

*REFUGE FROM THE STORM*

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*REFUGE FROM THE STORM*  
*GAYLE EDEN*

## Part 1

"I would not wed that man, were he the last one on earth!" Liana Bellingham hissed at her father as they stood on the deck of *The Adventurer*.

"Well, you are wed to him — by proxy. And I've lost the money he paid for you. There's no getting it back, and I ain't going to Newgate for your stupid pride."

"My pride!" Her opal eyes widened. "Are you completely mad? I have done nothing but pay for your weaknesses from the time I was fifteen years old! I wed a man twice my age because you said I must, and when he did die and leave me a few pounds, you wheedled that out of me too. No. I do not care what notes or vows or anything else you've signed. I—"

"Twas done last eve, and there is nothing you can do about it."

"It's not legal I tell you. I did not consent."

"The stand-in did."

"Father, please." Her voice was raw with anger and desperation. "I am twenty three years old. You promised me...swore to me, when mother died, that you would change your ways."

"I have."

She snorted.

"Listen, Liana... you've got to honor this. I cannot pay him back."

She groaned. "I should let you rot in Newgate. At least then I would have my own life."

"Wha...that's a sin. You sh—"

"Don't you lecture me about sins." She pushed back her hood - the wind kept tugging it - and she squinted as it picked up speed snatching the pins from her wine-red hair.

"Oh God...I cannot believe you have done this. I should have never stepped aboard this ship with you." She looked at George Bellingham, unkempt, unshaven, and eyes bloodshot. He had done little in her lifetime but go from tavern to tavern, or gaming hall to brothel. Liana knew he cared not a whit about her personally. She wished she could not care about him either. Unfortunately, she kept giving him chances, hoping that he would change, really love her, and be a father. But this last trick proved that nothing had changed, and that he would always be as he was now.

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Bloody hell. He had married her off! Liana said, "Are you telling me the man stood with a proxy bride and said his vows."

"He did."

"God!" She leaned her head back and all but yelled. "This cannot be lawful. I am too old for you to have any legal rights over me."

"We're aboard ship, and there were several witnesses. He had a lawyer draw up papers and paid all my debts..."

She lowered her head looking at him as if he were dense. Unfortunately he was shrewd, sly as a fox. "I'll have it annulled."

"You can't. The man's a Baron for God sakes, Liana. His family owns half of England and France...part of Scotland too."

"I doubt that." She snorted. "He looked the bloody pirate to me."

"That's because he's foreign..."

"Foreign? Make up your mind, father, either he owns-"

"I mean his mother was," he snapped. "She was from some Island...Jamaica or Barbados..."

"Wonderful." Liana sneered and then laughed helpless. "Christ... I'm in a nightmare..."

Her father had been lighting his pipe and looked up at the billowing clouds. "Best go below now, daughter... A storm is brewing."

She too saw the dark, gray clouds with almost black edges. "Perhaps I will stand here and be struck by lightening."

At that very moment a sizzling bolt of white heat split the heavens.

George screamed and jumped back from the rail.

Liana had too, but muttered to God, "What have I done? It's him you should be angry with."

"Liana! Get below." George tugged her arm.

Liana heard the loud hiss of a heavy downpour and dashed to the stairs leading down to the cabins. The thunder boomed behind her. Passengers were scurrying every which

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way. She tried to grab her father who was headed for the dining cabin. "You don't need whiskey now. The seas will be rough and you'll be sick."

He sniffed and hiked up his velvet breeches. "I can see to myself. You got a husband to fi—"

"Go on." She cut him off and moved out of the way for a matron who looked green already. "But don't blame me if you're sick all night."

She was jostled and bumped as the choppy sea heaved the ship. Passengers exited the salon and other cabins to lock tight in their own. Liana could see through the porthole that it was nearly pitch dark, and walls of icy rain were now blowing in gales and gusts of wind. She could hear groans and curses already while the storm picked up force.

At the end of the hall, she was in the process of opening her door when the ship pitched sharply and threw her off balance, sending her back against a masculine frame as the man stepped out his own cabin door across from hers.

"Umpf!" She nearly went to her knees before his strong hands caught hold of her.

"Steady."

Liana tried to wrench away from that all too familiar voice. Unfortunately the tilt of the ship had her back plastered against his front. She muttered a few choice curses and looked up into that bronze face with smoke gray eyes that seemed to be waiting for that moment.

"If you will shut your bloody door, I can steady myself on my own."

His sensual mouth curved slightly. "I'm much more reliable than a wooden door."

She snorted and ignored once more that flip in her stomach when she viewed his high, broad cheekbones, flared nostrils and deep set eyes. He was a tall man, around six feet five and honed muscle under that lawn shirt and those black breeches. His hair was raven black and hugged his head in s-shaped curls. He had a ruby in his left ear, and a tribal marking under his eye, as well as on the side of his neck. Anywhere else he was marked, she did not know, but he had been displaying that body in snug leather breeches and white shirts since he'd boarded the ship...and every time she was at the railing taking air, he made a point of standing within her sight.

When he did speak to her, it was usually some daringly male observation in that deep resonant voice of his. *Oh yes*, he certainly made no secret he wanted her attention—but to have purchased her—wed her—

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"Your eyes are like heather," he murmured, booted feet braced and seeming to take the roll and pitch of the vessel with ease.

"They're opal." She grit, trying to move his hands from her rib cage. "Really, you do not have to hold me. I am quite..."

"I want to hold you, Liana."

She shivered at that soft admission. "Look, I know what my father did. I realize that he duped you into paying for his debts, but it is not legal. I assure you that I gave no such consent and that he—"

The ship heaved in the opposite direction, and her words were cut off. The man holding her had almost wrapped his body around hers, pinning her to the facing and bracing her with his bulk.

"This is not necessary!" she said against his chest.

"Don't be foolish," he said mildly. "It appears that we are caught in a bad storm. I shouldn't like it if my bride broke a few bones before the wedding night."

Liana pushed at him, and then had to grab hold of him, as the ship seemed to spin around. Now—she was afraid. "I'm not your bride, and there will be no wedding night."

He shifted and cushioned her as the vessel dipped. "You want me. You have been following me with those lavender eyes for weeks."

"Of all the arrogant—," she ground her teeth. "I have not been..."

"Lusting?" He supplied.

"No. Nor anything else for you. I have suffered your rude comments and—"

"Compliments, my dear. I assure you," he grunted as the ship heaved and muttered, "We are in for it. This is no small squall."

Liana peeked up at him. "What do you mean?"

He gazed at her, all teasing gone, his face taut as the violent storm outside could be heard in the silence. "I have sailed enough ships on my own to know a perilous storm when I feel one."

Liana knew her eyes were wide. "Are you saying we are in real danger?"

He debated a moment and then nodded. "I have complete confidence in this captain and crew, but not even the best can control the forces of nature."

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Wetting her lips she turned her head to peer into his dark cabin. "What shall we do?"

"Nothing to do, but anchor yourself and ride it out. I did observe that you were a good sailor."

She glanced at him wryly. "My father once owned a few fishing vessels...before he lost them at cards."

"Ah..." His eyes moved over her face. "I'm glad my wife has her sea legs."

"Don't start that."

"By the way, " he ignored her. "You're the baroness de Louve."

"I'm—" she grasped his shirt and they both staggered a few steps at the next roll of the ship.

He moved into the cabin with a firm hold on her, cursing when the porthole revealed nothing but angry churning water. "Sit on the bunk and hold tight."

She did, simply because there was no standing up without being thrown about. "I should go find my father."

"He is likely in the salon."

"—drinking, "she finished.

He sat down beside her and shrugged. "It is one way to suffer the storm."

For a few long moments Liana merely hung onto the edge of the bunk and listened to the frightening sounds of the tempest. In spite of her brag, her stomach was starting to feel the effects of the rolls and pitches. The angry churn was either throwing her into his shoulder, or forcing her in the opposite direction.

After several dives and dips that had few seconds between, she began to sense the fear crawling over her skin. To cover it, she said, "We are not legally wed."

"I have the papers. I promise you, we are."

She glanced at his face. "Why would you want an unwilling bride?"

"I want you." He held her gaze. "Since you have rebuffed my attempts at conversation, and you seem adverse to courtship, I figured that marrying you first might do the trick."

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“Are you serious?” She gaped at him. “That is a stupid reason to do something so— well, serious as get married. You’re titled for Christ sakes.... Isn’t there a debutante or something you—”

“No deb would wed me, no matter how wealthy or what title I hold.”

She stared at him, her brow raised.

He smiled somewhat bitterly. “It is not just my mixed blood, but my father murdered my mother.”

She swallowed. “What!”

He supplied, “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you when it matters.”

“It bloody well does now,” she hissed at him. “You can’t say something like that so calmly, and not explain.”

He laughed then and said, “Ah, Liana. I like your spirit. Do you know, I have watched you with your father? A man who would try the patience of a saint and cheat a monk. You are very much like a mother with a naughty child...exasperated.”

“He is my only kin, and no, I am not generally amused by his poor luck and hair brained schemes. It is more often, that I am left to suffer for them. I am particularly disgusted that you, obviously knowing he is weak, took advantage of that.”

“To have you,” he filled in. “I imagine it will be a relief to have your own life, and no longer be under his guidance.”

“The both of you imagine quite a bit,” she said tartly. “I view what you did as no better or different from him. I’ve no intention of honoring something I wasn’t consulted on. And— likely you want me because I have not fallen at your feet as half a dozen other females aboard have.”

“There is the challenge...” his white teeth flashed.

Liana rolled her eyes and then found herself thrown back on the bed. She then, by force of the waves, was tossed to the side. “This is becoming quite annoying,” she said breathlessly, grabbing a hold of the headboard.

“Brave, girl,” he murmured, having reached out to steady her. “You are doing very well.”

“Thank you.” Her tone was sarcastic but she swallowed a lump of fear as the timbers creaked and groaned as if the wood was being twisted. “Are you sure you could not steer this vessel a bit better—”



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“Sorry, no.” He scooted back until he sat up in the bed beside her, letting his bulk wedge her in between the headboard and wall. “You can rail at me some more. That should be distracting enough.”

Liana looked at him, with little light in the cabin she could just make out his silver eyes, and the shadows of his bone structure. He really was quite a striking man in an exotic way. There was no question but that he was compelling in a virile manner. She had not been wed but a year to her elder husband—a clerk in Yorkshire, but that did not mean she couldn’t tell the difference between him and this one.

“My God,” she suddenly gasped...“I don’t even know your first name.”

“Raiden. Raiden de Louve. “ He leaned his head back against the headboard.

“And you are Liana Elise Bellingham. You did not keep your first husband’s name.”

“He told you that?”

“Yes. Whilst you have ignored me at every turn, your father has been more than happy to pour out his woes every night in the salon.”

“His woes?” she choked.

“No matter how he phrased it, any fool could deduce that he’s used you for his own ends. To hear him tell it, he’s been trying to find you a husband better than poor Paul for several years.”

“I was stupid enough to believe he’d go to prison if I did not wed him. I was bloody fifteen years old, and the only mercy in that little arrangement, was that he died in time to leave a few coins that covered another of father’s debts.” She added firmly, “He has been trying ever since, but I am wiser now. I know his weaknesses and his games.”

“You’ll like being wed to me.”

Liana felt that husky promise from her head to her toes. “How arrogant of you to say so.”

He laughed. “Not arrogance, my dear. Simply an assurance.” The hand holding her steady flexed. “A woman such as yourself should not be wasting her life being manipulated by a man like your father. Believe me, I know there are un-natural parents, that we have the poor luck of being born to. You deserve much better.”

“That being you?” She snorted. “I see no difference in you and him.”

“You will. I am much more indulgent where it matters most. And I will spoil you most delightfully.”

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“No thanks. That is where father and I are opposite. I do not sell myself for material objects.”

He slid his hand up her spine. “I wasn’t particularly speaking of that, but you will not want for anything.”

Fire tingled behind that touch and Liana put it down to nerves and fear. When the ship rose and nearly flattened her against the wall she whispered, “Could we die out here?”

He reached out and righted her, leaving his warm palm on her cheek. “I hope not. I have waited thirty five years to take a wife...I should like to enjoy the experience for at least that long.”

She got both nostrils full of his scent of spice and some tropic aroma. “I’m afraid my bravery has reached its limit, “ her tone was unsteady. “I have never been on a vessel in such rough seas.”

He leaned toward her, bringing the shadow of his face very close. “Then I shall distract you.”

Liana had her mouth open to reply when the feel of his warm, velvet lips touched hers. She gasped at the tingle when his tongue lightly traced her bottom lip.

Against them, he murmured, “You taste as sweet as I imagined...” He slanted his head and this time delved in for a taste. Not giving her time to react he rubbed his mouth over hers lightly and husked, “pale pink...like a rose pedal.”

Trembling now from the husk of his voice, the erotic feel of his kiss, Liana did forget the storm for a moment, particularly when she was kissed again, this time, full out and unlike any she’d imagined.

His mouth opened and his tongue slid deep, stroking the inside of her own and rolling under her tongue. She lifted it, and when he delved under, a soft moan came from her throat.

The inside of his mouth seemed velvety, mysterious. His taste was sensually masculine. Her head swam. Points of light flickered behind her lids. Every caress of his tongue across hers shot a hot sensation to the tips of her breasts and below...between her legs.

He had just slid his hand to her shoulder when they were forced apart by the roll of the ship again.

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Liana thought she needed that to bring her back to her senses. She gasped rather ineffectually, "Are you daft? We're possibly going to drown out here and you're...you're..."

"Kissing you?" he quipped.

"That was more than a kiss," she muttered, more than she'd felt with a husband she'd given her virtue to. A tinge of guilt and revulsion waved over her. She'd cried for days realizing her fate back then, suffered through half that year before Paul grew ill, having to serve her duty and him, and having to suffer through insensitive rutting.

"Are you really worried about your father?"

"Yes. Don't pretend to care what I think now," Liana grated. "Or what I feel."

"You do have a tongue on you." He laughed, then murmured, "But deliciously sweet where it counts."

"Do shut up," she uttered through grit teeth. The whole vessel shuddered and the echo of screams could be heard throughout.

"If you can hang on by yourself, I'll try and make it to the salon. Though, you know Liana, he is likely not the least be concerned about you."

"I know. But he's my father."

He folded her fingers tightly over the headboard, coaxing her to the furthest corner. "Hold there, sweet." He bussed her cheek. "Your loyalty, though misplaced, is one of the reasons I chose you."

Liana was still muttering as he left. But as soon as he did, she put her head between her arms and prayed, "Oh God, don't let me die. I'm sorry I detested Paul. Sorry I felt relieved when he died. Sorry I committed any offence." She sucked in a deep breath. "Since I can't lie to you, just forgive me for everything and..."

"He's passed out, locked himself in a cabinet and oblivious." Raiden sat back down on the bed. He reached out and touched her arm. "However, I should tell you, it does not look good... The captain was honest enough about that."

Sick to her stomach, Liana felt a clammy sweat break over her skin under the bright yellow day gown she wore.

"I have come through worse..."

She grunted, "What is worse than dying in a ship wreck, pray tell?"

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“There is worse,” he said simply, then, “Tell me, have you ever thought of what you’d like to have done before you died?”

“Must you be so...morbid? No, I have not, and I did not intend to have to think of it before nature took its course and old age or disease took me.”

“We could be making love.”

“Is that all you think about? Honestly...you’re insane.” She shuddered. “We’re going to die and he’s talking about sex...” she said to no one.

He pried her hands off the headboard. “You’ve had a rough life, my girl. A feckless father, and wed to an old man when you were too young to do anything about it. These last years, to hear your father talk, you’ve gotten him out of one scrape after another, and did whatever you could to pay his debts, dragged him home from places no lady should have to enter.”

That was all true, and it surprised her that he’d sifted through her father’s talk and gleaned that. Most believed George’s ramblings. In any case, she wasn’t going to die feeling self-pity. “I wept when it mattered, though it rarely helped, in fact I deduced that crying solves nothing and changes nothing. I would just as soon go out of this world with some dignity.”

“How about with comfort? Strong arms to hold you, the feel of a heartbeat and holding to someone who feels something for you.”

Damn him. Her eyes were stinging. “You care nothing about me, beyond my body.”

“Not true. Your body is enticing I admit. The first time I saw you with that wine-red hair half piled up and half blown loose by the breeze I was mesmerized. Your skin is peerless in the sunlight, did you know that? Then I spoke to you and you turned to look at me...those eyes, love...a man could enjoy looking into them up close.”

She tried to resist when he repositioned her, but soon found that lying on her back against the wall with him on his side facing her kept her from at least being flung. Besides, her arms were strained and hurting. She wanted to close her ears to the chaos outside, to pretend she could not hear the violent storm and screaming wind – to not hear the sounds of sobbing, screaming and praying.

He went on, murmuring under the nightmare, “I have had many women. That is not a boast, merely assuring you that I did have the chance to wed a half dozen merchant’s daughters and a few dozen princesses.”

“Princesses?”

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“On the islands...tribal,” he clarified and added, “I wanted you when I laid eyes on you. You were prickly and I think, a bit intimidated.”

“Of all the arrogant—“

“Many can overlook the heritage but not the markings and...”

“You’re bloody six foot five and built like a gladiator. I should think that sufficient enough to give a woman pause... And you go out of your way to draw attention to that heritage, so don’t bother telling me that—is a burden. You look like no other man. You try hard not to.”

“As I was saying,” he sounded amused. “My courting skills are a bit rusty. I have long been in relationships that, shall we say, don’t require it.”

“I can imagine.”

“And when you refused, I watched you, trying to figure you out and attempting to discover a way to my goal.”

“Just like a man—“

“Your father was it. He played cards every night, well, most of the day too, and lost heavily. He liked his whiskey, so it was a matter of doing what I had to, getting him to talk, which was fairly easy, and then taking action.” He reached out in the dark and touched her hair. “Don’t take it so negatively, sweet. I have never gone to so much trouble to get what I want.”

“You still don’t have it.”

“Yes, well, I am willing to do the wooing properly should you relent. If it is the legalities that bother you, then we shall re-do the whole thing.”

She moved his hand, then winced as a pin caught and pulled. She muttered and felt blindly for the rest that held up her shoulder-length locks. “If we survive this storm, you have done little but reinforce my first impression of you. You have the arrogance of a peacock, the apparent sexual appetites of a dog, and the—“

“Oh, sweet.” He chuckled deeply. “You really must not mock my confessions. I am trying dammably hard to prove to you how far I did go to have you.”

“I’m aware of how far. I’m apparently married to you.” She tossed the pins over him and to the floor.

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On a downward heave he steadied her. Liana moaned in fear when surging upwards, the sound of water flooding the room could be heard. She clutched at his forearm, her nails biting. The loudly ringing alarm bells followed shouts from the crew.

“Raiden!”

“It appears they’re abandoning the ship.” He gathered her close and murmured, “They will go by sections, women and children first. I’ll get you topside.”

She could hear sobbing and shrieking children. “How many do you think the boats will hold?”

“Not enough.” He sighed tensely, and sat up. “Come, sweet. “

She sat up, moving across the bed in inches because of the sway and jolts. She gasped feeling the cold seawater on the floor that soaked her slippers.

“Liana?”

“Yes?” Her throat was tight with panic.

“One kiss.” He had turned and cupped her head in his hands, kissing her quite hungrily, deeply, as if to drink her taste and remember it.

Breathless when he pulled inches away, Liana whispered, “Even if I am put in the boat...I’m likely to die, aren’t I?”

“Your chances are as good as anyone else.”

“Don’t lie to me.” She covered his hands. “Please.”

His thumbs stroked her face. In gruff tones he supplied, “It’s in God’s hands.”

She gulped in a breath. He slid his arm around her to get her to the door. She said in trembling tones. “I can’t stand this...you’re going to stay on board and die...”

“Hush. Take it moment by moment. You are a brave woman, Liana. Don’t let the fear control you.”

At the doorway they were forced to stand still while wailing and shoving passengers filed past, many with children and a few elderly. Liana looked up at the shadowed face. “I wanted you... I have never been kissed like that before. I never felt that. I— I did not like what you did, what my father did, but I could have wanted you.”

He turned his back against the facing, holding her to him. “Thank you for that, sweet.” His head dipped and there was a tremble in both their frames as he kissed her.

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He did not kiss fast and urgent, not at all like she'd expect when the situation was so dire. The touch of his lips was slow, the spread of them gradual. When his tongue was inside, fear and dread dissipated for the heartbeats that passed. He caressed, stroked, with each movement of his head, like warmest honey flowing into her mouth.

The kiss went on as the vibration of running feet and chaos of a panicked mass joined the horrific sounds of flooding. Liana felt the water rise from her slippers to her calves, icy and sharp. But for those moments, she experienced the first taste of desire, the first surge of longing, and for the first time in her life— ironically near death— she felt alive.

His breathing was hot, harsh when he lifted his head. Holding her against him so that she heard the thunder of his heartbeat under that lawn shirt.

"Don't go topside," she whispered gruffly. "It's too dangerous. I'll go alone." She could tell that the way was clear to the stairs. Nothing but ocean poured down. No human sound at all.

His hand cupped the back of her head. There was something terrible in his voice when a massive wave hit and the water reached their knees. "There is no topside, love. Forgive me, I lied. I knew there would be no room for you..."

Her eyes squeezed shut and she felt the ship spinning right and leaning on its side. Her arms wrapped hard around him. Her body completely overtaken by trembling. "Oh, God. Don't let me die alone! Don't let go of me."

"I won't...I won't." His arms tightened and she heard a sound in his throat.

"Let there be a heaven..." she murmured while tears ran down her face and onto his shirt. "Let God be merciful— and let this be swift for us both."

"Liana." It was a raw sound. He bent his knees and said roughly in her ear, "your father told me that you owned a little flower shop once, what was it called?"

"The Rosebower."

"And your pet, the mutt that was always chewing up his slippers."

She laughed on a sob as they were flung to their knees. "Pepper," she gasped at the chill and coldness, fighting panic. "He loved pepper."

He was struggling, trying to right them. "And you're favorite hat, the one that he grumbled over the cost."

Clinging to him, trying to help steady them both and feeling her soaked gown, she managed, "Straw with a wide brim and ribbons...blue ones."

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“When you were in Nottingham...you had a pony.” He shifted his hold, his clothing wet too.

Pitch-blackness met her eyes as she said, “Palo...” And then the ship heaved, slamming her backwards and his weight to her front.

She cried out. Her back struck the door, and they broke apart, falling to their sides. Groping in the deep water she screamed, “Raiden.”

“I’m here!” his hand found hers and he waded close.

“It’s so cold...so black.”

They both heard the groan of wood and the tumultuous boom. It seemed that the vessel was rolling. The tension building in the structure was palatable.

Liana was on her knees, Raiden behind her, trying to hold her steady when the tension reached its peak. Her scream rent the air, long and piercing. The pressure burst forth. All she could feel was a force—pushing her up, out of the ship—into the angry ocean. She was tossed higher, violently rasped by a surge so cold, it ached like a thousand needles raking over her skin.

Liana’s last impression was her body swirling amid the debris and wreckage.

## **Part 2**

She was hot, burning hot. Itching all over. Inside her mind was a hazy vapor of red and bright yellow. By degrees she began to feel things, her burning eyes were watering and her stomach churning painfully. She needed to throw up.

Liana coughed and choked. Seawater erupted from her stomach and pushed out of her mouth. Shuddering and trying to open her eyes, she begged the world to stop bobbing her up and down. *If it would only stay still.*

She groaned and turned her head, trying to find some relief from the heat and bright light. Her tongue came to wet her lips. She moaned with stinging pain. They seemed raw, dry and swollen.

Lethargic, she tried to raise her arms, wincing at the sore muscles but managing to block out the brightness long enough to start blinking, trying to lift her lids. Tears poured out of the burning orbs like water. She rubbed them, feeling the grit and rawness.



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Her hands dropped. The echo of wood sounded. Liana rolled her head to the side. Through her burning eyes she saw a blur of dark blue, lighter blue turquoise. It moved, undulated in a rippling series of waves. The sounds of birds, seagulls and some sharp cry penetrated her dull mind. She kept blinking, feeling her vision improve each time the tears washed the salt away.

Licking her lips over and over, she began to feel with her fingertips. Wood beneath her on both sides, ragged cloth dangling on her right arm, nothing on the left, ripped material across her middle that exposed her corset. She could feel one bare thigh; the other seemed to be covered by – a hand?

Her eyes wide now, she groaned and pushed herself carefully to brace on her forearms. The wood swayed, tipping. She had enough instinct left to still her motions.

Blinking, she saw the man half in the water, half out, and it took her dull mind another moment to recognize Raiden de Louve.

Her first attempt at speech produced nothing but a whisper. Coughing, wincing at her sore throat, she rasped, “Raiden...” Half-fearing he was dead.

It took several more whispers, and finally using her other bare foot to nudge him, before he began coughing, then vomiting up the same as she had done. His tawny fingers clutched her leg with each violent heave, before finally he raised his head, hair crusted with seaweed and under the bronze skin, bruises.

“Liana...”

She winced seeing similar black and blue marks on her legs and a gash that was burning just under her knee. “We’re alive.”

He brought his body higher out of the water causing her to gasp as the wood rocked and it sank a bit.

“Be careful!”

He rasped, “I am only trying to see beyond you. It looks like land...”

She turned her head and squinted at the dark mass seeming to float beyond the sunset. “Will we float that way?”

“No. But if I have the strength.” He began to kick powerfully and grunted, “I can catch the waves and up our chances.”

“I can swim.”

*Gayle Eden*  
Refuge from the Storm

He glanced at her, teeth bared with effort. "So can sharks. Your leg is bleeding and your arm has a gash."

She looked down merely blinking at the red gash on her upper arm. "You must be hurt too."

"Likely. But I am stronger." He suggested, "Turn carefully to your stomach and paddle if you can."

She was careful, groaning with pain and soreness, but gingerly rolling and then re-centering on the wood so that she could paddle and help him.

It took several failures that left them wet, and tossed them under twice, before they caught the waves. Tiring and muscles straining, sheer desperation kept them at it long past sundown.

A helpless sob escaped Liana when her trembling arms gave out, folding them she buried her head against them, feeling the cooling night wind waft over the sea, and could not even be thankful for it.

She croaked, "It's too far away."

"At this point, there is no such thing." He was breathing heavy, resting too but obviously not giving up. "A pile of rocks would be safer than our present situation. These waters hold more danger than you realize."

"Did you have to tell me that?" She raised her head and looked back at his moon lit face. "Really. I can deduce for myself that those shadows out there are sharks. I have seen them all day."

He wet his dry, cracked lips. "Good, then you will try harder and—"

"I have been trying. My bloody arms are falling off."

"Rest a bit more, Liana. But we cannot drift much further or we will lose our chance."

She shuddered and expelled a breath. "Tell me when you are ready."

"There's my girl," he grunted.

Liana lay back down on her stomach, using the time to rest her arms and keeping her eyes on the distinct fins moving eerily in the water. She used her mind to think of relaxing things, a hot bath, since her body itched, and lotions, oils that were soothing.

"Now."

*Gayle Eden*  
Refuge from the Storm

When his kick sounded, she spread and began her rowing, using her arms to cut through the water, shifting when he called out and getting back in the rhythm of riding the waves closer to the mass of land.

The full moon hung over them, glinting on the rippling surface. Time had no meaning – neither did soreness or fatigue, as she focused on his voice, his instructions, and kept that island in view.

Two more brief rests, and just time to catch their breath, before her eyes could actually see the moon glow shining on the land. Her adrenaline surged then, as did Raiden's, for it seemed to her that they doubled their efforts until the wave pushed them within yards of the shore.

"Now we swim." He let go of the wood and came round the side, dunking under several times and smoothing his hair back. "Come on."

She looked back to make sure the sharks were not close by. Then heaved with one movement and sank, coming up gasping and pushing her hair back. She felt things brush her calves and feet, seaweed and creatures she'd rather not know about.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

She struck out first, using the waves as they had been doing. Thankfully her kicks took the brunt of the labor from her arms.

"Go on." She called out knowing he was faster and stronger.

"No. Just keep that steady pace. It's not far."

She swam with a blank sort of purpose, ignoring anything but chanting one more, one more, one more – knowing each stroke brought her closer. When it seemed her lungs would burst from the burning, she felt him touch her arm and looked at him.

He was treading water. "Some of these Islands are dangerous. When we get to the beach, just rest and we'll await daylight to see what is what."

"Resting is what I had in mind." She nodded and began swimming once more.

The last surge Liana glided, allowing the wave to carry her to the dry sand. She lay as she landed, sprawled and heaving for breath, hearing Raiden struggling and gasping beside her.

Hearts thudding and lungs greedy, the first half-hour was spent unmoving while the surf pounded and the night birds called to each other.

*Gayle Eden*  
Refuge from the Storm

Once her body calmed, she rasped, "I don't suppose my father got on one of those boats."

"No."

She looked up at the expanse of dark sky. "He likely did not wake up." Her eyes teary, they came, spilled, and ran down into the sand.

"I doubt he even felt the storm. It was an easy way to go if he had to."

"Yes." She bit her swollen lip then soothed it with her tongue. "How long did we drift?"

"I was conscious on and off. Maybe two days."

She sighed shakily and felt the wet grit under her. Sitting up, she used the saffron moonbeams to look over her tattered gown. It was little more than rags. One sleeve missing and half the side from hip to thigh. The bodice gone and slashes in the stomach. Her corset was ragged. She already knew her bloomers, slippers and stockings were gone.

Pulling the tattered edge of the side across her thighs, she glanced at him. He wore no shirt and no boots or socks. His leather breeches were slashed and only from hip to thigh did they cling to him. Like herself, his limbs were shadowed with scrapes and bruises.

"I suppose we are lucky to be alive."

"Most fortunate." He rolled his head, looking at her. "Let's hope wherever we are, there is substance and fresh water."

"Yes." She looked over her shoulder seeing palms and cliff like rocks rising behind a dense tropical forrest. "And no hostiles."

"We'll know by morning." He sat up with a grunt. Then he stood and pointed, "Let's move to that cropping and try to sleep."

She took his hand and trudged through the deep sand to the spot he chose. He sat with his back against the rocks and offered, "stretch out and rest. I'll watch as long as I can."

She lay on her side in the sand, and cushioned her head with her arm. Closing her eyes...sleeping almost as soon as her lids closed.

~

*Gayle Eden*  
Refuge from the Storm

He was not with her when she awakened to brilliant sunlight. Liana sat up blinking and scratching at her salty skin. She looked around, amazed at the vividness, white sand and deep green foliage and clarity of her surroundings.

Setting against the rock, she glanced down and realized the only thing holding her gown on was the one sleeve. She peeked around and slid it off, covering her bottom half, which was nude, until she could figure out how to wear the blasted thing.

A squawk of birds had her eyes shooting to the left; Raiden was striding toward her, his arms full of coconuts.

Liana groaned and tucked the now ragged material under her arms, arranging dangling pieces over her thighs.

He dropped to his knees and spilled the fruit. Glancing at her face, and then slowly down her bare shoulders. "We are not the first to be stranded here."

"Is the island inhabited?"

"No. But someone knows it's here." He broke the coconut on the stone and handed it to her. "The milk is good for you."

"What do you mean, someone?" She drank it greedily, closing her eyes a moment to savor the coolness.

After he drank one, he said, "I'll show you after we've eaten. There's fresh water. The island is bigger than it appeared. Most things are when you're on the ocean."

She watched him break the shell, cracking layers to hand her the meat. Chewing and taking some of the edge from her hunger, she explained, "My gown is useless."

"I noticed." He smiled. "I've no objection if you wish to toss I—"

"I don't," she snapped and tucked it back under her arm. "I'm not running around naked."

He was sitting with knees bent. After eyeing her, he shrugged and ripped away his flapping trouser legs, leaving a hem at his upper thigh. "Let me see the gown."

"Oh, very good." She snorted. "You know bloody well my.... That I have nothing else to cover me."

"We can't fashion something if you won't give it over."

"You're incredible..." she blinked at him. "Didn't nearly dying make you a bit more serious about things?"

*Gayle Eden*  
Refuge from the Storm

“No. Actually, It has the opposite effect, sort of makes you take things less seriously.” He eyed the edge of her corset. “Take the corset off and let’s see what we have to work with.”

“I can figure it out myself.”

“I’ve lived on islands where people make their garments from the barest materials.”

“I’ll bet.”

“And – I learned to fashion them.”

“We’ve no needle and thread here, in case you haven’t noticed.

“Fish bones... well, actually, I could make one with any sort of sharp bone.” He had cracked her two more coconuts and then stood. “I’ll be right back.”

Liana ate and dreaded his return, knowing she was going to end up naked in front of him one way or the other. *Surviving a shipwreck only to die of mortification. My God. It was too much.*

She had polished off most of the food, discovered that her hair was sticky and stiff, and that she doubted there was a privy nearby, when Raiden returned.

“What the blazes is that!” she stared at the wide leaf.

“Your covering... for modesty’s sake, until we see to some clothing.”

“Just like Eve...” she said groaning and taking the massive green thing from him.

“I’m going behind this rock.”

“Right, toss them over, sweet. I have a quill here, I’ll show you how to use it.”

“Just get me decent. I’ll learn all the necessary means of survival later.”

He chuckled and sat down, whistling softly.

Liana rolled her eyes and tossed the dress first, then the corset, and what was left of the chemise. Standing there bare-assed, she peeked down at her body, marred by scrapes and indented red from the corset, rubbed raw in spots. It was not alluring in the least now. She dusted seaweed off her breasts, brushed and scratched everywhere. “You did say there was fresh water?”

“Umm... A lagoon not too far. “

*Gayle Eden*  
Refuge from the Storm

"If someone knows this island exists, then we could be rescued..."

"Let's hope," he said. "There are native markings but some remnants of a ship wreck. I did not explore it but if we move the undergrowth, there's likely to be something useful."

"I suppose I should feel fortunate I survived with you. At least you have the handy skills to keep us alive."

"Ouch, sweet." He laughed. "You should be thrilled your husband lived."

"Of course I'm glad of it... But please, we've had a trauma. I at least cannot even think beyond—"

He sighed loudly. "I see I must begin the wooing all over again."

"Actually. Why don't we drop the whole thing and concentrate on staying alive."

"Come out."

She did come from behind the rock, her huge leaf held like a fan over her torso.

Liana looked at the garment he held up. "That's it? That's my clothing?"

He was laughing. "It is modest by Island standards."

"I'm an Englishwoman. I require a bit more than covering my bum." She snatched the thing out of his hand. "Turn around."

He did, and she dropped the leaf. The bottom part was little more than a band from mid thigh to waist. The top, made also from his breeches, was a similar band that laced up between her breasts. There were three inches between the small skirt and the top.

He said, "You should save the cloth, for your menses."

She wanted to die on the spot. Liana grated, "There's no undergarment."

"Actually, that triangular piece laying there will do the trick.

She picked up the yellow material and spent a moment turning it this way and that, before she figured out how to tie it on under the skirt.

"I'll use the other leather to make slippers...sorry I can't weave. My mother's people make sandals from grasses and—"

"This is...indecent!"

*Gayle Eden*  
Refuge from the Storm

He turned around, his smoky eyes going over her curves and lingering on the bare shoulders, the lacings between her breasts. The skirt was laced too. He eyed it, then down to the jagged hem. "I'm better than I expected."

She crossed her arms. "I feel exposed."

His eyes raised to hers. "You look ravishing."

She doubted that, but she also knew her exposed limbs and above the breast was drawing his eyes time and again.

*He wanted her.* She had not forgotten that. And, she was more exposed right now than she had been when she'd lain with her husband.

*Actually,* he was fairly exposed too. Coppery skinned with a brown underlay, and powerful legs, lightly haired, defined with muscle. The leather that did cover him was hardly more than her own. He did have more markings, one around his ankle and two rows of tattoos on his thigh. He looked incredibly warm, powerfully built. His hair, even matted, was trying to wave and curl.

*It was really unfair...* His nipples were like velvet discs, somehow sexual. She jerked her eyes from them, only to be staring at his ridged abdomen before she looked away.

"I itch all over," she said to draw her eyes away from his stomach.

"Let's get your feet covered and do some exploring, then we'll bathe."

"I need...a moment's privacy."

He shrugged and waved to the thick copse. "Help yourself."

She did, stomping off and tugging at the back of the short skirt whilst he was making her footwear—knowing the beast was watching her every step. Enjoying every moment of her embarrassment.

~

The shoes were like pouches covering her feet, but Liana was grateful for them once they were trekking through undergrowth, vines, and thick foliage. The constant call of exotic wildlife echoed as she walked close behind him. In a clearing he paused and pointed.

"See there. That looks to be the remnants of a shelter. Those timbers are from a ship, and that iron piece from trunks."



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She followed him over to it, watching him take a sturdy stick and beat at the vines until he was squatting down and digging out a few pieces. A cup and several more articles which he laid aside. He stood, looked around and then further they came upon a towering pile of stones, oddly rounded and marked.

“Some sort of temple?”

“Yes.” He fingered the grooves. Then moved on, to walk around it.

They explored the area, finding an iron trunk half buried in the ground and Liana watched him collect a growing pile of items they would pick up on their way back.

She could have enjoyed the lush beauty of the surroundings had her eyes not been darting everywhere, on the lookout for any predator. In her wildest imaginings she hadn't seen herself in a place like this — nor with a man like Raiden. But his ease and calmness did help her. He pointed out familiar flora and eatable fruits and plants, giving her the impression that he was much more knowledgeable than she was about this type of setting.

They reached the lagoon. She stood at the edge of the forest, admiring the light blue water. It was breathtaking, with a cliff soaring half moon around it. And when she walked closer, the water was clear enough to be inviting.

He'd been standing at the edge and met her eyes, his ruby earring twinkling as he scratched at his stiff hair. “After we rid ourselves of this salt and seaweed, I'll see how well my fishing skills hold up.”

“We don't have a cook fire.” She squatted down and ran her fingers through the water.

“I can make fire.”

She glanced at him.

He winked.

Liana stood awkwardly, wondering how they were going to go about bathing when she noticed he was tugging his lacings.

“What are you doing!”

He had them gapped wide enough, so that she could see his black curls. “Swimming, bathing...getting clean.” He peeled them down his legs.

Her wide eyes got a flash of his sex, before she jerked them away. “Can't you do that with some covering.”

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Refuge from the Storm

"No. And neither can you." He dove in the water.

She looked as he sprung up, slicking his hair back; sunlight glistened on those water drops running over his torso. His white teeth flashed. He called out, "Come, Liana. You will enjoy this."

"No – you will." She crossed her arms. "I'm not getting in there naked."

He swam over close and stood so that the water covered, yet did not cover his manhood. "We're married. We're allowed to see each other nude."

"Are you going to keep bringing that up?" she glared at him. "We're practically strangers, and I did not marry you."

"We weren't strangers on that ship." His silver eyes held hers. "It didn't matter how little you knew me..."

She swallowed. "That was different."

Radian's swarthy hand absently brushed water off his chest, drawing her eyes to that motion. "There is no telling how long we'll be stranded here, Liana. Maybe forever. Your modesty is misplaced under the circumstances." His gaze went down her slowly and then back up. "You're an attractive woman, and yes, I want you – even with bumps, bruises, and cracked lips." He shook his head. "But though I cannot help but look, perhaps respond... I am not going to attack you."

She was ashamed seeing that taut face, the almost angry hurt there. She attempted, "I did not see my husband unclothed, nor he me."

He stared at her. "That must have made for tedious sex."

She looked away. "At fifteen, it was quite disgusting and not at all comfortable."

"I'm sorry," his tone softened. "Because of your age, I sometimes forget the details." He was silent a moment, then, "You wanted me..."

"I knew you were going to bring that up!" She nearly wailed. "I knew it. I was near death for God sakes...I thought you were going to go down with the ship."

"Nonetheless. You're not disgusted by me."

"No." she admitted.

"So you understand, one can enjoy seeing, and feeling, that attraction."

"I'm not completely ignorant."

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Refuge from the Storm

He grunted as if frustrated. "I don't mind you looking at me. I quite welcome it."

She was flame red. "Can't you leave anything unsaid?"

"Why bother. What we've been through, where we are, there's little reason for pretense. We are all each other has at the moment."

She stared at him then. "That does not mean I can be something I am not. I cannot throw off twenty three years of being civilized."

"No one is asking that. I'm merely pointing out that this is our reality. I'm not going to rape you. I'm not going to take you by force...but my attraction and my instincts are very much inclined to seduce you."

"Well. That makes me much more comfortable."

He smiled and his lashes dipped. "Feel free to follow your own inclinations."

She sat down. "I'll just wait until you are finished."

He came up, out of the water, onto the bank, and her scream was no deterrent when he scooped her up – and tossed her into the center of the lagoon.

Liana sank down first. Then rose up gasping, pushing her heavy hair from her eyes. "Bloody hell!" she glared at him. He was laughing so hard, she doubted he heard her.

Chuckling, he was wading toward her. "Do you strip, or do you need my help?"

"Get away!" She swam back.

"Liana..."

"I'll do it, just stay back."

He stopped and arched his brow.

Muttering, she sank several times wriggling out of the clothing. When she held them aloft he reached out. "I'll lay them to dry."

She tossed them, not waiting to see if he caught them, before she swam away. Liana dove and swam, scrubbing at her hair and body, rubbing until she tingled and then surfacing.

"There are plants here that are as good as soap." He was just surfacing himself.

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Refuge from the Storm

“Soap would help.” She scraped her nails over her scalp. “It feels better though, just to get the salt out.”

“I’ll gather some of the plants, roots and blossoms too, next time.”

She went under and then arched her neck, coming up and spewing out water she used to rinse her teeth. “There’s fish in here.”

“Yes. “ He was standing in water just at his shoulders, watching her.

“Christ...you’re lovely...even battered from the wreck.”

Her opal eyes moved over his face, seeing the crystal drops running from his wet hair, over his wide cheekbones and down his rugged chin. The lagoon fit him. He looked primal, wonderfully sculpted. From the natural flair of his nostrils, to the deep set of his eyes there was a sensual, animal essence he bore.

Here in this tropical nowhere, at this oddly fated time in her life, Liana could feel a magnetism and raw potency radiating from him. In another place, a crowded place, she would sense it perhaps, but not like now, when there was nothing covering either of them but water, and no laws or codes to stop her from looking, from feeling it.

He had stilled under her gaze, but those lustrous eyes were hooded when he murmured, “Come here, Liana.”

*Christ.* His tone was compelling, husky. She shook her head.

He swam closer, keeping only a foot between them. Water spiked his lashes. He dipped the lower part of his face before raising it, and running his tongue over his lips. “Your eyes touch me.”

“I—“

“Let your hands do the same.”

She shook her head again, her throat tightening with the tension, with having him so close.

He held her gaze. “Touches and kisses,” he whispered deep, “small pleasures compared to what I would give you... But pleasure all the same.” He reached out the water, taking her hand and tugging her close, placing her palm on his side and rubbing it against the taut skin.

Liana was trying to keep a distance and keep her breasts from his view. She could feel the heat of him in the warmed water, feel the sinew and strength. She pulled her hand back. “I need to bathe.” She swam away and ducked under. Spending several moments

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swimming under the surface, gliding and washing her hair, until it felt clean and then simply coming up for air, going back down to swim again.

She had her eyes open, watching a brightly colored fish when she spied Raiden...

He was under the water too, and his eyes were as open as hers were.

She knew he'd seen her, all of her. When he glided under the water toward her, there didn't seem any point in avoiding him. She was half-curious, half-afraid to see what he would do.

He swam half past her and turned, until they were side by side. He took her hand, turned her to face him and simply looked at her, head to toe, before meeting her glance and surfacing.

She came up slower, filling her lungs with air and smoothing her now cleaner hair back. Oddly soothed by the tropical scented warm breeze, she didn't avoid his gaze. He was close enough that their shoulders touched.

"Your father never said why the two of you were sailing to Jamaica."

She smiled sadly. "He had pretty much run out places to drink and gamble. Most taverns had barred him. Knowing that many rich Englishmen have plantations and properties there, he thought to find him a son-in-law among them."

"And he did..."

She ignored that. "I went along, still thinking he'd change his mind. That perhaps we'd start over. We were always starting over. Another city, or township, another cottage..."

"You were, starting over. I think poor George was simply unstable in his character."

"Yes." She sighed. "He gambled horribly but couldn't seem to stop. My mother loved him though. She would make excuse after excuse when we had to vacate some hovel or spend weeks with a family who was kind enough to take us in. Until he did something else."

"You were educated?"

She nodded. "My mother tried. She was learned herself, the daughter of a tutor."

Liana watched the flight of a vivid bird. "There were people in my life who taught me things. Even my husband, who clerked for a living." She glanced at him. "Perhaps it was out of pity, but there were kindness' done me."

"How did you afford passage?"

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"I sold everything I had but two gowns. My wedding rings and...my mother's jewelry." She smiled stiffly. "It is foolish to be so optimistic, I suppose. But he is all I had."

Raiden nodded and reached out to move a strand of hair from her cheek. His eyes touched hers. "Your qualities far surpass things that riches or titles can bring. As much as it brought you no happiness, it has made you far more mature and stronger, than women of your age."

"There are many out there, Raiden, who accept their lot."

"This I know." His fingertips traced her cheek. "But there are several kinds of gentlemen, just as there are ladies of quality...and women of substance. I have moved in both worlds, and became jaded with those who are called Lady simply by virtue of birth. I could not move in the upper circles of aristocracy, if I had not the good fortune to be rich, no matter what title I hold."

"You were born in Jamaica?"

"No. My mother was. She was a slave born, of a native and a Frenchman, who abandoned her. My father, the Count, became obsessed with her..."

"How did he meet her?" Liana swam slowly, and he followed.

"In a brothel on the island. He bought her as a virgin for a cheap sum, and did not wed her until I was three."

Liana winced and stayed still, looking at his face and trying to read it, seeing a distance there, a slight tightening around his eyes.

"I was born in England, in de Louve castle. It was awarded the family in the time of William the Conqueror. It sits on the coastline, rising up from the cliffs, always shrouded by dark mists. As a lad, I hated it—the spires and arches, and winged gargoyles." He smiled. "It was a terrifying place for a lad."

Liana sensed that smile was forced. "I was born in a cottage by the sea." She looked up at the sky and then down. "Did he really — kill her?"

"Yes." He looked away then.

She could feel the darkness on him and knew it wasn't time to dig deeper. "I suppose we should hunt for our dinner now?"

He ducked under and came up; a brief emotion flickered in his gaze that she took for relief. "Hopefully we'll have fish. Eventually we need to construct some sort of shelter. Preferably in a clearing, and not too far from the shore."

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They were swimming to the edge. She stood, arms folded over her breasts, water leveled at her lower hips.

Raiden walked out of the water as comfortable as he'd gotten in. Pulling on his covering and lacing them.

His back was turned. She slipped out and found her garments. She fashioned the undergarment and pulled on the makeshift skirt, tying the ties. The top piece was in her hand when she stilled, and looked aside to find him standing there, watching her.

Her pink tipped breasts were tingling, getting harder under his gaze. Liana looked down at them without thinking, and watched the nipples pebble on the pearl white skin, watched their plumpness seem to tighten. She looked up. He walked over and tilted her chin up. Then lowered his head, kissing her, raw and explicit, stealing her breath, and sucking lightly at her tongue before parting.

His thumb rubbed her chin, still tilting her head back, while his other hand moved, then settled over one breast.

Her eyes widened but she could not move, did not exactly have the ability to think, as he stared at her in that watchful way and lightly flexed his fingers. He massaged that breast and then let his fingers slide to the tip, rubbing gently.

Liana moaned. Her lashes fluttered.

Raiden rubbed the other, doing the same motions, but this time while he put their lips together, the kiss light, barely touching, flicking his tongue over her lips, and then stroking just the tip of hers. At the same moment his fingers played at the nipple.

Trembling, Liana was panting against his mouth; not knowing what to do with her hands and feeling her knees grow weak.

He lifted his head again, his eyes much more smoky. Then he moved his hand from her chin, bent his knees, placing his grip at her waist, while his tongue laved over her breast.

"Oh...Oh--God..." she grasped his upper arms, "Raiden."

"Shhh....I just want a taste...just a sweet sip..." He employed first the flat of his tongue then swirled it slowly around. He suddenly took the whole thing in his mouth.

Liana cried out softly and jerked back from him. Looking down at the quivering, wet nipple, amazed at the intensity she'd felt, and the squeeze of her inner muscles. She was wet, damp – down there - and aching. She stepped from him and pulled on the top piece, tying it with shaking fingers.

*Gayle Eden*  
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Raiden laid his hand at her nape. "So many firsts for you, yes?"

"Yes." She glanced at him, flushed but too shaky to care.

"I found much pleasure in your sweet taste, Liana, in the feel of your skin." He smiled sensually. "Such things we both enjoy."

She blew out a breath and looked away.

He said, taking her hand. "Let's fill our bellies, and then see what we can find for shelter."

She went, somewhat in a daze of tingling nerves, and with a heart that was beating much too briskly.

~

The beach was littered with debris from the wreck when they returned. Liana sensed his excitement, he looked at her and ordered, "Drag anything you can find out of there. Hurry!"

She did racing down to the water, grabbing silver pitchers and platters, and serving forks. She raced back as he did, dragging trunks and bigger items. Liana was only half-aware of how many trips she made, and had no time to savor the joy at having such amenities, the sea was trying to steal them back. Time was of essence.

Her head turned, arms filled, when his laugh echoed across to her. He was holding up the corner of a white sail with the ropes still attached.

"This will make a fine tent, a mansion, in fact."

"I thought perhaps you'd build us a boat."

"I shall, but it will take time." He was smiling, coiling up the rope and nodded, "Grab what you can, sweet, hurry now."

She did, dumping another pile and coming back, scrambling and falling in the waves while she fought for bottles of spirits, tins of oil, and anything sealed that looked purposeful.

An hour passed. She joined him, dragging some of the heavier items up the beach grabbing whatever he told her to.

He'd rolled the sail up and she grabbed one end, sitting to rest after they placed it by their trove.



*Gayle Eden*  
Refuge from the Storm

He caught his breath, leaning over a bit, hands on his thighs, but eyes on the water.  
“We’ve made a good haul. We even have a net to fish with.”

She was watching the water too. “Do you think they made it? People in the boats?”

“I don’t know. In storms like that, ones that toss a huge ship...it’s almost futile to bother to abandon it.” He straightened and turned his gaze then to the forest.

Liana sighed and stood, looking over the items, a mixture of personal things and pieces from the common areas of the vessel.

“Should I sort this while you fish?”

“Yes. But for now, just keep out the necessities, a knife if you come across one, will be handy for clearing a spot for our shelter.”

She began sorting, putting the cooking and eating utensils in a pile, combs and mirrors, odd pieces in another. She eyed the trunks and then looked around for something to break the locks or latches. Finding a stone, she set to the task, not making much progress until Raiden came up the beach.

He had three good size fish on the end of a sharp stick.

“That was fast.”

“I’m very good at it.” He shot her a grin and then took over breaking the lock.

“What fine luck, “ he murmured lifting out a naval uniform and then a short sword as well as a long dress sword. There were books, boxes, tins, and he showed her each item saying, “We have a means to start a fire now. Even a sewing kit.”

Liana grew morose as they went through the others, finding letters, photographs, prayer books and rosary beads, all items that made it so personal. She swallowed several times holding a child’s shoe or tiny coat. In late evening, he left her side to choose a cool spot for their tent, telling her they wouldn’t have time before nightfall to do much.

They didn’t. Once he’d made the pit and they ate, darkness was upon them. Liana lay on her side, Raiden keeping watch, and she fell asleep with her gaze on that gift from the sea, heavy hearted that it had taken so many people, such a great loss to supply her with it.

~

Liana barely opened her eyes at sunrise before Raiden was shoving coconuts in her hands, telling her to eat, so they could start on the tent. She ate and visited her privacy

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spot. Then followed him to the cool copse and stacked the limbs as he hacked them down.

If not for the breeze it would have been sheer hell. Her arms ached, itched from insects, and sweat ran down her back trying to match the speed at which he worked. Always an industrious person herself, Liana found that Raiden could make a team of oxen look weak.

The clearing seemed unnecessarily huge to her. She said so, somewhat grumbled since he'd worked her so hard.

"There's several hundred feet of sail. No use building something we'll go daft in, when we can do it comfortably."

Muttering, she shoved her hair back, making a mental note to find something and get it off her sweating face, she murmured something sarcastic. Her hands had blisters. When they went back to drag the sail to the clearing, he drew on the sand, showing her how he'd left the trees so that the rope could be tied to it.

"Ingenious." She smiled stiffly, rubbing her spine. "I hope you can climb that high."

"I can."

"Of course you can." She grunted and picked up her end, more or less letting him drag her, because she couldn't see a blasted thing.

In the clearing, she took orders, making mental notes despite her fatigue. And was fascinated when he climbed up the trunks, holding hacked off rope in his teeth, and clung with little more than his bare feet whilst he looped it through the eyehooks and tied each end. Three corners were up when he pulled it taut like a canopy. It had walls he told her he'd stake down, and then he raised a center pole he'd cut; anchored by iron he beat down around them.

"It will be an oven in here."

"No. Just be patient." He wiped sweat and grit from his brow, still holding the short sword. "Are you hungry?"

She was starving, but said, "I can wait for you. It will be nice to sleep under a shelter."

The next hour was consumed by her holding the stakes, trusting him enough whilst he beat them down to pull the tent taut. He cut several window flaps that could be tied back down, but aimed to catch a cross breeze, then tied back an entry. They laid the palm on the roof, and then she hauled in the items from the beach while he strapped bamboo braces in some intricate pattern inside.

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Tired as she was, Liana could see the care he took to make the thing strong as well as comfortable. He crossed the poles, roof and sides, between the main braces and lashed them with rope and some long reed material. He gathered more green poles to make them beds, hammocks he told her, and other necessities.

They ate finally, in the evening, this time with a pit fire burning outside their new dwelling. Sitting on the trunks and eating fish and fruit from silver plates. For Liana, it was simply another ludicrous moment to add to the rest.

When they were done, he opened a tin that held cigars and lit one, glancing at her in a puff of smoke. "Can you cook?"

"Generally. But this place doesn't exactly have a local butcher shop."

He grinned. "There's utensils and pans, even spices in one of the trunks. Natives use what they have and you'll find it quite tasty experimenting."

"Is that your way of telling me my woman's chores?"

He laughed at her tone. "No. I won't mind helping. But there will be long hours with nothing to do, unless we give ourselves tasks. You are welcome to fish too."

"Thank you."

He stood and rubbed his back. "If it wasn't so dark we could bathe."

"I certainly stink."

Raiden pointed to some items he had kept out. "We can catch rain water in that cask, strain it. There's also pitchers and bowls we can bring water back in." He pointed to a crewman's coat. "That is oil skin, virtually waterproof."

She eyed her grimy hands. "As much as I'm sick of sea water, I'm going to the surf to wash up before we do anything else."

They went together, walking down the moonlit beach while the white foamy waves crashed upon the shore. Liana ended up laying down in it, cooling her body and sighing at the relief to her sore muscles.

Dripping wet, they returned to the tent. Raiden searched for lanterns, small oil lamps and such, while she sorted clothing and material. Using the empty trunks for tables, chairs, they had light enough from the fire to work steady through most of the pile. Nearest the door she placed the cooking items and utensils, furthest back any bedding linen or items of that nature. Liana eyed the running dyed velvet and silk clothing in one trunk, sopping wet and damaged. She kept petticoats camisoles, bloomers. The heat

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was simply too much to dress in layers, and after two days of being nearly nude, she wasn't so picky about coverings for her body.

She sat down after awhile, watching Raiden fill two squat silver lamps from the oil tin. He sat cross-legged in the floor on the rushes, and sorted through what she assumed were useful items.

At one point, with night sounds mingling with the pounding of the surf, he was going through a pouch of gunpowder and balls.

"Are there eatable fowl here?" she asked. "I imagine we'll get sick of fish."

"Yes. Likely there are." He glanced at her. "I see you've chosen your wardrobe?" His brow arched at the pile of white petticoats.

"They need washing, but yes. I at least won't be tugging and pulling at them."

"Pity." He smiled and went back to his task.

Liana said, "I found you some trousers."

"I'll cut them off." He said without looking. "It's too blasted hot to wear more."

"The nights are cool."

He shrugged.

Liana rolled her eyes and went to the back of the tent and lay down. She yawned.

"I'll have something for your hands tomorrow. You worked hard today."  
She murmured her thanks, and slept, dreaming of running along the surf, plucking chickens, and of Raiden...all those images she'd stored of him climbing trees, cutting limbs, pounding stakes, of bronze muscles tensing and gleaming with sweat, of powerful legs flexing...and hands, tawny hands that had touched her breasts.

~

They began marking days, going back to the first and recording it in a dried out journal using berry juice and a quill for their ink. The next week, Liana watched him make their beds at the back of the tent, on either side with a trunk for her to hop up easily into it. She began to record roots, plants he chose, for cooking, healing or bathing, so she could gather them herself. The clothing was washed, hung and quickly dried, and the tent became sectioned off much like a real house.

Raiden made shelves and Liana sewed covers from the material. He made benches and she padded them.

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One morning when she sat out in the breeze sewing, muttering at her hair blowing loose from the tie, he came over and squatted behind her.

“Tilt your head back.” He had a comb in his hand.

“What are you going to do?”

“Braid it.”

She stilled her hands, glad she’d washed it in the pulp that morning, and closed her eyes at the soothing feel of him combing it. He braided it intricately from the crown back, his hands occasionally touching her ear, her nape, sent sparks down her spine. By the time he tied the ends, she was flushed and much too aware of him.

He came around, eyeing the camisole she wore, buttoned up the front, and the petticoat with ruffles missing, landing just at her knees. He’d already raised a brow at her cutting most of the leg out the long bloomers earlier that week, seeing them flapping on her makeshift line.

“Your skin is peach now.”

She nodded. “At least I’m not burning.” Not since he’d given her something to smooth on her skin. In fact, when she looked in the mirror hanging in the tent, she was surprised but not completely repulsed. She looked different certainly, less stiff and formal with her hair most of the time loose around her shoulders and with that peach tint to her skin. Her lips had healed and the scrapes were faded.

His was getting darker, she thought, making his eyes lighter and making her dreams more interesting. He sat down in the cool shade and relaxed. She went back to her sewing, pretending she did not know he watched her, and that his eyes felt as warm as his touch.

Liana finished her task and glanced at him, experiencing the tension that stirred both at the lagoon, and when they lay in their hammocks at night, when the cadence of nature brought about that thick intimacy, and the moon reflected down, filtering through foliage and creating patterns on the walls.

He had his head leaned back now, one leg bent, arm resting on his knee. His other hand raked through his wind-ruffled hair that had regained its inky wet sheen. She’d watched him shave under her lashes that morning, sitting by the water while he balanced the mirror and scraped with the short sword. She didn’t recall seeing Paul shave, he was normally up at daybreak and off to his employment.

But watching Raiden had been interesting, pleasant – seemingly a very masculine and personal thing.

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It was odd how her mind rebelled against the way Raiden de Louve had come into her life, yet it seemed to collect images and replay them at night. And her body – there were times she felt such a hunger, an intense craving for him to touch her or kiss her again.

His arrogance of course was bloody irritating, as were his comments, which had hardly altered. He made them at the lagoon, here at the tent, or anytime he felt like it, and they were always personal, intimate, never letting her forget that he wanted her. Part of her wanted to know what lay behind that sensual smile and those hooded eyes. Part of her was afraid however, because he possessed an aura of mastery and virility, and an earthy sensuality that curved his lips, entered his eyes, as it did now. She was ignorant of anything remotely close to that, and discovering it, with him, through him, was going to take more bravado than she'd built up.

"You have remained untouched since you were sixteen?"

She knew that deep husk by now. "I've been kissed."

"Not the way I kissed you."

She knew that arrogance too. "No." she agreed. "Not like that."

He smiled. "It would be my pleasure to show you the varied ways two mouths can feel against each other."

She licked her lips.

He watched that motion. "Tongues too." He sat up straighter and gazed into her eyes. "Are you hesitant because of pregnancy?"

"No. But, since you brought it up. I don't particularly want to have a child on some island in the middle of nowhere."

"I'd help you."

She flushed.

He shrugged. "I'm not obsessed with having an heir, but I wouldn't mind you bearing my children."

"Must we talk like this?"

"Liana – here we're simply man and woman. I understand females are not raised to speak so openly, but you are of an age and a maturity where it's allowable."

"We're not really married."

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He grunted. "There's a bible in the tent. Would you like to say your vows so that we may at last, put that argument to rest."

"No. I would not. I hardly know you."

"You know quite a bit," he argued. "We've been as intimate on a daily basis as any married couple."

"For a little over a week," she returned, strained.

He said, "You were married to that...Paul, was it, a bloody year, and I'll wager you did not whisper his name in your sleep."

Mortified, she stood and walked off toward the beach. Face so red her eyes burned, she did not stop until she stood in the surf, arms crossed and eyes closed.

*My God... Had she actually spoken his name?* She asked herself. Horrified that she must have, and that he'd lain there, hearing it.

Raiden walked up behind her. Liana stared out at the expansive ocean, smelling the scent that had become his, sun warmed skin, dark spices, and tropical fruit. He stood close enough so that her shoulders with the thin camisole straps touched his lower chest. Close enough to feel the breaths he took. To feel his hips against her, and his thighs.

He raised his hands to her arms, brushing across them and then tugging to unfold each, until he held each wrist loosely. Imagining he was looking out at the ocean, she heard him husk, "Could you give me a day...trust me, for one day, to show you how good we can make each other feel."

"No."

"Without the risk of pregnancy?"

"No."

His fingers trailed up her arms. "I want you, but I've no intention of handling you like your husband did. It was many years ago, Liana, and nothing compared to real desire,"

Eyes closed again she murmured, "I know that. I obviously cannot deny it now. But—"

He slid his hands up to rest on her shoulders, his thumbs caressing her. "I wouldn't consider it a complete surrender."

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She shook her head whispering, "How does one simply set aside an hour or a day and it be nothing more than some sort of test or experiment? You're speaking of things that yes, I can wonder about, but I cannot take them as lightly as you."

He slid his hands down and came round to face her, reaching out to tilt her chin, make her meet his eyes.

Liana saw the desire, the sensual promise there.

"I do not take them lightly. Your pleasure is mine, Liana, and I cannot prove that unless you trust me at some point." He probed her gaze. "You're letting fear and the unknown hold you back from even kissing me when you desire it."

*Was there nothing he had not read on her face?* Liana thought mentally groaning.

As if to answer that, he said, "I've been within touching distance of you a thousand times and have not. My mouth has watered for yours and my eyes have been filled with visions of you, at the lagoon, the tent, here on the beach... I have the patience to wait for all those walls to crumble... But you want my kisses and you want my touch, and knowing that, seeing it on your face, is the sweetest torture."

She breathed out a shaky sigh. "I'm not a weak woman. I have been responsible for myself a long time. I may only answer to me, but I don't like being in the dark about what I'm feeling or what's going to happen. I have lived a lifetime never knowing what the day might hold. I don't like giving up control to someone I hardly know."

"I know that." He slid his arms around her and started walking back until they were knee deep in the ocean. When she gazed up at him, he lifted her so that they were face to face. "Kiss me like you want to."

She gave in. Liana leaned and put her mouth on his, rubbing her lips across it before opening and sliding her tongue inside. But it was she who moaned when he opened and met the slide of her tongue with his. It was a long kiss, a kiss where she moved her head seeking texture and flavor and he gave it. He would let her lead, do as she wished, but return it so well, she had her hands threaded through his hair before she realized it.

Rocked by the waves swirling around them, Liana's head was light, her body too as she pulled back to catch her breath. He lifted those raven lashes and the heat in his silver eyes sent shivers of desire through her

He walked forward and lowered them both to the surf, laying her on her back and himself a little across her, from the side, his hand braced while he leaned down, kissing her softly, tenderly, and catching her lip with his teeth, soothing it with his tongue.



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She breathed hot, shallow. He kissed each corner of her mouth, then planted them over her face, brow, cheek and temple, before sliding his lips down to her throat.

Turning her head, arching her neck, she threaded her fingers in his hair again. He suckled just below her ear before running his tongue over the shell. Liana was awash with sparks, each one coming from the drag of his tongue and the brush of those lips over her skin.

Raiden returned to her mouth, starting easy and then kissing deeper, stroking every inch inside before sensually sliding their tongues over and under, around, until she pushed at his chest to catch her breath.

Trembling, Liana reached up, touching his mouth, tracing it with shaky fingertips, feeling the velvet softness while she held his gaze.

He obviously liked it. Raiden closed his eyes while she continued to trace his face with her fingers, touching his brow, down the center of his nose and across his cheekbones. She was touching his lips once more when his lashes lifted.

He went back to kissing her, strings of long kisses that went on and on until she was dizzy. She did not know people could kiss so long, nor in so many ways. But the biggest surprise were the feelings, the incredible way it made her skin sensitive, and with each stroke of his tongue the shower of hunger spread, the cravings grew sharper.

He wasn't exactly breathing steady as he broke the last long string of kisses. He lay down beside her for a moment, obviously gathering himself.

Liana thought her heart matched the pound of the waves. Her head was feather light.

Raiden raised himself after a while and rolled toward her, laying on his side and reaching to undo the braid he had worked on not long before. He worked the braid out and then let several strands slide through his fingers while he gazed at her.

"Your kisses stir a fire in me, Liana... As new and as fresh, as sweet nectar from the most wondrous blossom." He kissed across her collarbone and shoulders then kissed her breasts that were covered by the thin camisole.

She sighed, her hand on his head, her eyes looking at the sky, her senses alive to his touch, his warm breath.

Raiden raised his head and stood scooping her up and carrying her up the beach. Arms around his neck, head resting on his shoulder, she didn't care where they went at the moment.

Where they went was to the tent for him to collect a few items, which he put in a pouch. With a blanket under his arm, he took her to the lagoon.

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“Swim if you wish, I’ll be right back.”

She swam, coming up to see he’d laid the blanket out and fetched one of the bottles of wine. He had other items she couldn’t see and went off into the forest. The anticipation along with the soothing water, the scented breeze and sun made her body hum, and her thoughts suspend in that ultra sensitive way, so that even the lapping water was sensual.

He joined her in the water after placing things on the ground beside the blanket. Swimming under, coming up to kiss her, and then to lead her out.

Her nudity hardly seemed to matter as he laid her down, leaning over her so that droplets ran from his hair and blending a kiss of their wet mouths before he reached for the coconut shells.

“Oh!” Her stomach contracted as he dipped his hands in the paste he’d made and began spreading it on her. He sat on his knees, hands starting at her nape, spreading with his palms a substance that smelled wonderful and seemed to open her pores.

Liana held his watchful gaze, arching as he spread it down her breasts, lingering to rub and soothe around them. His palms worked down her stomach and hips, before he moved and began to do each leg.

She raised onto her elbows only flushing at seeing her dark red curls so obviously exposed. He was soothing the mixture up her leg, and it left a sheen behind on her skin. When his fingers got close to the apex, she sucked in her breath, holding it, then closing her eyes as he rubbed the curls and slid between.

She moaned.

Raiden husked, “Turn over, sweet.”

She lay down and did so. His long strokes began again, and Liana felt with each one her body was becoming more and more sensitive. Each breath she took held the ambience of blooms and sun and fruit, each slide of his palm left behind a sleek fire that seemed to touch every nerve. He didn’t miss a spot, a mound or curve or hollow.

He was rubbing her taut buttocks when she raised and looked over her shoulder.

His face was tense, eyes shimmering. “It’s a lovely sight, sweet.”

She swallowed. His dark hand on her lighter buttocks was a stirring sight.

“This...feels wonderful.”

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He smiled. "For me, also." His thumbs dipped inward, and when she jumped a bit he slid more of his fingers between her legs and murmured, "Lie down and relax."

She bit her lip. "I don't think I can...I'm tingling all over. My body feels...strange."

He let out a heavy breath, a half laugh that was strained. "It's supposed to. If you'll just feel...just trust me...I'll show you how much more pleasure you can have."

He leaned up over her and kissed her, loose and erotic, sipping at her lips and lightly touching their tongues. When he pulled back her lids were heavy and she said almost sluggishly, "I've never had anyone touch me..."

"I know, sweet." He lay down then on his side and rolled her over, while he gave her more kisses and smoothed his palms over her again, spreading the substance. She was on her back, looking up at him as he massaged her breasts and used his fingertips to tease the nipples to the point where she was trembling.

Raiden smoothed that palm oil down her ribs, her belly, until his hand rested on her curls. He said against her mouth, "spread your legs wider."

"I—I..." she closed her eyes feeling his sleek fingers sliding lower, across swollen nerves that stole her breath and then to the moist heat of her. He rubbed and stroked, her eyes flew wide.

He seemed to be waiting, and told her softly, "Breath...feel.... Take your pleasure, Liana..." he kept his motions slow as her limbs parted for him. When they did he smiled at her tense face and shimmering eyes, whispering words that were soft and deep and sensual.

She was sinking, falling into the wonderful mist while the sound of his voice whispered through her mind and the breeze wafted across her sun-dappled skin. Liana began to move to his touch. Her arms lifted and she pulled him down for a kiss, hot and slow, thick with hunger. He slid his tongue deep just when his touch slid inside. Raiden swallowed her moan while her muscles contracted and she trembled.

Liana fell back, hungry and feverish now, burning hot for something that built from that intimate touch. She was breathing harder, lips parting and her head rolling restless from side to side.

Raiden whispered in her ear, "Take your pleasure..." and slid that touch back out to increase the friction and sweetly chafe the slackened spot.

Her hands gathered in the blanket and Liana opened her eyes looking at him through the mist as the pressure exploded like a bursting sun, and then radiated out in wave after wave of the most incredible bliss...

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She lost time and thought until she realized he was there, stroking her hair back from her face and watching her expression.

“What was that?”

He leaned down, whispered in her ear.

She stared at him, wetting her lips. “I liked that.”

“I know.” He smiled and sighed heavy. “As did I.” He lay on his back and rolled her atop him, sliding her slickened body sensually against his own.

She felt his thick shaft, hard and hot. “I don’t know if I’m going to enjoy this part.”

“There is no part, Liana, only feeling.” He sat up, positioning her to face him astride.

She looked down at his manhood, straining, throbbing, so vivid.

Raiden tilted her chin so she was once more meeting his gaze. “Just feel...” He began to slide her hips, back and fourth so that his hardness slid in her heat.

It felt wonderful Liana thought, as much as her glistening inner thighs and buttocks felt sliding against his skin. “I can do this myself.”

He let go of her hips, his eyes light. “Don’t take me inside... just as I showed you. We’ll both enjoy it.”

She did, she enjoyed riding him that way as much as she enjoyed watching his face and feeling his body tremble. His dark muscles strained and stood out, veins swelled. He made sounds in his throat, male sounds that matched the look in his eyes.

When she felt him arch in counterpoint, she gasped and their hands reached, met for that moment when he released a guttural groan, pumping his seed hotly out at the same second she felt herself soaring, feeling that brilliant lightness fill her again.

~

They swam afterwards. Liana had never played but there was something playful in Raiden as he touched her in the water. He pulled her back against him and floated, and swam under the water, skimming her body sensually, giving her kisses each time. He rolled them in the water, making her laugh for the first time in years and surprising them both.

Raiden cupped her face moments later, his smile brilliant. “You laughed...”

She was smiling too. “I thought you were going to drown us.”

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He kissed her hard, and then picked her up and threw her over into the water.

For the next hour her laughter echoed against the cliffs and their play was more like children romping, splashing and chasing each other.

When they were catching their breath, smoothing back their hair, he said, "Let's head back before the sun sets."

They got out together and pulled on their clothing. She helped him gather the things and carry them. They held hands.

They cooked together and tried a few experiments with the fruit and spices. Looking across the fire, smiling at the taste, which was quite good. She cleaned up and stood at the edge of the clearing, watching the moon rise on the water and the foamy waves crashing.

Raiden came up behind her, reaching around to undo the camisole, leaving the ends open while he massaged her breasts. Liana leaned back against him, enjoying her view through lowered lids while she enjoyed more the feel of his hands on her skin. When he began kissing the side of her neck, she turned to him, her arms sliding up, her mouth reaching and hungry.

"Liana." He murmured, lifting her up so that their mouths met and the kiss began full bloomed and seeking. In the night breeze their breaths labored while tongues stroked and desire burned hotter and higher. He pulled her up, completely in his arms and carried her back to the tent.

The flaps were open and a sultry current wafted through them, filling the structure with exotic aromas. Liana was touching his shoulders, kissing his neck and chin, nibbling and suckling as he lowered her to the hammock.

"Wait there." He spread blankets on the floor, just in the spill of moonlight, then collected her and lowered her upon them, coming down to lie facing her. He began the kisses again, drugging and long. His hand caressed her arm, her hip, and breasts.

He rolled her to her back, his lips and tongue now starting as his hands had at the lagoon, caressing, kissing, and moving over her inch by inch. Her soft cries filled the intimate space, body arching, hands reaching to touch him, while he turned her skin into hungry fires and stirred her passions to another new height. He parted her limbs and slid up, kissing her there too, where she ached again, bringing a sob from her throat, whispers of mindless wonder from her lips.

She was nearly blinded by feverish pleasure. Liana pushed upon her elbows shuddering with erotic heat at the sight of him, at what he was doing with his mouth.

Raiden lifted his head, lips glistening. He ran his tongue slowly over them and winked.

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Barely in a whisper she said, "I feel out of my head...my body...like a fever..."

"Do you like this, Liana...do you want it?"

She swallowed. "Yes."

He slid up her and then kissed her, before he rolled to his back. He brought her over him.

"My... God..." she choked when he slid down until her thighs were beside his head.

He was holding her hips, he husked, "Take it..."

She did. She moved to the stroke of his tongue, pressed into his mouth when he suckled, and when he squeezed her buttocks and moaned in pleasure, she shivered and arched her neck letting the sparks race up her spine, build and expand and gloriously explode.

~

She was awake lying on the pallet, Raiden behind her. Liana's mind was filled with images and scents, with sounds that were sexual and wondrous. She thought back to her marriage and mentally shook her head. There was nothing wonderful about it, only a sense of invasion and humiliation.

She sighed and pictured Raiden, eyes glittering and expression of complete satisfaction. He touched like a man who wanted to, kissed her as one who hungered for it, and pleased her as if nothing else mattered. She had no idea that wanting her meant any of that.

He slept now, with his arm around her, his hand near her breast. Liana felt a confusion between her mind and body, a natural inclination to resist the man who'd used such underhanded means to gain her...who had the arrogance to think she'd be pleased by it. And then, there was her desire for him, that awakening of her sexuality, late to be sure, but very intense and at moments today overriding anything else, tearing down any resistance.

*She could have him if she wanted.* That was a clear assumption. She could do as she wished to him and he had said, before he slept, that he hungered to show her more. But was it all a part of their circumstances, that made them seem like the only two people in the world at the moments. And the trauma of nearly dying in that ship, of surviving together. What of this was real and what was simply need because she'd missed nurturing and love and touches in her life?

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Liana drifted off with no sure answers. This time her dreams were in the bright sun suspended in a turquoise sky...of floating on clouds over the sea.

~

The next day, true to his request of just one day—Raiden acted as if nothing different had occurred.

In the next week she had her menses and he was considerate, giving her privacy, occupying himself with hunting and exploring the island.

Liana kept the tent as she would have a house and cooked the meals and gathered herbs and flowers. When her menses made her moody, she took a book from one of the chests, and reclined in the shade, reading and later walked along the shore, collecting shells that she was stringing for a necklace.

After her menses, she started to feel the gulf, and even missed the lack of normal tension when she'd argued with him or voiced her opinion. She sat one evening on the rocks, just out to sea, having bathed and swam earlier and put on a man's shirt she'd hacked the sleeves from, and one of the white petticoats. The salted breeze whipped her hair and streaks of lavender and gold and pink fanned out from the sun. Knees bent slightly, palms down on the rocks, she let the roar of the ocean and the bird cry fill her ears, while her mind drifted from day to hour, replaying vignettes and scenes, of herself and Raiden.

She'd never really relaxed in her life, never really known what normalcy was. There'd been a natural survival in cities and towns, the need for food, shelter, clothing, and the means to earn money. There'd also been the constant, tense waiting for her father to come home with bad news...always bad news. So she'd learned to adapt, do what she must, pick up and move again.

Was she adapting simply? Making what she could of the situation as she had in the past. When it was over, if they were ever rescued, would she block it out and get on with the next thing — or would she accept what Raiden claimed, that she was his legal wife? And then, if she made that choice... there would be the fitting in, the filling a role and expectation.

Sighing, she reached up to brush her hair from her face, turning her head and spying him, walking up the shoreline. He wore trousers he'd hacked off, some buff hued material that made him look nude.

She laughed, more like a grunt, and thought of how natural that state was to him. He covered himself less and less, and took his sweet time after getting out of the pool, sometimes sitting there in the sun until he dried.

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She knew when he spied her. He paused and shaded his eyes, his curls now longer and ruffling against his neck. She raised her hand. His lifted in answer.

He cut around the water and climbed up the rock to join her moments later.

“Feeling more the thing?”

“Yes.” She turned to stare at him, noting a strain around his eyes and mouth, a shadow there that made her curious. She thought perhaps his mind had been occupied too these two weeks. “Find anything interesting out there?”

“A few things.” He let his gaze skim her face then looked out to sea. Then, in a flat voice that was telling, he said, “He killed her in the dungeons, and then hung himself, in the south tower.”

She felt her heart stop. “Your father?”

“Yes.” His eyes squinted against the lowering sun. “When he was away from England, we weren’t allowed to leave de Louve castle, or even have visitors. There was only one servant there.”

“That must have been horrid.”

“It was...stark.” He shrugged. “Mother talked about the islands and tried to make it as normal as possible. She let me slip out to the grounds.” He took a deep breath and released it. “I was seventeen when I realized that our world wasn’t normal... That he was...mad ... He taught me himself, you know, when he was home. He brought me books, clothing, but he was obsessed with my mother.”

“Obsessed?”

“He didn’t want anyone to see her or talk to her. He controlled the very air she breathed. He wanted her sexually...but he wanted her in every way.” He glanced at her. “In ways that hurt her and degraded her, and he insisted that she say each time...he owned her.”

“My God.” Liana felt sick.

“I hated him. My mother never said anything and tried to endure, because in the Islands she was a slave. But I raged and I vowed to get her away. Father let me do my exams and when I entered the university, I planned... night and day I planned and saved money, made it too, anyway I could. I came home and showed it to her, hid it for us—and finally she agreed.”

“That’s why?”



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“Yes. We had enough and I’d planned on getting us to France. I had left her only long enough to hire the boat and store our belongings... I returned too late.”

Liana reached out and touched his arm. “I’m sorry. I’m... There’s nothing that expresses how sorry I am.”

“Thank you.” He glanced at her. “So—then I fled and went to the Islands and joined any man or crew, in search of their fortune. I joined a few wars too and fought, I think for the sheer need to burn that hate out of me. But I was bitter, angry, reckless, and I hated all Englishmen. When my fortune grew I finally went back to de Louve and dragged his coffin to the edge of the cliffs and dumped it in the sea. I took everything that he’d touched or bought and burned it. I built a crypt for my mother...and I had the masters decorate it in ivory and gold, and sealed off the dungeons. The people who work there now, only see the beautiful gardens and the crypt in the center...they say she walks there, and sits in moonlight smiling.”

Liana felt her eyes sting. “I know she does. She has peace and a lovely place where she knows she’s free...where you love her.”

He nodded and sighed again and seemed to shake off the dark mood. “I have a big house on the Island but I own no slaves.”

“Of course not.”

He smiled. “I don’t hate Englishmen anymore.”

“I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry.”

“It seems in the distant past. When you burn as long as I did with that much emotion, you fill every second of your life with something that challenges you to prove you’re not like them...that the world or anything else can’t control you.”

“Ah, that’s where the arrogance comes from.” She grinned.

“I know what I’m capable of...and what I’m not.” He lay back, folding his hands behind his head. “I know who I am and who I am not. I take his name and title because it gives me access when I need it. When someone recalls the old tales, I never deny them. I have been around the world too many times to count...and I am the only de Louve most remember and respect.”

Liana stared at him, now able to understand more about him. She supposed he expected adversity and refusal and rebuffs, and he had learned to deal with it in his own way. Considering what he had witnessed for so many years, she was surprised he had accomplished anything. But then, as he said, he knew who he was, and yes, it was written on him, he wore it like a mantle of pride that could be misconstrued for arrogance.

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His head rolled so that his gaze could skim her features read them. He said, "I was employed in a pleasure house for two years."

Her face turned red. "What..."

His grin was much easier. "I didn't live there, but two days a week I went."

"Why?" Her gaze slid down him and back up. She bet he was in great demand.

"It was a place for females, for women to come to. I wanted to learn the secret of pleasing them."

"I see."

"I didn't participate all the time. I have no taste for...some things."

She thought he was speaking of those things his mother had suffered. "That's understandable. But... I'm not sure I understand why you had to go that far."

"I had other instructors. In India, even in France." He shrugged. "All men are not the same, just as all females are not. I do not know why so many men are content to treat their brides the way they do, or why they reserve such things for a mistress. There are very few I've met who think a woman's pleasure is of any importance."

Thinking of the things he'd done to her, Liana's face flushed a little darker.

"Considering your father's — depravity, I'm surprised you have no aversion to the act itself."

"No. His was about control. His madness and sickness. It had nothing to do with sensuality or pleasure as was intended. I knew that. I liked women, their shape, their scent, their voices. I discovered while at the university that there were texts and drawings passed around. I viewed them. They were most always centered on male pleasure. I wanted to be a connoisseur. The way I look at mastery, is to be skilled and knowledgeable...but to also love what you do."

"No wonder I've never heard anyone talk as you do... Nor as frank." She was processing the shock of what he was admitting to. Only him...she thought, only this man would admit to that.

He sat up, hooking his arms around his knees. "In some cultures eroticism is like a fine art. It is not as some crude or base exploitation or hedonistic indulgence." He reached over and tugged a strand over her hair, then let it slide through his fingers. Looking into her eyes he murmured, "Taste...like the first bite of ripe fruit that sprays across your tongue...Touch...like the caress of silk, the warm breeze...scent...like the aroma of

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tropical blooms and spices. If you enjoy those, and breathe them deep, they stir something in you... Your senses are sharper and attuned...and when you detect it, you visualize what it is."

She was certainly mesmerized by the sound of his voice, by the luster of his eyes.

He went on "When I saw you on the deck, this hair...the color of claret, and ruby in some lights, and the skin...pearl white, though no less alluring, now a warm peach. The color of your lips like rose pedals...and your eyes...yes, fine opals, but when you are feeling your pleasure...they are a dark lavender. That vivid image in my mind was stirring."

Liana was feeling stirred too. She watched his hand move to slide down her arm before he said, "Shall I tell you what I've added to that imagery?"

"I— No."

He smiled sensually. "Your other scent, the essence of your passion and taste, the—"

"That's quite all right." She looked away and moved his hand from her. Liana breathed deep and released it slowly.

He laughed softly. "I know what you have been thinking."

"No, you do not."

"Yes, sweet. But you see, I don't want to own you. I do not think you belong to me. When I wanted you for my wife, I wanted to be your mate and husband, your lover—"

"You trapped me."

"No, Liana. I merely put you within my reach. Because you wouldn't have come to me, or even spoken to me."

"That's true."

"I made no boasts that I didn't intend to prove. I may have gained you as a wife in a selfish, arrogant manner, because I wanted you. I did not do it with the intent of making you regret it."

She tucked her blowing hair behind her ears. "You play at this." She glanced at him. "To get the result you want...you play the role. Confidante with my father... a soldier...a sailor...a businessman...an aristocrat..." she searched his face. "Is that how it goes, Raiden? You know who you are, but there are too many layers for anyone to actually know you?"

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His brow raised slowly. "You adapt to situations too, Liana. I'm not playing at my life. It has been my life. I've lived the choices I made. I choose you, yes... I can be many things to you...for you. But that doesn't mean I'm amusing myself."

Liana looked away. For some reason her eyes were watering and tears burned in them. Her tone was thick with it, "I'm a woman who has survived, but that's all. I don't think the way you do, Raiden. I don't know the world in its colors and scents and sounds. I don't know how to open up and absorb that the way you do."

She shook her head. "Females have the rules, carry the guilts, and are blamed for the downfall of mankind. Out there in the world there isn't a culture that exists where we can indulge ourselves, expand our minds, experiment, or even question our role, and not be punished in some way, or branded by society. I don't mind the rules of civilization, even morality, but we aren't given the same understanding and forgiveness as men."

"I'm not going to argue with that, sweet. But what is between you and I, how we define our marriage... That's nothing to do with anyone or anything else."

She pressed her fingers to her eyes, pushing back the tears. "If we're rescued, where do we live? What do we do? What do you expect of me?" She turned her gaze to his. "That's how I think. That's what I think. Because I didn't choose it."

If I were considering it... Those are things I'd have to know. It's not a free spirited, *open to all things* approach, because I am a woman and for whatever reason, I don't want to hand my life over to someone else...blindly. Not anymore."

He was silent a moment, then, "If we were never to leave here. If no ship comes or we never find a way to leave, what then?"

She had to think about that. She didn't want to, as wonderful as the island was. Yet she had to think about it. Finally she told him honestly, "I don't know. I still have hope we will be rescued."

"And I don't have a mould for you to fit in," he said calmly. "I have houses, businesses, and I go where I need or want to. The only certainty I'm offering is that you will enjoy your marriage to me. I will take pleasure in making sure you come to that conclusion."

Liana laughed softly and sighed. "I can't take all of this seriously. I swear to you. I've never heard such promises."

He stood and glanced down at her. "I'm cooking fowl for dinner."

She stood and allowed him to help her down.

They strolled up the beach and to the tent. He indeed had plucked birds roasting, so she ate something besides fish and drank a mixture of fruit juices. When the plates

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were cleared, she found herself in thought again, watching the pit fire and thinking of the things he'd told her. She imagined him, in the pleasure house, and snuck a peek at him, where he sat by the fire making a pouch to take on his excursions.

Her gaze remained on him a long time, so that he glanced over and caught her. His hands stilled on his task. He visually searched her face while the flames flickered over the hollows and bones of his own. After a time, he set the things aside and stood, facing her.

Liana observed with some fascination and surprise as he pulled at the ties of his trousers before he skimmed off his only covering.

Raiden walked closer and stood in her full view.

She looked. She'd seen him before, but every time was arousing, and she started at his face. "What are the markings for?"

His voice was husky, "Rites of passage..."

Her gaze moved down his sinewy throat, over the bronze skin, wide shoulders, those fascinating nipples, and the sculptured male perfection that made up his frame. She hadn't wanted to stare at his sex, but the curls around it were glistening black and the flesh was fully aroused, thick, hard, and strong. A ridge of hair ran in a narrow line from his navel, and her eyes moved for a moment to the bulge of his powerful thighs, before they went back to his manhood.

"You can touch me," he spoke low and soft.

She glanced up at him, "Where?"

"Anywhere."

She stood and then looked up at him. She'd question herself later — or not — at the moment she *wanted* to touch him.

Raiden looked around, then took her by the waist and set her up on a stool he'd made.

Liana touched his throat, tracing veins and sinew. She spread her hands out over each shoulder, down his warm, strong arms, to his wrist. She skimmed back up, running her palms over his chest, rubbing those nipples, hearing his deep sound, and then going over his ribs. She nudged him back and jumped down, finishing her mapping, enjoying the experience, liking the texture of his skin, and feeling the desire in her stir to new heights at her boldness. Her heart was pounding hard, her hands tingling from contact.

She turned him around, reaching up to caress his nape, across his shoulders, down his taut back. She let her palms slide slow over his hips and buttocks to the top of his upper

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thighs, where she rubbed down the sides, then came inward, touching those buttocks again.

He was breathing strident, she could tell, and wasn't too surprised when he turned around and held her gaze, taking her hand and wrapping her fingers around his sex. It pulsed, was sleek, hot. Liana beheld his face, seeing the glow in his hooded eyes, the tension in the skin across his cheekbones.

His legs started to tremble, yet he didn't hide it. She had a feeling he knew that her watching his carnal pleasure was sending fire through her own blood.

He however stopped her long enough to find something to lean against. The tree he sat under most evenings did the trick.

Raiden placed her hand on him and said roughly, "I'm not reluctant to accept something I desire."

"I knew that." She smiled unsteady, her breathing shallow. Oh Christ. She knew that. She could see her touch was taking him through the same sensual journey his had when he'd touched her.

"How shall I pleasure you?"

His eyes closed a moment and a tremor went through him. When he opened them they were almost metallic in sheen. He began to move her hand in the rhythm. When she did well on her own, he removed his hand, reached up to grasp the trunk over his head, his body stretched and taut. His chin tilted up, his lashes fluttered gently, slowly, down.

Liana was trembling too while she felt the tension building in him. She saw his lips part softly, heard the breathing pushing out more and more turbulent. After a few moments his chin dropped, his eyes opened and he pulled her closer, so that she just had enough room to touch him. The moment she felt him swelling and the trembling in his legs increased, he slid his hands under the shirt and cupped her breasts, firm, almost tight, and released with a spasm so strong his head went back, he gulped a breath and murmured her name.

She stepped back. Witnessing him sitting on his haunches a moment, rubbing his face with his hands. She moved to the water container and pulled off her shirt, then scooped the pulp out of the coconut shell to wash up. She glanced over when he came up beside her, having taken one of the cloths from the bushes that they used to wash with. She stepped back, giving him his privacy and went into the tent to change.

He came through, obviously having washed his face too and dunked his head. He plucked a pair of the loose trousers off the pile that was his and pulled them on.

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Liana was standing there, holding the chemise she'd chosen. He walked over and took it out of her hands, lifting her, carrying her to her hammock.

"You enjoyed that?"

"Yes," she admitted.

He smiled. "I don't suppose I have to confirm how much I did?"

"No." She felt his hands on her legs and glanced down as he parted them, so that they dangled over the sides. He slid his hands up, touching her curls, ruffling through them with his fingers, dipping down lower and lower.

"You did enjoy it," he murmured.

She knew he'd discovered her moist with arousal.

He rubbed between those curls finding that supple skin and erotically abrading it enough to bring a moan from her, then he slid his finger deep in her warmth and held it there a moment. "That feels good."

"Yes." She kept her eyes on his. He began to slide it out, back in, over and over, very slow. She muttered and arched, then gasped as he leaned over and took her nipple into his mouth. His touch went on and on, his mouth switching breasts, nipping lightly, suckling hard, and laving.

Liana felt the tension gather and it erupted before she had time to think, her hips reached for it. She held his head, keeping his mouth on her breast. Her choppy breathing ended on a groan as she shuddered through the ripples and waves of her climax.

Her lids lifted only a bit, enough to see him when he gathered her up. He held her for several moments then set her on her feet. "The moon is shadowed, we're likely in for a storm."

"We need to bring everything in, then?" She slipped the chemise on, her legs wobbly.

"Yes." He kissed her temple. "I'd rather continue but we need a plan."

They gathered everything and put out the fire. Then weaved the palm leaves through the braces as he'd planned. Everything was secured and though the trees would buffer them, there was still danger.

He said, "If it turns out to be a bad one, we need to head for the cliffs. There's a cave that should be safe."

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"I'll gather up some supplies."

He smiled. "Smart woman. Now, trousers and shoes for you too. It might be colder than you think."

She went to her stack and pulled on a boy's shirt and rolled up the sleeves, then a pair of riding breeches she'd found that fit. The slippers had to do as shoes.

She tied her hair tightly back and began gathering an emergency bundle.

"You're not afraid, sweet?"

"No. Anxious though." She glanced to where he stood watching the sky. "I want to think it's going to be a normal storm, but with my luck, it won't be."

He had pulled a shirt and some trousers on, boots from one of the trunks. He'd oiled the leather back into shape and salvaged them. "Let's hope it doesn't take our shelter. I think the stakes will hold it down."

"Can't we just go to the cave and wait it out?"

He turned, searching her face. "Yes, if you want."

She wet her lips. "I'm not afraid...I just... I..."

"Let's go." He took the bundle and her hand, and they headed out into the night.

They were still away from the cave when the wind picked up. The rain came slamming at them. Raiden was in a jogging run. She kept up, jumping over vines and stones.

"Bloody hell." She looked up at the cave. "Can we get up there, Raiden?"

"Yes. There's a low side we go up and climb down to the cave." He pulled her along with him, their clothing and hair now blown wildly and soaked.

Liana panted. They climbed the steep rocks, her feet slipping a number of times. It was hard to see, even shielding her eyes from the rain, but the hard part was getting down to it without falling.

Raiden went down first, and stored the bundle. He came back up, taking her hand and shouting over the wind, "Feel for the crevices, I've got you."

She was slower getting down than him, but made the last bit by him catching her.

The cave was somewhat back into the cliffs. She watched the storm while Raiden lit the oil lamp and looked around.



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"It looks like the ocean is spinning." She told him.

He joined her, looking out and saying, "Damn! We might lose everything if that is a twister."

"We could go back and collect more."

He shook his head. "It's coming in too fast."

It was, and it screamed toward the cave with force that blew them both back.

Lying on the cave floor, they shielded their heads and then Raiden grabbed her hand and the bundle.

"Get the lamp..." he told her. "We're going further back."

She got it and they ran back, far enough so that the rain couldn't reach them. It was a narrow space and they sat against opposite sides, looking at each other while the horrendous sounds reminded them both of the storm aboard ship. How long they sat there listening Liana didn't know, but Raiden put out the lamp to save the oil and pulled her over so that he could put his arm around her.

Liana lay against his shoulder, wide-eyed for endless moments, trying not to feel like disaster followed her through life.

"You're trembling," he said against her ear.

"The wind..."

He moved her for a moment and spread the blanket, then they were in the tight space, facing, his arms around her, her legs though his.

Against his throat she said, "If something like this happened whilst we slept, we'd die."

"Don't think that way. These storms are natural. If we pay attention, we'll survive them."

She rolled slightly to her back and reached up to touch his face. "The wind is screaming...it's maddening."

"Sweet." He covered her hand and shifted so that he leaned over her. "It's natural to be afraid, considering. But we're safe here."

She pulled his head down. "Kiss me..."

He did, and though he meant it to be soft, she suddenly wanted it deep and passionate.

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The hyper breathing grew loud between them. Liana 's anxiety made her suddenly desperate for him, for his kiss and touch. For that human contact. Like those moments on the ship. She didn't want to be feeling it alone.

He raised and settled between her legs, she wrapped them around his.

Even with clothing on they burned against each other, and her hands tugged, moved and sought, sliding under his shirt, holding his sides.

"Liana," he growled kissing her ear, her nape.

"I can't feel enough of you..." she whispered against his cheek.

He got to his knees and took off his shirt, then was leaning back down, when her hand stayed him.

Liana knew what she wanted. She began undressing, pulling off her own clothing.

"Are you sure?" He reached out touching her thigh.

"Yes... Yes..." she sat up and reached to help him take off the trousers.

Then he lowered himself and they were skin to skin, body to body. And sex to sex. His kisses were deeper. Liana's was wilder. She rubbed her inner thighs restlessly against his hips. "Now...please...now, Raiden..."

He flexed his hips, giving her inches, groaning and telling her, "Stop me if it hurts..."

"More." She arched up, shifting her legs higher.

He sank then, deep and fast.

She took a moment to adjust.

"Are you all right, Liana?" He stroked her hair.

"Yes," her voice was tight. "It's...different. Better... I just forgot... to breathe."

He chuckled and then groaned when her muscles flexed. "How rapid do you want this?"

"I don't know exactly."

He began to move, slow and measured, apparently waiting to judge her response. When she shifted her legs restlessly again, he seemed to read the subtle signs and sped his movements.

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Liana lost control, overwhelmed by the feel of him, the wonderful sensation of him stroking her inside, of her body wanting it, needing it. She was helpless to the groans and sighs, and gave up thinking of anything, but taking more, urging him on.

He rocked into her body, thrusting steady with long exquisite strokes, then delayed and slid down to kiss her. Grunting with delight when she devoured his mouth. Her teeth biting at his lips, her tongue running across them, she tried to drink every sip of his taste.

Neither had control after that, it was simply long held need and desire, a craving for each other that became instinctive, primal, basic, and that sent him over the edge with a swiftness that had him muttering curses.

Liana choked, "It was wonderful."

He eased off her and lay on his back. "It wasn't enough." He reached blindly out, took her hand and kissed it. "Let me recover and give it another go."

She sat up and sighed, her legs still trembly. "I'd like that." Bloody hell, wouldn't she just, she thought, still trying to get her body to calm down.

He groaned and sat up too. "That's not an argument."

"No."

He touched her face.

"What?"

"I'm checking to see if you're Liana..."

She slapped his hand away. "Very funny."

"Damn. I wish it wasn't dark. I'm tempted to light the lamp next time."

"Don't waste it." She cleaned up and dressed, walking a bit toward the entrance but feeling the wind and rain, the pressure keep her back.

He came up behind her. "It could last all night." His chin rested on her head. He kissed her ear. "I could too."

She covered his arm that had slipped around her waist. "I'm not going to say no. I don't want to *not* know what it feels like to enjoy it. Now that I do I want you."

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“Keep saying that. I like the sound of it.” He pulled her back and they lay down, holding each other again. “Scream it next time.”

She laughed and bit his neck.

“All right, I’ll scream it,”

“Raiden...” She rubbed his back and felt him rubbing over her backside. “I liked it.”

His tone was more serious. “I’m glad, sweet. I just regret we aren’t in the bright of day so that I can see your face.”

She yawned.

He laughed, saying wryly. “Nap. I’ve a feeling this isn’t going to be my most impressive night anyway.”

“Why.”

He hugged her tight. “It feels too good. I want you too much. “

Liana smiled against his throat and drifted into sleep. He had made it wonderful, no matter what he thought.

~

It was dawn when she awoke and slipped out of his arms. Liana walked toward the entrance, through a puddle of water and felt only a spray of rain hit her face. She couldn’t judge much from the restless sea, but the worst seemed to have passed. The air though was cool, and she slid down against the face of the opening and leaned her head back, watching the sun come up.

It was beautiful, picturesque, more like a brilliant rainbow of yellow and gold. Clouds shifted, and moved past, leaving behind a dazzling azure sky.

The sound of crumbling stone had her rolling her head to watch Radian emerge. He stopped in the puddle to dab his hands and then run his fingers through his hair. Seating himself opposite he met her gaze at full sunrise.

“We fell asleep.”

She smiled lazily. “Yes.”

“I didn’t dream it, did I? I was inside you...”

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“No. You didn’t dream it.” She rolled her head and gazed out. “I was sitting here, thinking about it. About how different it was to really want someone. How right it feels and well...more natural.” She shrugged. “It should have felt that way the first time, shouldn’t it?”

“Yes. The way it was meant to be.”

“It was meant to be, last night, with you.” She met his gaze.

“I’m not that delighted with myself.” He grunted.

She squinted and shaded her eyes. “Then let’s let it have been something special for me.”

He leaned over and kissed her. “All right. But I reserve the right to redeem that plan to spend the night like that.”

She nodded and stood. “Do you think it’s safe to head back?”

“Yes. We’ll have to watch for debris.” He left her to gather the supplies. They headed back moments later.

~

“It’s a ship.” Raiden stood atop the rock beside her. They had just started their descent. “Christ! It must have blown off course. It’s a bloody ship!”

Liana grabbed his arm. “Let’s hurry. “ She slipped and slid trying to hasten down, her heart thundering as they finally descended, breathless and excited.

They ran fast through the humid and wet forest, hardly noticing the damage to the tent, scrambling past it to reach the beach.

Breathing with difficulty, Liana let lose an oomph sound, when they’d hit the sand and Radian’s arm flew out to stop her.

“Wait...” He sounded out of breath too and turned to look at her.

“What is it?”

He took a few steps forward. Liana could see it then — the body lying on the sand...

“Raiden.”

“Let me check, Liana. We want to be certain they died naturally and not from some fever.”

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“Oh—“ She fell to her knees in the sand, steadying her breathing while she watched him. When he called back there were two more, she eyed the big ship, leaning slightly aside, sails tattered and one of the masts broken. Observing Raiden again she winced when he turned the man over, looked in his mouth, and pulled up his lids. Liana shuddered knowing it was a necessity but glad she did not have to do it.

He was at the other side of the bow, when he yelled, “Liana!”

She stood so fast she stumbled, but ran through the wet sand, skirting around the body and skidding to a halt at the front of the vessel.

Raiden was on his knees by a bearded man, dressed in rough wool garb. He glanced at her. Then he smiled. “He’s alive...and... I recognize the face.”

“Who?”

“George...your father.”

She dashed over, falling to the other side and staring. Sunburned, much leaner and dressed in too-baggy clothing. With a full beard and missing more hair. It was George Bellingham.

“Do you see any injuries?”

Raiden sat back and grunted. “No. But I smelled his breath. He’s passed out.”

Liana closed her eyes, shaking her head but laughing at the impossibility of it all.

“I’m going to take him to the tent. I need to go aboard, and I’ll see to any dead.” He scooped George up. “There’ll be a map, a log book, charts and likely a record of what happened. We’ll get a good idea of where we are.”

She followed behind him, noting how small her father seemed in his brawny arms. “Will you be able to sail the ship?”

“If it’s seaworthy. Yes. And George here, is going to have to assist.”

She snorted.

He muttered, “You get him well and hearty. A hard day’s work is just what he needs to keep him sober.”

She was skeptical, but also was aware he’d need her father’s help. As long as he did not recover any alcohol from the ship that her father could drown himself in.

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The tent had taken some battering. Liana watched over her father while Raiden made it more stable. When he had it secure, he carried George inside and laid him down. "Just watch him for fever. Maybe get something to feed him when he wakes." He stood and told her. "I'll be back when the bodies are seen to. With any luck, they'll be more crewmen alive. It appears to be a cargo ship, likely a merchant vessel. I need to assess the damage."

Liana nodded. "I'll build a fire and gather food."

~

It was early evening before Liana saw Raiden again. Her father was in a more natural sleep having awakened disoriented and thrown up for several moments. She'd covered him and when he'd fallen back into slumber, she gathered the items the storm had scattered and then set to fixing a fire.

Raiden had obviously swum, and fished, since he had several. He looked weary.

"No more alive?"

"No." He shook his head, sitting heavily by the cook pit. "I found the Captain and the logs...the maps."

"And?" She handed him the knife to clean his catch.

"We're not far from Jamaica."

Liana felt a thrill of excitement, then recalled the damage. "What is the good news."

He cleaned the fish. "I can work on the ship until he's recovered." He nodded toward the tent opening. "Then he'll have to assist me." He shrugged. "Getting it fitted is going to take some time."

Liana nodded and peeled the fruit. She did feel a quiet thrill though, because she knew if anyone could get that ship ready to sail, Raiden could.

"The hold is not full. But there's coffee and other things I will bring out and add to our supplies."

"I can help, Raiden."

He handed her the fish and stood to throw the mess away. "I counted on it."

~

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Liana sat with him, eating, some time later. He'd found torches and was soaking them in the fuel found aboard. He was reading the logbook as well as studying the map, having found a compass and other nautical instruments aboard. She was fascinated watching him make notes, trace the route and write all sorts of complicated calculations into his own journal.

A groan from the tent made her look over her shoulder. Her father was sitting up, holding his head.

She fixed a plate and poured pulp juices in a cup, taking it to him.

He blinked. "Liana!"

"Yes."

George rubbed his eyes. "Am I dead?"

"No. Just drunk as usual." She handed the items to him. "Here. Eat this. Do you hurt anywhere."

He felt his arms, legs, and his balding head. "No. Good God...I cannot believe you're here, alive! Where are we by the way?"

She told him about the first shipwreck.

"Yes...Yes I recall being fished out of the sea... the crew.... And there was wondrous stacks...of kegs of rum aboard..."

Liana rolled her eyes. "Listen, Father. We're going to get off this island, and you have to help us."

"Us?"

"Raiden... The man you wed me to, remember." Her tone was dry.

His eyes got bigger.

"Yes. Aren't you listening to me? I told you, we survived together. " She was staring down at him. "Please...for once in your life, listen to what I am saying. Raiden can get us off this island... We can sail to his home *if* we all work together."

He made a face. "I'm weak and sick, daughter...I—"

"Then I will feed and nurse you until you are well and strong," she snapped. "Eat. I'll cook for you and I'll help you gain strength, but you're going to have a new reality,



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Papa. One with no spirits and no gambling. You'll work like we do, and you'll take orders from Raiden."

"I will not! Where is your compassion? I was near dead wh—"

"You were passed out drunk and don't recall a thing." She headed for the flap. "I'll give you time to rest. Then you help or you starve."

He was grumbling when she stepped out.

~

Her eyes went to Raiden. "You heard?"

"Yes." He smiled slightly. "I'll enjoy this."

She laughed sitting down heavily. "He's never done a hand's turn in his life."

"He will if he wants to eat, and if he wants to sail home."

"He can be stubborn."

"This might be the making of ole George." He stood and smiled. "I'll turn a deaf ear to his whining if you will."

Liana smiled back. "Okay. But he can be bloody annoying. He can smell a drink at a hundred paces."

"I'll lock the hold after I get what we need."

She gazed at him. "Where are we sleeping?"

"Our beds look sound enough." His gaze met hers, a husky pitch to his voice.

"There are places we can be alone."

"Yes." She wet her lips.

Raiden glanced at the shadows in the tent. He sighed. "You'd best get some rest. In the morning, we'll hang everything out to dry and take stock again." He leaned over and kissed her temple. "I'm going back to the ship, I'll return before too late."

Raiden took one of the torches and lit it by the fire. Liana watched him walk toward the path. *They had a ship... He could sail it... Was she going to be his wife? Did the night in the cave answer that for her... She enjoyed being his lover, that at least had been settled finally. There was no use lying about it now.*

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“Is there any more fish, Liana? I’m near to starved with just this measly offering.”

She sighed, muttered and called out, “No. But I’ll bring you more juice.” She poured it, wondering how many weeks it would take to get the vessel repaired. She was glad her father hadn’t died, but she did not miss this part of their relationship. She had learned in his absence that she needed her own life and that being manipulated by him and doing things simply to shut his whining and complaining up, was a mistake. Because he was weak, she would tolerate it, but only for a few more days.

~

The following days were filled with work, and they were trying Liana’s patience. She knew her father was much better. He ate plenty and he slept normally—but he found excuse after excuse to avoid helping.

Finally, one morning Raiden hauled him up, shouting loudly, “Come George. I’m washing the stink of rum off you, and then putting your lazy arse to work.”

Liana, just getting out of her bed, watched her father try to pry that hold off his grubby shirt, but Raiden had him well by the scruff and was dragging him along.

She laughed and shook her head, imagining Raiden was going to scrub him down too if he didn’t do so himself. Her father’s drinking made him lax in his bathing habits, and she could hear his grumbling bellows and protests fading into the forest.

She did not see him until late that evening, obviously exhausted and obviously having been put to work, for he ate four plates of food. She shared an amused smile with Raiden, because if he so much as cleared his throat, George Bellingham jumped a foot.

After that, Liana worked sitting on the beach, watching and often hearing them aboard the vessel, apparently fixing the masts. Raiden’s voice boomed as he called George *Mate*, and she could hear the times he refused to fall for her father’s protests that he was too tired, too weak, and too old.

She was sewing the sails, patching them, and any other task Raiden gave her, leaving only to cook for them and make coffee, which they all drank since Raiden set the torches and they often labored late into the night.

Once the sails were repaired, she boarded the ship wearing white trousers and shirt, leather slippers, working along with them under the hot sun, spreading pitch, cleaning decks, nailing and hauling the heavy rope until her arms ached.

When the masts were repaired, Raiden came to find her, as George was in a makeshift hammock on deck, resting after their noon meal, something Raiden had now allowed him, since neither of them could work with as much vigor and speed as he did. He made

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allowances for George's age, and did slap him on the back or shoulder when the man worked hard. George was getting browned, shaking and chilling less as he sweated the toxins out of his body. And since Raiden insisted he bath and scrub every day.

Liana was standing at the rail, looking at the Island when he came up behind her.

"I could use a swim."

She heard that double meaning, the husky rumble in his throat, and nodded. *She wanted him too.*

They disembarked and held hands walking to the lagoon where they peacefully swam and eased their tired muscles a good hour, before Raiden came up out of the water reaching for her, kissing her with insatiable need.

Liana wrapped her arms around his neck, holding to him. He walked them to the bank, lowering her to the pile of clothing and covering her body with his.

Raiden's desire overwhelmed her. He was touching, kissing, wanting her.

She arched her neck, holding his head while he spread kisses over her jaw and then filled his hands with her breasts, suckling at her throat, laving it.

"Oh..." She groaned when his hand slid down, wedging between her thighs, finding her moist and ready.

"Liana..." He raised his head, eyes glittering and lids half-mast. "You feel wonderfully soft and sensually wet for me." He touched her deep. "It's been bloody hell in that tent at night... wanting to touch you...to—"

Her legs parted, knees bent, she arched. "Now...now..."

He withdrew his touch, and moved his hand, hooking her knees with his arms and driving deep inside with a growl of hunger.

Her tumultuous cry echoed around the cliffs, swiftly followed by moans and sighs. Raiden surged time and again, thrusting deep and pulling back, over and over, his body one graceful flow of sensual movement.

Under her hands, Radian's wet bronze body sparkled with the drops of water, his wet hair sending crystal drops out in a spray as he shook it back from his face.

*His face*, Liana thought, sinking into the fiery pleasure he gave her, was a picture of bliss, of his own gratification that amazed her. That her body made him feel half as good as his did to her — It added to the erotic heat and the excitement making her blood race, her heart pound and her head swim.

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Raiden made up for the short duration of their first time in the cave, Liana thought.

Catching her breath, while he stopped after several moments and changed their position until she was on her side. She lost track of the times those explosions went through her, but she would never forget how good his lovemaking felt. Nor when he reached his own peak, having leaned down to kiss her breasts...shuddering and moaning deep.

They bathed again, swam lazily and lay on the bank watching the birds in a perfect blue sky, hearing the balmy scented breeze waft through the palms behind them.

Liana was half-dozing, incredibly relaxed, and void of the tension and worries and constant sifting through her thoughts, when he turned to her again. This time touching her languidly, kissing her body and turning it again, so that she was on her knees when he joined their flesh again.

A feverish sort of chill ran over Liana, sexual, raw, and her senses sharpened to the point she could feel everything, from inside where he slowly stroked her, to the hands on her breasts and his breathing in her ear. She leaned her head back. "Why does this feel so good?" It sounded like a sob.

He answered roughly, "Because I love you. Everything about you, the way you feel and smell and sound, and I love this..."

She just registered that pause in her heartbeat from his words before he was thrusting faster and breathing harder.... Taking her out of her head with pleasure. They both cried out when the force of the gathering emotions raced upon them, taking them to the edge and leaving them trembling.

It was too quiet. Liana lay on the shore beside him as he dozed, replaying that confession and wondering if she'd been hearing things? If he'd actually said that.

She rolled to her stomach and looked at his face, feeling that tingle in her blood and the tightening of her stomach, looking at him awake stirred her, but looking at him so relaxed and asleep, was just as effecting. How long she lay mapping him with her eyes she did not know. But he opened them gradually, looking right at her.

She wet her lips. "Was I imaging things?"

"No."

Her heart hung again somewhere between beats. "You can't... You don't really."

"I can, Liana. I do." He sat up slowly, shoving his hair back. There was a silent, paused look on his face before he murmured, "I want to ask you something."

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She sat up. Wanting to shake her head and clear the haze out of it. “Yes?”

“Don’t say anything until we sail.... But, if you feel anything close to the same, I will wed you again. I would hear you speak the vows yourself.”

Liana released her breath shakily. “If I did, that wouldn’t matter now.” They were lovers and had been partners in many ways during this survival period.

He stared at her. “I don’t know the answers to all of those questions. Life takes us where it will, Liana. I don’t know if that ship will make it. If there will be no more storms. I don’t have certainties to give you. I can only guarantee you one thing.” He stood and began to dress.

When they were both dressed, Raiden looked at her. His voice holding that same inflection that had told her he knew what he was, and what he was not.

“I will be your refuge, from storms, from anything that makes you feel uncertain or afraid.” His voice thickened. “I will hide you from the tempest, shelter you from those things that harmed you in the past.” He stepped closer, gazing down and cupped her face. “A day, a week a year. Whatever time we have, wherever we are. I will fill you with as much love as my heart is capable of – and yours can stand.”

Crying silently, her hands over his. She looked into that handsome face, the emotions dark in his eyes.

He whispered, “I need that too Liana. As big and as strong as I am. I need a heart that understands me, the dark and the light, the past and present. A body that will welcome my passion, and take me in, when my body craves to be joined.” His thumbs stroked her skin... “You...that is what I once wanted, but now– I need... Because I know your heart, Liana. I feel it, and I feel your soul, and you can love me the way no other can...you can understand me and challenge me – and yes, fill me with fire.”

She saw his head descend in a blur of tears, felt that kiss both on her lips and in her heart. She tried to speak when he pulled back, but he wouldn’t let her. He held her only a moment before turning, and they returned back to the ship.

He made no more confessions nor sought her out except to assign a task. Liana worked absent-mindedly, able to ignore even her father’s mutterings because her mind echoed with those words, those promises.

She watched the ship take shape, witnessed their efforts pay off every day, and the sore arms, sun baking their skin, nothing really affected her, because she was so stunned, so filled with disbelief that a man like Raiden de Louve needed her?

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That he wanted her was so much simpler to understand — and comprehend — the physical she could now deal with. But love? Considering who he was, how he was, she was trying to figure out *why* and *how* and *when*... and if it was possible that he really could feel so strongly that it was love.

Liana had never known it or felt it herself. She felt strong emotions connected with Raiden de Louve, but she had enough uncertainties in her past and present, that serious emotion wasn't something she wanted either of them to be mistaken about.

~

"You've had your head in the clouds, daughter," George commented in a grumble one afternoon as they were on the sand roasting their lunch over the pit fire.

Liana could see Raiden up on the deck, longish hair now waving back in the breeze and dark musculature, only dressed in white linen trousers with billowing legs. He was at home on the ship, lithely climbing the rigging or down in the cabin pouring over maps and charts. A million times she'd seen him moving about with ease and expertise, going over his check list, testing this or that or standing at the rail with the spy glasses looking at the ocean while the balmy wind washed over him. He'd caught her looking, studying him, glancing up or over at times and simply held her gaze with his.

"He says...he loves me." She murmured, some of her disbelief coloring her tone.

George grunted. "I expect he does. A man like that doesn't get himself married to any woman, for just any reason. He could have a rich bride. Truth to tell, he could get the marriage voided."

She stared at him. "You're actually speaking rationally."

George shrugged. "Don't be pert. I'm only trying to agree with you."

She blinked. "You think he loved me then? No — I won't go that far. He didn't even know me. We didn't...we weren't man and wife until...recently."

"Which proves it. He wanted you for a real wife."

"No. It proves we were shipwrecked on an Island and stuck with each other."

George stroked his beard, which had grown long. His lips pursed as he considered the view of Raiden, which she was observing. "He's a man who takes charge and doesn't take orders. He's not a bloke to blurt out every feeling or to make friends easy I'd say. Much as I dislike his high handed manner with me, he treats you with a difference that is telling."

Liana nodded.

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“He treats you like an equal, but like a wife also.” George glanced at her. “When you’re working he don’t criticize I noted, but if you get a blister or fall over something, he’s rushing over to take care of you.” George swallowed and looked down at the sand. “Like I never did. Like I promised your mother I would...but I never did.”

“That’s simple kindness.”

“No. Liana.” He looked back at Raiden. “That’s someone who values you and who respects you.”

“But love? I don’t even know...”

“You watch him and yes, you fuss at him and it didn’t escape my notice you make him laugh. I may be slow but I’m not blind. You look at him as if he is the world, Liana. I don’t know love myself as the poets speak it. But I’ve rarely seen two people so different, so connected and so conscious of each other.”

Liana took the meat off the fire and told him. “Fetch him down to eat. I’m going for a walk along the shore. I’ll eat later.”

When they were both standing George awkwardly patted her shoulder.

It so surprised her she looked at that blistered and scraped hand feeling her heart go all soft and weak. “T—thank you for the advice, father.”

He grunted and walked off for the ship, muttering, “That’s what I’m here for.”

Liana bit her lip, tears rolling out of her eyes. She dashed them off her cheeks and headed down the beach. It was time, she mused, to make decisions for herself.

~

The steady rain was quite welcome this time, to cool the humid air and to fill their water casks. George was asleep in the tent when Liana decided to walk to the ship where Raiden had been working in the captain’s quarters.

She enjoyed the rain, standing a moment and just letting it was over her hot skin and looking up at a shadowed moon trying to rise. Pushing her hair behind her ears she let the sand stick to her feet, then washed it off in the sea before going up the gangplank.

There were lanterns lit and she smoothed the white shirttail which fell to the hems of the hacked off white trousers she wore. Sprayed with rain she headed below, seeing the arc of light coming from the open door. Liana paused in the doorway. Taking in the picture of him, lounging on the massive bed, the porthole open and the lamps high enough to read whatever he was focused on.

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He had one knee bent, his weight on his elbow and the other holding a drink which looked like some of the brandy he'd discovered below. His long curly hair was shimmering in the light and his deep bronze torso gleaming, muscles cut and defined, abdomen ridged and that line of hair drawing her eyes for a moment because the waistband of his hacked off shorts was riding low.

She leaned back against the facing, her head resting against the wood while she eyed again every line of that exotic face.

The rain-scented breeze reached her, cooling her wet clothing deliciously, but she'd started her scrutiny at his feet again and moved up over those powerful long legs, remembering touching him in places, feeling those legs between hers, feeling his arms holding her own high.

Liana ran her tongue over her lips, her breathing shallow as arousal spread through her and a realization that she'd missed him. She'd liked to have slept beside him, to have talked to him in the hush of night, to have shared sunrises and sunsets like they had before the ship came. There were things she knew, true, but many she wanted to know, and yes, there were things she realized only he could show her.

He took a sip from his drink and let the chart drop to the bed. Raising his gaze as if he'd sensed her there.

Her heart did a triple beat when those silver eyes slid over her taking in the rain damp shirt that was nearly transparent and the curves of her body, her skin now visible since it had tanned more golden brown. His gaze traveled back up after lingering on her breasts.

She pushed away from the wall and padded over, noting the crimson coverlet and rich golden silk sheets. He'd shoved the tasseled pillows into the corner but the bed was large with a scrolled headboard. Liana held his gaze and began undoing her buttons. She stripped down, hardly looking away from him, breathless from his hot eyes moving over each exposed inch, and becoming lighter, more expressive.

She stood there, nipples tightly aroused and body chilled with sensitivity, her nostrils already detecting the hint of brandy, sun-warmed skin, and that tropical aroma that always clung to him.

She waited for his gaze to meet hers, before she said, "I want you."

His hand came out, reaching for hers and he pulled her to the mattress with him. She lay half over him while his hands palmed her buttocks. Liana touched his lips with trembling fingers. "I've wanted you for days." She lowered her head and touched their lips together, slowly opening, gradually tasting until their tongues were flowing over, under and their heads moved to get and give all in the mating of mouths.



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His hands slid, cupped, stroked wherever he could, stirring her body and her blood.

Liana slid her leg across him, straddling him while she kissed his throat and chest, laving his nipples until they were hard and flushed.

He was touching her where she ached most when she gently removed his hand and leaned forward, holding his arms wide above his head. A new husk of aggression and assuredness entered her voice, "I want to be in control this time."

"It would be my pleasure." He arched so that she could feel his hardness. "Take me..."

She did. Liana slid back and down on his hard sex so smoothly and quickly he half sat, grasping her thighs and groaning.

She'd thought about it, figured the nuances, and so her instincts guided her as she undulated and arched, riding him and stroking them both with a rhythmic pace that was erotic and exquisitely pleasurable.

His head slightly back now, watching her through hooded eyes, he met her movements and held her breasts in his palms. "Liana..."

"Raiden..." she gave up control because it was simply too good, and too sensual. Liana let herself go, moving faster and closing her eyes, hearing his guttural sounds and feeling him shuddering. Her pleasure built and peaked, meeting his own when he too let go and shuddered under her.

Lying on his chest she breathed heavier waiting for the fog to clear in her brain, but managed, "This is our night, right now, right here. I want to stay until the sun rises."

"I'd like nothing better."

~

Eventually they cleaned up, but lay on the bed, exploring each other with hands and mouth, with eyes that caressed and met while the sweetest scented breeze soothed them.

Liana discovered in the next hours that making love and being loved was as near to heaven as she'd ever feel.

Raiden stroked and kissed her, he murmured and whispered things that he would do, did do, and showed her ways that skin and mouths could bring and give pleasure.

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The cabin breathed with them, it filled with cries and hungry moans and sounds of surrender, which changed to voracious sounds of need and the husky growls of aggressive desire.

When the sun was ascending in the sky, the rain gone, she was still being loved by him, looking up at his face while he moved slowly inside her, stroking her with his body. Liana had her answers. Her heart was sure when she reached up and touched his face, eyes like liquid heather from the long hours and intimacy, from the fullness of knowing how he responded to her touch, her kiss, and the pleasure he took in pleasing her.

The moment of gratification came with a quiet rush, like a rainbow of colors and light floating over her. When he joined her they held, and then slept naturally...spooned together on the big bed, their hands clasped at her waist.

~

The ship was moving.

Liana blinked her eyes open wide feeling that rise and fall, and for a minute flashing back in panic. She sat up and then scrambled off the bed, rushing into her clothing and shoving her hair out of her eyes, her bare feet pounding on the floor when she raced out and flew up the stairs.

The scent and wind was different. She ran to the stern, stopping in her tracks, when she noticed Raiden guiding the vessel.

She walked to him, letting her heart slow to normal, seeing her father sitting by the main sail.

"How long have we been out?"

Raiden glanced aside at her, the high wind whipping at his hair. "Since the tide swept us out. You're father barely made it." He grinned. "I've never seen George run so fast, nor jump so high."

She looked at the receding island. It was strange, but she felt a kind of sadness sweep over her. It occurred to her that for all the trauma of the shipwreck, she'd learned a lot about herself there and had time, to think and do for just herself. In essence, she felt as if she'd become a stronger woman. And thanks to the man beside her, she was less afraid of the worst, whatever it was, and more eager to explore life in all of its facets. She'd opened her eyes, her heart and her mind. Liana sighed and shielded her eyes. It seemed like years had passed away from civilization. But there was something of that island in her now, the vivid blues and greens, the sultry nights and the blossoms, the sweet taste of fresh fruit. She'd carry that inside her forever and she'd never forget where she fell in love, discovered it was real, and imaginable.

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“We’ll come back, sweet. In fact, I might just buy the whole bloody Island for us.”

She was looking into his eyes. Her lips began to curve into a smile. “You’re arrogantly assuming that I love you too. That we’re going to stay married.”

“I know you do.”

She bit her lip. Then moved to his side and his arm slid around her. “I do. And yes, I will.”

He laughed low and hugged her to him, then placed her hands under his, standing behind her as she guided the ship. He leaned down and murmured in her ear, “I’ll take a son first, then you can...oomph...” He grunted, because she’d elbowed him in the stomach. “Christ, sweet, that wasn’t very loving...”

“Listen de Louve...” she raised her chin. “I may be wildly in love, and I may be looking forward to being your wife for as long as we both shall live and so on and so forth. But I’m—”

“Delicious...absolutely ravishing,” he was murmuring in her ear. “And when you are big and waddling around, complaining, swelled, pregnant, I’m going to bath you and kiss you and feed you luscious fruits...and rub everywhere you ache.”

“Oh—all right,” Liana sighed, then leaned her head back to look up and wink at him. When he smiled too she added, “I’ll practice getting with child, you can rehearse the rubbing part.”

Raiden threw his head back, laughing loudly and hugging her to him.

Her laughter joined in, floating on the sea breeze.

George propped his elbow on his thigh and eyed the couple who were now kissing rather passionately, Raiden having lifted Liana off her feet. Liana, having her arms tight around his neck.

He murmured, “I did it, it took me awhile... but I finally did something right.”

The End

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**Gayle Eden and Eve Asbury are the pen names for Dian Addair, an author whose dreams of writing were put on hold in her twenties while she raised a son and daughter and worked several jobs. Romance novels kept her sane during those busy years during which she moved from the mountains of West Virginia to a suburb of Washington DC where she lived for fifteen years. Finally, she settled in East Tennessee (USA) on three acres surrounded by the North Holston river, where she now writes to her heart's content.**

**Already a grandmother at 44, she calls her life controlled chaos, but it's actually quite normal for a woman who was born 9th in line and was an aunt by the age of five. She sets aside Saturdays for family, cooking and romping with the granddaughters. The rest of the week, when not stealing an hour with her busy husband, she spends at the computer immersing herself in another good plot.**

**She's an author who believes very strongly in writing stories that speak from the heart. She tries not to limit her characters by outline, but starts with a vague idea that generally they will run away with - and sometimes give her fits by defying her attempts to keep them in check. It's not unheard of for her to sit down at the computer and realize ten hours later she's written 200 pages - prolific, yes! She's found it's better to indulge her muse than try to control it. Just like real life, the stories happen, and there's always something new and surprising that makes the experience rewarding.**

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