his bottom lip, locking her gaze with his, and her hands moved up between them and she could lightly pinch his nipples between her fingers, something he had always particularly enjoyed during their lovemaking.

A low growl erupted from deep within Alsandair's throat as she knew it would. He unlocked his arms and slid his hands to her hips, easily lifting her up to set her down on his throbbing rod, situating her upon him like a well-oiled dagger into its sheath.

"Ah," she groaned, and ground against him, the muscles of her vagina gripping him then letting go, gripping then letting go again.

“Keep that up and I’ll come before you get your jollies, milady,” he warned. The heat of her was so tight around him, so all-encompassing that he could think of nothing save the pleasure her sweet body was giving him.

Her voice was a throaty purr. “Do it,” she challenged, and once more squeezed her vaginal walls around his penis.

Nothing could have prevented Alsandair from erupting. His cock was on fire already with need for her and that one last pulse of her muscles sent him right over the edge. He dug his fingers into her ample hips and thrust upward savagely, letting go the seed spurting like hot lava into her moistness.

Rylee’s eyes flared for he was pushed so far up inside her she could feel him lodged against her womb. The feeling was sublime as he came and it brought her release within a heartbeat of his. She was unaware she was twisting his nipples—causing exquisite pain—until she heard him grunt and snatched her fingers from his swollen paps.

The water surged around them and over the side of the bath as one last shudder rippled through her, one last pulse shot from his body.

They lay that way until the water was almost too cool to be comfortable then he reached for the soap and began lathering his hands.

“What are you doing?” she asked lazily.

He didn’t answer but reached for her arm and began running his soapy hands down it.

“Sandair?”

“I am attending to milady’s bath,” he whispered.

Rylee closed her eyes as he washed her chest—paying particular care to her nipples—then spread more soap over her back and sides and down her taut abdomen. When he reached the curls at her thighs, she wedged her eyelashes up just enough to look at his beautiful face and smiled.

He was concentrating on bathing her and as he did, she knew he was unaware he had tucked his lower lip between his teeth, his gaze following the movement of his hands upon her body. When he dipped his soapy hand between her legs, she drew in a quick breath and with it, his attention.

“Feel good?” he asked, rubbing her spiky curls.

“Aye, warrior,” she acknowledged. “You know it does.”

His fingers dipped into her—sought and found her clit—then rolled that swollen little nubbin between his thumb and middle finger until she was squirming beneath his touch.

“The water is getting cold,” she complained.

“And I am getting hot,” he countered.

Before she could protest again, he slid out from under her and down in the tub, his head disappearing beneath the water.

Rylee gasped as his lips pressed against her core and his tongue surged inside her. She put her hands down through the water to grab his hair and pull him up but he was making a banquet of her nether region and she was beginning to pant, her cunt to ooze juices, her womb to leap and her fingers raked through his thick curls.

Twice he came up for air but then sank down beneath the undulating waves to torment her with his suckling, his thrusting tongue and the sweet nibble of his teeth on her clit. When she came, she arched her hips up and stiffened, her toes curling, and still he feasted on her willing flesh. When he resurfaced – his dark hair plastered back from his high forehead – he was grinning wickedly, the taste of her on his lips as he moved over her and claimed her mouth.

With her arms securely around him, their kiss unbroken, he lifted her from the bath as though she were nothing more than a child and then carried her up the two marble steps out of the sunken tub, squatting down to lay her on the floor. He covered her with his hard, taut body and drove into her – once, twice, three times – and released his cum deep within her velvety recesses.

“Sandair,” she sighed as he rolled off her and lay there beside her on the cool tiles.

Though the lovemaking had been completely pleasurable, unfortunately the pulsing of his blood made his headache worse. He closed his eyes and arched his arm over them to blot out even the little bit of light cast from the candles.

“Tired?” she asked, turning so she was snuggled against him.

“We need to go back to our rooms,” he said. As much as he loved being with her, all he wanted at that moment was peace and quiet, a dark room and a cold rag over his forehead. It was the only way he was willing to relieve himself of the migraine. He had about three hours or so before supper and he needed that time to try to get over the headache.

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” she asked, twirling a curl of his chest hair around her finger.

“I know how long it takes you to get ready for supper,” he said. “And I’d like to take a short nap before then.”

“You have a headache,” she said.

“No,” he lied again, “but I am tired. The sun took its toll of me today.”

“Oh all right,” she said and sat up, reaching for her gown. “But after tonight, I won’t be sent away from your side, milord.”

“And I’ll not ask you to leave, milady,” he returned. He lowered his arm and opened his eyes to look at her as she got to her feet, tugging the gown over her head. As the fiery curls at her thighs were hidden from his view, he sighed audibly.

Rylee held out a hand to him and he reached up to take it, allowing her to help hoist him to his feet. Just as he knew she would, she pulled him into her arms for one last, hot, searing kiss.

“Take *that* with you into your dreams, milord,” she said.

He watched her go to the door, unlock it, peek out and then slip into the corridor, quietly closing the door behind her. The smile that he had plastered on his face quickly dissolved and he swallowed against the godawful pain in his temples and the hot, surging bile trying to rush up his throat. As he reached for his clean trousers, he had to grab something to steady himself for his equilibrium was off and the room was beginning to tilt to one side. Already the aura was streaking wiggles of light at the periphery of his vision, making the nausea worse. He was hurting so badly, he didn't bother with retrieving his fresh shirt but left it there in the bathing chamber with his dirty clothes. He would ask a servant to retrieve them later. His head a crushing agony upon his shoulders, he made his way back to his room, collapsing upon the bed as soon as he entered.

Rylee climbed the stairs to the sleeping area of the inn. She was almost to her room and was fumbling in her pocket for her key when her hand closed around the vial of tenerse.

She grunted with annoyance.

She knew Alsandair Farrell well enough to know when he had a brutal headache and she was relatively sure if he didn't already, he had the beginnings of one coming on. She pulled the tenerse from her pocket and looked down at it. Chances were good he wouldn't voluntarily take the elixir unless she forced it on him but she knew that wouldn't be hard to accomplish. All she had to do was slip it into his drink at supper. There was no sense in him suffering because of silly male pride.

It was as she reached for the key to her room that she felt the presence behind her. Before she could turn, something rough was thrust over her face and a sickening musky smell enveloped her, causing her eyes to burn. She fought against the arm that snaked around her, fought the pungent scent that clung to the cloth pressed tightly to her nose and mouth, tried not to breathe in the vapors, but her depleted lungs were screaming and she sucked in air, the lights in her world going out almost instantly as the fumes rushed down her throat to render her unconscious.

## Chapter Nine

Alsandair awoke with the remnants of his headache still bouncing like shards of glass between his temples. He sat up—grimacing—and ran a shaky hand through his hair. He looked at the clock on the bedside table then cursed. It was eight forty-five in the evening. Rylee and Kyle would be expecting him to join them for supper—were probably already seated at the table—and the mere thought of food made him gag.

Not up to making idle conversation, having no desire to even attempt eating, he decided the best thing for him to do would be to have the innkeeper send someone over to the tavern with his apologies. Rylee would understand and hopefully not come over to insist he swill down a portion of the bitter brew she seemed to have on hand at all times.

The trousers he had on were wrinkled so badly he doubted an iron could smooth out the creases. Struggling not to vomit, he managed to get them off, pull on another pair. Grabbing a shirt, he thrust his arms into the sleeves and was just about to open his door when it crashed open.

Kyle Striker was standing in the corridor with his fists doubled, his face set. “Tell me she’s with you!” he demanded. He looked past Alsandair to get a glimpse of the bed then pushed past the younger man and stormed into the room. “Rylee?” His bellow made Alsandair flinch.

“She’s not here,” Alsandair said. “She’s not in her room?”

“Would I have come looking for her here if she were?” Kyle shouted.

A cold finger of dread dragged its bony finger down Alsandair’s spine and he had to reach out to grab hold of the door’s edge for the room was spinning again. “She was with me in the bathing chamber then—”

“He took her,” Kyle said, his eyes flashing blue fire. “The bastard took her. I know he did!” He jabbed a finger against Alsandair’s shoulder. “Get dressed, goddamn it. We’re losing time!”

Alsandair didn’t need to ask who Striker thought had abducted Rylee. He knew it was the man who had been trailing them earlier in the day. Forcing the terrible pain down, the young warrior hurried to get his socks and boots on. He scooped up his money and stuffed it into his pocket. His sword lay on the low dresser across the room and he grabbed it, not bothering to stuff his shirt into his pants as he headed for the door. The sheath with his dagger in it was the last thing he picked up as Kyle and he rushed from the room.

“Can you find us horses?” Kyle asked as they pounded down the stairs. “I will talk to the innkeeper and see what I can find out about the man who was shadowing us.”

"He's a slaver," Alsandair said, and felt that frigid finger gouge a bloody furrow down his back.

"I figured as much. Get the horses," Kyle snapped. "We'll worry about the rest when we catch up to him."

They had reached the bottom of the stairs. "You don't think she's still in Sulan?" Alsandair asked. "Wouldn't he—?"

"They are long gone from here, Farrell!" Kyle hissed. "You can be damned sure he had a buyer for her before he ever snatched her!"

The truth nearly crippled Alsandair and it was all he could do to stumble out of the inn in search of the stables. He was panting with the pain, but his heart hurt much worse than his head at that moment and his anger was building like magma in a volcano. By the time he reached the stables, his face was as hard as flint and his eyes as cold as the winds in the deepest part of the Abyss.

"Two of your best mounts, saddled and ready to go within the next fifteen minutes," he snapped.

The stable owner gave the Outlander a shrug, his hands palms up at his shoulder. "Milord, I am sorry but—"

Alsandair snaked out a hand, grabbed the stableman and jerked him forward, almost nose to nose. He glared into the suddenly frightened man's bloodless face. "You like breathing, pog?" he snarled, insulting the man.

The stableman nodded, unable to speak.

"You want to keep on breathing?"

Again the man nodded, his lips trembling.

"Two of your best mounts, saddled and ready to go within the next *ten* minutes," Alsandair said, shoving the hapless man away from him. "If they aren't ready, I'll slit your throat and you won't have to worry about taking another breath. Is that understood?"

Trembling violently, the man nodded and stumbled as Alsandair pushed him away. He hurried to do the young man's bidding.

Alsandair left the stable—walking fast, his hand on the hilt of his dagger—and headed back toward the inn. He had almost reached it when the door opened.

Kyle came striding toward Alsandair, his lips pressed tightly together. Over his shoulder was a serviceable-looking sword and clutched in his hand was a crossbow and quiver of bolts. He was fairly quivering with rage and when Alsandair would have questioned him, he shook his head angrily. "Not now," he snapped. "Where are the horses?"

"Being saddled," Alsandair said. "I was coming to get you." He glanced at the sword. "Do you know how to use that weapon?"

"I wouldn't be wearing it if I didn't," Kyle growled. He turned toward the docks.

"What are we doing?" Alsandair asked, falling into step beside the older man.

"We need help and I know where to get it," Kyle said mysteriously.

It was to a seedy dockside tavern that Kyle led Alsandair. The night was still young and the grimy building into which they strode smelled of musky body odors, vomit and spilled urine. The air was thick with the smoke of hashish and the press of drunken bodies stumbling against them disgusted Alsandair. Strident music came from a trio of beggarly looking musicians whose enthusiasm for their playing was even less than their ability to play the strange instruments upon which they plucked. The din hurt the ears and did little to drown out the coarse laughter and curses filling the room.

"Who the hell are you going to get help from in a place like this?" the young warrior demanded.

"Just shut the fuck up and let me do what has to be done," Kyle told him.

Threading his way through the throng to a rickety set of stairs at the back of the tavern, Kyle shoved men out of his way and hissed at whores who would have stepped up to him to offer their wares. He took the stairs two at a time with Alsandair close behind.

A door at the very end of a dark, odorous hallway was Kyle's destination and when he reached it he lifted his hand, rapped four times, paused and then rapped twice more.

The door opened a crack to reveal a bloodshot eye. "Aye?" a gravelly voice inquired.

"I'm looking for Khalid," Kyle stated in Jentu.

"And who are you?" the doorkeeper snorted.

"Let him in," someone said from the recesses of the room beyond.

The doorkeeper stepped back just enough to allow Kyle to enter but stepped in front of Alsandair to deny him entrance.

"He's with me," Kyle stated.

"Stand aside, Jubal," came the order.

Once inside the room, Alsandair saw there were nine men sitting at a large gaming table. A huge pile of coins lay in the middle of the felt top. Beside the table stood a beautiful young woman whose lush body was barely clothed in a diaphanous outfit that caught and held his attention despite the worry flitting through his mind.

"Khaleel!" the woman chirped, and threw herself at Kyle, wrapping her slender arms around his neck and pressing her barely clad body to his.

"Khaleel?" Alsandair questioned, looking at Kyle.

"Enough, Zaina," Kyle said, removing her arms from him. "I am here on business." He swatted her on her shapely rear.

The sultry beauty thrust her lips out in a pout and stepped back. "You grow boring in your advanced years, Khaleel," she complained.

“What brings you to my establishment, *akhooya*?” one of the men at the table asked, and when Alsandair turned to look at him, the resemblance between he and Kyle was too striking for them not to be related.

“You know of a Kanusian named Munthir Bourguiba?” Kyle asked.

“Son of a diseased jackal!” one of the gamblers proclaimed then turned his head to spit on the floor.

“Safiy, that is a disgusting habit you need to break,” the young woman complained. The spitting man lowered his head, a tight grin on his thin face.

“I know of him,” the man who looked so much like Kyle replied. “Has he taken something that belongs to you?”

“To my friend,” Kyle stated, nudging his chin toward Alsandair.

Dark, fathomless eyes slid to Alsandair. “And he is?”

“Commander Alsandair Farrell of the First Anlusian Guard,” Kyle stated, putting a hand to Alsandair’s shoulder. “He is the betrothed of the one stolen from us.”

A low buzz went about the table in a language Alsandair did not know and he felt the weight of every eye on him.

“Anlusian?” The man sat back in his chair and folded his arms, regarding Alsandair intently. “You are a long way from your home, *sadik*,” he said.

“Who are you?” Alsandair asked.

The man smiled, showing strong white teeth in his dark face. “I am Khalid al-Rashid,” he replied. “Younger brother to Khaleel.”

Alsandair nodded. He’d figured as much.

“Will you help me find Bourguiba and take back my friend’s woman?” Kyle asked.

“Of course,” Khalid replied. He unfolded his arms and got up from the table, the men sitting with him quickly getting to their feet as well. “Give me twenty minutes to—”

“We don’t have twenty minutes!” Alsandair interrupted. “Milady—”

“Will be perfectly safe until Bourguiba arrives at the wadi where he will meet with his buyer,” Khalid interrupted. “He’ll allow no one to touch her since he will want a good price for her.” He looked at Kyle. “She is beautiful?”

“And spirited,” Kyle answered. “You know to whom it is he intends to offer her?”

“Fortunately I do and I have long been seeking a way to rid the world of his vile presence. Until now I have had no reason to go after him.” He grinned and there was sheer malevolence in his black gaze. “Now, I have reason.”

“The man who took my woman belongs to me,” Alsandair said through clenched teeth.

Khalid inclined his head. “And that is as it should be, *sadik*.” He looked at Kyle. “You have mounts?”

“At the stable,” Kyle replied.

Turning to Safiy – the man who had spat on the floor – Khalid rattled off commands in his harsh tongue and all the men save the doorkeeper hurried from the room.

“You have ruined my evening, Khaleel,” the young woman said, flouncing down in a chair.

“Keep her out of mischief, Jubal,” Khalid told the doorkeeper. “Her safety is on your head.”

Jubal bowed respectfully and said something in another language Alsandair had never heard.

Gathering up a wicked-looking scimitar and two daggers from an inlaid cabinet hanging on the wall, Khalid then picked up his heavy black robe and indicated Kyle and Alsandair were to precede him from the room.

Once out in the chill coastal night, Alsandair found the eight men who had been gambling with Khalid already mounted and waiting, three of them holding the leads of the horses meant for their leader, Kyle and Alsandair. Along with them were roughly twenty more riders and each one of them looked as though he was more than capable of murdering an enemy without giving it a thought.

“The one we seek has an hour lead on us, *rabba*,” Safiy told Khalid. “He will take the road to Futuwah.”

“Then we’ll head for Sabil and await him and his buyer,” Khalid announced. He vaulted into the saddle of a magnificent black Rysalian stallion. He shifted to a comfortable position and waited for Kyle and Alsandair to mount. He met his brother’s eye. “It is Prince Ammar al-Shishakli who will journey to the wadi to retrieve the woman.”

“He will come himself?” Kyle asked, surprised at both the name and his brother’s statement.

“He fears no one,” Khalid said with a tight smile, “and believes himself invincible in Midworld.” He tugged on his horse’s reins. “Tonight, I intend he find out such is not the case.”

Alsandair knew vengeance when he heard it in a man’s voice and as Khalid dug his heels into his stallion’s flanks and took the lead, he understood he was with a man much like himself.

Setting a fast pace, Khalid and Kyle rode side by side with Alsandair right behind them on a sorrel that was as fast as the wind. Moving out into the vast desert sands beyond the coastal town of Sulan, only the sound of the horses’ trappings could be heard in the still night air. At such a brisk clip no conversation could be held, but Alsandair had questions tumbling around inside his aching head that he longed to ask.

It was obvious to him that Khalid was a man of power in Sulan. As they had ridden out of town, those who had encountered them stopped to bow respectfully as the tall man went past. His posture was that of someone who expected such deference and knew he would get it.

Reaching up to rub at the pain eating away at his temple, Alsandair could feel the discomfort magnifying with each step his steed took. Though the sorrel was light-footed and his gait was even, the bouncing was doing nothing to lessen the migraine agony. His nausea was once more lurking in his throat and he was afraid he would be required to stop to relieve his gut of the roiling vetch. He doubted Kyle or his brother would halt the men should that happen so he gritted his teeth and forced himself to swallow down the bile threatening to erupt.

For nearly an hour Khalid led them deeper into the desert and when he began slowing—holding his hand up to alert his men—those riding with him slowed their mounts to an easy trot behind him. A few minutes later, Khalid pulled his horse up and turned to say something quietly to his brother. Alsandair took the opportunity to come abreast with them.

Kyle nodded then leaned over to speak to Alsandair, careful his low voice would not carry in the stillness.

“The wadi is just over this next dune. We’ll dismount and go in on foot.”

Alsandair nodded and swung his leg over his steed’s head then dropped lightly to the ground. The pain jolted him like a sledgehammer to his forehead but he kept quiet.

Khalid slid to the sand and handed the reins of his horse to Kyle. He motioned that he would take a look before the others made a move.

Watching the Sulanian move stealthily up the dune then stretch out on his belly to look over it, Alsandair felt the sweat oozing in the center of his palms. It was always a sign that danger was nearby and he was about to move into the threat. He would have preferred to be free of the pain ripping at his skull but he knew he’d not let it incapacitate him in any way.

Gone only a minute or two, when Khalid came back he took Kyle and Alsandair aside.

“There are four men with Bourguiba,” he reported then looked into Alsandair’s eyes. “Your woman and child seem fine.”

“Child?” Alsandair questioned, his brow furrowing.

“Not yours?”

Alsandair shook his head in denial.

Under the faint moonlight overhead Khalid’s face became a brutal mask. “Then it is a boy child destined for al-Shishakli’s seraglio to become an *akroot*.”

“A what?” Alsandair asked.

“*Aerach*,” Kyle translated into Anlusian. When Alsandair just looked at him, Kyle grimaced. “Al-Shishakli will use the boy for sex and turn him into—”

“Aye, Kyle,” Alsandair whispered, his face turning red. “I understand.”

“We will not allow that to happen,” Khalid said.

“Their asses are grass,” Kyle muttered.

“And we have the scythe,” Khalid finished.

It was a warrior’s taunt with which Alsandair was familiar. He saw the brothers grin devilishly at one another then Khalid gave the signal for all of them to move silently up the sandstone rise to await the attack on the slaver and his buyer when al-Shishakli showed up.

For Alsandair, climbing the dune was rough going and it did nothing to help the headache that had now become a clawing nightmare in his brain. Just putting one foot ahead of the other was an excruciating agony. By the time he reached the summit, he hurt so bad even drawing breath intensified the pain.

Crouched side by side, the thirty men made no sound at all as they looked down at the wadi. It was not the rainy season so the streambed was nearly dry. Broom brush speckled the desert floor and a palm grove wound by the depression in the sand where the stream meandered when filled. Sandstone mountains ringed the wadi on three sides and in the moonlight cast a reddish glow back from the campfire around which the slavers sat.

Relieved to see Rylee sitting calmly by the fire—though her wrists and ankles were tied together—and sipping from a cup, he studied her as best he could and did not detect any damage done to her. Her face was lit by the campfire and he could make out no bruises on that creamy countenance. She sat with a small boy huddled against her, the child’s head in her lap, and she appeared to be speaking quietly to her little charge.

Khalid reached over to tap Alsandair on the shoulder then pointed off to their right.

From the west, a party of riders traveled slowly down a serpentine path between two tall rust-colored bluffs. Counting the approaching party, Alsandair reckoned the odds were still in their favor for al-Shishakli had brought only ten men with him. With the slavers numbering nine, he and the men with him still had a clear advantage. Though he was in absolute misery, the berserker in his Anlusian blood began a wild war chant and he became anxious to test his mettle against the newcomers.

“Easy,” he heard Khalid advise.

When all their enemies were congregated at the meeting place and al-Shishakli had been helped down from his large white stallion, Khalid gave the signal and he and his men descended upon the man at the wadi with a piercing cry meant to frighten and throw the enemy into chaos. It worked, for as their attackers came rushing over the dune, the men with the slavers party scattered like ants while al-Shishakli’s men simply crouched over with their weapons drawn, searching back and forth for the threat.

His hand gripping his sword, Alsandair skidded down the dune and made straight for the man who had taken Rylee captive. He had made it clear the bastard was his and no one else was to lay hands to him.

One of Bourguiba’s men made the mistake of stepping in Alsandair’s way in an attempt to prevent him from reaching the slave trader. The man died quietly, his belly opened up with a single flick of Alsandair’s blade.

For just a moment he saw the panic in the Bourguiba's eyes as Alsandair came at him, past the man who had tried to protect him. The Anlusian warrior engaged the slaver in hand-to-hand combat.

Terrified for her lover, Rylee saw fear flit through Bourguiba's gaze before the slaver made the decision to give the fight all he had. He lunged at Alsandair but it was obvious he did not have the skill to defend himself against a man such as his opponent. Soon hopeless resignation replaced the determined look on the slaver's sweating face.

The child beside her sat up to watch the melee taking place in front of them. Rylee managed to loop her arms around the little boy's head and scoot them away from the fire and out of harm's way. It was a hard thing to do for her ankles were lashed securely together—as were the boy's—but she managed to get them both back as far as possible and out of the way of the fighters. Not once did her eyes leave Alsandair as he slashed at the man who had abducted her.

"He is a brave warrior," she said to the child, but she knew the little one did not understand her language. She had been talking to him in a soft, encouraging voice, trying to console him as best she could by tightening her arms around his quaking body.

With his face a horrible mask of cold fury and ruthless resolve, Alsandair drove his enemy back, his sword lightning quick and brutal as he hacked at the other man's clumsily held scimitar. He was unaware the rest of the fighting had stopped around him and that victor and loser alike were watching his merciless attack on his opponent. He continued to chop at his enemy.

"*Shekast!*" the man stumbling back from Alsandair shouted. "*Shekast!*"

Neither Khalid nor Kyle spoke as they watched Alsandair. They could have told him the man was telling his attacker that he was defeated, giving up, but they chose not to. Like the rest of the watchers, they simply stood there and waited, knowing what the eventual end would be.

Though he had taken her against her will, Bourguiba had not hurt Rylee. He had been as courteous to her as any Midworlder man could be to a mere woman, a commodity he had every intention of selling. He had not hit her nor unduly caused her hurt. She felt nothing but contempt for him but the wild fear on his face as he struggled with Alsandair's flashing blade put a touch of guilt in Rylee's soft heart. She called out to him but Kyle was immediately at her side, his dagger in hand, hunkering down to slice the ropes at her ankles and wrists.

"Be quiet, sweeting," Kyle said. "He does what he needs to do."

"But—" she protested, only to have Kyle give her a stern look.

"He does what he needs to do," he repeated, holding her gaze for a moment before reaching out to free the little boy who shrank back from him with a whimper.

"It's all right," Rylee said, trying to soothe the child's fear. "He's a friend."

Kyle spoke quietly to the child in a language the little boy would understand then got to his feet to watch the action that was rapidly coming to a close.

No doubt having realized the man attacking him would not stop, Bourguiba roused himself just enough to meet the last few parries with feeble attempts to protect himself. It was doubtful he even felt the expert slice that separated his head from his torso.

Shielding the little boy from the gruesome sight, Rylee felt her gorge rise and bent her head over the child's as she pressed his face to her bosom, squeezing her eyes shut to the nightmare she knew she would relive in her mind's eye for the rest of her life.

Breathing heavily as he stood there with his sword lowered, his legs spread wide as he surveyed his bloody handiwork, Alsandair turned his head toward Rylee, wanting to be assured she was safe. His head was filled with a savage throbbing and felt as though a white-hot band of molten iron was wrapped around it. He wobbled for a moment then dropped to his knees, the sword falling from his hand and then he pitched forward as his eyes rolled up in his head.

When he came to, he was lying on the cold desert sands with Rylee sitting down beside him, his head in her lap, her fingers smoothing the hair back from his forehead. Around him, men were moving quietly, performing some task he could not see in the dim light of the dying campfire.

"Kyle," he heard Rylee say softly. "He's awake."

The pain was a bit less than it had been while he was fighting but it still plagued him and the nausea seemed ready to erupt at any moment.

"Are you hurting?" Rylee asked.

"Aye," he was able to say.

His head was lifted and something cool was pressed to his lips.

"Drink and don't even think about giving us any more of your shit, Farrell," Kyle grumbled as he hunkered there beside Alsandair.

Unable to do anything save swallow the bitter cherry-flavored liquid that flowed into his mouth, he winced brutally and nearly gagged at the taste of the tenses. He shuddered as the medicine moved down his throat and into his bloodstream like lightning. Almost immediately all resistance left his tense body and he relaxed.

"That was quick," Khalid said. He was standing over Alsandair with his arms crossed over his chest, his lips twitching with amusement.

"Hello," Alsandair said, smiling up at him.

"Greetings, warrior," Khalid replied with a chuckle.

"Are you the bastard who stole my woman?" Alsandair asked in a pleasant voice.

"He's the one who helped get your woman back," Kyle grumbled, and when Alsandair's glazed eyes met his, he arched a brow for the prone man's face had taken on a comical scowl.

"You are the one who tried to take my woman," he accused. "Didn't work, did it?"

Khalid snorted with laughter and turned away to see about the progress of his men as they fashioned a travois to transport Alsandair.

"Go to sleep, Sandy," Rylee said as she caressed his cheek.

"I gotta sleep now, Ry," Alsandair said, nodding.

"That's fine. Just close your eyes and —"

He reached for her hand and tucked it against his chest, holding it over his heart. "Going to sleep now, Ry," he said.

"You do that," Rylee said, and watched his eyes slide shut.

The little boy who sat so close to Rylee their shoulders were touching had his little hands wrapped around her left arm and was staring wide-eyed at the sleeping man. Kyle had told him the man was the betrothed of the woman the child had latched onto with a vengeance and that he was a good man, a brave warrior. When the child asked Kyle a question, Rylee looked up at Kyle.

Kyle crooked his index finger and scratched it up and down his nose, a slight grimace on his face. "He wants to know if the warrior will accept him as your son," Kyle said.

Rylee blinked. "What?"

Kyle spoke quietly to the little boy for a few moments then gave a long sigh. "Bourguiba bought him from his father after his mother died. Apparently the father already had enough mouths to feed and was happy to have one less belly to fill. There are no other relatives for the child to go to."

Rylee glanced at the child. "What will happen to him then?" she asked.

"A state-run orphanage," Khalid said as he came back over to them. "Where anyone can purchase him for whatever purpose they desire."

"The hell with that," Rylee said through clenched teeth. "Tell..." She looked at Kyle. "What is his name?"

Once more Kyle spoke with the child then smiled. "He doesn't know the name of his father so I can not give you a surname but he is called Ataa."

"Which means gift in our Midworld language," Khalid said.

Rylee nodded as though the name was apt. "Tell him that he is now my son and that the warrior will accept him as such."

"You sure about that?" Kyle pressed. "Shouldn't you wait for Sandair to say either yay or nay?"

"I know Sandair and I know he would not allow this child to be thrown away," she said. "We'll just be starting a family a little earlier than planned."

\* \* \* \* \*

Arriving back at the inn in the wee hours of the morning, Kyle and Safiy carried Alsandair up to his room on a makeshift stretcher. The young man was snoring lightly

with one arm hanging off the stretcher while the other was bent over his belly, his head tilted to one side as he slept. Rylee had told them he would be unconscious for several hours and hopefully when he awoke, the headache would have fled.

Climbing the stairs behind Kyle and his limp burden, Rylee had hold of Ataa's small hand. The boy was swinging his head from side to side as he moved up the stairs and was humming to himself. His bare little feet were stomping on the wooden treads like it was a game.

Moving ahead of the men as they made the landing, Rylee went to Alsandair's room and opened the door, half expecting his belongings to be missing for the door had not been locked. But nothing seemed to have been taken and she let go of Ataa's hand so she could smooth the rumpled surface of Alsandair's bed and pulled the covers back.

Ataa was inspecting the room and touching things he no doubt had never seen in his young life. The six-year-old paid little attention to the men as they transferred the unconscious warrior from the stretcher to the bed. He had discovered the close stool behind a fancily carved screen and was staring down into the chamber pot when Rylee came over to him.

"Do you have to go?" she asked, at a loss as how to mimic such a thing with a little boy.

The child looked up at her and cocked his head of black curls to one side.

"*Dastshooyi*," Kyle said from the bed.

Ataa's little face broke into a wide grin and he bobbed his head up and down. Whether or not he had to relieve himself was a moot point for he seemed eager to try out the throne-like chair and was already pushing his tattered cotton pants down to his knobby knees.

Rylee's face flamed and she spun around, leaving the child to his own devices. She met Kyle's amused look and gave him a reprimanding glare.

"I'll teach you a few helpful phrases, Ry," he said, "but it would be best for Ataa to learn Jentu."

She nodded, still feeling the burn in her cheeks. Walking over to the bed as the sounds of urine hitting porcelain echoed from behind the screen, she was grateful Kyle and Safiy had undressed Alsandair and tucked him under the covers.

Ataa came hurrying out from behind the screen and spoke excitedly to Kyle, tugging at Kyle's trousers.

"What is he saying?" Rylee asked. She was running a cool rag over Alsandair's face as he slept.

"He wants to know if he will be allowed to sleep in the same room as you and his father. *Maadar* is mother," Kyle said, "and *pedar* is father." He laughed. "He likes what he calls the piss-pot on legs." He bent over and said something in a soft voice to the boy.

Rylee bit her lower lip. She had every intention of sleeping in the bed beside Alsandair, but having the child there would be awkward. When the boy started jumping up and down and clapping, she looked at Kyle.

"I told him he would sleep with me until we leave Sulan and then he will get an entire room to himself on the ship," Kyle explained. "Such a thing to him is like offering heaven."

Sighing with relief, Rylee smiled at Ataa who came hurrying over to wrap his little arms around her waist and press his cheek to her tummy. He said something then ran over to Kyle who was getting ready to leave the room.

"Ataa said for you to lock the door behind us and not venture forth anymore this night," Kyle translated. "He bids me tell you he is the man of the house until his *pedar* is up and about so you are to do as he says."

Rylee looked up from Alsandair's still face and tried not to smile. "Were you born here in Midworld, Kyle?" she asked, curious about the mysterious man's past and how it was he spoke the language.

Kyle opened the door and ushered Ataa through. "I was Vind Gynr born, dearling," he replied, giving nothing away. "Lock the door behind us."

Long after Kyle and his pint-sized ward had left her, Rylee took her time undressing and climbing into bed beside her lover. The sun was only a few hours away and she had not slept since her ordeal began, but oddly enough she didn't feel tired. All she wanted to do was lie close to Alsandair, put her arm around him and lie there watching him sleep so peacefully.

The covers were soft and inviting as she snuggled down into them and laid her head against Alsandair's shoulder. She slipped her arm over him and beneath her palm she could feel the steady beat of his heart. His face was turned away from her with his lips slightly parted and the light snore that came from his mouth was endearing. Not once in all the years she'd known and loved him had she spent an entire night at his side and it was a heady experience that made her throat close with unshed tears.

Before too many minutes passed, she closed her eyes and sleep claimed her despite her vow to stay awake and watch her lover sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

She came awake to a soft touch upon her breast. Opening her eyes, she looked up into Alsandair's dear face. He put his hand to her breast and smiled as he ran his thumb over her nipple.

"Good morning," he said.

A faint light shined through the window to announce the beginning of the new day.

"Feeling better?" she asked, searching his gaze for the telltale signs of pain.

Lying on his left side next to her, he lightly squeezed her breast. "It feels wonderful," he replied with an upward crook of his left brow.

"You are incorrigible," she told him.

He leaned over until his lips were at her ear. "I am in desperate need of my woman's silken body beneath mine," he whispered, his warm breath sending chills down her side.

"Are you up to it?" she countered.

Releasing his tender grip on her breast, he took her hand and brought it to the hard bulge between his legs. "What do you think, wench?" He rubbed her palm over his erection.

"I'd say you were very up to it," she said, and wrapped her fingers around him. He was completely nude and she knew Kyle and Safiy had not put him to bed that way. At some point while she slept, he had divested himself of his pants.

Alsandair drew in a long breath as his lady's hand massaged him. He was hard and throbbing and ached to slide inside her honeyed warmth. His balls felt as though they were on fire and the need was building in leaps and bounds.

"Easy, milady," he said, stilling her hand on him. "Don't spill the beans just yet."

Rylee giggled. Her man had such wicked little sayings that never failed to amuse her. She took her hand from his steely erection. When he groaned, she sat up in the bed, tossing the covers aside.

"Wench!" he complained, for the room was a bit too cool for comfort.

"You are such a baby," she said. She looked down at his manhood and smiled when it leapt in anticipation.

"I beg to differ," he said in a husky voice. "What you see is all man."

"Lie down," she ordered, putting out a hand to push at his shoulder. "We'll see how much of a man you are, Farrell." She gave him an evil smile. "And just how much you can take before crying quarter."

"Aye?" he asked, scooting over in the bed so he could lie flat. "Are you intending to have your wicked way with me, wench?"

She moved over him and between his legs, pushing his apart with her knees as she knelt there at the apex of his thighs. Leaning forward, she braced her hands on his chest, her fingertips grazing his hard paps. "Tell me what you want," she said.

"You."

Lowering her lips to his right nipple, she lightly clamped her teeth around the puckered nub. She heard him suck in his breath and felt his hips arch toward her. When she ground herself against his straining flesh, he buried his hands in her hair.

"By the gods, wench," he said. "You've no idea what that does to me."

She kissed her way across his chest to his other nipple. He was squirming beneath her, his cock hard against her belly. Nibbling as he often did her, she tongued his pap until he was groaning.

"Wench, please!" he begged.

Rylee grinned and reached down to wrap her fingers around his cock. She continued her fleeting kisses down his chest, over his side, along his hip, across his taut belly and through the crisp curls at the junction of his legs. His hands cupped her head, tousling her hair and when her warm mouth slid down his shaft, he grunted with the sheer pleasure of it.

“Aye, milady,” he whispered. “Take your man.”

Over the years they had been lovers, Rylee knew precisely what things her lover enjoyed, and she had grown very adept at providing him with the satisfaction he craved. She knew the way he liked her tongue to flick over him – to lick, to penetrate, to slide. She knew the tighter she clamped her lips around his swollen head and the stronger she suckled him, the easier she could drive him to mindless panting. His heels were digging into the mattress as he lifted his hips up for her. She could feel the quivering of his legs as he strained not to come as she licked him – dragging her tongue along the entire length of his shaft then flicking it over his head to taste the seepage.

“Rylee,” he groaned, his hands tensing in her hair. It was a warning.

She stopped tormenting his cock and straddled his hips, reaching down to guide him into her moistness. He thrust upward and she was impaled upon him, wriggling against the rock-hard, velvet cock that stretched her and filled her so completely. She ground against him then lifted her sheath until he was almost free of her then slid down him once again.

“Wench!” he gasped, and slapped his hands to her hips, guiding her up and down his shaft as he arched his hips up to meet each downward glide.

He was hard. He was silky. He was hers and his body belonged to her. With each push, each thrust, each sweet slide, each lift of her hips from his, desire built within her until her upper body was coated with a light sheen of perspiration. Heat was flowing between her legs and with every meeting of their genitals she felt the squeeze of her womb welcoming him.

Alsandair felt the throbbing, the pulsing and the grip of her inner muscles just a moment before the eruption of her orgasm washed over his cock. He watched her throw her head back – her waist-length hair falling to tickle his knees – and he pushed hard into her and held.

“Sandair!” she cried out, and ground against him as the quickening claimed her and she oozed sweet liquid around his flesh.

He held her still with his fingers digging into her hips and within a moment his cock was pulsing inside her as her vaginal walls milked him of his seed. He strained upward against her softness and felt her thighs clamp around him. The peaks of her breasts hardened even more and he longed to draw them into his mouth, to suckle her as her sheath was suckling him.

Spent, Rylee trembled as the last quiver rippled through her and she sat there with him deep inside her, her breaths coming in quick, shallow intakes, a light coating of sweat glistening on her skin. Her eyes were closed as she reveled in those last few

movements of his cock until his hardness began to diminish and the slickness of his cum eased him from her.

Alsandair reached up for her and brought her down to his chest, her cheek against his shoulder as he smoothed her hair. "I love you," he said gently.

"And I love you," she answered.

As the brightness of dawn spread over the seaside town, they fell asleep like that—her in his arms and him in her heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the next several days Rylee went nowhere without Alsandair at her side. Between them, a tiny brown hand clutched theirs and a lilting little voice spoke words they didn't understand. Behind them, Kyle and his brother would walk—interpreting the excited phrases Ataa chirped as new clothing and shoes were purchased along with more toys than the little boy had ever known existed. The five of them ate meals together and went sightseeing with Khalid, making sure they had guards near them at all times.

"Bourguiba had no friends. Al-Shishakli had a few friends but many enemies," Khalid had explained. "I doubt one of his few friends will dare to take exception to his death in the desert but we will be careful nonetheless."

It had been Khalid's scimitar that had ended the prince's life that night and as al-Shishakli's blood had seeped into the greedy sand, a reign of evil the likes of which the Midworld had long since feared came to an end. Not a one of either his men or Bourguiba's survived Khalid's attack, but Kyle's brother wasn't taking any chances with the lives of his new friends.

"*Samanie Bazi Atfal!*" Ataa said, pointing to a group of carved wooden soldiers.

"You've got enough toys," Kyle said sternly then laughed when Ataa tugged at Alsandair's hand and led him into the shop where the brightly colored toy soldiers were displayed.

"He's spoiling that boy," Khalid told Rylee who had shaken her head and let go of Ataa's hand as the child and her lover entered the store.

"Aye, he is," Rylee agreed.

Alsandair had quietly embraced the idea of Ataa joining them. Not once had he protested when Rylee had told him her plan to take the little boy with them and to claim him as their own. He had simply smiled and taken her into his arms.

"I think he remembers being a child whose parents rarely had time for him. For him to think a child was sold, was about to be given into the hands of a man who would defile him, hurts his tender heart," she explained. "Let him spoil Ataa. Both are enjoying the spoiling."

Khalid had sighed deeply, but in his eyes was the same tenderness she'd witnessed in Alsandair's and—truth be told—in Kyle's.

On the day Captain Andelton sent word that the *Mary Constance* was taking on the last of its return cargo and would be weighing anchor for home the next day, it was with sadness that Rylee and Alsandair bid Khalid goodbye.

“You will always have a safe haven here,” Khalid assured them. “Do not hesitate to return. You are under the protection of the al-Rashid family.”

Alsandair had thanked the Midworlder still once more for his help in rescuing Rylee and had bid Khalid to come visit them. Rylee and he then left the two brothers to say their goodbyes to one another and had gone back to the inn to pack for the trip home.

## Chapter Ten

Once the *Mary Constance* was well out to sea, Captain Andelton performed the Joining ceremony over Alsandair and his lady since they had had trouble finding a local priest who would marry them without the banns being posted, a sufficient amount of time having passed and a rather substantial tithe being offered.

Kyle and Sedric Bonny, the first mate, stood witness – as did the entire ship’s crew. As the sun set, the sailors were playing hornpipes and concertinas and dancing jigs in celebration of the Joining. Ataa was running about and enjoying all the merriment as he tried his hand at following the dance steps. A portion of rum was given to each man and Briarly, the ship’s steward, brought out a couple of fruit cakes he had baked for the occasion. By the time the festivities ended, Alsandair lay in his bunk with Rylee at his side and a content smile on his handsome face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ataa stood looking up at the small, bare-chested man who was scurrying up the rigging like a monkey and would have scrambled up behind him had not Bonny put out a staying hand and shook his head to deny the child the pleasure.

“Uncle!” Ataa complained, his little face turned to one side, his lips thrust out in a pout, his eyes beseeching, long lashes batting like a woman’s.

“No,” Bonny said. “Absolutely not.”

“Humph,” Ataa snorted. “Bad uncle. Bad, bad uncle!”

The small boy had many uncles aboard the ship and went around to each with his complaint of not being allowed to climb the rigging, but not a one of them would give in to his angelic face or his nut-brown bare foot that he stamped. At last he ran off in search of the lady who had become his new mother.

“Fearless,” Kyle commented to the captain.

“Did you have fear of your own mortality at that age, milord?” Andelton inquired.

“Probably not,” Kyle replied. “I once tried to charm a cobra with a homemade flute.”

Andelton whistled around the stem of his pipe. “Not the brightest of playtime activities I’d think.”

“Lucky for me someone came by and killed the viper else I would have been speared for sure,” Kyle laughed.

“Were you in Midworld when that happened?” Andelton questioned.

Kyle shrugged but didn't answer. "Do you think he's all right?" he asked, the point of his chin arched toward the man who stood farther down the rail from them.

The captain of the *Mary Constance* glanced that way. "He's a very private man," he replied.

"He's too quiet for my taste today," Kyle admitted.

Alsandair gave no indication that he was listening to the men discussing him. He was leaning against the rail with his elbow on the polished teakwood surface—his favorite spot on a ship—his hands clasped together as he stared out at the rolling waves. He'd been there for over an hour while he waited for Rylee to finish her morning ablutions and join him to break their fast. Andelton and Kyle had already eaten, insisting Ataa sit down and join them despite the boy's eagerness to be running about the decks.

"*Pedar!*" Ataa had whined, but Alsandair had shaken his head.

"You must do as your uncles say," the warrior told the child in a firm voice before ruffling his dark curls. "Understand?"

Ataa agreed he did and had then eaten enough food for four children as Alsandair sat with them and had a cup of coffee.

"Though it doesn't appear as if he is, he's keeping an eye on the bratling," the captain observed. "Did you notice?"

Kyle nodded. "He's growing very fond of the boy. That surprises me."

Andelton took the pipe from his mouth and knocked the ashes out into the sea. "Why?"

"He didn't strike me as being the fatherly type but I am relieved to know he has the makings within him. Rylee has already lost her heart to the little rascalion."

"My men have as well," Andelton said. "I will miss him." He tucked his pipe back into its leather case then pocketed it. "Did you enjoy your stay in Midworld?"

"I had more adventure than I was counting on," Kyle said. "But I was able to see friends I had not planned on seeing."

"And family?" the captain nudged.

Kyle cocked a blond brow. "Nothing gets by you, does it?"

"From the moment I met you, I knew you were related to Khalid al-Rashid," Andelton replied. "I once saw his mother when she was visiting him and I assume she is your mother as well."

"She was," Kyle said softly. "She passed away two years back."

"I am sorry to hear that." He scratched his chin. "Al-Rashid is a man many fear," Andelton said. "He has power even the caliph envies."

"Yet he insists on living in that squalid tavern with his men," Kyle said on a long sigh. "I've never understood that."

"I heard several men died out in the desert," the captain remarked. "Such justice is mentioned only in passing since those who met their just rewards were men others believed as evil as they come." He turned to look at Alsandair. "Did he deal death to one of those men?"

"To two of them," Kyle said. "And I think it bothers him that he did so in a manner that put a touch of unease even in my brother."

"He let his temper rule him," Andelton said.

"It was black rage, my friend," Kyle stated. "As black and as cold as I've ever seen it. I would not like to be on the receiving end of his sword, believe me."

Alsandair didn't think they knew he could hear every word they said since he was downwind of them. Hearing them discuss the men he had killed—and especially listening to Kyle recount the fury with which he'd taken the slaver's life—brought that night back to him with clarity. It had been a moment when he had lost all control and he didn't like to think of himself in that way.

"Ready?"

He turned to see Rylee coming toward him, a bright smile on her lovely face. He straightened up. "Why don't we bypass the meal and I'll nibble on you?" he asked as she reached his side.

"Look good enough to eat, do I?" she asked with a giggle as she threaded her arm through his.

"Always," he replied. "I—"

"Sail ho!"

Everyone looked up at the crow's nest. The sailor perched there was pointing to starboard.

Captain Andelton took a spyglass from one of the men and leveled it in the direction the sailor had indicated. He stiffened and whispered, "Black sails."

"Pirates?" Kyle asked in a low voice.

"It's the *Vengeance des Raven*," Andelton said, his shoulders sagging. "I recognize the raven carved on her masthead."

"One of the Corsair brothers' vessels," Kyle said softly. "From Wicklaw Cay."

"Aye," the captain said. He turned to give Alsandair a steady look. "Get the lady and child below, Commander."

Rylee's hand tightened on Alsandair's arm. "What's wrong?"

"Ataa!" Alsandair called out to the boy. "Come with us." When the child made no move to do as he was told, Alsandair shouted, "Now, mister!"

"Sandy?" Rylee asked.

"The ship coming at us isn't friendly," was all he said. "I want you and Ataa below and out of sight."

Rylee knew enough about sea travel to understand the dangers of pirates and with the orders being given and the scurrying of the sailors on deck, she knew there was danger coming at them. She took Ataa's hand when he ran up to them and headed for the hatchway.

Garnet Ruck, the *Mary Constance's* cabin boy, rushed to them as they stepped off the ladder. "This way, milady!" the young man said, motioning with his hand. "We've a good place for you to hide."

"Hide?" Rylee asked.

"Go," Alsandair said. "Keep the boy quiet."

Exchanging a worried look with her husband, Rylee allowed Ruck to guide her and Ataa to safety. When Alsandair turned to go, she called out to him.

"Be careful, Sandair!"

Alsandair nodded and hurried to his cabin to retrieve his sword. He shoved a dagger into his boot, one into the waistband of his pants and slung the sword over his shoulder. Above him, the clamor on the deck was growing louder and the unmistakable sound of the ship's guns being readied shook the ceiling above him. He knew from conversations with the captain that the main protection of the *Mary Constance* was in her speed but he doubted she could outrun and outmaneuver a stripped-down ship captained by a seasoned pirate.

"I've been lucky in that in the twenty-two years I've been plying the seas, I've never once ran afoul of pirates."

Well, Alsandair thought, the good captain's boast was about to be laid to rest. He drew his sword from the scabbard over his back.

The first shot across the *Mary Constance's* bow came as Alsandair came up on deck. His hand tightened around his sword as he watched the black pirate vessel closing on them.

"Cap'n?" Bonny inquired. He had the wheel and he knew he'd be the first to meet his doom if they tried to escape the pirates. A ship without a helmsman, floundering in circles, was an easy target to snare.

Andelton was staring at the one hundred or so scruffy men lining the decks of the other ship and he shook his head. "They've got us outmanned, Sedric. Have the men stand down."

"What of my lady?" Alsandair asked. "Her safety and the child's—"

"All we can do is hope to bargain with their captain," Andelton said. "Mayhap he'll allow you to ransom her." He turned apologetic eyes to Alsandair. "Don't let on you're a military man. He'll gut you right off."

"Aye, and mayhap he'll rape her first then turn her over to his men," Alsandair said through clenched teeth.

"That's Andre Corsair's ship," the captain said. "He's not like some of his ilk. Now if it were his brother Louis, then things would be about as bad as they could get."

"They aren't now?" Alsandair scoffed.

"I've heard of Andre Corsair," Kyle said. "He's about as close to a gentleman pirate as they come, Sandair. Don't do anything rash and pray they will let us ransom Rylee." He looked at Andelton. "You know they are going to take your ship and set us adrift."

"They might," Andelton said, resigned. "Then again, they may take us as hostages too." He glanced at Alsandair. "Put down your weapon, son. Don't take a chance they'll come after you."

Hating to lower his sword, Alsandair stared defiantly across the water as the pirate ship got close enough for her crew to throw grappling hooks over the railing of the *Mary Constance*. His dark stare met that of the man he reckoned to be the leader of the ragtag band of thieves and he thought he saw a smirk on the man's deeply tanned face.

"Put it down, Sandair!" Kyle hissed at him, reaching out to slap his hand on Alsandair's arm. "There's a quarrel with your name on it just waiting to fly!"

Against his better judgment and his warrior instincts, Alsandair bent down to lay his sword on the deck.

"The blades too," Kyle hissed.

Cursing beneath his breath, Alsandair placed his two daggers atop the sword and stood up slowly. He flinched as the first grappling hook came arcing over the side of the ship and the prong buried itself deeply into the teak.

As the pirates came swarming over the side of the *Mary Constance*, the captain and his crew huddled together, pushing Kyle and Alsandair into their midst.

The man who swung over to the deck of Andelton's ship behind his crew wore a pair of tight-fitting black leather britches that molded to his long legs like a second skin. His billowing white shirt was open to the waist to reveal a muscular chest pelted with dark hair. With the sleeves rolled up to display brawny arms and the scarlet headband that held his shoulder-length black hair back from his face, he was every inch the pirate of legend. From the golden hoop in his left ear to the deadly looking dagger at his hip, he was a formidable sight as he let go of the rope and dropped gracefully to the deck.

It wasn't so much the swagger that irritated Alsandair as the man came toward them. Had he been asked, he would have dismissed the notion that the neatly clipped goatee and mustache, the broad shoulders and the capable-looking hands brought out the anger in him. Nor was it a face he had to begrudgingly admit was fairly handsome that aggravated him. What annoyed Alsandair the most were the gleaming white teeth exposed behind a taunting grin and a sardonically lifted eyebrow aimed right at Alsandair. He longed to smash his fist into that gloating mouth and relieve the grinner of more than a handful of teeth.

"So," the pirate inquired in Jentu as he pushed aside three men so he could stand directly in front of Alsandair. "What is it you have that is so precious you would dare to take up arms against a Corsair brother?"

"He didn't know who—" Andelton began, but when Andre Corsair held up a staying hand, the captain shut up.

"Who are you, my friend?" Andre asked, his black-as-soot eyes boring into Alsandair's.

"Alsandair Farrell," came the reply from a tightly clenched jaw. "And I am not your—"

"Kyle Striker," the man at Alsandair's side said, stepping forward to draw the pirate's notice. "Brother of Khalid al-Rashid."

Andre's dark peaked brows shot up. "Are you really?"

Kyle nodded. "I ask—in my brother's name—that you allow us to be on our way."

The pirate regarded Kyle for a moment. "Aye, I can see the resemblance." He folded his arms over his chest. "You realize of course the cargo and ship are now mine."

"Aye, but do you really need the ship?" Kyle asked.

Andre Corsair shrugged. "No, but it is a worthy vessel and would bring much on the block." He glanced around. "Where's the woman I spied earlier on deck?"

Alsandair tensed and would have stepped up to the pirate but Kyle blocked him.

"Captain Corsair," Kyle said. "The lady is a newlywed and—"

"To him?" Andre inquired, giving Alsandair an insulting look then shook his head. "Surely she could have done better than this one. In the eyepiece of my glass she was a stunning woman with a lush shape."

"Don't talk about my wife like that!" Alsandair snarled.

"I'll talk about her however I like," the pirate said with a snort. "I have command of this ship."

Alsandair raised his chin. "If it is a duel you want—"

"Sandair, hush!" Kyle snapped.

Andre threw back his head and laughed, his crew joining in with loud, raucous guffaws. They were grinning as though they knew something the men of the *Mary Constance* did not. As the laughter died down, the pirate spoke in a language Alsandair did not know and one of the pirate's men started below.

"Leave her alone!" Alsandair bellowed, and would have attacked the pirate had Kyle not grabbed him on one side and Briarly on the other, holding him back.

"Quite a temper has this little Anlusian," Andre chuckled. He cocked his head to one side. "You are Anlusian, aren't you, boy?"

"I'm not a boy," Alsandair grated, struggling to break free of Kyle and Briarly's holds.

"Is that lovely redhead an Anlusian filly too?" Andre countered. He stepped up toe to toe with Alsandair. "Is she a natural redhead?"

"Get out of my face, you bastard," Alsandair growled.

"I've never bedded a true redhead," the pirate continued, almost nose to nose with the man he was taunting. "Is the fleecy down between her thighs as fiery as the rest of her lovely hair?"

Cursing the man before him, Alsandair bucked against those holding him and would have kicked the pirate had not Rylee's voice broke through his irrational fury.

"Sandair, don't!" she shouted.

The pirate crew moved back as the woman in question was drawn forward by the crewman who had gone below to ferret out her hiding place and bring her to his captain. Her upper arm was in the man's tight grip but his left eye was swelling shut and there were deep furrows down his arms where his captive had scored him with her nails.

"Rylee, for the love of the gods—" Kyle began, but already she was heading for the pirate leader.

"Leave my husband alone, you brute," she snapped.

Andre was staring at her with eyes wide and lips parted. He'd only viewed her from a distance through the spyglass and even then he had thought her magnificent. Standing close to her, he realized she was far more beautiful than he had anticipated. Seeing her up close hit him like a rack of stones had been dropped on him.

"Milady," he said, sweeping her a deep bow. "I am your devoted servant."

Rylee's heart was thundering in her chest for she realized the precariousness of the situation. She knew next to nothing about pirates save that they were a bloodthirsty, evil bunch known to rape and ravage and pillage, brutally murder and had no compunction about doing any of that. She was shivering as she was brought before the man who was obviously the pirate leader. She had not expected him to bow to her or to be so—well, handsome.

"What are your intentions, sir?" she heard herself ask, and winced at the fear in her voice.

Andre flung out a hand and the man holding Rylee's arm released her immediately and stepped back. The pirate leader stepped up to her and took her hand in his, bringing it to his chest. "You, milady, deserve only the very best and I intend to see you get it."

"Get your gods-be-damned hands off my woman!" Alsandair spat.

It wasn't that Kyle and Briarly had relaxed their hold on Alsandair or that they had lost a modicum of their concentration that made it possible for the man they were holding to break free. What broke their hold was the snapping of their captive's restraint and the nearly insane fury that turned him into something not quite human. Before they could stop him, Alsandair had thrown himself on Andre Corsair and both men went crashing to the deck in a tangled heap of flailing arms and punishing fists.

Reaching out to drag Rylee back from the fight, Kyle winced as one particularly vicious blow rocked the pirate's head before Corsair managed to get in one of his own that knocked his opponent back against a spar.

"Stop them, Kyle!" Rylee pleaded, struggling to get away from Kyle.

"I can't," Kyle said.

No man there would have stepped between the two fighters. Crowding back and away from the combatants, pirates and crew of the *Mary Constance* alike recognized true fury when they saw it. Evenly matched in size and height, and each intending to do as much damage to the other as was humanly possible, the men crashed into one another time and again. Despite the situation, men will be men and those gathered began to make bets on the outcome.

Alsandair staggered after one particularly brutal blow and went down to one knee, his hand skidding along the deck. He looked down as his fingers touched the hilt of one of his daggers. He snatched it up and got to his feet.

"Sandair, no!" Rylee shouted. She tried to get away from Kyle's hold but he held her easily.

Andre Corsair backed away from the threat now crouched in fighting stance before him. He smiled nastily and his hand went to the dagger at his belt. "Are you any good with that?" he taunted Alsandair as he drew his blade.

"You're about to find out," Alsandair snarled, his eyes narrowed, lips drawn back. He lunged forward.

The clash of steel rang out over the deck as one man parried and the other blocked. Across the deck they hacked at one another, neither getting the upper hand, each as expert with his blade as was the other.

"I believe you're a soldier," Andre commented as his opponent drove him back and he had to whirl around a mast to keep from having his belly sliced open. "An Anlusian Guard, perhaps?"

"I believe you're a coward," Alsandair returned. "Why do you keep backing away?"

Men of the pirate crew gasped at the insult but Andre merely laughed. He drove forward with his blade and the edge caught Alsandair's. They were chest to chest with their blades pressed between them.

"You aren't going to win, boy," Andre said in a low voice no one but Alsandair could hear.

"I'll die trying," Alsandair growled.

"Aye, but that I won't allow because it might break yon lady's tender heart and I've no desire to spend the rest of my life easing her sorrow. I'd rather be making slow love to her."

Rage fell over Alsandair's face and he pushed his enemy away, slashing out with his dagger, but Andre jumped back, grinning like a mischievous schoolboy. He kept well back from Alsandair's flashing blade, playing keep-away around the tall spars, feigning striking with his blade only to dance away and leap to a crate out of the way.

"Stand and fight, you bastard!" Alsandair bellowed, and tried to swipe his blade across the other man's shins but the pirate jumped up in the air and did a very graceful back somersault off the crate, landing easily on the balls of his feet.

“By the gods,” Captain Andelton said as the men of his crew drew in shocked gasps of breaths.

Skirting the crate, Alsandair went after the pirate and once more their blades clashed with a loud skirling of metal. Both men were tiring but neither was willing to cry quarter and so they fought on—dancing across the deck like the warriors they were.

“Kyle, please,” Rylee begged him. Tears were flowing down her cheeks for she expected one of the pirate leader’s men to ventilate Alsandair’s back at any moment. It was while she was looking at Kyle, pleading with him, that Alsandair fell. She knew it was him and not the pirate at the very moment it happened and whipped her head around, her eyes wide and her mouth open in shock.

Alsandair went down hard, tripping over a coil of line that lay on the deck. The breath was knocked from his body and as he struggled to breathe, to get up, to continue with the fight, his opponent put a booted foot to Alsandair’s chest and pushed him down, shifted his foot to trap his opponent’s dagger hand to the deck. Bending over, he put the tip of his blade to Alsandair’s throat.

“It’s over, boy,” Andre said, and dug the tip of the steel just a little into his enemy’s flesh. “Ask quarter and I’ll let you live.”

His eyes flashing dark fire, Alsandair clenched his teeth together, a muscle jumping in his jaw. The pirate was leaning over him, speaking so softly no one else could hear.

“Don’t let her see you die like this,” Andre told him. “Live to fight me another day.”

“Go to hell,” Alsandair said, still gasping to drag breath into his depleted lungs.

Rylee stamped her foot down hard on Kyle’s instep and the gambler released her with a grunt of pain. Before anyone could stop her, she ran across the deck, stopping at Andre Corsair’s side and putting out a trembling hand to stay what she thought was to be her husband’s execution.

“Please, milord,” she said, drawing the pirate’s eyes to her. “Let him live and I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Shut up, Rylee!” Alsandair hissed, and would have struggled up but the pirate lashed out with a perfectly timed left hook and pulled the stars down from the heaven for Alsandair Farrell. The young warrior went out as darkness enveloped him.

“Sandair!” Rylee cried out, and dropped to the deck.

“He’s merely unconscious, milady. I’ve bruised his jaw and his ego, nothing more,” Andre said. He glanced at a man standing near him. “Tie the little bastard up and put him and the rest of them in the jolly boats and lower them over the side.”

Rylee looked up at him. “Please, don’t do that! Let them go on their way. I said I would do whatever you—”

Andre reached down and took her arm to help her up. He shook his head as she would have continued her protest. “Milady, this isn’t entirely about you,” he said

gently. "We came for the ship and its cargo." He smiled, his eyes roaming over her flushed face. "Finding you merely sweetened the deal."

"Don't put them adrift," Rylee pleaded. "I've heard of men dying out on the ocean."

"There will be ships coming by within the next few days," Andre told her. "I'll leave them enough water to last them."

"Please," she said, her lips trembling. "Isn't there some place safe to which you can take them?"

"Clare Island is nearby," Captain Andelton spoke up. "Could you not at least take us close to it before putting us in the boats? We have a child with us."

The pirate captain frowned. "A child?"

"My little boy," Rylee said. She was aware the strong hand that held her did so gently and that his thumb was smoothing up and down her arm.

"Yours and his?" Andre queried.

"A child we adopted from Midworld," Rylee said.

Andre looked away from her to Kyle and spoke to the gambler in the language of that land. When Kyle answered in the same language, casting her a stern look, Rylee stilled, looking from one man to the other. The pirate was quiet for so long, she became afraid.

"Milord, please—" she began, but he held up a hand.

"You have a generous heart, milady," he said. He glanced at Alsandair. "And apparently he does as well."

"He is a good man," Kyle said, "and can be counted as a personal friend of my brother Khalid al-Rashid."

Andre smiled slightly. "You love to drop that name, don't you?"

"I merely wish for you to know that—"

The pirate cut Kyle off with a chuckle. "Aye, I know. The warrior is under al-Rashid's protection." He winked. "I think you've made that abundantly clear so do not belabor the point."

"So noted," Kyle replied.

"I'd take the boy with us but I doubt you want him to live the life of a pirate," Andre said.

Rylee shook her head for she was staring into Andre Corsair's eyes—too frightened to say anything as he regarded her. There was no indication on his handsome face to give her a hint as to what he was thinking. His thumb was still rubbing gently along her arm and when he drew in a long breath then exhaled slowly, releasing her arm as he did, he looked away from her.

“Take milady aboard the *Vengeance des Raven* and make her comfortable in my quarters, Gaston,” he told one of his men, an older pirate who wore a scruffy beard. “Show her every consideration due a lady of her breeding.”

“Aye, aye, Captain!” the man responded. The man stepped up to Rylee and sketched her a clumsy bow before extending a hand toward the side of the ship. “This way, milady.”

“Captain Corsair – Kyle began, a warning in his tight voice.

“I will treat her with respect,” Andre said. “Have no fear on that account.”

Kyle lifted his chin. “You intend to make her your own?”

Rylee held her breath, waiting for that answer. She had yet to move from the pirate’s side.

Andre turned his black gaze on her. “Aye, since she has already said she will do whatever I want.” He reached out to cup her cheek, ignoring the flinch that shook her body. “Isn’t that what you said if I spared your husband’s life?”

Rylee was trembling beneath the pirate’s soft touch. “Aye,” she agreed in a hushed voice. “I did.” It was all she could do not to scream as the pad of his thumb eased over her lower lip.

“What is your name, precious?” he asked.

“R-Ree,” she replied. “Rylee Farrell.”

“Rylee,” he repeated as his eyes traveled over her thick red hair. “The given name suits you but the surname will have to go.”

“What?” she gasped.

“On Wicklaw Cay the Privateer Brotherhood is the law. I will petition them to set aside your Joining and then I will take you as my wife,” he told her.

“You can’t do that!” she protested.

“Oh but I can.” His smile was deadly. “Rylee Corsair has a far better ring to it than Rylee Farrell, don’t you agree?”

Rylee’s trembling changed to quivering rage and she lifted her hand to slap the smile from his face but he caught her wrist and brought it down and around behind her back, pulling her to his hard chest.

“His life hangs in the balance here, precious,” he said, the smile gone from his face. “His life as well as the lives of those on this ship. If you want me to cut his throat and set the others adrift, I will do that.” He pulled her even closer so she could feel the jut of his shaft on her belly. “Otherwise, go quietly with Gaston and we’ll speak no more of it.”

There was really no choice. Rylee could not risk the chance of something happening to Alsandair. She lowered her head – hating the man holding her with every fiber of her being.

“Good,” the pirate said, releasing her. “Now that’s settled, Satordi, tie the warrior up so he will keep his ass out of mischief. Sail as close to Clare Island as you dare then put him and the other men into the boats and set them down.”

“Aye, aye, Captain!” Satordi replied.

“Gaston, escort the lady to my ship.”

A wide plank had been laid across the distance between the pirate ship and the *Mary Constance* and it was over this that Gaston took Rylee, swinging her up into his arms as though she weighed no more than an infant, reassuring her as the plank wobbled and she cried out in fear. As he set her down on the deck of the *Vengeance des Raven*, she thought her legs would give out beneath her.

“Steady as she goes, milady,” Gaston said, making sure she didn’t stumble.

Looking back at the *Mary Constance*, Rylee felt her world crashing down around her. The crew was being forced over to the two eighteen feet long jolly boats, her still unconscious husband dangling limply from the hands of Kyle and the captain. She was terrified he had a concussion. Ataa was being held in Briarly’s arms and the little boy waved at her, no sign of fear on his dark face. Apparently Kyle had said something to reassure the child for Ataa had a broad smile on his face as though he were having a grand adventure.

With men from his crew in charge of the *Mary Constance*, Andre hopped up on the plank and came over to his ship with a surefootedness Rylee couldn’t help but admire. Remembering the somersault off the crate, she thought him perhaps an acrobat as well as a pirate. When Gaston would have taken her arm to guide her below, she pulled back.

“Get us under way, Mr. LeRouge,” Andre told Gaston. “I’ll escort milady.”

“Rylee!” It was a forlorn shout that drew every eye to the *Mary Constance*.

The last sight Rylee had of her husband was him struggling as he fought the hands trying to restrain him, his face turned to her with another shout echoing across the water.

“Rylee!”

## Chapter Eleven

Sitting primly on the seat edge of an oversized chair in the luxurious cabin of her abductor, Rylee had twisted her fingers together in her lap. The man across the room from her was pouring two goblets of wine from a decanter that sat upon a heavily carved sideboard no doubt bolted to the cabin wall. He moved with all the confidence of a well-heeled host, saying nothing to her but surreptitiously watching her from the corner of his eye. When he turned and came toward her, she tensed, fearing the lethal calmness that might otherwise have intrigued her had it been under different circumstances.

"I don't want that," she said.

"Humor me," he told her, and held the wine goblet out to her.

"Getting me drunk will not make this wretched situation any the better for me," she stated.

"No, but perhaps it will calm you down a bit before you jump out of your skin," he said. Once more he extended the wine goblet.

Looking up into his inscrutable dark gaze, she saw something that made her think better of denying him a second time. She took the wineglass but did not take a sip of the rosy liquid.

Andre went over to the loveseat and sat down, placing one arm along the back as he relaxed, crossing his right ankle over his left knee before taking a sip of his wine. He regarded her from under lashes far too long and far too thick to belong to a man.

"I am not an ogre, precious," he said softly.

"Please do not call me that," she asked. "I am nothing to you. I—"

"You will be my wife and when you are, you will be the most precious thing in the world to me," he interrupted her.

"I refuse your suit," she said, lifting her chin.

Andre sighed and leaned forward to put his wine goblet on the long table sitting before the loveseat. When he straightened up, he gave her a stern look. "Milady, you can refuse all you like. I rather like feisty women." His gaze hardened. "Up to a point, that is. After that, they are more nuisance than enjoyment."

"I struck a bargain with you and I will adhere to that bargain," she said. "My heart will always be with my husband and—"

"And I could turn this ship around and go back for him," he snapped. When she flinched at his tone, he pressed his advantage. "I could bring him aboard the *Vengeance des Raven* and keelhaul him. Do you know what that is?"

Rylee's heart was thudding painfully against her rib cage and she could do no more than shake her head in answer.

"We keelhaul men who deserve a punishment a bit harsher than a mere flogging," he told her and his foot bobbed up and down with what she knew was irritation. "It is a penalty we don't need to use that often but there is a rope looped under the keel, the belly of my ship. The unlucky man sentenced to keelhauling will be stripped naked, have his wrists tied together and then he will be thrown overboard on one side of the ship then drawn up the other, being dragged beneath the belly of the ship." He tilted his head. "Is he a good swimmer?"

Rylee's face drained of its color. Although Alsandair could swim, he was very claustrophobic and being under water for any length of time was hard for him.

"Of course there are barnacles under the keel and the hapless fellow's skin will come into contact with those sharp—often razor-thin—edges which tend to scrape the hell out of flesh. Naturally his cuts and scrapes bleed and if there's a shark lurking about, the flow of blood will draw it as we're pulling the man back up."

"Stop!" she said, feeling sick to her stomach.

"Then we take him to the bow and start the procedure over," Andre lied. "Dragging him from bow to stern under the keel takes about three minutes. If he's a good swimmer he might be able to hold his breath that long." He shrugged. "If not, he'll drown."

"Don't!" she pleaded, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Either way, you'll be a widow if I go after him because if he doesn't drown beneath my ship, I'll gut him when they bring him back up," he said brutally.

Defeated, Rylee slumped in the chair, drawing her legs up and tucking them beneath her, turning her head into the chair's winged span as she gave in to her crying.

Andre sat where he was for a long time then got up and went to her, hunkering down before her chair. He put a tentative hand on her leg, and when she didn't flinch or stiffen, he lightly squeezed her calm muscle.

"I am offering you something I've never offered another woman, Rylee," he said quietly. "I will be a good husband to you. I will care for you. I will protect you. I will lay the world at your feet."

Her eyes red rimmed, she lifted her head and turned to look at him, tears spiking her long lashes. "Why?" she asked, confusion and hopelessness mixed in her strained voice. "Why me?"

He put his hand to her face and cupped it gently. "Because long ago a Romney woman read my fortune from a deck of stained cards and told me I would take one look at the woman the Fates meant for me. She said I would lose my heart to her for as long as I lived and into the world beyond." He smiled gently. "I saw you through the spy glass and..." He shrugged again as though there were nothing else he could say. "I'll never hurt you, precious. I will never let anyone else hurt you."

"I belong to another man and I always will," she said, trying one last time to make him understand her heart was already taken and nothing he did could change that.

The pirate removed his hand. "No, precious. You belong to me," he said, and got to his feet.

Rylee watched him leave the cabin, shutting the door softly behind him. She heard the unmistakable sound of a key thrusting into a lock and knew he had locked her in.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gaston LeRouge had known his captain since Andre Corsair was but a boy in knee pants. He had watched the man the Privateer Brotherhood called *Le Livreur de Glace*—The Iceman—grow to manhood and into becoming one of the most feared pirates to ply the seas. Only the captain's brother Louis had a reputation nearly as formidable as Andre Corsair's.

"I'll take the wheel for a while," Andre told his helmsmen.

Sitting on a keg as he had been chewing the fat with the helmsmen, Gaston—the first mate of the *Vengeance des Raven*—silently regarded his captain as Andre took over the navigational duties.

"You've something you want to say, Gaston?" Andre asked, not even looking at the older man.

Before replying, the wizened man leaned over and took up a used tin cup. "She has the most beautiful hair I've ever seen," Gaston observed. He spat tobacco juice into the cup then set the cup down again.

"Aye, she does," Andre agreed. His thick black hair was blowing in the breeze, his ebony eyes squinting as he kept his ship on course.

"Anlusian, is she?"

Andre nodded. "You can tell by the brogue." He cut his eyes across to Gaston. "A melodic sound in a female but it sounds stupid coming from a male."

"I've always thought so too," Gaston said. "I imagine her temper is as fiery as that pretty hair."

Andre grunted.

The men said nothing for a few moments then Gaston took up his cup to spit his wad of tobacco into it. He then tossed the contents of the cup overboard.

"There you go polluting the sea again," Andre said with a sigh.

"No worse than the piss and shit from every country in the world draining into it, I'm reckoning. As it is, I'm merely giving the sharks a little treat they can chew on instead of some hapless fish," Gaston said, his mustaches twitching.

"Not only polluting the sea but addicting its denizens," Andre scoffed.

His rheumy brown eyes locked on the younger man, Gaston said, "You know it won't be legal in the eyes of man or the high sheriff if you have the Brotherhood set aside her Joining."

"Our marriage will be legal on Wicklaw Cay and that's all that matters," Andre said.

"As long as she stays on Wicklaw Cay."

A muscle ground in Andre's jaw. "She will."

"And you don't think that boy will come after her?" Gaston asked.

"He'd best not."

Gaston shook his head. "Andy, son, you're deluding yourself if you think you'll be able to keep her without there being one helluva duel between you and him." He cocked a sparse brow. "If you were in his boots, would you just leave things as they are and not try to take her back?"

Andre didn't answer. He looked to the stern of his ship to see the captured vessel following in his wake. It was a good catch and the cargo one that could easily be sold and a stiff profit made. Idly he wondered if Louis had fared as well.

"Don't answer me then," Gaston said, getting to his feet. "I suppose you'll do what you'll do."

Watching the old man amble off—the rolling gait of his bowlegs looking almost painful—Andre felt the tug on his heartstrings that had been there for nearly as long as he'd known Gaston. He bore great affection for Gaston LeRouge, even if that wasn't the aged sailor's real name.

Giles DuPree, the ship's cook, came to tell his captain the noon meal was ready.

"LeFrois!" Andre called out to the helmsmen. "Come take the wheel."

Going below to fetch the woman he had stolen—and he had to admit that was exactly what he'd done since thieving was his stock and trade—he dug into his pocket to extract the door key. When he swung open the portal, he grinned for the lady in question was curled up on the loveseat, her hands tucked beneath her head, sound asleep.

He felt a momentarily pang of guilt knowing she'd cried herself to sleep.

Easing the door shut, he walked quietly over to her and stood looking down at her beautiful face. The salty tracks of her tears were still on her cheeks, giving evidence of her sadness. Her coral lips were parted with just a hint of white and even teeth showing. Her knees were drawn up and she had kicked off her slippers. The sight of those sweet little toes peeking out from the hem of her skirt did strange things to his lower body. He could feel the tightening of his britches and put a hand to himself to ease the sudden ache.

"*She will be the one who will bring you to your knees, Andre Corsair,*" the old gypsy woman had told him long ago.

*"I always knew you'd hang because of a skirt,"* Louis had scoffed, taking a deep gulp of his rum. *"Best keep it in your pants and away from the whores, boy, else you'll be dancing the hempen jig."*

*"I said nothing about him hanging,"* the Romney had stated with a sniff. *"There be other ways for a man to meet his fate than by dying."*

For the last ten years since having his fortune read, Andre had been expecting to encounter the woman the gypsy had prophesied. He believed in the powers of the supernatural—like most of his men—even if Louis thought him a fool for doing so.

*"A man makes his own destiny, you little bastard,"* Louis had told him over and over again. *"Best you stay clear of women in general though!"*

Gazing down at the tender morsel sleeping on his loveseat, Andre knew in a way Louis had been right. He had taken his future into his hands the moment he had stolen the lovely creature from her husband. For good or bad, she was his now and he would move heaven and earth to keep her—no matter the consequences.

He bent over her and shook her gently. *"Se réveiller, madame,"* he said, bidding her wake.

Rylee's eyes flew open and she gasped, seeing the pirate hovering over her. She shrank back against the loveseat.

*"Dinner is ready for us, precious,"* he told her, straightening up.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she wasn't hungry but she'd had no breakfast and her stomach was rumbling, her head aching from lack for nourishment. She slowly swung her legs from the loveseat and sat up, swiping back a tress of hair that had come loose from her chignon.

Andre held out his hand to help her up but she ignored it, getting to her feet on her own. Once standing, she smoothed the skirt of her dress.

*"Are you going to fight me every step of the way, bébé?"* he asked.

There was in his eyes something evil stirring and Rylee knew her husband's fate was at stake and what she said, how she behaved from now on, might affect Alsandair.

*"No,"* she said, meeting his gaze. *"You have given me no choice, Captain. There is something far more important to me than humiliation and degradation at your hands."*

The pirate's eyes narrowed. *"Something or someone, milady?"*

*"You and I know the true way of it,"* she said. *"There is no reason to discuss this between us again. I will do whatever it takes to keep my husband safe."* She raised her chin. *"He will come after me if it takes a lifetime. Never doubt that."*

Andre nodded. *"And I will be waiting for him,"* he said.

She moved around him and to the door, waiting for him to open it for her. When he did, she swept regally out into the corridor and waited for him to close the portal and show her the way to the common room.

After a satisfying meal, her captor allowed her to go up on deck with him. The crew frowned at her but made no comments amongst themselves as they worked. She asked Andre why they appeared to resent her.

"Pirates are a superstitious lot," he said as he walked beside her. He had extended his arm but she had refused to touch him. "There are some things they feel strongly about."

"Such as women onboard their ships," she said.

He nodded. "And people with red hair are always considered bad luck."

"So I am doubly damned in their eyes," Rylee stated.

"Aye, but if I kept you naked the entire trip, you would be considered good luck," he said with a laugh.

She made no comment to his bawdy statement. Her gaze wandered to the ship following behind them and she quickly looked away, unable to bear the sight of the *Mary Constance*. The jolly boats were gone from the ship and she was glad she had not been there to see Alsandair and the others abandoned. She did not think she could have borne the pain of it.

Andre's mouth tightened. He knew where her thoughts had gone and decided if it were the last thing he ever did, he would wipe the memory of Alsandair Farrell from her mind.

"We are two hours from Wicklaw Cay," he said. "We'll be there before sunset."

She shrugged as if to say it made little difference to her when they would arrive. She had feared she would be forced to share with him the large bunk in his cabin but hopefully that would not happen.

"My home is the largest on the Cay," he said. "I venture to say it has all the amenities to which you are accustomed."

"Will I have my own room?" she asked.

"You will share mine," he answered. He reached down and took her hand, seemingly unaware she had tensed and tried to pull away, but he threaded his fingers through hers and held them firmly.

"I wish you wouldn't—"

His hand tightened on hers and he turned so he faced her, put a crooked index finger under her chin and lifted her face so she was forced to look into his eyes. "I'll say this just this once, Rylee, and never again. It would be best you heed the warning now and never say I didn't give it to you."

She could feel her heart pounding. "What warning?" she asked.

"Deny me at his peril," he said in a low, growling voice. "It is but a five-hour journey from my home to Clare Island. I can make that journey at any time you forget my warning."

"Captain, I—"

"No more denials, Rylee," he said. "None."

She nodded, knowing she had been treading over thin ice up to this point but neither her freedom nor Alsandair's safety were up for discussion. The pirate would have his way, and if she pushed him too far, there was no telling what he might do. He was not Alsandair—though they were more alike than she felt comfortable acknowledging. He was not to be budged from his plan and she would have to bide her time until rescue came. That it would, she had no doubt.

"All right, Captain," she said.

"Andre," he corrected.

If it took her body—unwilling and hating every moment of it—to keep Sandair alive, she would do whatever it took. There would be a payday for Andre Corsair.

"Andre," she said so softly her words but a mere breath of sound.

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Vengeance des Raven* had docked just as the sun began to sink beneath the horizon. The waterfront was bustling with people, other pirate boats tied up along the long wooden pier. Torches were lit and they cast a rippling glow in the dark water lapping at the shore.

The house to which Andre took her was spectacularly beautiful with a nine feet deep veranda running around the entire perimeter of the large white two-story structure. By the time the wagon took them the short distance inland to the pirate's home a bright crimson light was flowing over the structure, bathing it in a beautiful, soft pink hue.

"*L'endroit Sûr*," Andre replied when she asked if his home had a name. "The safe place."

"It is lovely," she said begrudgingly.

"I am glad you like it."

Placed well back from the pristine white sand beachfront with its sparkling, clear waters, the house sat amidst a lush variety of greenery. An oyster-shell-lined driveway led up to the steps upon which stood a stately black woman with a gaily colored turban wrapped around her head. She was smiling and the stark whiteness of her teeth against the darkness of her skin stood out like a welcoming beacon.

"I've brought us home a chatelaine, Suzette," Andre called out to the woman.

"'Tis about time, *Le Capitaine*," Suzette replied. Her ebony eyes met Rylee's, flickered for a moment as she caught the pain in the white woman's gaze then cleared. "We will make her feel at home."

Andre hopped down from the wagon and held his arms out to Rylee. She had no choice but to allow him to lift her down from the seat. She marveled at the hardness of the muscles in his arms as she braced her palms on his biceps. When he set her down on the ground, he reached to capture her hand in his and draw her toward the steps.

“Suzette is Gaston’s daughter by Marie Teresa, our cook,” Andre said, leaning over to speak softly to Rylee. “She is the apple of his eye.”

Rylee nodded politely. She liked Gaston with his funny little walk. “Hello, Suzette,” she said softly.

“Milady,” Suzette said, curtsying prettily.

“Will you take milady to our room and have Raoul draw up a bath for the both of us before supper?” Andre asked.

“Where is her luggage?” Suzette asked, looking around him to the wagon that was turning around in the driveway.

“We’ll have Madame Pinchot prepare a new wardrobe,” the pirate captain replied. “Send someone into town and ask her to come out first thing tomorrow.”

“I have gowns on the *Mary Constance*,” Rylee protested. “I don’t need any new —”

“Let me spoil you,” Andre said. “The men will bring your things from the ship but I imagine the gowns are of a heavier material than you will need here in this tropical climate.” He smiled. “Am I wrong?”

“No,” Rylee had to admit. The gowns she’d worn in Midworld had been much too hot for they had been made for a cooler clime, the rainy, windy shores of Anlusia.

“You will need lightweight cotton here,” he stated. His dark eyes slid over her. “Something to bare those lovely shoulders to the kiss of the sun and the breath of the wind. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the underside of her wrist. The fine hairs on his goatee tickled her flesh. She flinched.

“Does that bother you?” he asked. “If so I will shave it off.” He caressed her hand. “I would do most anything for you, precious.”

Rylee blushed and lowered her head. She tugged her hand free of his grip and lifted her skirts to climb the steps. She wanted nothing more than to be rid of that devastatingly handsome face and sensuous voice for they were affecting her in ways she found very disturbing.

Suzette walked ahead of her and opened a type of door Rylee had never seen before. It was covered in a thin wire mesh that Suzette explained was called screen.

“It allows a fresh breeze in and keeps the pesky insects out,” Suzette said.

Intrigued by the strange material, Suzette ran her fingertips along the mesh. “I can see the advantages of such a door,” she said.

“The windows also have screen on them,” Suzette stated.

The interior of *L’endroit Sûr* was painted entirely white with high, vaulted ceilings and numerous floor-to-ceiling windows—all opened to the early evening breeze. An older black man went about lighting oil lamps and the rooms through which Rylee passed came alive with a faint amber glow. A pleasant scent of flowers drifted through the screen and combined with the delicious smells coming from the kitchen.

“*Maman* is making shrimp bisque,” Suzette said. “You will love it. She is a wonderful cook.”

Each room through which they passed was spacious and airy and filled with beautiful furniture that complimented the openness. Splashes of color were in the cotton fabric covering the loveseats and chairs, on the rugs scattered about and in breathtaking seascapes that hung on the wall.

“Oh my!” Rylee said as she spied one painting that drew her like a magnet.

“*Le Capitaine* painted that,” Suzette said.

Rylee stood looking up at a stunning canvas representing a school of multi-colored fish in every hue of the rainbow. “Do such creatures really exist?” she asked.

Suzette nodded. “They are called parrot fish. *Le Capitaine* swims every morning when he is home.” She smiled. “He enjoys diving as deep beneath the sea as he can safely go and it was there he saw these pretty ones. He said he had to paint them.”

Marveling at the man’s talent, Rylee reluctantly looked away from the jewel-colored fish to look about at the other paintings. “Did he do all of these?”

“Aye, milady. *Le Capitaine* is a very talented man, no?”

Indeed he was, Rylee thought. She had always envied people who could paint.

Suzette led her up the curving stairs to the second floor and to a huge room that was Andre’s bedchamber. It took up nearly half the upper story and had windows on three sides with the screened windows open to billowing pale blue curtains into the room.

It was not what Rylee would have imagined a pirate’s personal space to be. The entire room was done in tasteful shades of blue and yellow. Although the bed that set in the middle of one wall of windows was huge, the wood of its carved headboard and footboard was a pale yellow hue that Suzette explained had been bleached. The coverlet spread across the mattress was a dark midnight blue material and the mosquito netting that draped from each bedpost had been done in the same pale blue color that hung at the windows. To either side of the bed were inlaid tables holding gleaming brass lamps with tall, etched-glass chimneys.

There were plush chairs done in gold corduroy sitting before a marble fireplace.

“It does get cool occasionally,” Suzette said. “But that is very rare.”

Twin loveseats covered in a brilliant floral design faced one another at the foot of the bed with a beautifully crafted brass-topped round table in between. An enormous armoire stood off to one side of the room and was flanked by two smaller chests over which hung two absolutely gorgeous seascapes. Along the windowless wall was a door Suzette said led to the bathing chamber and it was on this wall an ornate desk and carved chair was situated with bookcases to either side.

“*Le Capitaine* loves to read,” Suzette explained as Rylee went to take a look at the titles of the novels lining the shelves. She was amazed to find he had nothing but classical literature in his collection and that many were in foreign languages.

On the occasional tables set about the room were seashells and starfish, coral and sea glass. It was a soothing, calm place, and the more she viewed it, the more Rylee liked it.

"How often is Captain Corsair home?" she asked.

"Not as often as he would like," Suzette said. "He and his brother take turns going out, but this time they were both out at the same time. That is unusual."

At the mention of the pirate's brother, Rylee frowned. "Does his brother live here too?"

"Oh no, milady," Suzette said. "Captain Louis has his own estate on the other side of the Cay." She smiled. "They get along best when apart much of the time."

There was a soft knock at the door and when Suzette bid the visitor enter, the black man Rylee had seen lighting the lamps on the ground floor came in, directing several young boys who brought buckets of warm water for the bath.

"This is Raoul," Suzette said, indicating the older man. "He is my uncle, my mother's brother."

Rylee greeted the man and thanked him for attending to her bath.

"I will bring up your things from the ship while you are at your bath, milady," Raoul told her. "Suzette will unpack them for you."

After the tub had been filled and everyone had left her to her bath, Rylee sat in the warm water and stared out the lone window that overlooked the jungle. In a break between the lush foliage, a thin slice of the pale beach could be seen as the moon lit the sparkling water beyond and the sound of the waves crashing to shore was a soothing sound. Two brass lamps had been lit to illuminate the room and moths struck now and again at the screen as they sought to reach the light. Strange sounds of tropical insects chirped from the jungle.

In the other room, Rylee could hear Suzette moving around as she laid out a gown for Rylee to wear for the evening meal. The sounds made the young woman's heart ache for there was finality in the quiet noise.

Lethargically moving the soft washcloth up and down her arms, she inhaled the sweet scent of lemon in the soap she was using. She was in no hurry to complete her ablutions and dreaded having to meet the pirate downstairs for supper. When she had finished bathing, she just sat there in the cooling water, thinking of the bath she had shared with Alsandair in Midworld. She wasn't even aware the door to the bathing chamber had opened.

Andre stood leaning against the jamb, his gaze locked on the luscious beauty sitting in the deep copper tub. Fresh from his own bath in the guest room, he wore a crisp, white shirt left untucked from a pair of white cotton britches and unbuttoned halfway down his broad chest. In place in his earlobe was the golden hoop he was never without. When Rylee became aware of his presence and turned to give him a wide-eyed stare, he smiled slowly.

“You’ll turn into a prune if you stay in there much longer, precious,” he said.

Rylee’s heart was hammering in her chest. It wasn’t just because there was a man looking at her as she sat there naked, but that he lounged there in the doorway—arms folded over his chest, one bare foot crooked over the other—looking so devilishly handsome in that pose.

“Captain, please!” she managed to say, spreading the washcloth over her bosom although she didn’t think he could see anything other than her shoulders and head above the rim of the tub.

“Supper is ready,” he said, straightening up. “Would you like me to help you out of the tub?”

“No!” she practically shouted.

He arched one thick, dark brow. “Are you sure?”

“Very sure,” she snapped.

“*Qu’une honte,*” he said with a sigh.

“I beg your pardon?” she said through clenched teeth.

“I said it was a shame you didn’t want me to assist you at your bath, milady,” he said, and his grin sent tremors through her lower body.

It was then she realized he had shaved off his mustache and goatee. The absence of the facial hair made him look younger, more vulnerable, and it also revealed a deep cleft in his chin.

“I’ll wait below for you,” he said, inclining his head to her.

After he was gone—the door closing behind his exit—Rylee drew in a long, shaky breath.

## Chapter Twelve

Alsandair stood on the beach and glared at the heaving waves that rolled over his boots. His hands were on his hips and every inch of his posture screamed outrage and revenge.

"If he doesn't calm down, he's going to have a stroke," Briarly commented to the men sitting around the campfire.

"I wouldn't want to be in Corsair's boots when Sandair gets off this damned island," Kyle said.

"That may be a while," Captain Andelton reminded them. "Clare Island isn't a likely stopover for ships passing by this sea route."

"Mayhap they'll see our bonfire and come to investigate," Bonny remarked.

"Let's hope so and that it's soon," Kyle agreed. "The longer Rylee is with Corsair, the harder it's going to be on Sandair."

Clare Island had proved to be as hospitable as a deserted island could be. There were numerous fruits growing inland and a small waterfall revealed plenty of fresh water for drinking. As Briarly, Ruck and a few of the sailors had discovered, fishing the waters for food hadn't been all that difficult and there were clams to be had for the picking. The evening meal had been filling although Alsandair had refused to join them.

"It must be hell thinking about what might be happening to your woman," Andelton said. "My heart goes out to him."

"If we keep him busy tomorrow helping to build shelter he can take some of his anger and frustration out that way," Kyle suggested. "Otherwise he's going to blow like a volcano."

"And I don't want to be near him when he does," Bonny put in.

Ataa said something to Kyle and the gambler shrugged. He answered in the Midworld language then slowly repeated his words in the Jentu language the other men used. "Your father is not happy and we must give him time."

The crewmen had taken to instructing Ataa, pointing to different things and giving him their word for it. The child was proving to be a quick learner with an inquisitive mind.

"Patience," Ataa said.

"Aye," Kyle agreed. "Patience." He had kept the little boy from bothering Alsandair who didn't seem to want—or need—contact with the other men just then.

“Okay,” Ataa said, smiling. He sat down beside Ruck, the cabin boy. Nothing seemed to bother the child. His was a pleasant, sweet disposition that endeared him to every man there.

Alsandair hung his head as he stood there in the frothy foam from the incoming waves. He was heartsick and his headache was back with a vengeance. He had no idea what time it was but from the position of the moon overhead, it was most likely eight or nine of the clock.

“Rylee, forgive me for not being able to protect you,” he said softly.

Had the pirate taken her already? he wondered. Had the bastard put his filthy hands to her? The mere thought of Rylee being ravished by Andre Corsair made the blood boil in Alsandair’s veins.

Spinning around, he started walking down the beach, trying to still the murderous rage building within him. Until they were rescued, he had no way to go after Rylee and that made him even more furious. He stomped through the wet sand until his progress was blocked by a tall, black rock that jutted out into the water. Before he knew what he was doing, he had scaled the rock and was standing on it, once more glaring out to sea. Down the beach he could see the bonfire the men had built and from his vantage point, had a better view of the sea but there were no vessels in sight – only a sparkling, black silk sheet of undulating water festooned with a ribbon of moonlight.

Squatting down, he continued his vigil as the pain increased in his head. He put up a hand to absently rub his temple and sighed with disgust. Since he’d been a boy of seven he’d had these brutal headaches and over the years they’d only gotten worse. This one was gearing up to be a beast – he recognized the signs.

“Rylee,” he whispered. “I will come for you, milady. I will. Just don’t give up on me.”

A single tear eased down Alsandair Farrell’s cheek.

\* \* \* \* \*

The supper had been superb, the white wine sweet and dry. Andre had told her a bit of history about Wicklaw Cay and the men who made it their home. He’d explained about the natives who lived farther inland and about some of the strange animals she might see wandering about the jungle. He had asked her questions about her homeland and her family and had seemed genuinely interested in her replies. They had sat over coffee and lemon meringue pie and discussed some of the paintings that hung on the walls of the dining room.

“I have been working on a picture of the *Vengeance des Raven*, my ship, for over a year now but I just can’t seem to get it right.” He gave her a steady look. “I would like to paint you.”

Rylee looked away from the desire running through his intense gaze.

When it was time to retire, Rylee tensed, dreading going upstairs with her host. All evening his dark eyes had held her spellbound and she was fearful of what was to come.

Climbing the stairs with her hand tucked in his, he said nothing until they reached his room. With his other hand to the small of her back, he ushered her inside then turned to leave.

"I will let you have your privacy," he said gently. "I'll return when you're in bed."

The mention of his bed sent chills down Rylee's spine but she had made a devil's bargain with the pirate and she would uphold her end of it, for to do so was to keep Alsandair safe. She nodded, unable to speak, and he closed the door behind him.

Letting out a long, ragged breath, Rylee closed her eyes and stood there in the center of the room, feeling lightheaded with fear. It was with moisture gathering in her hopeless gaze that she began to undress.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alsandair had finally grown weary of squatting on the rock and had sat down, his legs crossed before him, his hands wrapped around his ankles. Though his stomach rumbled and his growing hunger made the headache worse, Alsandair didn't feel like joining the men. He could not stand to see the pity he knew would be in their eyes.

Somewhere out there, he thought with growing despair, was Wicklaw Cay and on that demon's lair was the woman he loved. He imagined he could hear her sobbing. The sound cut straight through his heart.

He lay down on his side, his head pressed painfully against the slick rock. With his legs drawn up in a fetal position, his hands wedged between his thighs, he stared at the sea until weariness and pain closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was beneath the covers when the door to Andre Corsair's bedchamber opened and the man himself came in quietly. She watched him beneath her lashes as he moved about the room—taking off his shirt and laying it aside, unbuckling his belt and removing it, unbuttoning his britches and pushing them down his lean hips. As he did, she squeezed her eyes shut, unwilling to look at his naked body. She heard him blow out two of the lanterns but the third he left burning. When the covers shifted and she felt the weight of his body dipping the mattress, she opened her eyes.

"You are leaving the one lamp lit?" she asked in a small voice.

"I can not sleep in the dark," he told her, and turned on his side so he was facing her. "Come here, precious."

She drew in a quick breath—wanting to deny him, wanting to scream that denial—but without comment she slid closer to him. He smelled of cinnamon and it was a scent she found very pleasant.

He wedged his arm under her shoulders and pulled her to him, nestling her against his shoulder. She was stiff in his arms but he did not seem to notice. He simply held her with his chin lightly on the top of her head.

"Sleep well, milady," he said softly.

Rylee pulled back and looked up at him. "You are not going to...to..."

"Not tonight," he said, and put his hand up so he could return her cheek to his shoulder. "Just sleep."

She wasn't sure she could lie there in his arms and give in to sleep. She could feel the steady beat of his heart where her left hand was pressed against his bare chest, her right arm trapped between their bodies. She could feel the wash of his breath over the top of her head. Her left knee rested against his left leg.

"Relax, *bébé*," he whispered. "There will be no ravishing done this night."

Rylee could hear the laughter in his voice and pursed her lips, annoyed that he could be so flippant at such a time. But bit by bit, muscle by muscle, breath by breath, she let the tension slip from her body until she lay as easily as she could in his strong arms. She heard him chuckle lightly and his hold on her tightened just a little until the soft, rhythmic sound of his breathing told her he had fallen asleep.

She lay there with her eyes open, staring at the wavering light across the room. He had turned the lantern down low but there was enough of an amber glow to keep the darkness at bay.

"*I can not sleep in the dark*," he had said, and she mulled that over in her tired mind, wondering what residual fears of his childhood had carried over into his adult life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alsandair was dreaming and in that dream he was whimpering. A fine sheen of sweat covered his face. He flinched and moaned, jerked and groaned in his sleep. His fingers scrambled at the rock beneath his legs. His eyes jerked back and forth behind his closed lids. He was caught in a nightmare.

*"Sandair!" she called out to him, her arms reaching for him. She was standing on a grassy hill, a broad, twisted and gnarled tree bare of its leaves crouched off to her left.*

*A fierce wind whipped her gown about her legs, her long red hair about her head. Behind her the sky was gunmetal gray with an approaching storm and lightning zigzagged across the firmament, thunder rolling ominously. Birds took wing before the advancing tempest, crying out as they flew. The grass at her feet shifted, the ground rumbled.*

*He ran to her and gathered her to him, holding her trembling body to his as the storm crept toward them. Bright flashes of light made her cry out and he hurried her to what little shelter the knotted tree provided. They sank down on the ground and huddled there as the violent wind skirled through the stripped branches.*

*She clung to him, her forehead pressed against his shirt, her fingers gripping the material. He cupped her chin and lifted her head. Stark terror had etched lines into her lovely face and her eyes were accented with dark circles beneath their verdant depths.*

*"It's all right, milady," he said, and lowered his mouth to her trembling lips.*

*Sweetly he kissed her to ease her fright and to take her mind from the brewing storm. She shivered and he brought her closer to him, molding her breasts to his chest, imprisoning her hands against his heart.*

*"I am here, Rylee," he whispered.*

*The kiss deepened until he gently thrust his tongue into her mouth, nibbling on her full lower lip until she opened for his tender invasion. He tasted the honeyed recesses of her mouth and claimed her.*

*Then the scene changed.*

*The sky grew darker, more demonic as the storm raged closer. Lightning speared faster, louder with its fury as it sank jagged strikes into the hillside. Thunder boomed and the ground trembled beneath the onslaught. Overhead, the naked branches moved like the tentacles of some hellish beast.*

*He lay atop her – their clothing gone, his shaft buried deep within her welcoming sheath. Her fingernails dug into his back to spur him on as his lower body moved up and down upon hers, his cock making a rhythmic glide into her sweetness. His hands gripped her hips. Her legs gripped his waist. They were wrapped up in one another as the volume of the storm increased and its ferocity was amplified.*

*Her warmth was milking him and the sensation of her velvety moistness squeezing him with each stroke branded him hers. They belonged together and not even the violence of the storm could separate them.*

*Beneath them the ground buckled and rolled. Rain came slashing from the boiling, black clouds to drench them in a cold, clammy blanket. The branches of the tree bent low as the onslaught of the storm moved directly over the lovers.*

*He could feel the first pulses of her climax starting. The fire in his lower belly intensified and his cock throbbed with the need to release the seed building within it. He ground against her and that first faint pulse became a clutching, grasping, greedy hand vibrating around him.*

*"Sandair!" she cried out as her passion came to fruition.*

*He was moments from his own release, feeling the gathering deep in his sac. He shifted against her, lifting her hips higher so he could spill his seed into her welcoming body.*

*It was then he felt the scraping of the branches against his naked back. He looked around and was stunned to see the tree had come alive, two fiery, glowing, red eyes set high up in the trunk glared at him as the thick trunk twisted and bent toward him, its limbs like arms, its branches like fingers. Fibrous roots came up from the ground and slithered toward him, undulating like pit vipers. More roots shot straight up into the air then arched downward, their whipping suckers sinking down into his back and drawing blood, plucking him easily from her body and holding him suspended high above her as the storm raged.*

*Bellowing with fear and enraged with fury, he struggled desperately against the hold of the roots but they were strong, reeking of the earth, smearing soil upon his body, and they wrapped tighter and tighter around and around him, soon making his struggles useless for he could not move in their entwined embrace, could barely even breathe.*

*She lay there on the ground—her silken limbs stretched wide apart, her naked body defenseless. Her cries were lost in the boom of the rolling thunder, the shriek of the stitching lightning.*

*It came up from the ground as the roots had and it was thick and swollen, pulsing with life, glistening with need.*

*“No!” he denied, sensing the intent of the massive taproot that was surging in the brisk wind like a cobra charmed by a whistle.*

*The fiery eyes on the trunk glowed brighter and the bark beneath those gleaming orbs stretched like that of a ravenous mouth. He could hear maniacal laughter coming from that strange, foreboding maw as the taproot swayed to and fro.*

*She writhed on the ground, her tearful green eyes locked on the thick, swaying root moving above her.*

*“Sandair!” she pleaded. “Help me!”*

*The taproot began its slow, unstoppable descent and there was nothing he could do to prevent what was about to happen. It slithered over her sweet body—touching, stroking, tweaking—and then arched down to the apex of her thighs. It spread its fibrous suckers over her fiery curls then dipped between her legs.*

*She cried out for just a second as that evil thing impaled her, sliding deep inside her helpless body but then her cry became a moan of pleasure and she smiled, her eyes closing to the rapture the demonic shaft brought. Her hips undulated, arched up to meet each thrust.*

*Held in the unbreakable hold coiled around him, he could do nothing save watch his lady being ravished by the twisted tree. It had lowered branches to her breasts and was caressing her as it thrust its taproot in and out of her silken body.*

*“Mine,” the tree growled, and sap shot forth to spread deep inside.*

Alsandair sat up so quickly he almost fell off the rock and had to scramble to keep himself from doing so. His heart was pounding so loudly he could barely breathe. Overhead the sky was filled with bright flashes of light as a gale approached. The first cold drops of rain hit him like shards of glass and then a peal of lightning shot across the heavens in a deafening shriek.

“Sandair!” he heard Kyle shout. “Get your ass down from there before you are toasted to a crisp!”

The lightning was streaking across the night sky, its pulses hurting the eye.

“Sandair!”

“All right,” Alsandair shouted back. He scrambled down the rock just a second before a bolt of lightning speared the exact spot where he’d been lying.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was his moans that woke her and not the rumble of the coming storm. He was breathing heavily and she knew he was trapped in some hellish dream that chased him through its night-darkened corridor.

"Don't!" he whimpered, and jerked against her.

He was sweating and his flesh was slick against hers. His head whipped back and forth on his pillow and she had to pull back to keep him from hitting her.

"Andre?" she questioned, risking waking him for his arms had become uncomfortably tight bands lashing her to him. She gently shook him and called his name again.

He lashed out with one leg, kicking at the cover as though it were holding him down. He moaned again like a trapped animal.

"Andre," she said, her voice a bit louder and firmer. "Wake up."

She flinched as his hands shot up to the spindles of the elaborately carved headboard and grabbed hold of them much as a drowning man scrambles for a plank of floating wood. His entire body tensed and he cried out, lost in whatever nightmare had claimed him.

Rylee had slept with Alsandair enough to know how powerful a man's bad dreams could be. She slid quickly from the bed as he kicked at the cover, thrashing upon the bed in the throes of whatever frightful visions were visiting him.

"Don't!" he said again. "Don't!"

He kicked the covers aside and lay there in the nude, his powerful body heaving as he dragged in breath after breath of raspy air. He let go of the headboard and twisted to his side to lay curled like a small boy, whimpering as the storm outside grew in volume.

One particularly loud screech of lightning brought him up in the bed, his eyes wide and staring, and his entire body trembling. Even his dark hair quivered as he sat there.

"Andre?" she asked quietly, drawing his glazed eyes to her.

For a moment he didn't seem to recognize her but then he let out a long, ragged breath and closed his eyes, putting up a shaking hand to wipe at the sweat covering his face.

"I am sorry I woke you, *bébé*," he said, his voice strained and husky.

She moved over to the bed and sat down cautiously. There was something so vulnerable in his voice, in the way he looked that she could overlook his nudity.

"Do you want to talk about your dream?" she asked. Alsandair always did.

He shook his head. "'Twas no dream, precious," he said, his voice as ragged as his breath. "That was hell."

She watched him swing his legs from the bed and walk over to a table on which stood the lamp. He turned up the flame until the room was much lighter, chasing away whatever demons had invaded his dreams. Then he went over to his desk where there

was a pitcher of water and two tin cups. With shaky hands he poured himself a cup and downed the entire contents without taking a breath. He filled it again then turned to her, holding up the cup.

"No," she said. She was trying not to look at his body but the sight of him was like a magnet and her eyes the iron filings sliding toward it.

He was powerfully built with long, muscled legs, lean hips, flat belly, trim waist and a broad chest any woman could lovingly stroke 'til her dying day. His arms were heavily muscled as though he were no stranger to hard work. That part of him that kept drawing her attention back to it was long, thick and very prominent between his legs. She had to tear her eyes from the sight of it dangling at his thighs.

He drained the cup of water then came back to the bed, sat down on the edge with his back to her and stared out the windows at the rain that was now falling beyond the deep veranda.

A boom of thunder shook the house and Rylee gasped.

"Do storms bother you?" he asked.

"Aye," she admitted. "They do."

He bent over to retrieve his britches from the floor where he had stepped out of them. Getting up, he dragged them on then turned to stretch out in the bed, one arm flung over his eyes.

"Do you need me to hold you?" he asked.

She started to say she didn't but realized he needed her beside him more than she needed to be held at that moment.

"Aye," she said, and moved over in the bed until she was next to him.

He lifted his free arm and she lay down in the shelter of his embrace, her head on his shoulder.

They lay like that as the storm crashed over the house for nearly half an hour before moving on into the jungle, leaving in its wake a freshening breeze that made it necessary for him to reach for the covers to pull them up.

"Have you had that dream before?" she asked quietly.

"Many, many times," he admitted.

She had thought as much. There was a dream Alсандair had that plagued him more than the others.

"Have you told anyone about it?"

"Never."

She said nothing until the storm was nothing more than a low rumble in the distance. "I am told," she said, "I am a good listener."

"Does he have bad dreams?"

"Aye."

"And do you comfort him, precious?"

"I try to."

His hand was smoothing up and down her arm as he held her. She didn't think he was going to tell her about the nightmare, but when he began to speak, she soon learned the dream had been more memory than the fabrication of his mind.

"My brother Louis left home when I was five," he said. "He was fifteen years older than me and was tired of the poverty in which we lived, the hard work we were forced to do just to stay alive, our father's drinking and the beatings we both got when Papa was three sheets to the wind."

"Where was your mother?" she asked.

"She died when I was born. It was one of the reasons my father and brother hated me so badly. They blamed me for her death. To this day I will find Louis looking at me as though he could kill me and I know he is remembering our mother."

"How could they have blamed you for her dying?" she asked. "You did not ask to be brought into this world."

"No, but I doubt either of them looked at it in that way," he said. "They needed someone to blame and that someone was me."

Rylee wasn't even aware she was stroking his chest with sympathy. "Was it worse for you after he left?"

He shrugged. "Papa was rarely there, only coming home to sleep off a drunk. When he wasn't plying his trade as a wheelwright, he spent most of his time in the local tavern drinking or gambling away what money he'd earned."

"Who took care of you?" she asked.

"No one," he said softly. "I was left to fend for myself. He brought food home when he thought of it but there were many nights I went to bed hungry. He'd have had a meal in town and never once considered I hadn't eaten. Once a week I'd find a basket of food out in the barn and know one of the neighbors had left it there for me. I had enough sense to hide it from Papa else he would have eaten it himself."

"And no one told the authorities?" she demanded.

"People feared my father," he said. "There had been rumors he'd killed men who had angered him and I don't doubt that for a moment. He was a mean son of a bitch."

Rylee's tender heart ached for him. "Someone should have taken you away from him."

"Someone did," he said.

He was quiet for so long after he said that she thought he had fallen asleep but when she lifted her head, she could see his eyes were open beneath the obstruction of his arm.

"The winter I turned six, he disappeared for an entire week. That wasn't unusual but there had been a blizzard a day or two before and I'd used up all the food and all the wood in the cabin. I was so cold I could barely walk but I made it out to the barn and lay down beside the cow to keep warm."

“Oh, Andre,” she said, tears gathering in her eyes for that little boy so long ago.

“When he still hadn’t come back the next morning, I put on as many clothes as I could find. I had to struggle to walk beneath one of Louis’ old wool coats that was many sizes too big for me but I managed to head into town.” He lowered his arm to wipe his hand over his face. “It seemed to take hours to reach Lorient. The snow was deep and had it not been for wagon tracks, I most likely would have wandered off and died of exposure. As it was, the sun was setting by the time I reached the town. I stopped the first man I saw and asked if he’d seen my papa. When he asked me what my father’s name was, I realized I didn’t know. He was just Papa to me.”

“Didn’t you know your surname?” she asked, thinking of Ataa.

He shook his head. “No and to this day I don’t know what it is. Louis stopped using it when he left home because he was ashamed to be—as he told me—that bastard’s son. I’ve asked him many times but he won’t tell me so I guess unless I go back to Lorient I’ll never know.”

“Did you find your father that night?”

“He found me,” he replied. “I was standing in front of an eatery, staring in the window, my palms against the glass when he grabbed me by the coat and jerked me out into the street.”

She felt his entire body tense and knew the memory was still raw and painful even after so many years.

“He was livid,” Andre stated. “He slapped me so hard he split my lip open and would have done a helluva lot more to me if there hadn’t been people about. As it was, he dragged me toward one of the taverns. I was sure he intended to beat me senseless but instead he took me inside and to a man sitting at one of the tables. He thrust me at the man and asked how much he would pay to have me.”

Rylee put a hand to her mouth, shocked at the turn in the narrative. “He was offering to sell you to the man?”

“For the night at any rate,” Andre said softly.

Nothing he could have said could have shocked her more. She felt the tears sliding down her cheeks. Hearing of children being abused in any manner had always upset her terribly.

“How could a father do something like that to his own child?” she asked, her lips trembling.

“For the money,” he replied. “He had none and he was thirsty, in bad need of a drink. He’d broken his hand in a fight and couldn’t work, and with no money coming in, there was no way for him to buy liquor. He saw a way to remedy that.”

“Did that man...” she couldn’t ask.

“No, *bébé*,” he said. “But another man had been listening to the conversation and he spoke up, offering more for me than the first man did.” He let out a long breath. “Papa

sold me to him for two goldens then turned and walked out of the tavern. I never saw him again.”

“The man took you from Lorient?”

“His name was Pierre LeClerc and he was the first mate on a merchant ship captained by a man named Giles Bertrand. He took me to the ship, telling me I was to be the captain’s cabin boy.”

There had been something in the way Andre said those last two words that made the hair stand up on Rylee’s arms. “That wasn’t what happened?” she questioned.

“Oh I became his cabin boy, all right,” Andre answered, his tone bitter and filled with loathing. “In and out of his bunk.”

Hearing that made Rylee’s heart ache for the lost child the pirate had been.

“I tried to fight him,” he said. “Even at that age I knew what he was trying to do to me was wrong but it was no use. He did what he wanted. I hurt so badly afterwards I was sure I would die—I wanted to. Blood seemed to be everywhere on the sheets and he made me clean it up. I could barely stand. Over the next few days if I didn’t please him exactly as he instructed, he’d punish me in the most degrading ways and it is memories of that punishment I have nightmares about.”

At some point he had threaded his fingers through hers and was holding her hand over his heart. He turned to look at the softly glowing lantern.

“If I displeased him, if I didn’t move quickly enough or show enough enthusiasm for his perversions, he’d have LeClerc throw me into the hold in this special box he’d had made for punishment.” He shuddered. “It was made of iron and it was cold in the winter and sweltering in the summer and as dark as the deepest pit. The floor usually had a few inches of bilge water lining it and when you mixed that with my waste, it was sheer hell. The damned thing reeked and it was hard to breathe even though there were holes drilled into the top of the box.”

“You were afraid of the dark,” she said.

“I wasn’t until then, but I developed a fear of it. To this day I can’t sleep in a completely dark room. I can’t seem to draw breath.”

As she lay there beside him, he told her of brutal punishments at the hands of the perverted captain who marred his soul. The things he told her disgusted her, made her sick to her stomach.

“He wanted my flesh as smooth as a girl’s,” he said.

Then he told her of the day he had awakened in the box to a tremendous noise that shook the ship around him. He related hearing the sounds of fighting and knew the ship was under attack by pirates.

“I’d been in there for two days and I was sick, running a high fever. I later learned every crewman on Bertrand’s ship had been put to the sword and an auxiliary crew from the pirate ship put on to sail it to Wicklaw Cay. No one knew I was in the hold

and by the time the pirates docked Bertrand's ship and they found me, I was nearly dead."

He went on to explain how the captain of the pirate ship—Maurice DuMont—had taken a starved, abused child under his wing and into his home where the good captain and his wife set out to make life bearable for a scrawny, frightened eight-year-old boy.

"I'd been with Bertrand for two years. The only reason I know that is because there was a notation in the ship's log about the purchase on December twentieth of a six-year-old indentured servant to replace a cabin boy who had died. I learned later he'd died after one of Bertrand's nights of excess. I can't tell you when my birthday is but Captain DuMont's wife Libby declared it was the day they had found me in the hole—April twenty-third—and from that day forward, they celebrated that day as being my birthday."

It was that year, he went on to tell her, that DuMont's ship the *Flying Pearl* had chanced upon a merchant ship carrying a young circus performer who had stowed away to escape a situation very similar to the one Andre had survived.

"He was an acrobat, a tightrope walker, a contortionist and if there is anything a pirate likes better than musicians, singers and dancers, it's an acrobat. Out of the entire manifest of passengers, he was the only one Captain DuMont brought back to the Cay."

"And it was he who taught you to be an acrobat," she said, smiling. The story was taking a much better turn and he was stroking her hand gently. Obviously the arrival of the acrobat was a pleasant memory for him.

"We hit it off right away. I begged him to teach me the tricks he did and after a while he agreed. He was a merciless instructor but within a few years I could do most of what he could and then some. I learned to swing from a trapeze and—"

"A what?" she asked.

"It is a type of swing upon which you can do acrobatic moves, hanging from your legs, your arms, even your chin or heels. Frederic had one built to his specifications although it was—he said—far from being a good replica. Nevertheless, he taught me to fly." At her skeptical look, he grinned. "That is the term they use in the circus. You fly on a trapeze. You can literally sail through the air from one swinging bar to another so that is why they call it flying. Usually, there is another man on the other bar who will catch you during the more difficult feats."

"And you do this still?" she asked skeptically.

He nodded. "There is a young man named Remy who I've been training as I was trained and he and I work out every morning when I'm at the Cay."

She pushed up so she was looking down at him. "May I watch?"

His smile became soft and tender. "Aye, precious, if you'd like."

She started to speak then yawned, her face turning red as she covered her mouth.

"I think we need to get some sleep," Andre said, reaching up to pull her head back down to his shoulder. "We'll have plenty of time to talk tomorrow."

Rylee settled against him, a bit confused about her changing reactions to this man. He had been nothing but polite to her – patient, charming and respectful – and yet she knew without a doubt that he could be as dangerous and vindictive as Alsandair. In fact, the similarities between the two men were very striking. As she lay there in his arms with his warm breath on her face, it was easy to imagine he was Sandair. She fell asleep with an image of both men drifting lazily across her subconscious.

## Chapter Thirteen

It had been Ataa's idea to build a beacon fire atop the rock upon which Alsandair had sat and stared out to sea. The little boy had surprised the men with his ingenuity and very adult way of figuring out problems. He was proving to be an invaluable member of their group of castaways.

"Papa!" the child yelled as he ran toward Alsandair. "Papa, fast!"

Alsandair looked up from his moody contemplation of the fish grilling on his stick. "What is it?" he asked.

Ataa was breathless as he plopped to his knees in the sand beside his adopted father. He pointed excitedly toward the jungle behind them. "*Gorbe!*" he said excitedly.

"*Gorbe?*" Alsandair repeated.

The little boy's shoulders slumped comically and he heaved a big, grownup sigh. "*Gorbe, Papa! Gorbe!*" He put his fingers up to his cheeks—thumbs on his face and fingers waving wildly. When his father just stared at him, Ataa made a meowing sound.

"Cat?" Alsandair said, smiling for a second before the smile drained completely. "Big cat?"

"Little!" Ataa replied with an exasperated roll of his eyes. He hopped to his feet and reached out to tug on his father's shirtsleeve. "*Pedar, fast!*"

"I don't know, Ataa," Alsandair said. "Mama?" He mimicked a big cat and fiercely growled.

"No, Papa, no!" the child whined, and tugged harder at his father's shirt.

"All right," Alsandair said, laying aside the fish. "But if we get mauled, it's on your head, little man." He got up, smiling as the enthusiastic child grabbed his hand and started pulling him toward the forest.

The forest seemed alive with insects clicking and chirping, singing along in harmony to tropical bird songs and the strange crooning of unseen animals. In the high canopies of the lush green trees, large colorful birds streaked from branch to branch and monkeys scurried along the thick vines, swinging from tree to tree and chattering. Now and again a snake slithered away from the rotting vegetation underfoot or perched wrapped around a high branch, its forked tongue flashing.

Alsandair and his eager little ward had skirted a shimmering pool when the warrior heard the unmistakable sound of a cat crying plaintively. He looked up for the sound was coming from above their heads.

"Papa!" Ataa said, and led him over to a tall tree. He let go of his father's hand and pointed.

It took Alsandair a moment to find the source of the pitiful lament. His gaze swept past the animal once before darting back. High up in the branches sat a white and gold feline, looking down at them with pleading golden eyes.

“How did you get way up there, little one?” Alsandair said, his hands on his hips.

“Meow,” the cat whimpered.

“Papa, climb!” Ataa said.

Alsandair wasn't all that fond of heights, but the tree had good, thick branches and it wouldn't be hard to climb. There were vines to grab for as well and no visible signs of vipers lurking about among the lush leaves.

“Meow,” the cat pleaded again.

“All right,” Alsandair said with a resigned sigh. He jumped up to grab a low-hanging branch and pulled himself up, lifting a leg to dig the toe of his boot into the wide trunk.

Ataa's little face was tipped up as he watched his father cautiously climbing the tree. He had tucked his bottom lip between his teeth and was quiet, somehow sensing it would be best not to bother his father at such a time, though he shifted back and forth on his bare feet as he waited impatiently.

Alsandair knew better than to look down. He could feel the sweat popping out on his face and under his arms the higher up he went. The cat was perched about five feet above him and kept making little mewling sounds.

His boot slipping down a patch of fungus growing on the trunk, Alsandair almost lost his grip on the branch above him and stilled, breathing heavily, closing his eyes to the real possibility of falling and breaking his back or neck. He swallowed, opened his eyes and looked up into the triangular face of the cat. “You'd better make my son one helluva good pet, cat, or I promise you I'll turn you into bow strings,” he mumbled.

“Meow,” the cat complained, and rubbed the side of its face against the tree trunk.

Slowly and methodically, Alsandair climbed higher until he could reach out a hand and grasp the cat by the scruff of its neck, pulling it from the branch upon which it sat. He wasn't surprised and had prepared himself for the feline to dig its claws into his forearm as he brought it toward his chest.

“Goddamit, that hurts, you little brat,” Alsandair said through clenched teeth. He could feel the sharp points drawing blood but apparently the cat recognized help for it released its death grip on the warrior's arm and turned so it could perch on Alsandair's chest—though it still dug its claws into the human male's shoulder in an effort to hang on as its rescuer started moving back down the tree.

Carefully making his way down the tree, Alsandair could hear the cat purring contentedly. It was rubbing its soft little face against the side of his unshaved jaw even as it clung painfully to his shoulder. Even when his boot slid out from under him and he scraped his knee against the rough bark, the cat held on, the vibration sound continuing softly.

Ataa held his hands up for the cat as Alsandair hopped to the ground. Plucking the cat from his clothing, wincing at the prickly claws still clinging to him, he gave the feline into his son's keeping.

"You're a wicked little widget," Alsandair grumbled, wiping his palms down his pants.

"So what are you going to name him, Attie?"

Alsandair turned around to see Kyle leaning against a palm tree with his arms crossed and a wide grin on his face.

"Widget!" Ataa pronounced, and went running off with his prize tucked securely against his scrawny little chest.

"If that thing climbs back up the tree, I'm not going up after him again!" Alsandair shouted after his son.

"Widget?" Kyle questioned with an arched brow.

Alsandair shook his head. "I'll learn to keep my mouth shut one of these days."

"That's a coon cat, you know," Kyle said. "A very expensive breed." He straightened up and fell into step beside Alsandair. "How do you suppose it wound up on the island?"

"Probably off some ship, wouldn't you think?" Alsandair asked. "In the last four days we've been over every inch of this island and there's no one else here but the animals and us."

"Which begs the question—if Widget arrived with other castaways where are they?"

"Probably rescued but the cat couldn't be—or didn't want to be—found."

The two men walked back to the beach and Alsandair wasn't too surprised to see his son feeding his new pet the fish his father had been grilling. He chuckled lightly.

"Someone is bound to see the beacon sooner or later," Kyle said. "I am more than ready to get off this gods-be-damned island."

Alsandair's attention drifted to the two jolly boats that had been pulled up on the beach. Both had holes in the bottom courtesy of the pirates who—before they'd lowered the boats from the *Mary Constance*—had created the holes so the boats would not be usable upon reaching the island. As it was, Alsandair and the other men had to scramble to get the boats to land before they sank. With no way to patch them, the boats were useless—just as the pirates had intended.

"Eventually, the Anlusian military will come looking for me," Alsandair said. "I'll be absent without leave in another few days."

"And surely the company that owns Drake's ship will send someone out looking for him when the cargo doesn't arrive back at Dellymal," Kyle commented. "I imagine his wife and daughter will sound the alarm, as well. He's supposed to be at a wedding."

"All I want is a ship to take me to Wicklaw Cay," Alsandair said, stopping to stare out at the waves rolling to shore.

"You have to believe she's all right, Sandair," Kyle said. He put a hand on his companion's shoulder. "I truly don't think he would hurt her."

"Fuck her but not hurt her," Alsandair snarled. Hurt entered his dark eyes. "Just imagining that makes me want to kill something."

"I know," Kyle said, and took his hand away.

"The gods help him when I get my hands on him again," Alsandair said. "One of us will be on our way to the Gatherer before it's all said and done."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rylee clapped her hands as Andre let go of the trapeze bar, twisted in midair and hooked his hands around Remy's wrists as the younger man hung by his knees on the second trapeze, swinging them both high into the air. She never tired of watching the performance that was a morning ritual for the two men. The area in which she was sitting had been set aside with a tightrope strung between two palms, the two trapeze, a set of uneven parallel iron bars, two rings hanging on ropes from a tall tree and a cleared place with soft white sand where Andre and Remy could do somersaults, handsprings and myriad moves she could not name but observed with astonished wonder. She clapped again as Andre twisted out of Remy's hold and caught the bar of his trapeze once again.

"Captain?" Gaston called out, drawing Rylee's attention to the wizened little man standing at the edge of the clearing.

"Aye?" Andre asked. He was sitting sideways on the trapeze bar.

"He's back," was all the old man said before turning around and heading back to the house.

Rylee looked around and saw Andre was frowning. She heard him tell Remy that was enough for the day and watched him begin pumping the swing higher with his legs until he could reach one of the two platforms that braced the trapeze rig. He slipped off the bar and onto the platform then slid down the ladder that gave access to the platform. He came toward her, dusting the rosin off his hands.

"Your brother?" she asked, putting up a hand for him to help her to her feet.

"Aye," he said, a muscle grinding in his jaw.

They started back to the house in silence. Andre's bare chest glistened with sweat as he unwound the wristbands that absorbed the moisture on his arms to keep his hands dry.

It was the morning of the fifth day since he had brought her to Wicklaw Cay and he had yet to physically claim her. Each night she slept beside him—wrapped securely in his arms—but he had made no attempt to even touch her in an inappropriate way. The threat he'd made to have the Brotherhood set aside her Joining to Alsandair had yet to happen.

"I will have to go to see the Council today," he said quietly.

Rylee looked up at him. "Why?" she asked, though she figured she knew the answer already.

"Louis will demand I marry you before the sun sets or else move you into a separate bedroom," he replied. "He has very strict notions of propriety where I'm concerned."

"Yet he has a mistress who lives with him," she said. "A woman he's not married to. I've overheard Suzette and her mother talking about her."

Andre grunted. "True but Antoinette was a two-bit whore when he brought her to the Cay. He has no intention of ever making an honest woman of her since she wasn't one to start with." He glanced down at her. "You are a different matter altogether."

She knew he had been dreading her meeting with Louis and as soon as she saw the burly man come striding toward them with an ugly sneer on his face, she understood why.

"Where the fuck was your head, boy?" the newcomer snarled. He was tall like Andre but barrel-chested with a full beard, shaggy salt and pepper hair lying loose on his shoulders and he wore a brace of deadly looking pistols on his hips.

Andre reached out to take Rylee's hand. "I intend to marry her," he said.

"And why the hell haven't you done so before now?" the man who called himself Louis Corsair demanded. He swept his eyes over Rylee and grunted. "She's gentry if I've ever seen it, and you don't fuck gentry and—"

"I have not taken her," Andre interrupted his brother.

Louis blinked, seemingly taken back by the admission. "Why the hell not? What's wrong with her?"

"I was waiting for the proper words to be said over us to make it legal," Andre defended his decision. "As you say, she's a lady and you marry a lady, Louis."

"I'm told she's already married," Louis said. "And that you set her husband down real gentle-like so's not to injure the little bastard. You do know he'll come after her, don't you?"

"More than likely," Andre agreed, "but I'll handle it if he does."

Squinting his dark eyes, Louis stared openly at Rylee. "Red hair and green eyes," he said with a disgusted shake of his shaggy head. "Temper and willfulness. You'll need to beat both of them out of her if you're to live even a single day in peace."

Rylee kept quiet for she had developed an immediate dislike of Louis Corsair. It was more than just his crude manners and the vulgar looks he was directing at her that made her want to stay clear of him. Whether or not his suggestion to beat her was real or meant to intimidate her, she knew from the way he said it, he was letting her know there would never be friendship between them.

"Get yourself before the Council *now*," Louis commanded then spun around and stalked back the way he'd come.

She heard Andre release a long slow breath. "Are you g-going to the Council?" she asked, fearful of his reply.

"I have to, *bébé*," he stated. "We'll be Joined before the day is out."

Rylee wanted to scream her denial of that happening. She had started to think of Andre as a friend – not unlike Kyle – and had begun to hope he would not make good on his threat to marry her. He hadn't seemed in any hurry to do so and hadn't forced her to be his mistress. The longer such a thing was put off, the better the chance Alsandair would find a way to rescue her. Not once did she doubt he would. Though she didn't want anything to happen Andre, she wanted to be with her true love even more.

"What if you don't go to the Council?" she asked.

"Louis will take you away from me and install you in his house until I do," he answered. "I doubt you'd either be welcomed or happy with him and Antoinette. She's a tawdry bitch."

"Can't you just tell him no?" she asked.

"I wish it were that simple, precious," he said. "There is more involved here than you know."

"I know your brother has entirely too much authority over you even if he is older," she said. They hadn't discussed Louis all that much. Each time she'd brought his name up, Andre had changed the subject. She didn't even know how they'd found one another again after Andre had been brought to Wicklaw Cay as a child.

"Go on to the house," he said. "I'll take a quick dip to cool off then join you. Put me out a clean set of clothes to wear before the Council."

"Andre –" she began, but he held up a hand.

"Complaining about it won't keep it from happening, *bébé*. Arguing won't either."

She watched him head down the path through the forest which led to a waterfall that fell just beyond the edge of his estate. Angrier at his brother than she was with Andre, she flounced around and started for the house. Cursing Louis Corsair beneath her breath, she came up short when that man stepped directly in front of her, blocking her way. She jumped back, her eyes wide, her hand to her throat.

"You scared me!" she said, the blood pounding in her ears.

"Hurt my Andi and I'll do more than scare you, bitch," Louis spat at her. "He's had more than his share of trouble in his thirty-odd years. He don't need no more and especially not from some skirt!"

"And whose fault was that?" she said, lifting her chin. "He was just a child, a defenseless little boy. You were his big brother and you should have protected him. Instead, you left him at the mercy of a man you knew would neglect him and –"

Louis moved so fast she had no time to step away from him. He came toe to toe with her, grabbing her arm to jerk him to her. "You don't know nothing about what you're speaking of!" he hissed into her face.

"I know you left him to a man who sold him for another man's perverted pleasure," she said, and strove hard not to tremble in his hard grip. "You have to know what that did to him. He has nightmares about his stay with Bertrand."

Pain flickered through Louis Corsair's eyes for just a second and he released her arm as though the contact had burned him. He moved back although he was still too close to her for her comfort. She imagined she saw guilt settling on his beefy face.

"Nobody could have anticipated what the old man did," he said in a breaking voice. "If'n I'd known what he had planned, I would have taken Andi with me when I left. Better he starve to death than have had that happen to him. All I wanted was to get away so I could make enough money to care for him properly as a man should care for his..." He shook his head as though to clear it of the thought that stung him. "You don't know nothing!"

Realization came like a lightning bolt through Rylee and her mouth dropped open. She stared at Louis. "Oh dear god! You're not his brother. You're his father," she whispered.

Louis Corsair straightened his shoulders. "Breathe one word of that and I'll pull your tongue out by the root, wench. I swear to the gods I will," he warned. That said, he pivoted on his heel and disappeared among the lush foliage.

"Oh my god," Rylee said as she put a shaky hand to her mouth. She felt sick to her stomach at the thought of a fourteen-year-old boy having an incestuous affair with his own mother. The mere thought of it was revolting.

"We did not have the same mother," Andre said quietly.

Rylee turned to find him walking toward her, his hair wet and tousled about his tanned face, water cascading off his chest, the waistband of his pants wet. He was barefoot, carrying his boots in one hand.

"Walk with me, precious," he said, and held out his free hand to her.

She took his hand without question and felt the wet coolness of his flesh against hers. He led her to a little gazebo he had built with his own hands, a fanciful creation in which she loved to sit and read in the late afternoon while he was with his men in town. Indicating one of the two large white wicker peacock chairs with thick, floral cushions, he waited until she was seated then sat down in the other chair. A fresh breeze lazily turned the wicker fan in the ceiling.

Andre sat forward with his hands clasped between his legs and looked at Rylee.

"I had been here about three years before Captain DuMont's wife agreed to allow him to take me on as his cabin boy. At eleven, I was big for my age and could pretty much take care of myself. The men of the Cay had taught me things no eleven-year-old should ever know and it was because I was starting to get some attention from the whores down at the waterfront that Miss Libby, the captain's wife, thought it was time I went pirating." He smiled slightly. "Truth be told, I was more than ready to go because I was growing tired of finding ways to fend off those whores."

He turned his head and gazed at the beach beyond.

“On the first day we were out, the lookout spied a navy transport from Françasia. Normally the captain wouldn’t have bothered engaging a military ship but he’d heard there was a cache of weapons being delivered to Espange and that meant a lot of money if he could get them. Military ships are hard to take because they’ll stand and fight whereas a merchant ship is rarely ever equipped with guns and even with those that are, the crew isn’t all that proficient with them.”

“It was more dangerous for you pirates,” she said.

“Very much so,” he agreed. “But we had speed on our side and we outmaneuvered them. We got in a few good broadsides and for the most part skipped well out of range of their gunners. The battle lasted several hours but in the end, the *Flying Pearl* had only minor damage while the transport was floundering. We knew we had to get on the ship quickly and get the guns before she sank.”

Rylee drew her knees up into the wide expanse of the comfortable chair. “Where were you during all the fighting?”

“Below deck,” he said with a bit of disgust. “The captain said if anything happened to me he’d best not return home else his wife would fillet him. He feared that little woman, believe me.”

She laughed. “I imagine so.”

“The fighting was fierce once our men boarded the transport. We lost a lot of good men that day but the military men fared worse. Their captain had died in the first volley and the first mate had been grievously wounded. The man who was next in command was a coward and surrendered as soon as Captain DuMont boarded the transport. I came up on deck as soon as I was allowed and it was then I saw Louis among the prisoners about to be executed.”

“Did he see you?”

Andre nodded. “At about the same time I saw him. He recognized me, he said, because I looked just like him at that age. He yelled out to me and I tried to get over to the transport but Gaston caught me and wouldn’t let me. I begged Captain DuMont to spare Louis and—as he later told me—he did so against his better judgment.” He looked down at the floor of the gazebo. “Louis was the only one to survive among the military men that day.”

“He had joined the military then.”

“Not intentionally,” he said with a snort. “He’d been looking for work and managed to get impressed into the Françasian navy. He has the scars on his back to prove it. He seemed relieved to see me yet even more relieved to be away from the navy and its cat-o’-nine.”

He went on to tell her how Louis had taken easily to the life of a pirate. His hatred for the military held him in good stead and even though the transport upon which he’d been billeted had not carried the expected weapons, he was able to provide invaluable information to the pirates concerning the ships which did.

“Louis developed a reputation for being a cold-blooded murderer,” Andre said. “Like DuMont, he took no prisoners and was excessively brutal when we encountered a military ship. Even with merchant and passenger ships, he is known for his savagery.” He looked up at her. “It was a good thing his ship was not the one who intercepted the *Mary Constance*. I hate to think what might have happened to you and the boy.”

So did Rylee. She shuddered at the thought. “When did you find out he was your father and not your brother?” she asked, trying to drag her mind away from what could have happened.

“About two years after he joined DuMont’s crew,” Andre replied. “I was thirteen years old, about the same age he’d been when my mother came to live with our father.” He smiled grimly. “I had reached the age where I was becoming very interested in the girls down at the waterfront. One night he caught me sneaking off down there and grabbed me up by the scruff of the neck and gave me a backhand that nearly broke my jaw. He yelled at me, telling me he wasn’t about to let me ruin my life with one of the diseased doxies who plied their trade on the docks and that if I needed to polish my whistle, it would be with a woman of his choosing.”

“I bet that went over big with you,” she commented, blushing.

He shrugged. “At that point and at that age, I just wanted to have sex with a female, any female. I wasn’t particular who or what she was. I also knew I wanted nothing to do with the men who kept giving me looks because of what Bertrand had done to me. So Louis dragged me down to Antoinette’s brothel that night. He’d set her up with her own place when he’d brought her to the Cay and he was making a pretty good living just off her and her girls. While I was in with Toni—he didn’t trust anyone else to initiate me as he put it—he tied on a helluva drunk downstairs. I had to go get Gaston to help me take him back to the hut where he was living.”

Rylee was watching his face closely and she could see the pain that began shifting across his countenance.

“It was while I was helping Gaston undress him and put him to bed that he started talking about Janelle, my mother. From the things he said, I began to realize what had happened, what the two of them had done. I ran out of the hut and hid in the jungle, horrified and filled with revulsion. I was out there four days before he finally found me. As soon as I saw him, I attacked him.” He laughed. “A thirteen-year-old boy can’t do much damage to a twenty-seven-year-old man twice his size and with ten times the experience with fighting. Before I knew what was happening he had me down on the ground, pinning my shoulders with his knees. He was one heavy bastard, let me tell you.”

She listened as he explained that Louis’ mother had left her husband for another man when Louis was twelve. After that, his father had hidden his hurt and embarrassment at losing his wife in every rum bottle he could get his hands on. He had also started taking his frustrations out on Louis, blaming Louis for his mother leaving. A year later, he’d come home one night with a woman in tow—the woman who would become Andre’s mother.

"According to Louis she was stunningly beautiful," Andre said. "She was a sixteen-year-old from l'Hongrie and our father had won her in a card game. Louis said he fell in love with her the moment he saw her and—as he swears—she fell in love with him. Together, they made me."

"Did your father know you weren't his child?" she asked, thinking of the card game in which Alsandair had won her from Kyle.

"Oh he knew," Andre stated. "He had drunk so much by then he couldn't maintain an erection long enough to take any woman. It seems the only way he could get satisfaction was orally and that was how he used my mother."

Rylee blushed and looked down at her hands. "I'm surprised he didn't cause her to miscarry you."

"I don't think that ever occurred to him," Andre said. "He professed to be a gods-fearing man."

"Thank the gods for that," she said. "What happened when he learned she was pregnant?"

"Louis says the old man did his damndest to kill him when he found out. He probably would have if Louis hadn't gotten away from him. As it was, he'd beaten him so badly Louis was in bed for several days, being cared for by a neighbor." He ran a hand through his hair. "The neighbor threatened to go to the sheriff if it happened again. From that day on, the old man was careful not to hurt Louis too badly when he beat him and to beat him where the bruises didn't show."

"What an awful time that must have been for Louis," Rylee said.

"The worst years of his life, he says," Andre told her. "But nothing compared to the night he lost the only woman he swears he will ever love."

"Was it a complicated birth then?"

Andre sighed deeply. "My mother was too young, too small. She started hemorrhaging and the healer couldn't stop the loss of blood. Before she died, she made Louis promise he'd look after me, not let anything happen to me. I think she feared what the old man would do if given the chance."

"Yet Louis eventually left you alone with your father," she said.

"He said he thought I had reached the age to look after myself long enough for him to find a decent job and come back for me. I believe him when he says he had every intention of doing that had not the press-gang taken him."

"How did you feel about him leaving?" she inquired.

"I didn't think much about it to tell the truth. His was one less hand to feel across my face," he answered.

"He hit you?"

"Often enough. Though he had promised her to look after me, he did so begrudgingly, and I grew up feeling his anger and hatred, thinking it was because I was

the one responsible for our mother's death." He sighed again. "It was not an easy childhood."

"I imagine not," she agreed. "I can't begin to understand how both he and his father could blame you for something you had no hand in causing."

"They had to blame someone," he said as he bent over to pull on his boots. "Louis had truly loved my mother and having lost her, having had her taken away from him, he was heartbroken."

"Now you know how I feel about Alsandair," she said softly.

Andre slowly raised his head and turned to stare at her. His eyes were cold, his handsome face as hard as flint. "Don't *ever* say his name to me again," he warned her.

"Haven't you ever loved anyone, Andre?" she asked.

"Not until now," he said.

Rylee drew in a quick breath. "Andre—"

"I have to go to the Council," he said and shot up from the chair so quickly she had no time to stop him. The last she saw of him, he was striding down the path to the waterfront.

\* \* \* \* \*

Half an hour later, Rylee was starting to go upstairs when she heard heavy footfalls on the veranda. She turned to find Gaston coming in the door, his hat in his hand.

"Milady," he said then cleared his throat to continue. "You need to come with me."

"Has something happened?" she asked.

"The Council is demanding your appearance," Gaston said, unable to meet her eyes.

Rylee's shoulders slumped. "For the Joining?" she inquired in a barely audible voice.

Gaston nodded. "Aye, milady."

"It won't be legal," she said.

"It will on the Cay, milady," Gaston reminded her. "And that's all that matters to him and Louis."

Knowing she had no choice in the matter, Rylee walked over to Gaston. He still would not look at her and she could feel the old man's discomfort. "Then let's get it over with," she said, and headed out the screen door.

When she returned to *L'endroit Sûr*, she returned as Andre Corsair's bride. He brought her over his threshold as was customary and carried her up the stairs to their bedchamber.

Outside, the men of the Brotherhood who had followed them from the Council were beginning what Andre had told her was a charivari, a serenade to them as newlyweds. Music from concertinas, guitars, whistles, drums and other instruments she

could not name swelled in the air. The noise from the pirates' merrymaking was loud and raucous as they celebrated a captain's Joining. Rum was brought out, food provided by Andre's staff, and both would be free-flowing until the last of the revelers left.

She did not fight him.

She did not shy away.

She said not a word as he set her down on her feet in the bedchamber and put his hands to her shoulders to draw her to him. Though she did not close her eyes as he slanted his mouth gently across hers, she could not stop the twisting desire that gripped her womb at his tender invasion. She had begun to have feelings for this wounded man and even though she knew she shouldn't, she wanted to know what it would be like to lie with him. When his hand moved from her shoulder to her breast to cup her tenderly she became bombarded by even stronger emotions she had not anticipated. As his thumb shifted over her swollen nipple, she thought her knees would give way beneath her. She hated herself for the forbidden thoughts that suddenly flew through her head. She hated herself for the longings that writhed deep in her belly. She was Alsandair's wife, not Andre's, yet her wicked body yearned for his in a way that left her wanting to cry with frustration.

"I love you," she heard him whisper against her lips. "With all my heart I love you."

It was wrong. It was sinful and it was a betrayal of Alsandair, yet unbidden her arms crept up around his neck. The gods help her but desire was running rampant through her veins and his body was a torch setting hers aflame.

Their kiss deepened and when he began undressing her—his fingers trailing seductively down her back to unbutton her gown—she did not stop him.

## Chapter Fourteen

The noise of the revelers out in the courtyard of *L'endroit Sûr* seemed to know the moment Andre laid her upon his bed for their merrymaking grew louder, more insistent. Light from their torches as the sun settled lit the windows in a mellow amber hue. It was the only light in the room for Andre had yet to light a lamp. He removed his shirt, pulling it over his head and tossing it aside. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he tugged off his boots and let them fall to the floor with a hollow thud.

Rylee was self-conscious about her nakedness and had half turned over so her breasts and thatch of red curls were partially hidden. She watched him stand up and unbutton his pants, push them down over his lean hips. The turn of his buttocks drew her attention and a wayward part of her wanted to reach out to that taut, sweetly upturned ass and caress it. He lit the lamp beside the bed and it was then she noticed the tattoo at the small of his back.

"Did that hurt?" she asked.

Andre twisted his head around. "What, *bébé*?"

"The tattoo?" She had noticed it before but had not had the courage to mention it to him. "Did it hurt you when it was applied?"

She saw a muscle jump in his jaw. "Aye, it did."

"Then why did you have it done?" She'd always wondered why men willingly did such things to their bodies. Alсандair also had a tattoo on his left pectoral but it was not as large or as intricate as the one Andre sported.

"I didn't," he answered. "It is a mark of Bertrand's ownership." He sat down on the bed and stiffened as she put her fingertips to the tattoo, tracing it. He held still as she inspected it.

"It's a raven, isn't it?" she asked. Her gaze roamed over the large tattoo that stretched from hipbone to hipbone just about the crease of his rump. The design was done in a dark blue ink.

"Aye," he replied. "Bertrand means bright raven in Françasian and he called all his *boys* by the name Raven. He liked putting his brand on those unlucky enough to share his bunk."

Rylee pulled her hand back. "Is that why your ship is called the *Vengeance des Raven*? The raven's revenge?"

He looked around at her. "I wasn't aware you spoke Françasian."

"I don't," she said. "Gaston told me what it meant."

He swung his legs up on the bed and turned on his side to face her. "I don't like to talk about that part of my life, precious." He reached out to finger a tress of her hair that fell over her shoulder.

There was deep hurt in his eyes that had not been there a few moments before and she realized his thoughts had gone back to the horror of being a child at Bertrand's mercy. She put her hand on his wrist—amazed as she always was by the strength residing beneath that tanned flesh—and brought his palm to her lips. She turned her head and placed a light kiss on that calloused warmth. The hurt fled his gaze in a heartbeat.

She looked into his eyes and their gazes locked.

"I have waited an eternity for this," he said in a hushed voice.

It was wrong. She knew it was wrong. She knew she should not give in to the passion building in her heart for this man but the look in his eyes, the tenderness on his face and the need for her that seemed to seep from his very pores was her undoing. She moved his hand to her bare breast.

Andre Corsair groaned as she turned so she was lying on her back beside him.

He cupped her breast gently, lowering his head to the swollen peak to tease it with his lips and teeth and tongue. He worried it lightly, laved it and suckled gently as her fingers spread out through his hair to anchor his head.

The taste of her flesh was heavenly, the warmth so inviting as he swept his tongue over her nipple. He eased one long leg over her thigh and lifted his knee to her heated core, feeling the spiky curls of her fiery bush against his flesh as she opened her legs to him. He moved so he could give her other breast the same worshipful attention.

Rylee stared up at the white ceiling with its exposed beams. His tongue was tormenting her breast with exquisite pleasure. His mouth was warm, the slight weight of him lying partially on her making her want to know the full weight of him atop her, pressing her down into the mattress. She could feel the stab of his cock as it grazed her thigh and ached to have that steely length inside her.

Andre lifted his head from her breast and moved up on the bed until he could kiss her, thrusting his tongue smoothly into her mouth. He tasted of heady wine, taking her breath away with the depth and passion of his kiss, the possessive way he plied her mouth and claimed her lips. His hand upon her breast tightened, his thumb running back and forth over the straining nub as he kissed her. The slide of his shaft probed at the junction of her thighs.

She writhed beneath him, wanting to know the heaviness of him upon her. Her hands went to his shoulders to encourage him to stretch out fully atop her but instead he slid down in the bed, raining fleeting kisses on her chin, upon her neck, between her breasts, along her belly and past the wiry tresses of her triangle. She sucked in a gasping breath as his tongue flicked against her clit then his lips settled over that swollen nubbin to suckle it. She drove the fingers of both hands through his dark curls and held his head.

The taste of her was intoxicating and Andre swirled his tongue around and around the burgeoning peak of her clit then dragged it along one velvety fold then up again, bringing the full flavor of her nether region into his mouth. He shifted his attention to the other fold and did the same, laving her with the heat of his tongue and taking in the essence of her as she oozed her readiness. At last, he stabbed the tip into her wet warmth, chuckling in his throat as she arched her hips up at the invasion.

He was torturing her with his knowing tongue and the sound of him tasting her drove Rylee mad with desire. All other thoughts flew from her head. She brought her legs up so the soles of her feet were flat against his shoulders and lifted herself up for his expert invasion. She nearly screamed when he insinuated a finger to replace his tongue—then two, then three—and had to slam her hands to the sheets and wad them up to keep from crying out.

Andre probed deeper into her hot sheath, aching to have his cock where his fingers were. She was tighter than he could have imagined and the hard squeeze she gave his fingers was nearly his undoing. Quickly, he withdrew and moved over her, shouldering aside her thighs as he slid up her, reaching down to take his cock in his hand to guide it into her moistness.

Rylee locked her legs around his waist as soon as he settled his body over hers. The feel of him, the weight of him and the power of him hovering over her as she felt the tip of his cock at her entrance was a heady sensation she felt to the very depths of her being. She was moaning and he was breathing heavily. Both their bodies were already slick with perspiration and the moment he drove into her, she cried out.

He went deep inside her—pressing his cock all the way in. He wedged his hands beneath her sweet rump and lifted her for his penetration to go even deeper, so it could reach the very core of her. Her arms were around his neck, her legs around his waist, her heels digging into his spine.

Then she began moving beneath him, arching her hips even higher for his invasion.

She could feel the beginnings of her release as he began pumping in and out of her, slamming into her with such force they both grunted and the top of her head actually struck the headboard of their bed. The mattress squeaked vigorously with each thrust of his cock and she was thankful for the noise of the charivari outside their window.

“Come for me, *bébé*,” she heard him whisper as he slammed his shaft deep inside her. “Come for me.”

Nothing save the sweet pleasure he was giving her registered with Rylee. She was lost to his lovemaking, adrift in the artful, lustful passion that drove into her. The tiny little quivers that began deep in her womb soon became swelling waves that pulsed through her entire body to claim her.

“Alsandair!” she cried out at the moment her climax came.

Andre went utterly still at the sound of that hated name but the muscles of her vagina were milking him, pulsing around him, bringing along his own release, vibrating around him like a tiny fist opening and closing quickly over his straining shaft

and he let the sensation take him, though his eyes filled with tears as he threw his head back and roared his release.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alsandair's dreams had become crippling nightmares that brought him awake with a pounding heart and sweat dripping from his forehead. He would run a shaking hand over his face and cover his mouth to keep from crying out in his grief. It seemed no matter how tired he forced himself to get during the day, how late he stalled going to his makeshift bed, the debilitating dreams would come to tear at him with vicious, unrelenting claws.

He imagined his lady lying helpless to the rutting fever of her brutal captor. He heard her whimpers of protest drifting through the night, her moans of humiliation as the beast took her over and over and over again in that never-ending nightmare. Even the smell of her sweet heat came to him in waves of merciless punishment that stiffened his shaft and brought fiery, unfulfilled heat to his balls. His body reacted with unremitting hardness, the pain so acute he found it difficult to bear.

Waking still again with the jumbled images of his lady being ravished, of her crying pitifully after the ordeal, Alsandair took to the beach—as he did every night of his lonely, heartbreaking existence. He walked for miles from one end of Clare Island to the other but the pictures in his mind took every step he did, the punishment so exacting he had even contemplated suicide to end the hateful scenes he envisioned.

“Rylee,” he whispered to the crashing surf that foamed around his bare feet. “I am sorry I could not protect you.”

He had never felt so helpless in his entire life, so devoid of hope, so lost. Not even the horror of being impressed by Diabolusian captors years ago could compare to the desolation he now knew. He had let his lady down, failed to keep her safe. He was not the man he thought himself to be and that made his soul ache.

The sea called to him in a sultry, beckoning voice and it would be so easy to plunge into the salty depths and swim out past his ability and endurance to swim back, to exhaust his body in the pounding waves. He could imagine the waters closing over him, dragging him down to blessed oblivion, or a shark making a meal of him out there in the dark waters. He would know a peace that had escaped him for nearly a week now and he knew with every passing day, his pain would only grow worse. If he hurt this badly in such a small amount of time, how would he feel when two weeks had passed? A month or two or even longer?

“Rylee,” he called out to her then buried his face in his hands and wept.

\* \* \* \* \*

He slipped off her heaving body and was out of the bed before she knew what he was about. She sat up, watching him dragging on his pants.

“Andre?” she asked, but he didn’t answer her as he headed barefoot to the door. She called his name again.

The pirate captain turned and gave her a look that she would see in her mind’s eye for as long as she lived.

“Thanks for the pity fuck, Rylee,” he told her. “It was great.”

Rylee opened her mouth to protest but he was already out the door and the sound of his heels hitting the stair treads as he thundered down them punctuated the aches that had suddenly struck her heart for she realized the terrible mistake she had made at the moment her climax had come.

“Oh, Andre,” she groaned.

She scrambled off the bed and snatched up her gown, pulling it carelessly over her head, wincing as she ripped a seam but not caring. She had to go after him. She couldn’t leave it like it was. The pain she had seen on his face had been cutting, brutal, and she had caused it.

As had he, she disdained taking time to put on her shoes. She ran out of the room and took the stairs as fast as she could. By the time she reached the front door, he was long gone – out into the boisterous night where drunken men were staggering past the veranda. Coming up short at the screen door as she viewed the revelers stumbling past with bawdy, half-dressed women tucked under their arms, she thought better of venturing out. She did not recognize any of the sailors in the courtyard so there was no one to whom she could call out. Her shoulders slumped, she turned back and went into the gathering room, taking a seat in an overstuffed chair and drawing her knees up. If it took all night, she would stay there until he came home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Louis glanced up from his card game as Andre came striding bare-chested and barefoot through the tavern door. The older man’s eyes narrowed as the younger man stepped up to the bar and ordered rum. Louis sighed, no doubt realizing that was not a good sign. He shook his head and turned his attention back to the cards in his hands.

An hour passed as Andre continued to stand at the bar, guzzling down rum as though there were no tomorrow. When a nearby table cleared of its inhabitants, he swiped up the bottle of rum and his glass and walked purposefully to the table, growling at a man who had been about to take a seat there.

“Fuck off,” Andre snarled, and swung a leg over the chair then plopped down heavily, grunting with the force.

“Did she kick him out of his own bed?” Satordi, one of Andre’s men, asked of Louis.

The men at Louis’ table knew Andre for all of them had sailed with him at one time or another. They also knew he had been joined to the luscious redhead he had taken captive on his last trip out.

"If he let her, he deserves what he's got," Louis commented. He eyed Andre across the room and his jaw clenched.

"Cap'n ain't never had a head for much boozing," Satordi remarked. "Won't be feeling so prime come morning, I reckon."

"'Twill serve the little bastard right," Louis mumbled as he met a player's bet.

All through the evening as bottle after bottle was consumed until the wee hours of the morning, Louis Corsair kept a watchful eye over the brooding man sitting by himself at the table across the room. Even when it was only Louis and Andre left in the tavern, the older man leaned back in his chair with arms crossed over his chest and still kept vigil. When the glass in Andre's hand slipped out of fingers overly numb from the drink taken and fell to the floor, when the young man slumped forward—unsuspecting nose hitting the tabletop hard enough to bloody it—Louis just sat there, a look of angry resignation on his beefy face. Letting the front legs of his chair lower to the floor, he waved away the sleepy barkeep and got to his feet, hitching up his britches as he walked purposefully toward the man the world thought his young brother.

Grabbing Andre's limp arm, Louis hoisted the unconscious man up, and upon dipping his knees, put a hard shoulder under Andre's belly and levered him up. With head and legs dangling, the drunken man was carried unceremoniously out the door and into the rosy streaks of dawn.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rylee stirred as the screen door creaked open. She jerked awake and jumped up from the chair in which she'd slept most of the night away. Rubbing her eyes, she found herself staring into Louis Corsair's enraged eyes as the man headed for the stairs.

"Is he hurt?" she asked, her hand at her throat.

"He's drunk as a pissant," Louis scoffed. "The hurting will begin when he wakes up."

She followed behind as Louis stomped heavily up the stairs and managed to get in front of him as he started for their bedchamber. She was straightening the mussed covers when Louis came in and—none too gently—dropped Andre to the mattress.

"Be careful with him!" she snapped.

"What the fuck do you care what happens to him?" Louis demanded. "'Tis you what caused this!"

Rylee was adjusting the pillow beneath Andre's head, smoothing the tousled dark hair that fell into his eyes. "I did no such thing," she snapped.

"The boy don't drink," Louis shouted. "He never drinks! For him to have done so last eve had to be your doing!"

"Keep your voice down!" Rylee admonished him, for she realized Andre was waking up. His eyelids were fluttering and at Louis' shout he had flinched.

"What did you do to him, bitch?" Louis hissed.

Andre's eyes opened and the look on his face as full realization hit him made Rylee wince. There was misery in that dark gaze and not only from the copious amount of liquor he had consumed during the night. She barely had time to drop down and snatch up the chamber pot from beneath the bed.

Louis' large hands were wrapped around the horizontal bar of the foot post as he watched Andre bolt up from the bed and turn sideways. He did not miss the green color that had invaded the younger man's face as he bent over the side of the bed. Nor did he miss the sight of Rylee scooting the chamber pot beneath Andre's chin as the young man relieved his gut of its contents. He stood there as Rylee sat down on the bed and held a hand to Andre's forehead—bracing him—as he puked, the chamber pot on her thigh.

"He's soiling your dress," Louis pointed out loudly, eyeing the splatters that had settled on the bodice of Rylee's cotton gown.

"I don't care. Either lower your voice or get the hell out of this room," Rylee stated, looking up to give Louis a savage look.

Andre was bent over, panting from the exertion, his head a throbbing, merciless agony. He was shuddering by the time the dry heaves hit and praying for his own death as his stomach continued to try bringing up its very lining. His right hand gripped Rylee's knee while the left was bent between them at a painful angle.

"Make yourself useful and get me a wet cloth for him," Rylee ordered Louis, and to Andre's surprise, the older man did as he was told, though he grumbled darkly beneath his breath.

"If'n it weren't for you, we wouldn't be having this conversation," Louis complained as he brought the rag over to her.

"I didn't tell him to fill his gut with liquor," Rylee insisted.

"What did you tell him?" Louis asked.

Rylee's cheeks burned. She hated to repeat what had brought this on. "I might have said something I shouldn't have," she admitted.

Louis snorted. "Such as what?"

"L-leave her b-be, L-Louis," Andre whispered, the very act of speaking causing untold agony in his pulsing head.

"I am sorry, Andre," Rylee said. "It will never happen again."

He didn't have enough energy to tell her it was all right. He was furious at himself for giving in to a filthy habit he never would have indulged in had he not been hurt so badly by her calling him the other man's name. Drinking was something he kept well away from him, not wanting to end up like the man he had believed to be his father.

"What did you do?" Louis asked, his voice going up an octave.

"I said be quiet!" Rylee hissed at him.

Feeling as though the retching was at an end, Andre flopped back on the bed, putting a trembling hand to his face.

"What did you do?" Louis repeated in a low, insisted voice.

"We'll talk about it later."

"We'll talk about it now!"

"Louis, please..." Andre asked. He hurt so badly it was a torment just to lie there with the room careening around him and a coat of thick fur covering his teeth and tasting like the hide of a musk ox smelled.

Realizing Louis would not let up, Rylee straightened and looked him in the eye. "I called him by my husband's name when I...when..." Her face turned beet red. "You know."

Louis stood there for a moment with his brows furrowed and then when he realized what she was saying, thunderclouds developed on that craggy plain. "You called him by another man's name when you came?" When she nodded, he reached out and took her arm in a punishing grip. "Andi *is* your husband, wench. You'd best remember that!"

Rylee snatched her arm out of his grasp. "Not legally," she told him.

"We'll see about that!" Louis groused, and spun around on his heel. He strode angrily from the room.

Andre stopped breathing, realizing what Louis had meant. He struggled to sit up although the pain was an excruciating tight band around his forehead and talons of steel were clawing at his innards.

"Oh no, you don't!" Rylee said, attempting to push him back down. "You aren't going anywhere, Andre."

"Louis is going after him and he'll kill Farrell," Andre said, batting her hands away. "I've got to stop him!"

## Chapter Fifteen

When the ship was sighted, a loud cheer went up amongst the castaways. A few of the sailors did jigs and were frolicking about like children until they got a good view of the ship's shrouds.

"Pirates!" Bonny yelled, and the cheering died down.

They were all gathered on the shore and watched silently as the big ship tacked toward them. With no weapons and only their fists to protect themselves, the castaways realized the precarious predicament that was coming toward them. What few implements they'd been able to jerry-rig to make their everyday lives better were useless against cutlasses and pistols.

"Can you make out its pennant, Captain?" Briarly asked. He was standing with his hand shading his eyes.

Andelton shook his head. "No but my guess is it's one of the Corsair brothers," he said, glancing at Alsandair. "Most likely Louis."

"His ship's the *Voleur*, ain't it?" Bonny asked. "The raider?"

"I believe so," the captain replied.

"Why would he be coming here?" Kyle inquired. "Surely he must know we don't have anything of value."

"We've one thing," Andelton said.

"What?"

"Me," Alsandair said softly.

"For what purpose though, Sandair?" Kyle asked.

"Ransom," Andelton replied for the younger man. "My guess is he's learned Alsandair is an Anlusian Guard and means to make them pay to get him back."

"Sail ho!" another of the castaways shouted and pointed starboard of the approaching ship. "Black sails!"

As the men on the beach watched, the smaller of the two ships began closing in on the larger. It was evident the one farther out was a faster vessel and was being allowed to run before the wind, all sails out. When a puff of smoke issued from the smaller ship, Captain Andelton cursed beneath his breath. "Maybe it isn't ransom after all," he said.

"Was that cannon fire?" Kyle asked.

"Aye," Briarly answered. "And so was that."

Alsandair was also shielding his eyes from the harsh glare of the sun on the water. He stared as the larger ship came about and fired a warning shot across the bow of the closing ship. Delayed, the boom of the cannon finally reached the castaways.

“Are they fighting, Papa?” Ataa asked, his childlike exuberance high as he fidgeted as his father’s side.

“Are they fighting,” Andre automatically corrected. “And aye, they are, son.”

“Why, Papa?” It was the little boy’s favorite question.

Alsandair looked down at his son. “I don’t know.”

Once more the smaller ship fired one of its cannons and a goodly piece of the railing of the larger ship exploded into the air. The loud reverberation echoed over the water. The two ships were close in to shore—about a quarter mile out—and close enough the castaways could see the indistinct figures of men on their decks. It seemed for the moment the hostilities were over and when after a long pause the larger ship picked up speed and crossed in front of the smaller then tacked back the way she came, the men on the shore breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Although he couldn’t see the man captaining the vessel left behind, Alsandair knew who it was that stared at him from the deck of the sleek black ship. He could barely make out the man’s outline but didn’t need to see his face to know who he was.

“Louis was coming after you to kill you,” Andelton said quietly in Anlusian so Ataa wouldn’t understand what he was saying.

“Aye,” Alsandair agreed. His jaw was clenched as he stared at the figure so far away out on the water. He could feel the hatred rolling toward him and sent his own back with equal volume, knowing Andre Corsair would intercept it.

“Why did *Le Livreur de Glace* stop him?” Briarly asked, using the nickname Andre Corsair’s men called him.

“Because he knew she’d hate him if anything happened to Sandair,” Kyle replied for his friend.

Across the distance the two men glared at one another though it was impossible for either of them to actually see the other. Both stood with their hands on their hips, legs spread in a defensive posture that labeled them the warriors they were.

“I hope you rot in hell, Andre Corsair,” Alsandair said in a low voice.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gaston came up to stand beside his captain. The younger man had spent nearly the entire voyage sitting with his head over a bucket and it had been only upon catching up with the *Voleur* that Andre had come to his feet, his fists opening and closing as he gave orders to fire on his brother’s ship to halt it.

“Are you sure?” Gaston had asked.

“Don’t question me, LeRouge!” Andre had spat.

Standing there beside the mast, his complexion a sickly green color, the captain had ordered the shots that had finally taken off a part of the *Voleur’s* stern railing. The shot had rocked the larger boat and it had brought the order from Louis for his gunners to

stand down. The two men had stared at one another for a long time before Louis ordered his helmsmen back to the Cay.

"This isn't over, you little bastard!" Louis had shouted across the water.

Gaston could have sworn he saw Louis Corsair smiling as he set about ordering his men to get under way but since Louis, the butcher, never smiled Gaston believed he'd only imagined it.

"What now, Cap'n?" Gaston inquired.

Andre kept his eyes on the man on the beach. "Bring her around, Mr. LeRouge, and take us home," Andre ordered.

Gaston frowned. "Just like that?"

"Just like that," Andre said, and turned away, heading for his cabin and the soft pillow that would cushion his nearly unbearable headache. He was unsteady as he made his way down the ladder.

"We ain't going after them castaways?" Gaston called after him. When his captain waved a dismissive hand at him, Gaston let out a blue streak of curses. He turned to Satordi. "All that way out here and for naught? Where the hell was the brat's head?"

"Up his lady's skirt," Satordi replied with a fatalistic shrug.

Gaston swiveled his head around and looked toward the men on the beach as understanding set in. "Ah..." he drawled, everything clear to him then. His gaze narrowed. "You be a lucky man, warrior."

\* \* \* \* \*

Alsandair didn't feel lucky. He felt like he could tear the pirate leader apart with his bare hands if given the chance. As the ship turned and headed back from whence it came, he threw back his head and bellowed his rage to the heavens.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rylee had paced from one end of the dock to the other since Andre had weighed anchor early that morning. It was now close to sunset and neither his nor Louis' ship had yet to appear on the horizon. Sailors from other ships were giving her a wide berth and speaking in low tones she could not hear. Each of them sent her dirty looks that—had she been any other man's woman—might have brought her harm. As it was, they kept well clear of her, their unspoken animosity growing as the hour grew later. Only once had she heard one of them voicing his opinion and it had been squashed quickly enough.

"Wouldn't want to be in her skirts if one of them Corsairs has been hurt!" the man had prophesied.

The thought of Andre being hurt because of her actions brought moisture to Rylee's eyes and a pang of guilt to her belly. She slumped down on the dock and buried her face in her hands, crying as though her heart might break.

"Stop that, you slut! Ain't no way for a Corsair woman to be behaving!" a crude voice hissed at her a moment before Rylee felt her arm clenched in a brutal grip.

Jerked to her feet to face a woman with hair as white as snow and a face as brittle as ice, Rylee knew this could be none other than Antoinette, Louis' woman.

"Ye'd best hope me Louis be hail and hearty when the *Voleur* docks!" the woman spat, lips drawn back over her tobacco-stained teeth. "Else I'll be gutting ye where ye stand, Andre or no Andre!"

The hard grip on her arm was punishing but Rylee managed to free herself and step back from the virago. Antoinette was a goodly sized woman with arms that were nearly as big around as Rylee's waist. She stepped back from the imposing threat, breathing hard.

"Why, ye ain't nothing more than a skinny twig!" Antoinette sneered. "I could break ye with one snap of me wrist!" She mimicked cracking Rylee over her knee, her pale gray eyes glowering at the younger woman.

"I want no trouble with you, Antoinette," Rylee said, backing up another step. She was perilously close to the edge of the wooden planks and couldn't step back any farther.

"Ye'd best hope ye don't get none neither!" Antoinette told her.

"Sail ho!" someone called out, and Antoinette flicked her beady gaze from Rylee to the water.

"The *Voleur*!" the lookout cried. "I see the captain, Toni!"

"How's he look to you, Rouyce?" Antoinette asked, looking up at the crow's nest of one of the ships where a gruff-looking man was perched.

"Right to fiddle, he looks," Rouyce reported.

Antoinette returned her hard glower to Rylee. "That's good for you, you little whore," she pronounced.

Rylee was breathing hard as the older woman moved back up the dock, flouncing her gaily colored skirts as she went, showing a great deal of calf and thigh as she flicked the garment, giving the men on the dock a good view of her wares.

Turning her attention to the sea, Rylee could see the black ship coming in, but it was alone with no other ship behind it. She bit down on her lower lip, worry making her heart pound in her chest. She moved back to the center of the wooden planks and began pacing again, turning her eyes constantly to the heaving waves in search of Andre's ship.

When Louis' ship docked and he came ashore, he walked right by Rylee without so much as a flicker of an eye toward her. She started to call out to him but thought better

of it. He made straight for Antoinette who curled around him as though she were a viper and he a sapling to the cheers of those gathered.

"Be he all right, Cap'n?" someone in the crowd called out, and Rylee held her breath waiting for the answer.

"He took a chunk of the *Voleur* from her stern," Louis snapped, turning to point to his vessel. "He'll be all right until he puts his gods-be-damned foot to land then I'm going to beat the little shit black and blue!"

The crowd roared with laughter and Rylee groaned. She had caused this and Andre would be paying for her actions still again. She swiped at her tears and walked to the end of the dock, searching for the sight of black sails against the lowering sun.

"She been doing that long?" Louis asked Antoinette in a low voice.

"Since Andi hied himself after ye," Antoinette replied. "Scared she might lose her sugar daddy."

"Scared she might lose a man she's starting to have feelings for," Louis corrected. He draped one massive arm around his woman's shoulders. "You should have seen the way she held his head while he puked. Not many women will do that for a man unless she has feelings for him."

Antoinette sniffed. "Don't mean squat," she said. "She knows to what side her bread be buttered."

"'Tis more than that, Toni," Louis said. He glanced back at Rylee. "She knows she hurt him and now she's suffering for it." He hugged her to him. "Should be a right interesting situation when that fellow on Clare Island finally makes his way here."

"You think he will?"

Louis grinned devilishly. "Oh I can guarantee it!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun had long been down when Rouyce called out a sail had been spotted. Torches along the dock had been lit and though most of the crowd had vanished an hour before, there were still those hanging about. Louis had taken his woman home with a demand that someone come tell him as soon as his brother docked.

"Is it Andre's ship?" Rylee called up to Rouyce, but the man ignored her, hawking a wad of phlegm off the crow's nest and into the water to emphasize his disdain.

Tired, hungry and with a headache plaguing her, Rylee sat down on the dock and let her bare feet dangle in the water. She smiled sadly as little fish came up to nibble at her bare toes. She was still sitting there when Andre Corsair came to sit down beside her.

"You been here all day?" he asked. He was still shirtless and barefoot.

She nodded, unable to speak past the lump of relief that was clogging her throat, unable to look at him. Instead, her head was lowered, her eyes on the hands in her lap.

“He looked well,” Andre said after a while, and when she did not react to his words, he reached out to take her chin and turn her head toward him. “Did you hear me?”

“Aye,” she said, moisture gathering in her eyes.

“I saw the child,” he said softly. “He too is well.”

She searched his eyes for the truth of his words then sighed with relief when she realized he was being honest with her. “Thank you, Andre,” she said.

He shrugged and let go of her chin, turning his attention once more to the dark waters rolling against the end of the dock.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she told him. “His name just slipped out.”

“I know,” he said. “My pride was stung, that’s all.”

Neither spoke for a long while and when he became aware she was crying softly, he put his arm around her and drew her to him. She laid her head on his shoulder and he lowered his cheek to her hair.

“What will Louis do?” she asked.

He threaded his fingers through hers. “Beat me senseless, no doubt,” he replied on a long sigh. “I took a big bite out of his pretty little ship. He’s not likely to forgive that any time soon.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t let it worry you, *bébé*,” he said. “I’m a big boy and I can take my lumps when I need to.”

She looked up at him. “But you shouldn’t have to. I am the cause of this. I—”

He put a fingertip to her lips to silence her. “I love you, Rylee,” he said. “I would take a thousand beatings if I need to in order to have you at my side.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she loved him too. She had come to that realization during a sleepless night. Despite the wrongness of it, the betrayal, the myriad other reasons she should not, her heart had notions of its own and it was reaching out to Andre Corsair against all the odds and regardless of the outcome hovering on the horizon. A part of her wanted to run from this man and another part wanted to cling to him, to reach out to him and hold him close. Her body was warring with her mind.

“Let’s go home,” he said, getting to his feet and helping her up. “My stomach feels like a punching bag already.” He glanced around the waterfront.

“What are you looking for?” she asked, afraid he’d say Louis. She wasn’t ready for a confrontation with that surly male.

He looked pointedly at her bare feet. “Someone to drive us up to the house.”

“I’d rather walk,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“Aye.” She slipped her arm around his waist as his went around her shoulders.

“You’re turning native, *bébé*,” he said with a wicked grin.

The warmth of him was soothing as they walked up the dock. She could hear the steady beat of his stalwart heart beneath her cheek and wanted nothing more than to have him lying atop her, his flesh melded to hers. For the first time in her life she thought of herself as being the wickedest of women on the face of the Earth but somehow that didn’t seem like such a bad thing.

*L’endroit Sûr* shined like a ghostly galleon in the moonlight as they walked beside the oyster pathway up to the house. The bright white of its exterior was a beacon that seemed to be welcoming her home. She understood as she had not before what *a safe place* André’s home was to him.

Walking beside him up the curving stairs she could feel his weariness and her own headache that had grown worse for lack of food. She thought perhaps once she had him to bed, she’d come back downstairs and make herself a sandwich.

As though he’d intercepted that thought, he stopped on the stairs and looked down at her. “Have you eaten?” he asked.

“No, but that can wait. I want to—”

“Go,” he said, releasing her hand he’d held all the way from the dock. “I’m just going to fall into the bed anyway.” When she would have protested, he shook his head. “I mean it. Go. Get you something to eat. I’ll be fine.”

Rylee nodded and turned to go back down the stairs.

After she’d fixed herself a sandwich of cold turkey and sliced tomatoes and a tumbler of tea, she took her meal out on the back veranda and sat down in the swing, putting the tea on a little table beside the swing.

The jungle behind *L’endroit Sûr* was noisy with night insects and the rustle of creatures walking through the foliage. A tantalizing scent of gardenia floated on the air and the smell was soothing. Just a hint of a breeze stirred the leaves of the banana plants and the palm fronds and cooled the air to perfection. The sound of the sea was calming.

As she sat there swinging gently and eating her food—her headache slowly dissolving—she wondered if it were possible to love two men at the same time. She suspected it was because when she honestly examined her feelings she knew she still loved Alsandair as much as ever and that the growing emotion she had for Andre could be nothing save love.

“Why ain’t ye with Andi?”

The sneering voice startled Rylee and she jumped, nearly dropping her empty plate. She snapped her head toward the sound to find Antoinette glaring at her. The woman looked dangerous with her blowsy hair and barely there blouse that dipped so low on her chest even in the moonlight Rylee could see Antoinette’s dusky areola.

“I hadn’t eaten and—”

"The man risked his life for ye today and ye're out here taking the night air," Antoinette snapped, coming closer. "Selfish bitch, ye are."

Rylee raised her head. She had the cut of this woman's jib and knew if she showed fear or the first sign of weakness to her, Louis' woman would pulverize her.

"Andre told me to go eat. He wanted to sleep and didn't want to be bothered with me," she said, knowing that would satisfy the tawdry slut.

Antoinette nodded. "Men be like that," she said, and without Rylee inviting her, came to sit beside her in the five feet long swing. "My Louis weren't in the best of moods just a'thinkin' of the damage that brat did to his precious ship." She turned sideways in the swing to stare at Rylee. "Andi's gonna get his arse whipped come morning."

Rylee didn't know what to say to that. She imagined there was nothing to say and nothing to be done about it. The two men would settle their problems without interference.

"What, milady?" Antoinette ground out. "No protesting Louis beatin' yer man?"

"What good would it do?" Rylee asked. "Louis will do whatever he wants and Andre will take it like the man he is."

"Aye, he will. And what do ye feel about it?"

"I caused all this by calling him the wrong name," Rylee admitted. "If anyone should get a beating, it should be me."

Antoinette's white eyebrows shot up. "Is that so?" she asked. "What name did ye call him – as if I didn't know?"

Rylee's shoulders slumped and she turned to put the plate on the table beside the tea. "May I ask you something?" she countered.

The whore sniffed. "Don't have to answer if'n I don't want to," Antoinette stated.

Taking a deep breath, Rylee twisted around on the swing until she was facing her companion. "Do you love Louis?" she asked.

Antoinette snorted. "Well, there be love then there be love. I suppose ye could say I love him, though it goes deeper than that, I reckon."

"There's something deeper than love?" Rylee questioned.

"Hells bells, of course there is!" Antoinette said as though talking to the village idiot. "Ye have to respect a man, trust him and be willin' to obey him if'n ye want that something deeper, wench. Ye can love a man and still not feel them things for him. That's more lust than love. Ye get me drift?"

Rylee thought about it for a moment. "Aye, I think so." She bit her bottom lip. "Have you ever loved any other men?"

Antoinette's pale eyes narrowed. "Whatcha mean?"

"Was there another man you loved before Louis?"

Those pale eyes rolled. "Aye, there was. Thought the sun rose and set in that prick, I did," she said. "He took me cherry – which was all he was after in the first place – then went harvesting in the orchard for more. Popped many a cherry that summer, he did, a'fore somebody set the press-gang after his lyin', deceivin' arse."

Rylee had a good idea who that someone had been.

"What yer asking is if ye can love two men at the same time," Antoinette stated.

"Can you?"

"Of course ye can!" Antoinette snarled. "The trick is in jugglin' the two."

A deep flush spread over Rylee's face. "I couldn't do that," she said.

"Why the hell not?"

Rylee shook her head. "Because it isn't morally right to have two men at one time."

"Who says?" Antoinette demanded. "Ye think Louis be the only man tugging me?"

Rylee's blush turned fiery at the use of that word. "But you're... You..."

"I'm a whore," Antoinette stated. "But I keep me personal life separate from me professional one, dearie. There be men what pay me for me services and them what don't." She grinned. "Louis knows of it but he don't care."

"Alsandair would," Rylee said. "And I've a feeling Andre would too. Neither would want to share me."

"If'n that be the only way they could have ye, they would," Antoinette told her. "Believe me, I know these things. This be Wicklaw Cay and things here be different than that other world."

"They are both proud men," Rylee said. "Good men. They wouldn't –"

"Don't give 'em a choice," Antoinette said, sliding out of the swing. "Tell 'em how it's to be and if'n they don't like it, fuck 'em." She folded her large arms over her equally lush bosom. "And don't be sittin' there contemplatin' whether there be a right or a wrong to it, wench. On the Cay, it be what feels good that is the law, if ye get me drift."

"Aye, that may be true on the Cay but elsewhere –"

Antoinette shook her head. "No, wench. Don't ye be thinkin' on elsewhere. Ain't goin' be no elsewhere. Andi ain't about to let ye leave the Cay."

"But when Alsandair comes –"

"Even if'n they fight for ye and this Alsandair wins – which ain't likely to happen I will tell ye right here and now – the Brotherhood won't let him leave with ye. He'll either stay his arse here or hie himself off the Cay without ye. That be the way of it."

Rylee's eyes widened. "Are you telling me I'll never be able to leave Wicklaw Cay?"

"No woman who ere stepped foot here has ere been allowed to leave. That be the law and ain't nothin' ye can do about it. Ye be a pirate's woman now, wench, and as such ye are under the law of the Brotherhood, Andre or no Andre. Ye ken?"

"Alsandair won't stay here," Rylee protested. "He is an Anlusian Guard."

“Shush!” Antoinette hissed at her, glancing about for eavesdroppers. She turned a furious face to Rylee. “Don’t ye be spouting that fucking gibberish, wench, else that man will meet his doom a’fore he’s on the Cay half a minute when he finally gets here!”

“But Louis knows, doesn’t he?” Rylee asked, fearful she had caused Alsandair great harm.

“Of course he knows and he told me, but don’t ye be letting no one else hear of it!”

“Toni, don’t you think Louis will be wondering where you are?”

Both women jumped even if the voice speaking to them had been soft and low. They swung their heads toward Andre and were surprised to see him leaning against the porch railing, his arms crossed, one foot crooked over the other.

“How long ye been there listening, brat?” Antoinette demanded, her hands on her ample hips.

“I think you need to go home now,” Andre said, ignoring her question. “You’ve given my lady enough advice for one night.”

Antoinette raised her chin. “Ye’d best get plenty of sleep tonight, Andi Corsair, ‘cause come morning, yer arse is Louis’!” That said, she flounced off with a flick of her multi-colored skirts, skipping down the veranda steps with an agility that defied her girth. She blended into the jungle and was gone.

For a long moment neither Rylee nor Andre spoke. She sat perched on the edge of the unmoving swing and he lounged there against the post. Around them the night was soft and pleasantly cool, the air filled with mingled scents of tropical flowers and the tang of the sea.

“Are you feeling better?” she finally asked, the silence getting on her nerves.

“The hangover has gone,” he said. “I had forgotten how fierce they could be. That’s one of the reasons I don’t drink. I’m like the old man. When I start, I can’t seem to stop until I make myself sick.”

“You’re nothing like your father,” she said, locking eyes with him. “Either of them.”

Andre grunted. “There you’re wrong, *bébé*. I’m too much like one and not enough like the other,” he said enigmatically. He pushed away from the post and came over to her, hunkering down before her, one hand to the swing seat and the other on the chain. “Toni told you the truth, Rylee. You’ll never be allowed to leave the Cay whether I’m alive or dead.”

Rylee wasn’t so much concerned with whether or not she would be forced to stay on the Cay or not. Truth be told, she loved it there and the house to which Andre had taken her was everything she could ever want in a home. It was Alsandair who worried her.

“If you’re wondering what might happen to you if something ill befalls me,” he said, “don’t. I’ve made provisions for you and as my legal wife *L’endroit Sûr* will come to you. You’ll never want for anything.”

“But won’t Louis – ?”

"Louis has nothing to do with this," he interrupted her. "That is Brotherhood law. If you want to sell *L'endroit Sûr* –"

"Never!" she said.

He nodded. "I'm glad to hear it, but you'd probably want to sell my ship and in that case, Louis would have first bidding rights for it. That's not to say you have to sell it to him but I would suggest you do."

"Nothing is going to happen to you," she said.

"Then there's something else for you to consider," he told her.

"I don't want anything to happen to either of you!" she said, tears forming in her eyes.

"I wasn't talking about him," Andre said, a muscle working in his jaw. "Have you considered the fact you might be carrying my child?"

Rylee's mouth dropped open. She had *not* considered that. With everything that had happened in the last week she hadn't even thought of her monthly. Mentally calculating, she realized it would be another two weeks before she'd know if she were expecting but even then...

"It could be yours or Al—" At his growl, she corrected what she'd been about to say. "His."

"True," he agreed. "And you might never know whose child it is."

She tucked her lower lip between her teeth. That was true. Both men were of the same height and build. They both had dark hair and eyes and dark complexions.

"He'll show up here sooner or later, precious," Andre said. "And you are right in saying neither of us would tolerate the other in your life. There will be a fight and one of us will meet the Gatherer. That's a given."

Tears slide down her ashen cheeks. "I don't want it to be you," she whispered.

"And you don't want it to be him either," he said softly.

"No!" Rylee put her hands over her face and moaned.

Andre stood up and moved so he could pick her up in his arms. He lifted her from the swing, smiling as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "There'll be time to hash this out later," he said. "Right now, it's late and I'm sleepy."

He carried her up the stairs and to their bed, laying her gently on fresh sheets he had spread on the bed himself. For the first time she realized he had bathed before coming downstairs to get her for his skin smelled like lemons. She did not take her arms from him when he started to straighten up but instead pulled him down atop her, her lips going eagerly to his.

\* \* \* \* \*

Louis sealed the missive with wax and his personal seal. He'd spent the better part of an hour writing the note, painstakingly forming the letters that were such a chore for

him. He was only partially literate but—thanks to Andre—had a rudimentary knowledge of how to fashion letters of the alphabet although his spelling left a lot to be desired. Getting up from his desk, he handed the note to one of his men who had been waiting out on the veranda.

“Make sure Renaud gets this as quickly as possible,” Louis said. “Go yourself on our fastest sloop and see to it personally. I don’t want no hitches.”

Knowing his captain as he did, the man asked Louis to tell him what the note said in case Renaud could not understand the writing.

Louis wasn’t offended. He knew how bad his spelling was but it was his signature and seal Renaud needed to see to know the orders came directly from Louis. He trusted his man and gave him the gist of the missive. “Now be off with you!”

When his man had left, Louis went upstairs, stripping off his voluminous shirt as he went. Being a large man, he perspired heavily and the shirt stuck to his hairy chest as he peeled it off. He was eager for the bath Antoinette had ordered for him.

Bending over the tub as she swirled bath oils into the water, Antoinette’s naked, white ass invited Louis’ palm to slap it and he obliged, chuckling as his lady let out a string of curses that should have turned the air blue.

“Bastard!” Antoinette snarled.

“Bitch,” he returned good-naturedly as he began unbuckling his pants.

“Sit yer arse down and let me pull off ye boots,” Antoinette ordered.

Louis did as she commanded, watching her pendulous breasts sway invitingly as she knelt down to tug off his boots. The sight of her lush bosom made his mouth water and his tongue tingle to taste the long nipples that awaited him.

“Did ye get yer business seen to?” she asked as she set his boots aside then turned her attention to his stockings.

“Aye, Boyer is on his way.”

“Don’t know that yer doing the right thing, Louis,” she said as she stood up, grunting with the effort.

“Ain’t nothing gonna happen what ain’t supposed to, *bébé*,” he said, standing up and shucking off his pants.

As soon as her man’s thick member sprang into view, Antoinette smiled. “Poor lil thing,” she said, reaching out to wrap her meaty fist around Louis’ cock. “He looks like he needs a good tongue-lashing.”

Her words going straight to his shaft, Louis felt himself harden like steel. “Wanna taste, luvie?” he inquired.

Antoinette massaged his shaft. “I’m thinkin’ maybe I do,” she said, and once more squatted down on the floor, this time bringing his erection expertly between her lips.

With his hands buried in Antoinette’s snow-white hair, Louis closed his eyes and let her wondrous mouth drain away his troubles.

\* \* \* \* \*

Delbert Rouyce and two of his friends were throwing dice in a seedy tavern on the waterfront. All three men were shit-faced drunk and barely able to cast the carved bone cubes. They'd been swilling down ale since the sun set and showed no inclination to stop as the hours dragged on.

"Has a pretty mouth on her, she does," Rouyce said. "Damn me if'n I don't want them lips wrapped 'round my pecker."

"I'm of a mind to sink my tallywhacker in her pussy," Clive Prescott spoke up. He took a swig from the bottle and ale dripped down the sides of his mouth and into the scruffy beard hanging almost to his bellybutton.

"I'm a backdoor man, myself," Ethan Mock said to no one in particular. "Gimme a sweet, puckered little hole to ram into and I'm in heaven!"

His companions grimaced at Mock's statement but made no comment. They knew Mock swung both ways on occasion and wasn't particular which sex he buggered when he had the chance.

The men had more than their crude meanderings in common. Each had been cast off one of Andre's ships at one time or another and had taken to getting billets only wherever there was a dire need for sailors and never again on a Corsair ship. Having earned their unsavory reputations as unreliable and untrustworthy and cowardly, the men rarely found billets unless a captain was truly desperate and even then, employment was given with reluctance and with the threat of losing their lives if they screwed up.

A fourth man squatting beside them looked from one to the other and merely grinned toothlessly. He was Mock's retarded brother Nealon who had the double handicap of being mute. Ethan's only saving grace was that he looked after his older brother with some degree of affection.

"Never thought I'd see *Le Livreur de Glace* dancing attendance on some skirt," Rouyce observed. He tossed the die so hard one hit the wall and bounced out of sight.

"*Le Livreur de Glace* is melting," Prescott giggled. He scrubbed a filthy hand over his acne-pitted face.

"Melting right into that tight little pussy," Rouyce growled. He was searching the floor on his hands and knees for the missing die.

"Barkeep, another round!" Mock called out, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth.

"Ye've had more'n enough," the tavern owner stated. "I'm for closing. Get yer pricks out of me establishment so's I can go home to bed."

Grumbling, the three men struggled to their feet, Nealon following suit. Rouyce had not found his die and fanned it away with a wave of his hand. "Damned thing was loaded anyway," he declared. Staggering, the men made their way out into the night.

"We could have her, you know," Mock said as he stood there weaving, drooling on himself.

"How you figure that?" Prescott questioned. He scratched the front of his stained trousers, rubbing his cock for good measure as he did.

"We would take her right out from under The Iceman's nose," Mock said.

"And then what?" Rouyce asked.

Mock straightened up, his shoulders thrown back. "Fuck her, of course!" He grinned, showing a mouth of rotted and pitted teeth. "Fuck her 'til she's as loose as a goose and then some!" He looked at Nealon. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, Neal?"

The retarded man bobbed his head up and down enthusiastically and put a grimy hand to his pants to rub his cock like Prescott had.

"I'd like that," Prescott said, and had to reach out to grab the hitching post to keep from pitching facedown on the ground.

"I'd like that too," Rouyce said. "But don't want The Iceman coming after me." He shook his head, stumbling as he did. "No, sirree. Don't want that."

"He won't ever find her," Mock said. "And who'd suspect us, eh?"

His two inebriated companions considered that for a moment. "Don't reckon no one would," Prescott said.

"When will we do it?" Rouyce asked. "My cock is as hard as flint just contemplating that sweet little pussy."

"Gotta find a place to take her first. Someplace nobody will come looking for her 'til we're done with her," Mock said. He put one finger to his nose, bent over and blew snot from the other nostril.

"I may know a place," Rouyce said. He swung his arms around the shoulders of his two friends. "Let me think on it overnight."

Together, the drunks wove their way down the street and to the lean-to they'd haphazardly slung together as their home.

## Chapter Sixteen

Captain Noel Renaud tried to decipher the note he'd been given first thing that morning with his meal. He recognized Louis Corsair's seal and the man's childlike signature, but for the life of him, he could not read the scribbling that passed for writing. He looked up at his butler. "Is the messenger still here?"

"Aye, Your Grace," the butler replied with a smirk. "He said he believed you would need him to translate the missive."

"Where is he?"

Clovis, Renaud's butler, drew himself up to his full six feet height. "I would not allow him to enter your home, milord. He is waiting at the door."

Renaud grimaced. "That bad, is he?"

"He positively reeks," Clovis declared, sniffing with disdain.

Such a pronouncement was perhaps the worst insult Clovis could bestow upon a visitor. Renaud grinned and took up his napkin to blot his lips. "I'll go out to meet with him then."

Clovis bowed elegantly. "That would be best, milord."

*Vue de Mer*, Renaud's palatial estate on the northwestern shore of Wicklaw Cay, lived up to its beautiful name. It did indeed have a spectacular view of the sea. Situated on a high bluff overlooking the sweep of turquoise waters, it boasted a crescent-shaped bay where three of Renaud's brigantines as well as a score of smaller vessels were docked. Among the oldest of the pirate mansions, it had once belonged to the infamous Jack Hawkins when that man still plied the trade. When Hawkins retired, he handed the estate over to his best friend, an up-and-coming privateer. Along with the estate, Renaud had inherited Clovis as well.

Scattered about the bay was a well-kept village where Renaud's men lived and several warehouses for the pirate's spoils. There were however no taverns or bawdy houses. For such entertainments, his men needed to take themselves to the main harbor of Wicklaw Cay where such places were in abundance. The men who sailed under Noel Renaud understood he had no sympathy for drunkards or tolerance for those who might disrupt the tranquility of his village. While a bachelor himself, the captain held family values of the highest importance so therefore the wives and children of his men were shown care and respect. He had even set up a school for the children. Any man foolish enough to run afoul of Renaud's personal brand of morals soon felt either a diligently applied lash or the tightening of a noose around his neck.

Walking from the dining room to the front door across the highly polished teak floor of his home, Renaud paused to greet a brace of maids who were cleaning the

parlor. He was always unfailingly polite to the help and with his friendliness invited them to tell him if they were in need of supplies or had any complaints. His home ran like a well-oiled clock and he meant to keep it that way.

"I need a new broom," Mazie, the younger of the maids, said. "I've nigh worn this one out."

"I'll see to it, sweeting," Renaud replied. He winked at the pretty girl then continued on his way, opening the screen door and going out on the veranda where Louis' man was waiting. "Good morning, Fletch."

Fletch snatched off his watch cap. "Good morning to you, Cap'n," he said, turning the brim of the cap around and around. "Right fine day it is."

Renaud nodded. "As beautiful as they come." He tilted his head to one side. "May I ask what Louis was attempting to impart to me?"

Louis' sailor grinned and scratched the bridge of his hawklike nose. "You know him all too well, Cap'n," Fletch laughed.

Listening to the translation of the message Louis had sent, Renaud's green eyes narrowed. He folded his arms over his chest and stared at Fletch. "Are you sure that's what he said?"

"Aye, Cap'n," Fletch replied. "Sure as my bunion is throbbing something fierce."

Renaud lowered his gaze to the sailor's scuffed boots. "My healer can see to that if you're of a mind to have him take a look," he said. "Wilkins was plagued horribly with the same ailment but now he's as spry as his youngest."

Fletch bobbed his head. "I'd appreciate that, Cap'n. I surely would."

"It comes from wearing boots too little for you, you know," Renaud suggested.

"I figured as much, Sir." Fletch looked down at the pilfered red leather boots he'd taken off a Diabolusian merchant. "But they were such pretty boots."

Renaud laughed. "We pay for our follies, don't we, Fletch? Just go down to Healer Draga's hut. You know where it is?"

"Aye, Cap'n, I do."

"Tell him there will be no charge to you. I'll handle the payment with him later."

"Much obliged, Captain Renaud. Much obliged!" Fletch said.

"And tell Louis I'll take care of his situation but that he'll owe me for this one."

Fletch grinned. "I believe he already knows that, Cap'n, but I'll be sure to tell him." He took a few steps back, saluted Renaud then turned and ambled off, limping.

Renaud looked out across the sprawling acreage that fanned out from his front door. It took a team of men to keep the jungle from encroaching on the pristine gardens and pathways Clovis' twin brother Vallis maintained. Not a single shoot of grass was allowed to overhang the oyster-shell drive and pathways. Every flowerbed was precisely aligned and molded to perfection by Vallis and his helpers. It was a lovely, reassuring sight, and it always soothed Renaud to observe it.

But today, even the sight of his immaculately maintained gardens could not dispel the annoyance he felt toward his friend Louis Corsair.

“Louis, Louis, Louis,” he said, shaking his head. “What are you up to now?”

Renaud was one of only a few men who knew the true relationship between Louis and Andre Corsair. Not even under torture would he ever reveal what he knew for the secret had been entrusted to him long ago and Noel Renaud held it as sacrosanct as he did his own true identity.

Several years earlier, Renaud had sailed to Lorient, curious about the man who had fathered Louis and sold Andre into sexual slavery. Although he didn’t know the bastard’s last name, he’d had no trouble finding him in the little fishing village. With the greasing of a few eager palms and mention of the two boys the world believed were brothers, he’d visited François Bevier in the same hut where the boys had grown up and he had forever rid the world of one piece of useless human excrement. He’d never told either man what he’d done and had no intention of ever doing so. He had his own deep, dark secret that paralleled Andre’s and removing such filth gave Noel Renaud great satisfaction.

With the wind blowing his shoulder-length black hair about his face, Renaud closed his eyes and inhaled the sweet scent of frangipani. The breeze tugged at his immaculate white lawn shirt, billowing the full sleeves and dipping into the deep V of the neckline. Always dressed flawlessly, his black boots shined with a deep polishing—as did the large buckle of his leather belt—and his buff-colored britches fit without a wrinkle upon his muscled thighs. He reached up to tug at the golden hoop hanging in his left earlobe—a pirate’s good luck charm meant to aid their eyesight.

“Where will we be going, Captain?”

Renaud turned to find his quartermaster Luc Clary walking toward him. “You never fail to scare me with that sixth sense of yours, Luc,” he said with a shake of his head.

“I saw the sloop come in and figured one of the Corsairs required your help,” Luc explained with a shrug. “No sixth sense to that, Sir. What needs to be done this time?”

“Just a short trip,” Renaud replied.

“Full complement of men, Cap’n?”

Renaud considered the question. “Aye, that would be best.”

“How long will we be gone?”

“The rest of the day and early into tomorrow.”

Luc touched a finger to his forelock. “Aye, aye, Cap’n.”

An hour later, Renaud’s flagship the *Perdu*—the Lost One—sailed away from Wicklaw Cay and toward a small island off the coast of Midworld.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the *Perdu* tacked eastward, Rylee was anxiously pacing once again. This time her circuit was on the veranda of *L'endroit Sûr*. She had been forbidden to accompany Andre into town that morning and was worried what might be transpiring when he met with Louis. Both Gaston and Remy had been sent to watch her and to make sure she stayed put.

"What is taking him so long?" she asked Gaston.

The wizened old sailor was sitting on the steps whittling, his pipe clenched between his teeth. He spoke around the obstruction. "He'll be along when all's said and done, milady. 'Tis like a watched pot. Seems to take longer for the water to boil if you've your eyes peeled to it, you know?"

"Best you sit a spell, milady," Remy advised. "You've fair worn a hole in the planking."

Rylee shot him an annoyed look but the young man just stared back, his swarthy face showing traces of amusement.

"If'n I didn't know any better," Gaston observed as he continued to add strips of wood to a pile between his feet, "I'd say you was worried about the captain."

"If Louis were to hit him, would Andre fight back?" she asked, nibbling on a cuticle.

"Most likely not," Gaston replied. "I reckon he figures he owes Louis for blowing a hole in the *Voleur*."

"He didn't blow a hole in Louis' ship," Rylee said, her jaw tight. "He just took off a portion of the railing."

"Damage a man's ship and you damage his livelihood," Gaston reminded her. "Men of our trade don't take kindly to that, brother or no brother."

"Then he shouldn't have gone after Alsandair in the first place!" Rylee threw at him.

Gaston shrugged, unwilling to get into an argument about that.

Rylee paused with her hands gripping the porch railing and stared down the pathway. She ached to see Andre come riding his big bay up the oyster-shell drive. She'd been put out with him earlier that day for insisting she could not accompany him into town.

"You've no need to see Louis take me down a peg or two before the men," he'd told her.

"Andre, please!" she'd begged, but he'd been adamant, shaking his head firmly at her pleading.

Now she was on pins and needles, worried that Louis had hurt him. She didn't like the man and trusted him no farther than she could see his beefy face. She'd put nothing past Louis Corsair. That he had every right to punish his son for his actions didn't make the situation any better in Rylee's eyes.

She stilled, cocking her head to one side for she thought she heard the clop of hooves. She let go of the railing and walked to the steps, brushing past Gaston and his small pile of wood shavings. Her eyes were locked on the pathway and as soon as she spotted the big bay, she put a hand to her chest for the steed was walking slowly and – it seemed to her – carefully.

“He’s hurt,” she moaned.

“I reckon he most likely is,” Gaston said. He tossed away the stick he’d been working on, folded his knife and stood up, tucking the sharp weapon into the pocket of his britches.

Rylee would have run to Andre but Gaston went to her and caught her arm, holding her back. He gave her stern look and commanded her not to shame the captain by acting like a ninny.

“You’re a pirate captain’s woman,” Gaston said. “Behave like one.”

As soon as she could see Andre’s face clearly, Rylee thought her knees would buckle beneath her. She whimpered and felt Gaston’s strong hand clamped around her upper arm.

“Steady as she goes, milady,” Gaston said in a soft voice.

Steeling herself to stand still, Rylee wanted to scream with outrage. Andre’s face was battered so badly, had she not recognized his horse and the clothes – now blood splattered and torn – he’d worn to town that morning, she could not have sworn it was him. His flesh discolored in a variety of painful-looking shades of yellow, purple and blue, his right eye swollen so badly it was completely closed, his bottom lip split and oozing blood, and both cheekbones punctuated with darkening bruises and one with a vicious cut, he looked awful. It appeared to her that with every step his mount made, he winced. She was unaware she was making a little keening sound of sympathy until Gaston shook her.

“Stop that moaning, milady. You’ll only make it worse on him!” Gaston insisted.

Remy went to take the bay’s reins and to help his captain down from the steed. It seemed to take Andre forever just to throw his leg over the horse’s rump and dismount. When he did, he sucked in a breath and would have collapsed had Remy not reacted quickly and caught him before he hit the ground.

Gaston let go of Rylee’s arm and rushed forward, taking hold of Andre’s feet to help the younger man carry him into the house.

“Go tell Suzette to fetch the healer,” Gaston ordered Rylee. When she didn’t move, he gave the order again in a louder, more forceful voice.

Rylee jumped to do the old man’s bidding then, running past him and Remy to snatch open the door, yelling for Suzette. She held the door open as the men carried Andre into the house.

Suzette had been coming down the stairs and realized what was needed before Rylee could tell her. She took off running, slamming the screen door behind her.

"Don't worry about getting him up the stairs," Gaston told Remy. "I think he's got a broken rib or two. Let's lay him down in the parlor."

Rylee was ahead of them, throwing all but one of the pillows on the long loveseat to the floor so they could lay Andre down flat. She tucked the remaining pillow gently under his head.

"Get his boots, Remy," Gaston told the younger man, and Remy was quick to skirt the loveseat and do as he was commanded.

"Best you get some hot water and rags, milady," Gaston informed Rylee. "We'll need bandages for his ribs and a poultice for that shiner."

"What kind of poultice?" she asked.

"Raw beef steak will do," Gaston replied. His arthritic fingers were already working the buttons on Andre's dirty, torn shirt, gently tugging the material from his waistband as he went.

Glad to have something to do, Rylee started to the kitchen but Marie Teresa, Gaston's woman, was already coming out with a large, bloody steak in hand. Silently she handed it to Rylee, her irritation with the younger woman plain on her dark face and then she turned and went back to her domain.

Rylee mumbled her thanks to the cook's retreating back then carried the steak to Gaston.

"Put it on that eye," Gaston said. He was slowly pulling Andre's belt out of its loops.

Carefully, Rylee laid the steak over Andre's battered eye. She was perched on the arm of the loveseat, unable to look away from the myriad bruises that were revealed by Gaston opening Andre's shirt.

"My god," she said. "Louis should be horsewhipped."

Gaston made an annoyed sound as he removed the belt then unbuttoned Andre's fly.

Andre groaned and opened his good eye, pain flickering across his face. He was breathing shallowly as though taking a deeper breath would be too much. He looked up at Rylee and tried to smile, wincing as his bottom lip reminded him it was split.

"You lie still," Rylee said, smoothing the rumbled hair back from his forehead. "Suzette went after the healer."

He tried to shift positions on the loveseat but gasped, his good eye going wide before that eye rolled up in his head and he pitched once more into unconsciousness.

"Andre!" Rylee cried out.

"Stop that, woman! He's got a gods-be-damned busted rib or two, that's all," Gaston snapped. "If'n he don't be still, it could puncture a lung. It's best he be out."

Long after the healer had come and gone—tightly bandaging Andre's ribs and dosing him with a liberal amount of tenses mixed with vinegar which made for a more than adequate painkiller and providing a better poultice for the unconscious man's

eye—Rylee sat on the floor beside her lover with her head on the edge of the loveseat. She was dozing lightly when she felt his hand in her hair and looked up.

“What are you doing on the floor?” he asked. “Come to bed, *bébé*.”

Rylee smiled, taking his hand in hers. “You’re not in bed, *têtu*,” she replied.

The eyebrow over Andre’s unmarked eye crooked up. “You’re calling me stubborn?” he asked. “Who taught you that? Never mind. I can imagine a certain old man’s been teaching you Françaisian.”

“Are you thirsty?” she asked, having been ordered by the doctor to make sure he received plenty of fluids.

“Aye,” he agreed, allowing her to relinquish his hand as she got to her feet and went over to pour him a tall tumbler of water. “How long have I been out?”

It was late afternoon and the sun was less than an hour from setting, and she told him as much.

“That son of a bitch packs a mean punch,” he said, reaching up a shaky hand to finger his jaw. He grimaced.

“You’ve two broken ribs,” she informed him. “It could have been worse. He could have done serious damage to that hard head of yours.”

“More than he’s already done?” he countered. His head was pounding as though he had a drum inside it.

Rylee handed him the water. He took one sip then gave her a disapproving look. “What did you put in it?” he asked.

“Just drink it. Healer’s orders.”

Frowning, he drained the tumbler then sighed heavily. “There was tenses in that. My damned tongue’s numb.”

“You need to sleep,” she said.

“Aye, well, I want to be in my own bed doing it,” he complained, and tried to get up.

“Oh no you don’t!” she said, putting her hands on his shoulders to push him down gently. “You’re staying put.”

“The hell I am,” he said. “I want my own bed, Rylee.”

“Best humor him,” Gaston said as he came into the room. “I’ll help him up the stairs. You’ve got company out on the veranda.”

“Me?” Rylee asked, looking past Gaston. “Who?”

“It had better not be Louis,” Andre grumbled as he managed to swing his legs off the loveseat.

“It’s not,” Gaston said. “It’s that woman of his.”

“That’s worse yet,” Andre complained. He leaned heavily on Gaston as the old man helped him to his feet. “What the hell does Toni want with my woman?”

“Didn’t want to know so I didn’t ask,” Gaston said.

Andre bitched all the way up the stairs, unhappy about Louis' whore coming to call. Rylee waited until her lover was in their room before going out on the porch to see what Toni wanted.

"He okay?" Antoinette asked.

"Do you care?" Rylee returned.

"Louis does."

"Then Louis should have come to see about him," Rylee told her.

"Didn't figure he'd be welcome here right now."

"He wouldn't be, but that's beside the point." She lifted her chin. "Your man did a lot of damage to mine and I'll never forgive him for that."

Antoinette gave her a smirk. "A lot of damage to yer man, is it?"

"Are you here for a purpose, Toni?" Rylee demanded.

"Just checking up on the brat. Louis didn't mean to get so carried away, but ye know how men be."

It was all Rylee could do not to hit the other woman. "You tell Louis he can go to hell for all I care. There wasn't any call for what he did. Ship or no ship, such behavior isn't any different than what Louis' father did to him and Andre when they were boys and you can tell him that for me."

"Reckon he knows it," Antoinette said, "else he wouldn't have sent me here."

Rylee watched the older woman stroll off into the jungle, swishing her skirts as she walked, her bare feet making no noise on the fallen leaves. For such a large woman, she moved with quiet grace.

A movement in the greenery off to her right caught Rylee's attention and she narrowed her eyes, straining to see who was lurking about. She could have sworn she saw a face peering out from between a break in the bushes. When nothing else moved, she went back in the house, dismissing whoever or whatever might have been spying on her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun was hanging low on the horizon when Baxter, one of the sailors from the *Mary Constance*, raised the alarm, pointing out to sea where he had spotted a ship. Running down to the beach, the castaways cheered when they saw a jolly boat being lowered into the water from a brigantine.

"We're saved!" Bonny called out.

Captain Andelton and Kyle were standing side by side, both trying to make out the figurehead on the ship but neither recognizing the carving of a half-naked maiden. "Could be anyone," Andelton remarked. "She's not flying colors."

Alsandair and Ataa joined the others as Widget, Ataa's pet cat, scampered among the men.

Running out to help bring in the jolly boat, several of the sailors from the *Mary Constance* clapped the sailors from the unknown ship on the back. They were all talking at once, asking if the new arrivals had food.

"Stow it!" Andelton commanded, striding forward to meet the man who had stepped from the jolly boat. From his appearance and stance, Andelton knew him to be the brigantine's captain. "Captain Drake Andelton, formerly of the *Mary Constance*, at your service, Sir," he said, saluting then extending his hand.

"Captain Noel Renaud of the *Perdu*," Renaud replied, clasping the other man's hand. "I've been sent here to pick up one of your men." He gave Kyle a steady look. "Are you Alsandair Farrell?"

"I am he," Alsandair said, stepping forward. He was staring hard at the newcomer.

Renaud swung his gaze to Alsandair. "Compliments of Captain Corsair, Sir," he said. "Your presence has been requested on Wicklaw Cay."

"You're not here to rescue us?" Bonny asked, his face full of despair.

Renaud glanced at the sailor. "That wasn't my intention when I left the Cay but if any of you are of a mind to leave Clare Island, you are more than welcome to accompany us back to the Cay."

"Have you any word of my ship?" Andelton asked.

Renaud reluctantly turned his attention to the other captain. "I believe she's being taken good care of, Captain."

"And my lady?" Alsandair asked, gritting his teeth. "Is she being taken good care of as well?"

Knowing there was a lot more involved here than he really wanted to know, Renaud held his hands palm up. "I don't know anything about your lady, Farrell. I was merely sent here to fetch you."

"I'm not sure this is wise, Sandair," Kyle said, glaring at Renaud. "You could be walking into a trap."

"Better than spending my life on this godforsaken hunk of coral," Alsandair said, "and that bastard has my wife."

Renaud's eyebrow shot up. "Your wife? The lady in question is legally Joined to you?"

"I married them myself," Andelton reported.

The frown that marred Renaud's handsome face boded ill for whoever had caused it. He swore under his breath then looked to the heavens. He seemed to be trying to make a decision and when he spoke, he seemed to be doing so against his better judgment. "I imagine your Joining has been put aside by now," he said.

Alsandair's face turned harder than flint. "She is still my legal wife and she belongs to me. Andre Corsair can—"

"Keep her according to Brotherhood law since you're not one of us. Of course that could be remedied."

"Hell no!" Kyle shouted, putting himself between Alsandair and Renaud. "He's not going to do that!"

"Do what?" Alsandair asked.

Renaud and Kyle were toe to toe, glaring into one another's eyes.

"Don't answer him," Kyle said in a low, deadly voice.

"Do what?" Alsandair repeated. He put a hand on Kyle's arm but the gambler shrugged it off.

"I'm merely the messenger," Renaud said. "And believe me if I'd known the particulars of this, I wouldn't have gotten suckered into being a part of it."

"A part of what?" Alsandair demanded. "What is he talking about, Kyle?"

"Kyle?" Renaud repeated. "Kyle who? I like to know the name of my enemies."

"Striker," Kyle stated. "Brother of Khalid al-Rashid."

"Never heard of him," Renaud lied. He looked away from Kyle's belligerent glower and locked gazes with Alsandair. "I was told to bring you back so you can either go willingly or I'll take you there in chains. It's up to you."

"Don't threaten me," Alsandair said. "I've already told you I'll go with you. What of the other men?"

"I said they could come along."

"As prisoners?" Andelton wanted clarified.

"Not on my ship," Renaud said. "They come as free men."

"We have your word?" Andelton pressed.

Renaud put out his hand. "I pledge on my honor they will be going to the Cay as men free to do as they please once they get there."

Andelton took his hand. "I will hold you to your word, Captain."

"And what happens when they get there?" Kyle questioned.

"Well," Renaud said, "that's up to these men. They're sailors. I imagine they can find billets if they are of a mind."

"On a pirate ship?" Briarly asked, shaking his head. "Not this old salt. I've no desire to end my life hanging from a crosstree."

"Then take the next neutral ship to whatever harbor suits your fancy," Renaud said. "You won't be prisoners on the Cay any more than you are here."

"Can Widget come too?" Ataa asked.

Renaud looked down at the boy and smiled. "And who are you?" he asked.

Ataa thumped his thumb against his bare little chest. "I am Ataa, son of Farrell."

Renaud glanced up at Alsandair. "I see, and is Widget your furry little friend there?"

Ataa bent over and picked up the cat. "Aye," he said.

“Well then, where your father goes, you go, and where you go, Widget goes, eh?” Renaud said, reaching out to tousle Ataa’s head of sleek black curls. He stood up. “Do all you men wish to return to the Cay with me then?”

A loud chorus of ayes rang out.

“I want to know what I can do to get my wife returned to me,” Alsandair demanded, and when Kyle would have protested, he shouted the gambler down. “Stay out of this! It doesn’t concern you, Kyle!”

“Only another pirate can petition the Brotherhood for the return of his woman,” Renaud said. “They most likely won’t grant the petition since she’s already been given to Andre but that’s a chance you’ll have to take.”

“And be branded a pirate ripe for the hanging if he agrees to such a stupid thing,” Kyle insisted. “Sandair, think of your life back in Anlusia!”

“I have no life without Rylee. I’ll do whatever it takes,” Alsandair said.

Kyle threw his hands into the air. “This is wrong,” he said. “Wrong!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Andre was restless, his ribs bothering him and the still, tropical air making him sweat. He was lying outside the covers, his white cotton pants sticking to his legs with the heat.

“Can’t you sleep?” Rylee asked him. She too was uncomfortable in the humid air. “Want some lemonade?”

“Aye,” he said.

She got up from the bed and padded over to the table where she had placed a pitcher of iced lemonade earlier. The ice had all but melted as she poured him a tumbler and brought it back to him.

“Remind me not to go shooting at one of Louis’ ships ever again,” he grumbled as he pushed himself up on his elbows.

“I’d think you’d remind yourself not to do so,” she quipped, holding the tumbler for him to take a sip.

“By the gods, it’s hot as hell in here,” he said.

The windows were all open but not a speck of a breeze was coming through the screens. Off in the distance the low rumble of thunder gave evidence that it might be bringing some relief.

Rylee put the tumbler on the bedside table and went over to wet a washcloth. She wrung it out then came back to run it over Andre’s chest.

“You make a wonderful nurse, *bébé*,” he said, lying down again. Though his bruises were agony, he was enjoying having her smooth the wet cloth over his chest.

“You make a poor patient,” she countered, running the rag down his arm. “All you’ve done is complain.”

"I know," he agreed, "but you can't help but love me." He said it with a cocky grin meant to be teasing but Rylee saw the truth in his eyes.

"That's true, Andi," she said softly.

Despite the broken ribs and aches and pains that made his body a throbbing, aching mass, Andre Corsair shot up in the bed as though he were attached to a pulley. "What?" he questioned, searching her face, his breath held.

"Don't do that!" she snapped. "Your ribs—"

"What did you say?" he asked, cutting off her words.

"I can't help but love you," she said, bowing her head to hide the moisture gathering in her eyes.

His hand trembling, Andre lifted it, held it out to her. "Rylee..." he said, his voice breaking.

She shook her head. "I tried so hard not to love you," she said. "I know it's wrong but..."

"Why is it wrong?" he asked.

She looked at him, tears coursing down her cheeks. "Andi, I am legally Joined to another man, a man I also love." She got up from the bed, her hands in the air, the wet rag flapping against her wrist as she spoke. "What's wrong with me, what kind of slut am I that I can love two men and want to be with the both of you? It's a sin, Andi, and I'm going to hell for sure!"

Andre couldn't move as the woman he loved, the woman he would gladly give his life for, sank to her knees on the floor, her face in her hands, her shoulders quaking beneath hard sobs that completely unmanned him. "*Bébé*, don't," he pleaded with her, struggling to get off the bed.

"Oh no you don't!" she said, seeing what he was trying to do. She sprang up and intercepted him before he could swing his legs from the mattress. She pushed him down flat on the bed none too gently. "You have broken ribs, you idiot! You stay put!"

"Rylee," he said, taking her hand and holding it, bringing it to his chest. "You aren't going to go to hell for loving me. I'm not a demon to whom you've sold your soul."

"It's wrong, Andi," she said with a whimper.

He could hear her heart breaking and it tore his from his chest. He pulled her down to his shoulder and let her cry until the tears were nothing more than hitches impeding her breath. His palm smoothed her hair and he crooned to her—saying nothing but merely trying to quiet her sobbing. When she at last settled down, he placed a gentle kiss on the top of her head and bid her come back to bed.

"What am I going to do, Andi?" she asked, lifting her head to look down at him. "I want you both."

"I'll send Gaston to fetch him in the morning and we'll sit down and discuss it between the three of us," he suggested.

She thought of the talk she, Alsandair and Kyle had had in Midworld about their situation and groaned. This time was vastly different from then. "He will fight you, Andre. I know him. He will –"

"The Brotherhood will uphold our Joining," he interrupted her. "As far as they are concerned he has no rights on Wicklaw Cay. He can take the Oath of the Brotherhood and petition them to set our marriage aside, but the Council won't do it. They will never remove you from my care."

"Leave him where he is," she pleaded with him. "If he comes to the Cay, tie him up and take him back to Anlusia."

"He'll only keep coming back, *bébé*," he said. He took the washcloth from her clenched fist and used it to wipe her tear-stained face.

"Then you'll keep carting him off again until he gives up," she said.

"I have a notion that won't happen, but if you don't want me to send for him, I won't."

"Thank you," she said, hiccupping.

"Come lie down, precious," he said. "The storm is moving closer to us."

Rylee had other things on her mind that were more frightening to her than the approaching bad weather. She had to find a way to keep Alsandair safe and out of harm's way. She got up and walked around to her side of the bed and climbed on, scooting over to lie in the shelter of Andre's arm as he lifted it for her.

"Be careful, Andi," she said, for he had sucked in a breath as he pulled her closer to him.

A loud shriek of lightning zapped through the air and she jumped, trying not to come into contact with his battered chest. She put her hand on his hip to keep from pressing against his broken rib and felt the rise of his shaft beneath the confinement of his cotton pants. Without conscious thought, she slid her hand over his tumescence and cupped him.

"By the gods, wench, don't start what I can't finish," he pleaded.

He was a good man, Rylee thought, a good and decent man who had taken a brutal beating because of her. A man who had risked his life to keep safe a man she loved. He had pried up a little portion of her heart and had slipped inside as easily as the tide rolled to shore. He was firmly ensconced in her very soul alongside Alsandair and despite her fears and self-loathing she liked having him there.

Gently, lovingly, she massaged his rigid cock through the material of the pants. She dipped her fingers between his legs and cupped his heavy sac. She could hear him breathing heavily and feel the tension in his body.

"Relax, *têtu*," she ordered.

"I am not stubborn," he said.

"You are my stubborn man," she said, and released him to slide her hand down the waistband of his pants until she could wrap her fingers around his naked flesh.

“Bébé,” he groaned.

“Shh,” she whispered, and with her free hand tugged his pants down his hips. Before he could protest again, she was up and over him, his warm, salty flesh buried in the sweet confines of her mouth.

She ran her tongue over his oozing slit—lapping away the pearly drop glistening there—and smiled as he began to gasp. He was gripping the sheet to either side of him, twisting the material as though she were torturing him. She let her hot breath envelop him and almost giggled when his hips came up off the mattress, pushing the head of his cock past her lips.

“You’re killing me, wench,” he panted.

“Be careful of your ribs then,” she warned.

She dragged her tongue down the length of him, across his sac while her thumb stroked gently at the base of his head.

Andre was not a novice to a woman pleasuring him in such a way but Rylee had never done so. It both shocked him that she was so good at what she was doing and that she—unlike a great many women—seemed to be enjoying it. He grudgingly wondered if Alsandair Farrell had taught her these sultry tricks and decided he must have.

“If you don’t want me to come in your mouth, you’d best quit that,” he said, his breath coming in gasps.

She replied by taking him deeper into her mouth, partially down her relaxed throat and suckling him so firmly, so well, he couldn’t have stopped his release no matter how hard he might have tried. He came fast and furious, crying out his relief with a loud, triumphant shout. He could feel her throat working as she swallowed his cum and that seemed to make his climax that much more potent. As the last spurt of seed left him, he sank down into the mattress, his breath heaving, his body completely drained, shuddering as she licked the last of the moisture from his cock.

“Rylee,” he heard himself whisper, and she came to him like the blessing she had become.

\* \* \* \* \*

“And that man is crazy as a loon, Cap’n,” Devin Boucharde, the *Perdu’s* first mate complained. He was giving his captain the last report of the day before Renaud turned in for the night.

“To which man are you referring?” Renaud asked, yawning as he unbuttoned his shirt.

“That Anlusian,” Devin grumbled. “He’s out there at the rail—in the pouring rain, mind you—just staring out at the water.” The first mate shook his head. “And with lightning scratching left and right around the ship. I told him to get his arse inside and he told me to go fuck myself.”

Renaud hung his head and spat out a stream of vulgarity. "Go get him and bring him here," he ordered. "In shackles if need be."

Devin nodded once and left, cursing just as brutally as his captain at having to go back out into the rain. When he brought Alsandair to the captain's cabin, the warrior was soaked to his skin and dripping on the highly polished floor as he was shoved unceremoniously through the door.

Alsandair spun around and would have plowed a fist into Devin's face if Renaud hadn't grabbed his arm and jerked him around.

"You won't be of any use whatsoever to your lady if you contract lung fever, now will you, Farrell?" Renaud snapped.

Alsandair shook off Renaud's hold and ran his arm under his dripping nose. His hair was plastered to his head and he looked like a drowned rat. "I don't get sick easily," he muttered.

Renaud went over to his sea chest and opened it to draw out a towel. He tossed it to Alsandair. "You're ruining my gods-be-damned floor."

"I didn't ask to be brought in here," Alsandair complained as he scrubbed the towel over his head and face.

There was a smell coming from Alsandair's wet clothes that was musky and unpleasant. With another vicious curse, Renaud went searching through his chest for a clean shirt and pants. "How long were you on the island?" he asked.

"Nine days," Alsandair replied. He stared at the clothes Renaud extended toward him. "I stink."

"Aye, you do," Renaud agreed. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder to the facility in the corner. "You can wipe off in there. I'll give you a razor too. You can use it later."

Alsandair took the clothes and walked behind the screen. He made use of the basin of water and soap he found on the dry sink. Glancing in the mirror, he winced at his scruffy appearance, his unshaven face looking haggard with dark circles punctuating his eyes. When he was dressed again, he came out from behind the screen holding his wet clothes.

"Just drop them outside my door. Gracey will pick them up in the morning."

When he closed the door, Alsandair turned around to find Renaud offering him a seat. He sat down and ran a hand through his wet hair.

"How long have you and your lady been Joined?" Renaud asked.

"Not quite two weeks," Alsandair replied.

Renaud shook his head. "This just keeps getting better and better," he muttered.

"Does that make a difference?"

"The longer the marriage, the better it would have been but we'll have to work with what we have," the pirate captain answered.

Alsandair narrowed his eyes. "Why are you helping me?" he asked. "What are you getting out of this?"

Renaud had been preparing for bed when Devin had come to report. His shirt was unbuttoned and he was barefoot. He brought one foot up on the chair seat and rested his wrist on it. "Louis Corsair is a friend of mine," he stated. "I've known him for ten years now. Not once in those ten years has he ever put me into a position like this one. I doubt he knows your Joining was performed at sea."

"Is that important?"

"Aye," Renaud said. "Very important. To the Brotherhood, that means your Joining was sanctioned by the gods of the deep. That's just one more point in your favor when you go before them to ask for her to be returned to you."

"One more point? What other point is there?"

Renaud smiled. "You will have my support." He held up his hand when Alsandair would have asked why. "I'm not happy with Louis right now and anything I can do to thwart what he had in mind for you will suit me just fine."

"I don't understand."

"Louis didn't tell me the whole story when he asked me to come fetch you. He just said there was a man on Clare Island who had insulted his family and needed to be punished for doing so. I had no reason to question him and wouldn't have if my first mate hadn't imparted to me what had happened a few days before."

"You mean Andre firing on Louis?"

Renaud nodded. "Louis was coming to kill you," he said.

"I figured as much."

"I spend my time on the north side of Wicklaw Cay," Renaud told him. "I've no desire to be anywhere near the riffraff who live on the main part of the Cay. I rely on my men to tell what they think might be of interest to me and when Boucharde informed me of what was going on between the Corsairs, I wasn't a happy man. Had I known about it before we were halfway to Clare Island, I would have turned around and gone home. I didn't however know there was a woman involved until you and I spoke."

"You said Corsair had something in mind for me."

"I was to take you directly to him without Andre knowing about it. That in itself should have been a warning but I didn't pay any heed to it. I imagine that once I delivered you into Louis' hands, he would have cut your throat, dropped your body in a lime pit and that would have been the end of it." He grinned nastily. "He won't be expecting me to bring the rest of the men from the *Mary Constance* to the Cay either."

"You don't fear him?"

"Louis?" Renaud asked with a laugh. "No, but Andre is a different matter."

"In what way?"

Renaud sobered. "Farrell, when we reach the Cay, Andi Corsair will do one of three things." He held up the thumb of the hand resting on his knee, fingers curled into a fist. "He'll either ignore you or—" he extended his index finger "—he'll challenge you to a duel or—" his middle finger shot out "—he will have his men truss you up like a feast goose and take you as far from the Cay as they can get you. Most likely all the way back to Anlusia." He spread his fingers. "My guess is the latter because he doesn't want his lady—"

"My lady," Alsandair snarled.

"He doesn't want her to hate him because something happened to you."

"I can handle a sword, Renaud," Alsandair said.

"Not as well as Andre Corsair, you can't," Renaud said. "I've never seen any man as good as him, Farrell. There isn't a pirate alive who would go up against him."

"Not even you?"

"Not even me."

Alsandair locked gazes with the pirate. "I know who you really are."

Renaud's green eyes narrowed. "Is that so?"

"I recognized you as soon as I saw you."

The two men stared at one another for a long time, neither blinking. When Renaud broke the silence between them, he did it with steely resolve in his deep voice.

"Utter one word about what you think you know, Farrell, and you won't have to worry about Andre or Louis Corsair. I'll fillet you and feed you to the sharks."

"Your secret is safe with me, Your Grace," Alsandair said.

"It had best be."

Alsandair watched his companion get up and go to a table where crystal decanters sat. Renaud poured two snifters of brandy. He gave one to Alsandair then sat down again.

"You will need to join the Brotherhood," the pirate said. "There's no getting around that. Once you do, you'll be an outlaw and you'll never be able to go home to Anlusia."

"I understand that," Alsandair said, taking a sip of the potent liquor.

"The Brotherhood isn't about to take the lady in question away from Andre. He is a much respected, greatly feared leader but—"

"I want my woman back!" Alsandair snarled.

"Will you let me finish?" Renaud snapped at him. "I am about to tell you how you can do that." He frowned. "At least in a way."

"What do you mean in a way?"

"Despite the fact the world believes us criminals, there are laws the Brotherhood lives by. Some of those laws govern conduct, the holding of property, the distribution of assets, that sort of thing. One of the laws that is as old as the Brotherhood itself but one that has rarely been used but it's still in the Book of Rules and Regulations. It is called

*Se Tenir Conjointement*. Once you have joined the Brotherhood and after your maiden voyage as one of us, you can invoke that law. Until then, you must not mention it to anyone. If Louis finds out, he'll do everything in his power to keep the law from being invoked."

"What does that law entail?" Alsandair asked.

Renaud winced as though he didn't relish answering. "*Se Tenir Conjointement* means to be held jointly," he finally replied. "It means you and Andre will share the lady equally."

"Share her equally," Alsandair repeated, his brows drawn together. "You don't mean—"

"Six months out of the year she will live with you. The other six months she will live with him."

Alsandair exploded out of his chair, the brandy sloshing over his fist. "The hell she will!"

"Sit down, Farrell," Renaud said calmly.

"She is my wife!" Alsandair said. He was quivering with outrage. "I'll not share her with any man!"

"Even if that's the only way you will be allowed to have her?" Renaud inquired.

There was deep hurt on the younger man's face and his eyes were too bright as he stood there staring down at Renaud.

"You are already sharing her, Alsandair," Renaud said. He was speaking in a soft, reasonable voice. "There really is no other way for you to be with her."

"I won't... I can't..."

"What if she is carrying Andre's child?" Renaud asked.

Alsandair had obviously not thought of that for the color drained from his face and he sat back down in the chair, his eyes wide, mouth open.

"Take a sip of your brandy," Renaud advised.

The Anlusian warrior didn't hesitate. He lifted the snifter and drained the fiery liquid. He sat there holding the empty snifter in his hand, staring bleakly down into it as though the answers he sought could be found in its crystal bowl.

"Obviously Andre cares deeply for the lady else he would not have Joined with her before the Brotherhood. Such a step is irrevocable and not taken lightly. Few pirates ever legally marry their women," Renaud said.

"Why buy the cow when you can milk her for free?" Alsandair mumbled. He looked up at Renaud. "What kind of man is he?"

"He's a good man, actually. I can promise you he will be treating her with the care and respect she deserves as his wife. Believe me, Andi would never have fired on Louis if he didn't have very strong feelings for the lady and wanted nothing to upset her, which your dying would have."

“She’s an easy woman to love,” Alsandair said softly. “She agreed to go with him if he wouldn’t harm us.”

“That in itself is rare for a Corsair,” Renaud said. “Did Striker tell Andre he was Khalid al-Rashid’s brother?”

“Aye, he did. I think he said we were under Khalid’s protection.”

“Then that’s another kettle of fish altogether. Andre wouldn’t have put the crew to the sword knowing that.”

“You mean my lady sacrificed herself for nothing?” Alsandair asked.

“I wouldn’t say that. My guess is Andi would have taken her anyway.”

“This is a living hell,” the younger man whispered.

“But one you can overcome if you’re willing to do what it takes,” Renaud suggested. “You have to decide what is more important to you – your woman or your pride.”

Alsandair sat there for a long, long time, his eyes moving back and forth as he thought and rethought his options. Outside the storm raged, rain beating against the portholes, the weather as turbulent as the thoughts crowding his mind. He was grateful Renaud did not speak, did not try to coerce him further. The pirate was allowing him to make his own decision and though it galled him, he realized there was really only one that would allow him to be with Rylee. When at last he looked up – his face pinched and drawn – he had made his decision.

## Chapter Seventeen

Rouyce, the Mock brothers and Prescott were biding their time, surreptitiously watching *L'endroit Sûr* and the woman who lived there for their chance to abduct her. What little coin they could scrounge was through gambling and the lifting of an occasional purse from one of the passengers or crew of the neutral ships—those merchant ships that came often to Wicklaw Cay to buy stolen merchandise from the pirates to sell at an ungodly markup in foreign ports. Now and again the three men would take the dilapidated sloop they'd inherited by nefarious means from a fellow pirate out past the reef to drop a net but what little catch they brought in was for their own use. They lived from hand to mouth.

"I'll be damned. Is that the *Perdu*?" Mock asked, nudging a tobacco-stained chin toward the water.

The masthead of Noel Renaud's ship was known throughout the pirate kingdom and to see the sleek brigantine that was the flagship of Renaud's fleet coming into the bay on that side of the Cay was highly unusual.

"Since when does His Lord High and Mighty bring one of his ships into our harbor?" Prescott sneered.

Sailors and islanders were stopping what they were doing to watch the *Perdu* as she made her way towards the docks.

"Corsair," Rouyce mumbled, and his two companions turned to see the elder of the Corsair brothers striding past. He waited until Louis was out of earshot and cursed him, hawking a wad of phlegm in the captain's wake. "Bastard."

"What you reckon Renaud is doing here?" Mock inquired.

"Bringing in a shipment of somethin'," Prescott commented. "It's happened a'fore."

"Let's mosey on down and find out for ourselves," Rouyce suggested. He hitched up his ragged breeches.

"Not that often," Mock said. "Come on, Nealon."

The mute nodded eagerly.

By the time the *Perdu* was tied fast to her moorings, a large crowd had gathered. Questions were yelled out at Renaud's crew but his men only shrugged. They were well trained and loyal and even if they knew what was happening, wouldn't comment about it.

It was Louis Corsair stomping across the *Perdu's* gangplank and going below to the captain's cabin that had those assembled buzzing like a disturbed beehive. People were craning their necks, pointing at Renaud's ship, making speculations. The longer Louis remained onboard, the longer it took for Captain Renaud to appear, the wilder those

speculations became so that when Devin Boucharde, the *Perdu's* first mate, came strolling off the ship, he was bombarded with a cacophony of questions—all of which he ignored as he continued up the pier and to the stable.

“Whatcha wanna bet he’s going to *L’endroit Sûr*?” Prescott asked.

“To fetch the younger Corsair?” Rouyce asked.

When Boucharde came out of the stable leading a roan gelding, mounted and took the pathway up to *L’endroit Sûr*, the noise from the crowd increased to a low roar.

“Aye, that’s exactly what Dev’s doing,” Prescott said. “He’s goin’ after Andre Corsair sure as shit.”

“And the good captain will be leaving that pretty little wife of his’n all alone out there,” Mock put in. He cocked his head toward the two women from *L’endroit Sûr* who had come into town for market day.

“Don’t reckon anybody but old Gaston will be left out there to mind the little chit,” Prescott added.

The four men looked at one another and grinned nastily. Nealon Mock licked his rubbery lips for the one thing he was truly good at was killing things. He’d spent a lifetime trapping, torturing and mutilating helpless creatures.

While the crowd mumbled in excitement about what was transpiring onboard the *Perdu*, the four ragtag rogues vanished behind a warehouse and melded into the jungle beyond.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alsandair had been warned by Renaud not to speak when Louis Corsair arrived. He’d bathed, shaved, had Renaud’s steward trim his hair and had been declared presentable. He’d been cautioned repeatedly that the man coming to visit was dangerous and would look for any slight he could use against Alsandair to call him out.

“Keep your mouth shut and your eyes down,” Renaud had advised. “Let me handle this.”

As the heavy footfalls thumped down the companionway, Alsandair tensed, digging his fingernails into the palms of his hands. He was standing to Renaud’s right—behind the captain’s desk—and listening to his heart pounding in his ears.

“He is a dangerous man,” Renaud said softly. “Don’t forget that for one minute, Sandair.”

That the pirate had used his nickname did not escape Alsandair. He was surprised to find he was beginning to like and respect Noel Renaud and unless the man proved to be false, he thought they could easily become friends. Kyle—on the other hand—had no use for the pirate and had made it clear there would never be anything but animosity between them.

“I don’t trust him,” Kyle had stated emphatically. “There’s something about him that just doesn’t ring true.”

Alsandair glanced at the gambler. Kyle was standing on the other side of Renaud's desk and Captain Andelton was seated in one of the two chairs flanking that desk. Ataa and the crew of the *Mary Constance* were somewhere below deck, being carefully watched by Renaud's quartermaster.

There was a short rap on the door of the captain's cabin then the portal opened to reveal a tall, bulky man with a face like an angry bull.

"You brought back the entire fucking crew of the *Mary Constance*?" Louis Corsair demanded, his lips skinned back from stained teeth.

"Good morning to you too, Louis," Renaud said politely. He was sitting forward over his desk with his hands folded, fingers entwined on the felt desk blotter. "Did you perhaps omit a few pertinent details to me when you asked my help, old friend?"

Louis' scowl deepened. "What pertinent details are you babbling about, Renaud?"

"Oh I don't know," Renaud said, sitting back, his folded hands now clasped over his trim belly. "Like the fact that the man you sent me after —"

"The man I told you to bring back in shackles!" Louis shouted, swinging his gaze from Alsandair to Kyle, not sure which man he should be glaring at but knowing it wasn't the middle-aged one sitting before Renaud's desk. He knew that had to be the captain of the *Mary Constance*.

"The man you sent me after," Renaud continued as though he hadn't been rudely interrupted, "who had his wife stolen from him by your little brother?"

"That's neither here nor there!" Louis snapped.

"Or that that wife was joined to him on the high seas by a licensed captain?"

Dark brows speckled with a hint of gray clashed over Louis' curved beak of a nose. "What the fuck are you talking about, Renaud?" he growled.

"Captain Andelton?" Renaud said politely.

Andelton got to his feet with a slight bow. "I am Captain Drake Andelton, formerly of the *Mary Constance*. If you will check my ship's log, you will find that I married Alsandair Farrell—" he turned to sweep a hand toward the man he'd named — and Rylee McCourtland on the twelfth day of December of this year. We were at longitude —"

"I don't give a diseased rat's prick where you were!" Louis thundered. His enraged glare was aimed at Alsandair who refused to lower his eyes to the man, even when Louis jabbed a stubby finger toward him. "You are a dead man, Farrell!"

"I would remind you, Captain Corsair," Renaud said in a voice devoid of politeness, "that you are onboard the *Perdu* and not one of your ships. I will not have you speaking to one of my officers in that manner."

Louis took a step back, his mouth dropping open. "One of your officers?" he repeated, his face taking on a red hue that did not bode well for his health.

"Commander Farrell has signed on as my chief tactical officer," Renaud said smoothly. "With his many years of service as an Anlusian Guard —"

“Are you listening to what the fuck you are saying, Renaud?” Louis demanded, his face redder than ever. His hands were opening and closing into meaty fists at his side. “This man has insulted my family honor and you hire him to some trumped-up post I’ve never heard of?”

Renaud smiled pleasantly, tilting his head to one side in question. “How, may I ask you, has he insulted your family honor, Louis?”

Louis sputtered, unable to answer that question. He swept his rage over Alsandair in an effort to cower the younger man but Farrell simply held his gaze with no expression on his face whatsoever.

“Who dared sponsor that whelp into our trade?” Louis managed to ask.

“I did,” Renaud answered, though he knew damned well Louis had already figured that out.

“You are a traitor, Noel Renaud,” Louis flung at him.

“Have I now been added to the list of those who have insulted your family honor?” Renaud asked.

“You know fucking well what it is you’ve done, you sorry little shit!” Louis hissed.

“I put forth to you, Louis,” Renaud said, drawing Louis’ attention back to him, “as I will put it before the Brotherhood, that it is your family – Andre in particular and you to a certain point—who have insulted Commander Farrell’s honor. If anyone should demand redress, it is he.”

“What?” Louis bellowed.

“Andre took this gentleman’s lawful wife from him and brought her here to the Cay, asking—at your demand and under threat of taking the lady from his custody until he did as you ordered—the Brotherhood to set aside her high seas Joining before the gods of the deep and wed her to himself. But you were not satisfied with that, Louis. You went after Farrell with the express intent of murdering him.”

“Damned straight I did,” Louis snarled, “and I would have had not that bastard son of mine come yipping at my heels like a lovesick terrier to blow a hole in my fucking ship!”

Captain Andelton and Kyle exchanged a look. They knew Corsair had not realized what deep, dark secret he had unwittingly revealed in his anger. Renaud though did and quickly changed the subject.

“Farrell has signed on with me and will go before the Brotherhood and take his Oath to them before the day is out. He will then be setting out with me tomorrow on the morning tide to make his first run as one of us. When we return, he will go before the Brotherhood again and ask that his Joining to the lady in question be recognized.”

“Won’t happen! Won’t fucking happen!” Louis bellowed. “The Brotherhood will never set aside Andre’s Joining. Never!”

“Perhaps not, but as his sponsor I will accompany him to the Council and advise him as I see fit.”

No one had noticed the man who had slipped quietly into the cabin until he spoke.

"Is he going to strike for *Se Tenir Conjointement*?" Andre Corsair asked quietly.

Every eye turned to Andre. Every man there – including Alsandair – winced at the battered sight the man presented.

"By the gods he'd better not!" Louis roared. He took a step toward Andre. "You let me handle this."

Andre could barely walk and the wagon ride into town had all but taken its toll on him. He felt as though he'd been rolled down a high escarpment of jagged rocks to land in the middle of a field of broken glass. Making his way to the chair beside Captain Andelton's, he sat down gingerly, holding a hand to his side where his ribs were throbbing brutally.

"You should be in bed, Andre," Renaud said, putting his hands on the desk once more. "I'd no idea Louis beat you this badly or I would have insisted we come to you to settle this matter."

"He got what he deserved," Louis snapped.

Andre ignored Renaud and Louis. He was looking at Alsandair. "Will you?" he asked. When Louis would have protested again, he cursed at the man the world thought to be his older brother in their native language. "*Damnez-vous à l'enfer. Laissez-moi manipuler mes propres affaires. Je suis un homme pas un enfant!*"

"Damn you to hell too, you evil little fuck!" Louis threw at Andre. "And aye you are a child and certainly not a grown man acting the way you've been acting!"

"And how is that, Louis?" Renaud inquired mildly.

"Like a mewling schoolboy sniffing after his first cunt!"

Almost in unison both Andre and Alsandair said the exact same words, "My wife isn't a cunt!"

Both Andre and Alsandair flinched. The two men stared at one another and something passed between them of which no one else in the room was aware. In that moment they each defended the woman they loved, a tenuous truce was laid down, an unspoken understanding grudgingly given and reluctantly accepted, one to the other.

"You didn't answer me, Farrell," Andre said. "Are you going to seek *Se Tenir Conjointement*?"

"How would he even know of it?" Louis demanded then narrowed his eyes, growling like a cornered beast at Renaud. "Unless you told him."

"I would like to speak to these two men in private," Renaud said, and when Louis opened his mouth to shout, he shook his head. "This is not your decision, Louis. This is Andre's."

"Go home, Louis," Andre said in a tired voice. "Renaud's right. This doesn't concern you."

Kyle came from behind the desk and both he and Andelton headed for the door. Neither man looked back as they left. For a moment Louis stood his ground but after a

prolonged glare at Andre, threw his hands into the air and stomped out, slamming the door savagely behind him.

"That man would try the patience of a saint," Renaud said as Louis' heavy footsteps crashed up the companionway.

"I am fully convinced he was put on this earth simply to torment me," Andre said and put a hand to his aching head.

"You want some water, Andi?" Renaud inquired.

"Please."

It was Alsandair who went to the sideboard and poured his rival a tumbler of water. He glanced at Renaud who declined the silent offer then brought the tumbler to Andre.

"Thank you," Andre mumbled.

Alsandair didn't reply. At Renaud's urging, he took the chair vacated by Andelton.

"I want the two of you to just sit there and hear me out before you speak," Renaud said. "What is decided here today won't be cast in stone but it needs discussing and you're both intelligent men. You can discuss this as adults."

Andre nodded, leaned his head on the chair back and closed his eyes.

Renaud leaned back in his chair. "I have never had the pleasure of meeting the lady in question, but for her to have two such powerful men fighting over her, she must truly be a beauty."

"She is," Alsandair said.

"The most beautiful woman I've ever seen," Andre agreed.

"And you both must love her beyond all that is holy to put yourselves through this."

"I've loved her for seven years," Alsandair admitted.

"I loved her the moment I saw her through my spyglass."

Renaud let out a long breath. "How does she feel toward you, Sandair?"

Alsandair's hands were clenched on the chair arms. "When last I saw her, she loved me as I do her."

"She still does," Andre said, opening his eyes and turning his head so he could look Alsandair in the eye. "But she has come to love me as well."

"In less than two weeks' time?" Alsandair challenged.

"Would you have me lie to you and say she hates my guts?" Andre asked.

"It would make me feel a helluva lot better if you did."

Andre smiled wanly. "Sorry, but I'm afraid you'll have to suffer along with me."

"Have you...?" Alsandair began and couldn't finish.

"You know I have," Andre answered, and closed his eyes again to the blinding pain ripping at his skull.

"Are you having one of your headaches?" Renaud asked.

"It doesn't matter," Andre replied. "Let's just get on with this."

"You have migraines?" Alsandair inquired.

Andre opened one eye. "You?"

"Aye."

"Figures," he said, and closed his eye again.

"*Se Tenir Conjointement*," Renaud said, "is the only solution. The lady will never be allowed to leave Wicklaw Cay and if you were to attempt to abscond with her, Farrell, the entire might of the Brotherhood would fall on your head." He smiled at Alsandair. "That's a headache you certainly don't want."

"I've seen it happen and it ain't a pretty sight," Andre asserted.

"Six months with him and six months with you," Renaud said. "But then there is one other alternative."

Andre forced his eyes open. He could barely see out of his right eye anyway, Louis' right cross had taken care of that. "We could duel," he said.

"You could and if by some strange quirk of fate and odd alignment of the planets Farrell should win, Louis would gut him before the day was out and the lady would be fair game to any man who lusted after her. And if she is as lovely as you two say she is, that might well be three-fourths of the Cay, myself included."

"You don't have much faith in a man you've hired on as your chief tactical officer," Andre said with a chuckle that made him wince as he felt the sting of his split lip.

"I'm good with a blade, Corsair," Alsandair said. "He's never seen me fight."

"Mayhap, but you forget I've already fought you once and you were only fair to middling," Andre reminded him. "I can take you easily even with two broken ribs."

"I tripped," Alsandair defended himself.

Renaud shook his head at the exchange. They were like little boys, but he liked them both and he didn't want to see either lose his life over a woman.

"We'll leave on the morning tide tomorrow and when we come back, Sandair will petition the Brotherhood for *Se Tenir Conjointement*." He looked from one man to the other. "Is that agreeable?"

"Shouldn't you ask Rylee?" Alsandair asked.

"I mentioned that ancient law to her last night," Andre said. "She thought it sinful."

"That sounds like Rylee," Alsandair sighed.

"She thinks she's sinful for wanting the both of us."

Alsandair nodded. "Aye, that she would."

"Do you think she would accept the law?" Renaud pressed.

Andre shrugged, wishing he hadn't for his ribs grated on one another. He pressed his palm tighter to them. "She was more concerned that I not go after Farrell and just let him be. She wanted him kept safe at all cost."

Alsandair smiled. "That sounds like her too."

"It's the only way, gentlemen," Renaud insisted. "Is it to be *Se Tenir Conjointement*?"

Andre had already decided to strike for the old law even before Devin Boucharde had arrived to tell him he was needed on Captain Renaud's ship. He wanted to take the shadows from Rylee's eyes, the pain from her heart. The moment he saw Boucharde, he had a good idea what was happening down at the *Perdu*.

"I see no other way and I'll not cause her any more grief," Andre said. "I will agree to it."

"Sandair?" Renaud inquired.

"Do I have a choice?" Alsandair asked, his jaw tightening.

"Not really," Renaud replied.

Alsandair asked Andre if Rylee knew he was on the Cay.

"Not yet. I didn't tell her why I was being ordered to Renaud's ship. I left her and Gaston playing chess on the veranda. Gaston must have known what was up but he won't have told her."

"I'd like to see her before this is done," Alsandair said. "This is her life we're deciding."

"You're right," Andre agreed. "She should be told and allowed to—" He stopped, putting his hand to his temple. His head suddenly felt as though an elf was inside his skull picking away at his brain with a dull blade.

"You need to lie down," Renaud said, coming to his feet and around the desk. He wasn't in the least surprised Alsandair was right beside him. "Help me get him over to my bunk."

"I'm okay," Andre protested, but made no attempt to keep the men from helping him to his feet and over to the bunk. He sat down and leaned back, letting Renaud lift his legs up to the mattress.

"Look in the top drawer of my desk on the right side," Renaud told Alsandair. "There is a vial of tenses there."

"By the gods I hate that shit, Renaud," Andre complained.

"So do I, but it serves its purpose," Alsandair told him.

It was after Andre had been given a fairly stiff dose of the purple-colored liquid that Louis burst through the door, his eyes wide and his teeth clenched together.

"She's gone," he said without preamble, his attention going immediately to Andre. "What the fuck did you do to...?"

"Migraine," Renaud said. "Who's gone?"

Alsandair didn't have to ask. He started toward Louis but came up short when Renaud put out a stiff arm as immobile as a tree branch. He ran into it and bounced off, cursing as he stumbled back.

"Rylee?" Andre murmured, the tenses already taking fast hold of his consciousness. He tried to get up but the room cantered off to one side and he pitched headlong into darkness, sinking down into the soothing waves of the drug.

"Where is my wife?" Alsandair shouted, trying to get around Renaud to Louis.

"She's been taken," Louis said, and turned his eyes to Renaud. "And Gaston is dead."

## Chapter Eighteen

It was only a quarter of a mile from the docks to *L'endroit Sûr* and the men who made that short trek ran full-out the entire way. It had not occurred to any of them to take time to find a horse to take them there. With Louis and Renaud leading the way, Alsandair and Kyle close behind them, it was a grim-faced, frightened and angry foursome who arrived at Andre's home.

"I came to talk to her," Louis said, panting as the house came into view. "That's when I found Gaston. He was already dead, stabbed in the belly."

The first mate of the *Vengeance des Raven* lay sprawled at the base of the steps that led up to the veranda. Around his hips, the ground was crimson with his spilled blood.

"Did you search the house?" Renaud asked.

"Of course I did, Renaud! She's gone," Louis said.

"Stop!" Alsandair yelled, and the men skidded on the oyster-shell pathway. They looked at him. "Stay back and let me take a look."

"Don't tell me what to—" Louis began, but Renaud reached out to grab his arm for Corsair had started forward again.

"He's a soldier. He knows how to track men," Kyle said. He bent over, his hands on his knees as he attempted to drag breath into his depleted lungs. "We could destroy signs he needs to read."

Alsandair had hunkered down beside the dead man, putting a hand to the side of Gaston's throat.

"What the hell are you doing?" Louis demanded.

Alsandair got to his feet. "He's been dead an hour or longer," he said, and looked closely at the pathway. "There were at least three of them, maybe four."

"How can you tell?" Renaud asked.

He pointed to the overturned table on the veranda and the chess pieces lying about, the blood smeared down the steps. "The man with Rylee must have fought them but they gutted him. They pushed him down the steps and took off that way, stepping in his blood as they went." He began following the pathway around the side of the house. "One of them most likely is carrying Rylee."

It was then the other men looked down to see the boot prints tracking away from the murder scene. There were at least three distinct sets of tracks on the pathway.

"How are you going to track them through the jungle?" Louis demanded.

"I'm a damned good tracker and they've got my woman," Alsandair said. He stopped and gave the men a hard stare. "And I don't need a crowd traipsing behind me to alert the bastards I'm coming! All I need is a sword and a dagger, maybe a pistol."

"Get him what he needs, Louis," Renaud ordered.

"I'm coming with you," Kyle said.

"No," Alsandair stated, shaking his head as Louis ran up the veranda steps to do as Renaud bid.

"You need someone at your back and we're not going to argue about it," Kyle said. "Three against one isn't good odds, my friend."

"I know the jungle, Sandair," Renaud said, "and so does Louis. We can be as quiet as we need to be."

"They have my wife and they've got an hour's lead!" Alsandair hissed at them. He was impatient to be gone, to find Rylee, and he flicked an irritated glance at the door to the house, willing Corsair to hurry. "I need to move fast."

"We'll stay back but we'll be behind you," Renaud said. His tone said he would accept no argument.

Louis came back with swords and daggers. "I don't know where he keeps his pistols," he apologized.

Alsandair stuck a dagger into the waistband of his pants, flexed his hand around the sword Louis had handed him and set off at a fast pace, studying the ground as he went. "No talking," he ordered, his teeth clenched.

The men following in Alsandair's wake couldn't see everything he was seeing as he led them along the path. He pointed out a few broken stems on plants but when he moved off the path and into the denser foliage they merely looked at one another, unable to fathom what he was doing.

Carefully stepping amongst the detritus on the jungle floor, Alsandair was moving as stealthily and as quickly as he could. His heart was pounding in his ears, his palms sweaty from the fear for Rylee's safety growing within him. Whoever had taken his lady was either so clumsy or stupid they didn't think to cover their tracks or were shrewd enough to be setting a trap for anyone following them. Several hundred feet into the lush canopy of the jungle, he decided there were four men and one of them was definitely carrying Rylee for his footprints made deeper impressions in the rotting vegetation. He also decided there wasn't anything shrewd about them. They were being careless, not bothering to cover their movement through the jungle.

He stopped, holding up a closed fist to halt Kyle who was following him about twenty feet back. He cocked his head to one side, listening intently for he had caught the hint of laughter up ahead. Twisting his neck, he gave Kyle a hard stare, looked past him to see Renaud and Louis also stopped behind Kyle. He held up four fingers and saw the other men nod. He forked two fingers toward Renaud and Louis then jabbed his thumb to their right. Once more they nodded and began moving quietly the way

he'd indicated. He looked back at Kyle and indicated the gambler was to go left. Kyle immediately headed that way.

Alsandair turned back to the pathway ahead of him. The laughter had come again and he knew that time the others must have heard it. With his jaw set, he began walking toward the sound.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andre tried once more to get up, fighting the lethargy the tenses had forced upon him. His head was swimming unmercifully and it was all he could do to get his leaden legs off the bed and his feet to the floor. The room tilted to one side. Furniture in the plush cabin of the *Perdu* receded and came at him in waves as he attempted to stand. His legs went out from beneath him and he slid down the side of the bunk, scraping his backbone on the wooden side rails as he went.

"Goddamit!" he barked, feeling the gouge along his spine. His legs splayed out and he couldn't seem to find the energy or strength to push himself up.

A part of him understood the urgency of going after Rylee, but though his spirit and heart were more than willing, his body simply wouldn't cooperate. Frustrated, he repeatedly slammed the back of his head against the edge of the mattress, hissing his anger at not being able to get up.

"Rylee," he whispered, fear and regret and helplessness pressing down on him like a ton of rock.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alsandair caught glimpses of Renaud, Louis and Kyle as they carefully skirted the clearing in front of the cave he was watching. He had to admit the men were being as silent as possible, yet to his trained ear he could pick out their movements with ease. He knew the men inside the cave could not. Those men were making enough noise of their own to mask the approach of a rescue party.

Skirting a fallen palm tree, Alsandair made for the cave's entrance. Once there, he flattened himself against the face of the rock upon which thick vines were hanging and quickly looked around the edge of the entrance. He'd caught just a glimpse of light farther back down a passage leading off the entrance chamber.

Kyle quietly appeared on the other side of the cave's entrance, carefully making his way opposite Alsandair.

Pointing a finger at Kyle then putting his hand out—palm down—to indicate Kyle was to stay put, Alsandair struck a thumb to his chest and then pointed his index finger twice toward the cave entrance.

Kyle shook his head firmly. The expression in his eyes said he wasn't going to wait while Alsandair went into the cave alone.

Sensing Renaud and Louis moving up behind him, Alsandair turned his palm up and folded all but one finger, giving Kyle another hand signal the gambler understood all too well.

Kyle grinned and wagged his brows then mimicked Alsandair's signal with his right hand while he wrapped the fingers of his left around his extended middle finger and moved the closed fingers up and down.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Alsandair was hard-pressed not to laugh as he slipped quickly into the cave entrance, leaving the other men behind.

Across the entrance of the cave, Renaud arched a brow at Kyle.

Kyle shrugged and melded into the cave as silently and efficiently as Alsandair had.

Alsandair had every intention of moving cautiously and slowly toward the flickering light that cast moving shadows on the cavern's ceiling but one scream—loud and piercing and filled with pain—broke his resolve and he dug his booted toes into the loose sand beneath his feet and vaulted forward, sword clutched tightly in his hand.

Kyle cursed, barely noticing Renaud and Louis entering the cave, and sprang after Alsandair. By the time he reached the place where Alsandair had disappeared, he heard a brutal war cry and then the harsh clang of metal striking metal quickly followed by a bloodcurdling shriek that made the hair on his arms stand up.

When the three men who had accompanied Alsandair on his rescue mission entered the wide chamber lit brightly by light from a campfire and torches stuck into crevices on the rock wall, they stepped into a living nightmare they would each remember for as long as they lived.

One man lay crumpled beside the fire, his head a good ten feet from his still twitching body. Another was struggling to stuff his innards back inside his lower body as he slumped against a jagged boulder. The stench of spilled blood and guts was thick in the air. Two other men were striking clumsily at Alsandair with swords they obviously did not know how to wield, terror showing clearly on their sweaty faces.

Kyle would have entered the fray but Louis reached out to stop him. He shook his head. "He would not appreciate your interference," Corsair said.

"He needs my help!" Kyle protested.

"No, my friend," Louis said. "He does not."

Renaud spotted Rylee lying off to one side and rushed to her, stripping off his shirt to cover her naked body as she lay like a broken toy on the cave floor. As he wrapped her in his shirt, he winced when he saw the myriad bruises that marred her soft flesh. Blood was running down her legs. He called out to Louis to give him his shirt and Louis hurried over, ripping the shirt from his body. He handed it to Renaud who gently pressed the material between Rylee's legs. Kyle came to hunker down beside them, groaning when he saw the scrapes and cuts on Rylee's lovely face.

"She's unconscious," Renaud said.

"Thanks be to the gods for that," Louis observed.

The three men could not keep their eyes from the gory spectacle that was playing itself out on the other side of the chamber. None of them were strangers to witnessing—and dispensing—death but not a one of them had ever seen anything like what they watched happen that day in the cave.

Alsandair was like a man possessed. He didn't know whether his lady was alive or dead. All he knew was that these men had hurt her, raped her and would have killed her had he not found her in time. He knew beyond a shadow of any doubt that he was going to mutilate the two remaining men who were trying desperately to get around him and get out of the cave. He slashed at them, driving them back farther into the chamber until there was nowhere for them to go. His eyes were dark fire, his face as hard and cold as the rocks surrounding him. Hacking at his enemies, placing cuts on their arms, their thighs, their chests, he was doling out as much pain as he could without finishing them off.

Louis watched Alsandair lunge and drive his blade into Rouyce's gut, twisting it one hundred and eighty degrees before dragging it up, cleaving the man's chest all the way up to his gullet. He saw Ethan Mock's eyes flare as his friend sagged to the cave floor, still impaled on the berserker's sword. Mock dropped his own weapon and held up his hands, hoping to stave off the death he saw flick to him. "Please, milord," Mock begged, and the front of his filthy trousers turned dark with urine. "Quarter, sir. Quarter!"

Pity and compassion were no longer words in Alsandair Farrell's vocabulary. With a calm, steady hand, he withdrew his blade from the dead man who crumpled at his feet and turned to the surviving man.

"Please," Louis heard Mock cry, and the man sank to his knees, his hands clasped under his chin as though in prayer. "I'm begging you, milord, please!"

This was the man who had been ramming himself into Alsandair's woman when the warrior had burst in. This was the man who would suffer the most at his hands.

Alsandair brought his left hand over to slowly wrap the fingers around his right hand, gripping the sword tightly as he began to pull it up and over his right shoulder. His hot glower never left the man's deathly pale face and it wavered only a fraction of a degree when his arms came down and he took off the top of his enemy's head—just above the nose—and blood and gore sprayed into his face. The backward swing of his blade took the rapist's head completely off at the collarbone.

Kyle looked away. His gorge was rising for the slashing did not stop when the rapist's head fell away from his body. The young warrior continued to hack at the dead man over and over again—the wet, meaty sounds, the splintering of bone loud in the still cavern.

When Alsandair was finished with the man he had seen raping his wife from behind, there was precious little that was left to label the destruction human. He had chopped and cleaved and pulverized the rapist into so much minced meat and blood ran in streamlets toward the campfire.

It was Louis who got to his feet and walked cautiously to the Anlusian and silently took the grisly sword from the younger man's hand. Alsandair just stood there staring down at the vengeance he had wrought. Unaware he was trembling violently, his hands shaking, his eyes glazed, he ran a blood-splattered hand under his chin.

"Your lady needs you," Louis said softly.

Alsandair turned his head toward Corsair and Louis would later tell everyone who would listen that he had gotten his first glimpse of what hell would be like in the molten eyes of Farrell.

"She needs a healer, son," Louis advised. He glanced back at Renaud who had picked Rylee up and was holding her. "I'll go fetch him."

"You need to hurry, Louis," Renaud added.

Louis took off like a shot, running from the cave as fast as his legs could pump.

Shrugging off the blood fever that had gripped him with iron claws, Alsandair stumbled back from his kills and moved like a man lost to sleepwalking toward his lady. He took her from Renaud's arms.

"It's all right, sweeting," he whispered to her. "I'm here now. Everything will be all right."

\* \* \* \* \*

Andre managed to pull himself up to lie halfway across the bunk. He waited until the strange buzzing in his ears stopped then cautiously straightened up. Although he felt numb, disoriented, he stumbled to the cabin door. Gripping the jamb, he wavered there for a moment—taking deep breaths, striving to clear his head. When he finally found the strength to head for the companionway and the steps up to the deck, his body was managing to push the potent drug from his system.

"Horse," he managed to tell one of Renaud's men as he wove his way across the deck.

"Go with him," Devin Boucharde ordered to one of the younger men. "Don't let him fall off the damned thing and break his neck."

By the time Andre staggered down the gangplank, a mount was waiting for him. He tried to put his foot in the stirrup and missed twice before finally accomplishing the task. It took him three more tries to hoist himself into the saddle before someone kindly put their hands under his ass and vaulted him up into the saddle. As it was he nearly tumbled off the other side and would have had another man not caught him and propped him back up again. Tugging on the reins, unaware of the young sailor keeping pace beside him, he dug his heels into the steed and held on for dear life as the beast sprang forward with a jolt that snapped Andre's teeth together.

\* \* \* \* \*

Crashing back through the jungle, Louis had just reached the clearing where *L'endroit Sûr* stood when he saw several armed men coming toward him. "Healer!" he called out, recognizing Andre's sailors. "Hurry and get the healer. She's been hurt!"

Suzette and her mother had just come back from market day, hurrying behind the men they had seen running toward *L'endroit Sûr*. When they saw Gaston being carried into the house, the women began to wail.

Louis flinched at the keening sound coming from Gaston's wife and daughter. He was winded and was leaning against the porch railing, sweat pouring down his face. He was too out of shape for such strenuous exercise as he'd gotten that day and his chest was tight. He would have fallen had not a strong, sturdy arm gripped him about the waist.

"Steady, ye old bastard," Antoinette growled. She took his weight against her. "Ye be too old to go fartin' around like this. Let's get ye in the house a'fore ye pitch over."

The sound of thundering hooves brought Louis' head up and he sighed with relief when he saw Andre. "Tell him," he whispered to Antoinette, "tell him they're bringing her and for him to stay put."

Antoinette's mouth sagged open as Andre slid heavily off his horse, hitting the ground to the accompaniment of a bone breaking. She shook her head as she led Louis toward the steps. "He ain't gonna be no help."

Louis craned his neck to watch Andre being helped to his feet, his right arm hanging at a strange angle. "Tell 'em to bring him on inside," he told Antoinette.

"Tell him this. Tell them that," Antoinette complained. "Just shut the fuck up, Corsair. Ye ain't running this here show!"

Andre was grimacing from the pain in his broken forearm and ribs as he cursed the men surrounding him. "Get away from me!" he ordered. "Where's my lady?"

"Bring his arse in the house," Antoinette told the men. "His brother done ordered it."

Though he spat at them and tried to strike out with his good arm, Andre found himself being hustled up his own steps and into the cool interior of the house. The smell of death hung heavily in the air and he got a glimpse of Gaston's body lying on the dining room table with his womenfolk standing over him. Louis was already in the room, sitting sprawled in one of the fancy damask chairs.

"Where's Rylee?" Andre asked.

"The Anlusian is bringing her," Louis said. Antoinette had gone to fetch a cool rag to wipe his sweaty face.

Andre refused to sit down, snarling at the men to leave him alone. He staggered over to Louis. "Is she all right? Did they hurt her?"

Louis' head was on the back of the chair, his eyes closed. He opened them to give Andre a tired look. "She's alive, lad, but you'd best prepare yourself. They raped her and she was bleeding badly when I left there."

Andre seemed to deflate like a balloon and he stumbled, the backs of his knees hitting the edge of the loveseat and he plopped down, grunting as pain rocketed up through his shoulder. "Louis, no," he said, tears forming in his eyes.

"Don't ye start blubbering like a spoiled child what's had its candy taken from it, Andre Corsair," Antoinette snapped as she came into the room. She went over to Louis and began to gently wipe his flushed face. "She ain't the first woman what's been attacked and she won't be the last. Ye need to be steady for her, man. She'll need yer strength."

"Who took her?" Andre asked, using the back of his left hand to swipe away the tears.

"The Mocks, Prescott and Rouyce," Louis replied. "They're dead. I doubt me there's enough left of Ethan Mock to bury. He was chopped up that bad."

"I don't care," Andre said, his jaw tight. "I want their bodies strung up on the town square for every man jack to see. Skewer what's left of Mock on a shark hook and let him hang there for the crows."

Louis shrugged. "Suit yourself, but if it's a warning you're intending to give, there ain't no need. Once the men hear of what happened in that cave, won't no man even give your lady a first look, much less a second."

"What happened?" Antoinette asked.

Louis shuddered hard, apparently seeing again the scene in the cave. "He slaughtered them, *bébé*," he said in a low voice. "Slashed them to shreds, he did. Four men to his one but he mowed through them like a high demon on Judgment Day." He met Andre's eyes. "Seeing him like that, Andi, I ain't so sure you could take him in a duel, fair or otherwise."

"Farrell?" Andre asked.

Louis nodded. "He was a killing machine, son. A pitiless killing machine. I've never seen anything like it and hope I never do again."

There was a sound of heavy footsteps on the veranda. Andre got up in time to see a man he didn't know holding the screen door open as Alsandair came in carrying a limp Rylee in his arms. Behind him was Healer Darcy.

"Up the stairs," the healer said. He waddled in front of Alsandair and struggled to get his corpulent bulk from step to step, his loud wheezing breaking the silence that had fallen on *L'endroit Sûr*. Renaud and Kyle Striker came into the house but made no move to go up the stairs after the men.

"Stay here, Andi," Antoinette ordered when Andre started to go after them. "Darcy will send him out of there too." She tossed the wet rag onto Louis' lap and pushed past Andre, hiking her skirts as she agilely climbed the stairs.

"Do as she says, son," Louis agreed. "There's nothing you can do right now. She needs another woman with her."

Holding his broken arm tight against his belly with his other hand, Andre walked to the parlor doorway but went no farther. Alsandair was coming down the stairs, his clothing splattered with blood, his face pale and pinched. His gaze went to Kyle then slid past him to latch onto Andre.

"Are you hurt?" Andre asked.

"It's not my blood," Alsandair said. He turned, walked between Renaud and Kyle, and pushed the screen door open. He sat down heavily on the top step and buried his face in his hands, mindless of the crowd who had gathered in front of the house.

Andre felt the weight of his guilt to the very depths of his soul. "If I'd left her with him—"

"Stow that kind of talk before you even start with it, Andre," Louis snarled. "If anyone's to blame, it's me. If I hadn't sent for you, you would have been here to protect her. They would never have had the guts to go up against you."

"It could have happened any time, Louis," Renaud said. "They would have waited for another chance."

Andre stood there for a moment looking up the stairs—apparently trying to make a decision—then headed for the front door. When he came out on the porch, he told those gathered to go home. "I know you're here to support us but we need the peace and quiet," he stated. "I'll send word about our lady."

Alsandair raised his head and looked up at Andre.

Without a murmur, the men touched their caps in respect, the women curtsied to Andre and then they began walking off quietly.

"Your people fear you," Alsandair said as Andre sat down on the step beside him.

"Aye, but it wasn't fear that brought them here," Andre replied. "Rylee is one of them."

They were quiet for a long while, each lost in morbid thought. Another storm was brewing out on the water and the wind was whipping up, blowing their dark hair and cooling the heat from their bodies. The low rumble of thunder sounded in the distance.

"Is it broken?" Alsandair asked, lowering his hands to his thighs. He stared blindly out across the yard.

"Aye and it hurts like a motherfucker," Andre reported.

"I know how that feels," Alsandair said. "I broke my arm when I was boy. Hurt worse when they set it though."

"Oh that's encouraging," Andre complained. "I've never broken anything before now."

Alsandair turned to look at Andre. "How the hell did you do it?"

Andre let out an exasperated breath. "Fell off the damned fucking horse," he said.

"You're supposed to ride a horse, Corsair, not fuck it," Alsandair quipped.

Andre glared at him. "Thank you for clarifying that for me, Farrell," he returned.

"Think nothing of it. Someone should have told you long ago. I thought you might have fallen out of the bunk."

"Bunks I can handle, even in a hurricane," Andre said. "Horses are a different matter, but now that I know what I'm supposed to do with one, I should be all right in the future." He raked his left hand through his hair. "Gods-be-damned tenses. I could barely put one foot before the other much less dismount the horse."

They were silent again as the wind increased in strength. The rumbling had become almost constant and now and again a flash of lightning would light the sky.

"She hates storms," Andre said.

"I know that. Mayhap the healer will give her something to knock her out," Alsandair said. "I hope to the gods he does."

Andre drew in a long breath. "Was she hurt that badly?"

"Bad enough," Alsandair said. He hung his head. "One of the bastards sodomized her."

Andre squeezed his eyes shut at that news.

The screen door opened and the men turned to look around. Healer Darcy was standing there, a grim look on his face. "She wants to see you," he said.

"Which one?" Andre asked as both men got to their feet.

"Both of you," the healer said. He looked pointedly at Andre's arm. "That needs setting."

"It can wait," Andre said.

"Then go on up but be quick about it. The longer you wait, the more damage can be done to your arm, Captain Corsair." He looked at Alsandair. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Alsandair replied. "Did you give her something to put her out?"

The healer shook his head. "She wouldn't let me."

"Make it up," Alsandair said. "I'll get her to take it. Turnaround is fair play."

The two men went into the house with Andre leading the way up the stairs. He grunted with every step, the bones in his arm grating against one another, his ribs aching like the very devil. Behind them, the healer struggled once more up the twisting staircase.

Antoinette was sitting on the bed beside Rylee and when the men came into the room, she heaved her bulk up and moved aside.

"Sandair!" Rylee called out, holding her arms up to him. Her bruised face twisted with relief.

Alsandair hurried to her, sitting down to take her into his arms, his right hand cradling her head against his shoulders. She had been unconscious the entire time he had carried her from the cave to the house and now that he could feel her breath against his cheek, her heart beating against his, he could relax a little.

"I'm here, sweeting," he said, unaware he was crying. "I'm right here."

Rylee looked past his shoulder to see Andre watching her from the doorway. She extended her hand toward him. "Andi," she said, her voice breaking, "I need you too."

Andre didn't hesitate, he came to the bed and took her left hand in his.

"Please," she said, looking from one man to other. "Please don't leave me, either of you."

"We're not going anywhere," Andre assured her.

Alsandair could feel Andre right beside him, could feel the man's hip against his back. Rylee was trembling violently.

"I've her medicine," the healer said.

"No," Rylee whimpered. "I don't want—"

Alsandair eased her back from him—breaking the contact between her and Andre—and looked down into her pale face. "You need to rest, sweeting."

"They might come back, Sandy. They might—"

"The men who hurt you are dead," Andre interrupted her. "Your husband saw to that."

The healer brought a tumbler to the bed, holding it out for Alsandair.

"I want you to drink this," Alsandair said.

Rylee was trembling violently, her eyes wild as she stared into Alsandair's. "You won't leave me?"

"Never," he said, and put the rim of the tumbler to her lips. When she'd taken the medicine, he pushed her down to the mattress gently. "I'll be right here until you wake."

"Lay down with me," she said. "Protect me."

He nodded and she moved over in the bed so he could stretch out on his side beside her. As soon as his head was on the pillow, she pressed tightly against him and his arms wound firmly around her.

Andre Corsair looked as though his heart would break and he turned away to leave the room.

"Andi!" Rylee shouted.

He turned. "What, *bébé*?"

"Don't go," she said. "Stay with me." She held her hand out to him again.

Andre came around to the other side of the bed and sat down on the edge of the mattress. He had positioned himself so he could take her right hand with his left, wrapping his fingers over and under hers.

"I need you," Rylee told him. She was looking around at him. "I need you too."

"I'm here, precious," he said.

"Close to me," she said, tugging him toward her.

Andre looked from her tearful face to Alsandair and something passed between the two men at that moment. He saw Alsandair's eyes narrowed with hurt but Andre knew it wasn't the other man's personal hurt but hurt he was feeling for his lady, for their lady. When Alsandair nodded almost imperceptibly, Andre brought his legs up on the bed and lay down facing Rylee, her hand still clasped in his.

"Andi is hurt, Rylee," Antoinette said. "His arm is broken. It needs settin'."

"It can wait," Andre said. Rylee's eyes were glazing from the tenses. "When she's sleeping, I—"

"Don't leave me!" Rylee protested. "Andi, don't leave me!"

"Bébé, I won't," he said. "I'll be right here."

"Beside me," she said, her words beginning to slur.

"Right beside you," Andre agreed.

"Andi and I will be like two slices of bread and you the ham," Alsandair said, and winked sadly at Andre.

"I'm not a pig," Rylee said, and her eyelids fluttered as she struggled to keep the open.

"You're our little piglet," Andre said. His gaze was locked with Alsandair's. "Mine and Sandy's."

"Piglet," Rylee said then sighed deeply. She wriggled her head end against Andre and went out like a light.

"Captain, your arm—"

"Set it where I lay, Darcy, or leave it off," Andre said. "I am not moving."

Darcy rolled his eyes. "You are a stubborn man," he pronounced.

Andre looked down at the woman lying asleep beside him. "Aye, so I've been told," he said softly.

"At least sit up so I can get your shirt off you," the healer said, stepping up to the bed. "Toni, give me a pair of scissors."

With the healer's help, Andre sat up.

After unbuttoning the pirate captain's shirt, the healer cut off the shirtsleeve of the injured arm then helped Andre out of his shirt. Gingerly he examined Andre's arm, proclaiming he believed it was a clean break then manipulated the broken bone, making sure the break was aligned properly. He splinted the bone with two pieces of wood and wrapped it tightly with strips of flannel to keep it immobile.

"I may have to put a cast on it," he said. "We'll see."

During the entire procedure, Andre sat there with sweat popping out all over his face but he didn't make any sound at all until the healer and Antoinette had left the room.

"Fuck!" Andre said, letting out a long, explosive breath as he lay back down.

"I told you it would hurt," Alsandair said with a grin. "My advice to you – since the healer didn't say it – is to wiggle your fingers as much as you can. It will help the circulation and keep the swelling down."

Andre tried that and it made his arm hurt worse. Grinding his teeth, he closed his eyes. "I don't make a good patient."

A loud skirl of lightning peeled across the firmament and both men jumped though Rylee continued to sleep on unaffected by the noise and the rain that suddenly began lashing at the windows. The boom that followed shook the windowpanes.

"I am sweating like a racehorse," Alsandair said.

"Then get the hell up and take off your shirt, man," Andre told him. "You stink anyway."

"That's you that you smell, Corsair," Alsandair grumbled as he eased his arm out from beneath Rylee and scooted off the bed. As he unbuttoned his shirt, he looked about the room. "I can't say I'm happy about sleeping in your bed."

"I *can* say that I'm not happy with *you* sleeping in my bed," Andre muttered. He too was perspiring and blew his breath over his face.

Alsandair sat down on the side of the bed and tugged off his boots and stockings. "You want me to take off your boots?"

"Eager to strip me, are you?" Andre groused.

"Suit yourself, horse fucker," Alsandair snapped. He started to lie back down.

"Aye," Andre said. "I'd just as soon not have my boots on."

Sighing as though he were being put through a tremendous ordeal, Alsandair got back up and came around to pull off his rival's boots, grumbling the entire time with a disgusted look pinching his face. When he peeled off Andre's stockings, he dropped them on the floor then rubbed his fingers up and down his pants. Once more he went to the other side of the bed and lay down on his back to glare up at the ceiling.

As the storm raged beyond the windows, the two men lay beside Rylee, their thoughts as dark and swirling as the storm clouds.

"So what do we do, Farrell?" Andre asked, also staring up at the ceiling.

"I wish to the gods I knew," Alsandair said.

"She wants us both."

A muscle flexed in Alsandair's jaw. "Then I guess we'll have to give her what she wants."

"Can you live with that?"

"Can you?" Alsandair countered.

Andre was quiet for a moment then heaved a long, harsh sigh. "Aye, I guess I'll have to."

"I guess I will too."

## Chapter Nineteen

It wasn't the continuation of the storm that woke Rylee as dawn spread its rosy fingers through the window but the obnoxious, raucous snoring that filled the room. She was lying on her left side facing Alsandair, who was flat on his back and making the most disagreeable sound she'd ever heard coming from his lips. She reached out to shake him when she heard his snore echoed behind her. Memory washed over her and she slowly closed her eyes, feeling shameful lying in the bed with both men, but the snores were so awful the sound dragged her mind from sinfulness to humor. She'd never known either man to snore like that before.

Alsandair drew in a loud, warbling vibration of air just as Andre expelled his. Now and again each of them would twitch and their breaths would hold then they'd start the intolerable snoring once more.

Carefully easing to her back, she turned her head to look at Andre and saw that he too was lying on his back, his mouth open. Both men generally slept on their sides. She nudged him with her arm and he stopped snoring, sputtered—his lips closing and smacking like a child's—then he rolled over toward her. His forehead came to rest against her shoulder.

It was then she noticed his splinted arm crooked across his chest. Very gently, she pushed him, easing him over until he lay flat again.

She lay there trying not to laugh at the ungodly noise coming from her two husbands—for she thought of them both in that way. Each in his own way was as dear to her as her own life and the love she knew she had for them had only gotten stronger with the knowledge they would put aside their dislike for one another to lie beside her in the same bed to ease her mind. She knew that had to have been the hardest thing for the two of them to do. They were both very strong men, powerful men, and men who did not like sharing—especially her.

Briefly her thoughts went to the men who had attacked her but she pushed that hideous interlude away, concentrating instead on the men at her side and how much they had both been willing to do to keep her at his side.

"That bastard snores like a bull," Alsandair complained.

Rylee turned her head to look into his sleepy eyes. "And you don't?" she asked.

"I've never heard me sleeping," he answered then yawned. "Do I?"

"Worse than him," she informed him.

Alsandair winced. "I'm sorry." He realized she was smiling at him. "Are you all right, milady?" he asked, searching her face.

"I will be," she answered.

"Are you sure?" The question came from Andre.

Rylee turned her head to him. "Aye, *têtu*," she said.

"I am so sorry we did not protect you, precious," he said, and his face crinkled with emotion.

"We'll not speak of it again," she said firmly.

"Rylee, you should speak of it," Alsandair said. "It is not good to keep it bottled inside you."

"He's right," Andre agreed. "The men who hurt you are dead but—"

She reached out to put the fingers of her left hand over Andre's lips. "There are many things I will have to deal with, Andi. Reliving yesterday's horror is not something I want to do." She met his troubled gaze. "Now or ever. Respect that."

Andre kissed her fingers before she took them from his lips. "Whatever you want," he said, and looked past her to Alsandair.

"I am an evil woman," she said.

"No!" the men protested in unison, and almost as though they were parts of the same whole sat up and twisted around in the bed to look down at her.

"There is nothing evil about you," Alsandair stated.

"Perhaps sinful is a better word," she said, looking from one to the other.

"Sinful in what way?" Andre challenged. "Because you love the both of us?"

Alsandair flinched at his rival's words but he reached down to take her hand in his. "Rylee, I don't know how we will resolve this but you are not to blame for any of this."

"I am wicked in that I want the both of you," she said, and when they would have protested, she shook her head. "I know what I want and I want you both. That makes me an immoral woman and you know it."

The two men looked at one another and once more something passed between them.

"Sandair?" Andre questioned. "Perhaps you should tell her what you intend to do."

Alsandair's brows drew together. "I don't..."

Carefully, Rylee scooted up in the bed, leaning her back against the headboard. Her body ached and she felt the wetness of blood between her legs, grateful her monthly had come so there would be no chance of conceiving from her ordeal.

"Andi told me about the *Se Tenir Conjointement*," she said. "I could live with that."

"Six months with him and six with me?" Alsandair asked. "Rylee, I—"

"Two months with you," she interrupted him, "and then two months with Andi. Would that be so bad?"

Andre arched a brow. "She's been thinking about this, Farrell," he observed.

"So it seems," Alsandair mumbled.

"Is two months not short enough, Andi?" she asked. "Would one month with you, one with Sandair, the next with you then—"

"Aye," Alsandair said. "I like that schedule better."

Andre sighed. "As do I but there is another problem that needs discussing here. Where would you stay with him, Rylee?"

"Renaud says he has a house inland up the river that he will let me purchase from him with my earnings from pirating," Alsandair said.

"The old Maxim place," Andre said. "It's nice enough for her, I suppose." He glanced at Alsandair. "You'll be low man on the totem pole, Farrell, so your earnings won't be that much to start. It will take you a while to pay."

Alsandair shrugged. "I'll take care of my woman," he said. "You take care of yours."

Rylee drew in a quiet breath, waiting to see how Andre would handle that challenge.

"Does her child stay with her as she moves from this palatial abode to that little one up river or does he stay with you?" Andre countered, ignoring the jibe.

"Ataa," Rylee breathed. "I've missed him so much! How is he, Sandy?"

"He's doing well and learning to converse with us. He'll go wherever he desires, Corsair," Alsandair said, "but I imagine he'll stay with me."

"Andi," Rylee corrected him. "He is Andi and you are—it just dawned on me!" She giggled. "Sandy!"

The two men groaned almost in unison.

"Isn't that funny?" she asked.

"I've got to pee," Andre grumbled, and got up, wincing as he padded into the bathing chamber.

Alsandair sighed. "I'd best help him. I doubt he can—"

"I can do it myself!" Andre yelled out to him.

Alsandair snorted.

"He's a good man, Sandair," she said.

"For a pirate."

"Ah, Farrell?" came a choked request. "Would you come here a minute?"

Alsandair nodded and got up, a smirk on his handsome face. "I won't hold it for you," he said as he went into the bathing chamber.

"Touch it and I'll kill you," Andre snapped.

Rylee sat there listening to them insulting one another but it wasn't a mean-spirited exchange. Rather it was comical and when Alsandair came back out, he was chuckling.

"Can you live with this, Sandair?" she asked as he got back on the bed and moved so he too was leaning against the headboard.

"He asked me the same thing."

"What did you tell him?"

"All I can do is try, sweeting," he answered. "I am not happy with the situation and I am your legal husband."

"And you always will be but—the gods help me—I love you both," she said, threading her fingers through his.

"I know," he said.

"Am I a bad woman?" she asked, tucking her bottom lip between her teeth as she rested her head on his shoulder.

"No, sweeting. You are an honest woman," he replied. "I may not be enthused about this arrangement but I'd rather share you with him than not have you at all." He lifted her hand to his lips. "And I know he'd fight me tooth and nail if it came down to that."

Andre came back. "I would, and rather than run the risk of one or both of us getting killed or maimed and leaving her at the mercy of Louis or Renaud, I too would prefer to share her though it galls me down to the very depths of my being. Damn it, but my arm hurts like hell," he announced as he climbed onto the bed and joined his wife and rival against the headboard. He slipped the fingers of his left hand through Rylee's.

"The healer should put it in a cast and you're going to hate that," Alsandair told him.

"I figured as much," Andre grumbled.

"Of course, we could always draw cards for her," Alsandair suggested.

"Oh no you won't!" Rylee disagreed. "Never again, Farrell."

Andre leaned forward and gave Alsandair an arch look. "You drew cards for her?"

"I won too," Alsandair quipped.

"Huh," Andre grunted, and leaned back. "Another rival put down, I guess."

"He wasn't a rival," Alsandair said. "He was a bump in the road."

"And now they are friends," Rylee said. "Just as the two of you will be friends," she said.

"Nope," Alsandair said.

"Don't think so," Andre agreed.

"We'll see," she said, bringing their hands into her lap to press their knuckles to one another. "We'll just see."

## Epilogue

*Two Months Later*

The pirogue skimmed along the choppy water as Alsandair dug the pole into the river bottom to guide the flat-bottomed vessel toward the landing where the house Renaud had sold him was located. Rain had started almost as soon as the boat reached the halfway point on the Fleuve des Épées and Rylee and Ataa sat hunched forward in their oilskins to keep from getting wet, Ataa's little yellow hat pulled low over his head, Widget protected beneath the oilskin.

Ahead it was smoother sailing—the water calmer—and it was toward that wide expanse that Alsandair poled the boat, his eyes on the shoreline to his left.

Alsandair's mind was torn between the excitement of seeing the house in which he would be living with his lady and their child, and the past that was riding him with cruel spurs. He thought of Rylee leaving him in Dellymal and of his encounter with the gypsy woman.

*"Ye must distance yerself from that which is not good for you,"* the old woman had said.

It was obvious to him now that that which was not good for him had been the military. Though he was now a deserter, a wanted man with a growing price on his head, he had never felt freer.

*"The waters here be choppy but the waters ahead of the boat be smooth. Ye need to leave behind the past and journey on to better times."*

He thought of having run away on the *Mary Constance* to escape his broken heart only to find the woman he loved on the boat with him. He thought of Kyle and the friendly rivalry that had indeed turned into a great friendship. He thought of Kyle being there to help him rescue Rylee from the Midworld slavers then of Kyle following behind him, watching his back at the cave.

He thought of his dream and the significance of it that made his insides quiver.

*"Would you kill for me?"* she had asked.

*"Aye, six times over,"* he had told her.

And there had been six—the two men in Midworld and the four there on Wicklaw Cay.

He shuddered, but it had nothing to do with the rain falling gently upon him.

*"Where there is balance between the head and the heart, it is there when true happiness will settle upon ye. Look not at the past and the storms it has brought ye but on the future and the smooth sailing it will bring."*

The old woman had predicted the six deaths and they had come at his hands. A violent storm had passed and the future looked promising though he doubted it would be without its choppy waters.

"Is that it, Papa?" Ataa asked, pointing to a break in the line of trees.

"Aye, I think so," Alsandair replied, and aimed the pirogue toward the landing.

Angling the boat toward the shore, Alsandair was very pleased with the house toward which they were moving. Sitting on tall pylons to prevent the house from being flooded when the river rose, the white one-story building sat amidst vibrant green foliage and like Renaud's *Vue de Mer* and Andre's *L'endroit Sûr*, it had a deep wraparound veranda and floor-to-ceiling windows to let in light and a cooling breeze. Its roof was made of tin and shined brightly in the light that was beginning to peek out of the sodden sky. A short pier jutted out from the shoreline and tied up on one side was a pirogue similar to the one they were on.

"I like it, Sandy," he heard Rylee say. "I really like it."

He breathed a sigh of relief. It would be here that he and his lady and their child would spend their time together. He had taken his Oath to the Brotherhood, had gone out on his first jaunt with Renaud and had returned to ask the Council for *Se Tenir Conjointement*. Andre had been there and he had seconded the request, making it a done deal where the Brotherhood was concerned. Not even Louis had objected.

"I don't like it none, but if Andi can live with it, I'll abide by his decision, foolish though it might be," Louis had snarled before stalking off.

"I've a request though," Renaud had spoken up. "As have other men who have joined in the *Se Tenir Conjointement*, Corsair and Farrell should become blood brothers. They should be one in purpose not only to their lady but to one another, guarding one another as brothers will."

"Aye!" the members of the Brotherhood shouted.

And so Andre and Alsandair had taken their daggers, each placing a shallow cut on his palm, and had then grasped hands, mingling their blood and forever becoming bonded.

"What will we name it?" Ataa asked, drawing Alsandair's thoughts back to the present. "It has to have a name."

"*Les Eaux Lisses*," Rylee said, turning to look around at Alsandair as though she'd been reading his troubled thoughts. "It's Françasian for smooth waters."

"This won't be a Françasian home, sweeting," Alsandair denied. "This will be an Anlusian home. Right, Ataa?"

"Right, Papa! We are Anlusian!" the little boy said. He pulled his feline friend out from beneath the oilskin. "Look, Widget! This is our new home!"

Renaud had sent along a brace of serving women to help Rylee take care of the house. One of the women had brought along her seven-year-old son so Ataa would

have someone to play with. There were also a couple of men servants who would take care of the yards and act as guards.

"Although I'll tell you now that you won't need them," Renaud had stated. "There isn't a man within a thousand-mile radius who would get on your bad side, Farrell. Your reputation is deadlier than Louis Corsair's."

"*Seoltóireacht Chothrom,*" Alsandair said. "Smooth sailing. That's what we will call our home."

"Aye," Rylee said, repeating the name. She threw back the bright yellow hood of her oilskin slicker. "That is what we will have from now on."

It had been while Alsandair was taking his first cruise as Renaud's chief tactical officer and Rylee was spending that time under the care of her *other* husband that Rylee's ordeal had finally crashed down on her and she had nearly buckled beneath the strain. He had known it would happen sooner or later, knew she'd start to relive the horror of that day in the cave and had warned Andi that it would, so Corsair had been prepared. It had taken both him and Kyle to see Rylee through it.

"Perhaps it was good you weren't here," Kyle had told Alsandair. "She would not have wanted you to see her like that. I thought Andi would go out and kill something when it was all over with. I *know* you would have."

On one level Alsandair disagreed. He was tired of killing, yet on another level he wished he could resurrect the four culprits and put them to the sword once again for the hurt and anguish they had caused his lady.

"Mama, look!" Ataa said, pointing.

A little boy with a wide, toothy grin had run down to the shoreline and was waving excitedly. At his feet, a small white cat was weaving between his bare legs.

"I hope to Alel that's a male cat," Alsandair said with a frown, "else we'll be overrun with furry critters."

"I hope she's a female," Rylee said. "Widget needs a playmate too!"

Alsandair grunted as he gave one final shove of the pole and the pirogue slid smoothly along the pier that would definitely need some work. One of the men came hurrying from a smaller house set off to the side of the main house.

"Welcome, Commander and Missus!" he said, and waded out in the water to take the line Alsandair tossed to him. "Welcome, little mister!"

Ataa set Widget on the pier then scrambled off his seat and practically threw himself at the stranger. "Hi, I'm Ataa," he said. The child never met anyone who remained a stranger for long.

"And I am Neville," the man said, swinging Ataa around and setting him down in the shallows. "That boy is my nephew Yves."

Ataa made a beeline to Yves and together they ran off, Widget—racing from the pier—and the little white cat scampering along behind.

Neville held the boat steady as Alsandair stepped down into the water, not trusting the safety of the wobbly pier. He reached for Rylee, sweeping her into his arms and wading through the water to take her to shore.

"We are going to love it here, Sandy," she said, her arms around his neck.

"Aye, milady," he said. "I believe we will."

The two maids were waiting on the veranda. They were around the same age as Rylee, had friendly, welcoming smiles and seemed honored to be working for *Le Vengeant*, The Avenging One. News of what he'd done in the cave that day had taken on mythic proportions and tales were being told and ballads written of how he'd saved his lady-fair and avenged her. The other guard had come to introduce himself as well, and it was discovered he was the husband of the older of the two maids. It seemed all four of the servants were related in some way and lived in the house beside the pier.

"We'll add on to your house," Alsandair told the servants. "That one is too small for all of you."

Long after the sun had set, the servants had cleared away the supper dishes and Ataa had worn himself out playing with Yves, Alsandair and Rylee sat on the veranda and watched a deer grazing at the water's edge. It was peaceful, still, the scent of gardenia and wisteria floating through the air. The cicadas were tuning up and somewhere out on the water, bullfrogs honked to one another.

"Happy, sweeting?" he asked.

"Aye," Rylee said. She was sitting with her bare feet in her husband's lap and he was rubbing the instep of her right foot. "Our children will love it here."

Alsandair's hand stilled. "Children?" he echoed. "Sweeting, are you...?"

"Not yet," she said, "but that will come." When he did not continue with the massage, she glanced over at him. "What's bothering you?"

"Whose child it will be," he said softly. "Mine or Andi's."

She was quiet for a moment and when she spoke, he could hear just a touch of hurt in her voice. "Will it matter?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her no but that would have been a lie. It did matter but—just as Andre had—he had accepted this arrangement and even if he did not embrace it as easily as her other husband did, he would never complain. There would be no way to tell who fathered the child if he took his looks from Rylee. Both he and Andre were dark with black hair, dark eyes and of roughly the same build. It would be difficult to know who fathered the babe unless the child bore a striking resemblance to his father.

"It will matter in what name we give him or her," he answered honestly.

"I have names already picked out," she said, and wiggled her toes in invitation for him to continued rubbing her foot.

"You do, do you?" he asked as he began massaging her foot again.

"If it is a girl, she will be Gabrielle, and if it is a boy Justin."

Alsandair nodded. He liked the names. "Aye, but what last name, sweeting?"

"Farrell-Corsair," she replied without hesitation.

In the gathering twilight, he smiled. "You've thought this out pretty well, haven't you, Ry?"

She moved her foot so she could rub the soft bulge at the junction of his thighs. "Aye, Sandair, I have."

He moved her foot away from his crotch and lowered her leg to the floor. Without another word he stood, stepped over to her chair and bent over to scoop her into his arms.

"Well, let's see if we can't hurry little Justin Farrell-Corsair up, shall we?" he asked.

With his lady in his arms, Alsandair had just a bit of trouble getting the screen door open but he managed to open it enough to insinuate his booted foot between the jamb and the edge of the door and use his hip to push it aside.

He carried her down the long central corridor that bisected the house and to the large master bedroom at the back of the structure. Kicking the door shut, he took her to the lovely, carved oak bed that had been a belated wedding present from Briarly, the ship's steward of the *Mary Constance*.

"Briarly finished it just before he sailed off with Captain Andelton," Kyle had reported when he met Alsandair on the docks after his friend's maiden voyage as a full-fledged pirate. "Corsair handed the ship back over to Andelton at Rylee's request. That was his wedding present to her."

Alsandair would miss Andelton, Ruck, Briarly, Bonny and all the crew of the *Mary Constance*. They had become his friends but he knew they were where they wanted to be—on the decks of their home away from home.

The thick coverlet done in multi shades of green—Rylee's favorite color—that lay upon the bed had been a gift from Antoinette. As he placed his lady on the plush softness, he couldn't help but smile.

"Who would have thought a woman like Toni could sew?" he asked when Rylee gave him an inquisitive look.

Sinking down into the mattress, Rylee did not relinquish her hold on Alsandair's neck and drew him down atop her. "Let's not talk about anyone but Justin or Gabrielle," she said, her eyes hot and sultry.

Alsandair slid his hand over her breast. "Let's not talk at all," he suggested.

It had been a month since he'd last seen his lady and much longer than that since he had made love to her. That final night on the *Mary Constance* before the ship had been attacked by Andre had been their last time together in a carnal way and his body was on fire with need for hers.

His lips upon hers, his tongue thrusting gently past her lips to stroke hers, his thumb caressing her swollen nipple, he pressed his weight against her, feeling his shaft grow rigid and full.

Rylee twisted so she could turn him over and lie atop him, easing her mouth from his to smile down into his heated gaze.

"I love you, Sandair Farrell," she said.

"I'm an easy man to love," he teased.

She laughed and sat up, leaning back so she was perched on his knees. Lifting one leg then the other, she dragged the skirt of her gown up then pulled it over her head, baring her body to her lover for—like the other women on Wicklaw Cay—she had taken to wearing nothing beneath the cool cotton gown. She tossed the gown aside.

"You are so beautiful," he said, his voice husky. He reached up to cover the mounds of her breasts with his palms. "So very beautiful."

Rylee pulled the pins from her hair and shook her head to let the fiery mass float down over her shoulders and back to tickle his thighs. She covered his hands with hers, pressing his flesh tight to hers.

"I want us to make a son tonight," she said, and wriggled against him, "but it will be hard to do with you confined in those britches, Farrell."

He dragged his hands from her breasts to her hips and easily lifted her off him, setting her beside him. "Let's see what I can do to remedy that, milady."

Rylee sat there and watched him get out of the bed and begin to undress. With her eyes glittering with desire, her body primed to accept his, she flicked out a tongue to lick her lips.

"Ah, wench, you're not being fair," he groaned as he peeled the shirt from his chest.

She tucked her lower lips between her teeth as her gaze shifted from the dark hair on his head, past the curly hair on his chest to the wiry curls at the apex of his thighs as he pushed his britches down over his hips.

"Who said anything was supposed to be fair?" she countered. "Anything goes when you're trying to make a baby."

He put a knee to the mattress and was soon atop her, straddling her hips as she had straddled his. He ground his swollen shaft against her. "Anything?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Anything pleasurable, at any rate."

Alsandair slid down her, easing her legs apart with his hips before putting a hand to his cock to place it at her entrance. "Want me, wench?" he asked.

Rylee nodded. "More than anything in this world," she replied.

He pressed into her slowly, deeply, until he was seated well and truly inside her velvet sheath. He didn't move but stared down into her eyes, waiting for her to wrap her arms and legs around him. When she did, he smiled and began to thrust smoothly, surely in and out of her heated folds.

"I think it takes a bit more thrust to make a baby, Farrell," she said, tightening her grip around him.

"You do?"

“Aye, I believe so.”

He increased the depth of his penetration but continued the slow, steady rhythmic pushes.

“Ah, mayhap you might want to step up the pace a bit, milord,” she instructed.

He increased the speed of his thrusts. “Like this?” he inquired.

“Umm,” she said, writhing beneath him. “You’re getting there.”

He put his hands under her hips and lifted her so he had better access to her nether regions. He went as deep as he could. “How about now?” he asked.

“Aye,” she breathed, her moist heat slippery with their combined fluids. “You are almost there.”

With sure, strong strokes that filled her, and with a velocity that soon had them both grunting, he took her up the mountain of desire, carrying her to the very summit of that wondrous peak and fell with her in spiraling turns of sheer ecstasy that spun them both out of control as they tumbled.

She clung to him—this man who was a third of herself—and gave herself to him again and again as the night wore on. She moved in perfect unison with him and graced him with as much pleasure as that which he gifted to her. By the time the moon was at the zenith of its path, a tiny souvenir of their great love had been left behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the veranda of *L’endroit Sûr*, Andre Corsair took the snifter of cognac from Antoinette’s pudgy hand. To either side of him were Kyle and Louis, sitting in their rocking chairs and enjoying cheroots. Renaud was sitting sideways on the steps with his back against one of the porch’s pillars, his knees drawn up. It was very late but none of the five people gathered on the veranda seemed to notice.

“To Rylee,” Andre said, raising his snifter.

“To Rylee,” the others toasted.

“And to a future of smooth sailing for us all,” Andre whispered beneath his breath then took a long sip of the fiery brew.

## **About the Author**

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 40 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorasCave.com](http://www.ellorasCave.com).

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