



# Lord Carabas

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An historical novel of erotic adventure by

**James Buchanan**

## Lord Carabas

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James Buchanan

# **Also by James Buchanan**

*Twice the Cowboy*

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# One

I was then, and am now, a creature of sin.

I covet.

I lust.

I am greedy and hateful, and take pride in these things. As a boy, I would steal food from the animals and hoard it. I would tease and tempt those reverend brothers whose tastes ran to their young charges. And I would use their affections to garner simple prizes to bribe other boys into doing my work. As I grew, I seduced the village maids and matrons, and picked their husbands' pockets. In my life there have only been two things at which I excelled: farming and finding trouble. You must agree with me that dodging the lash is far more exhilarating than breaking your back pulling a plough. It is also infinitely more rewarding.

That day, my sinful self was sitting on a crate, in an alley, off the docks of Calais, my usual station at that hour. As had often happened during my life, I was on the street, hungry and with less than a Pence in my pocket. I had never been more content. Adversity made my life interesting, the peace and routine of my boyhood years had almost driven me mad. An abbey is no place for one such as me. Now, I felt, it was time to create a little disorder and see if I might find the funds for dinner, and perhaps a bed for the night.

A likely mark passed me. A clerkish sort of man, he wore the clothes of an English sailor, good enough quality to possibly be the pilot or mate. Either would be lucrative. I slipped from my perch and began to stalk. As he wound his way through the confusion of the wharf, he paid far more attention to the small book he carried than to his surroundings. Not wise, not wise at all. Apparently his position was gained by birth rather than merit.

Most cut purses work in pairs: one to distract, one to pinch. I never found anyone I cared to work with. So, I worked the docks. The marks were more streetwise, but the commotion at the wharf—what with ships docking, goods and travelers being offloaded, whores, brothels, taverns

and fights—acted as my unpaid partner. I would normally have to look for an opportune distraction before I moved, but his book would divert his attention sufficiently without any effort on my part.

My fingers itched and unconsciously I massaged their tips with my thumb as I fell into the rhythm of his steps. We wound our way through the swarms of men. He bumped into several along his route and scarcely noticed...a good sign. I was wary for a change in his steps indicating that he realized I followed or that he was nearing his destination. I had to chance both until I was ready to strike.

He stopped.

I paused, took two breaths, and moved in.

He looked up.

I stopped and glanced to see what caught his attention, whether it would help or hinder my work.

Lesser poets would describe her as a vision, a creature from a dream. But no vision, no dream, could be that painfully beautiful. If Helen of Troy could send men to war with a word, this woman could have called those ships back with a sigh. Her hair was a deep, rich sable, and she wore it as a maiden might, straight down to her waist, but with a small feathering of hair cut short to brush her lightly freckled cheeks. That, with her small widow's peak, exaggerated the heart shape of her face. She seemed made of porcelain, so fine and flawless was her skin.

I had once seen a face like that. It *had* been made of porcelain. A very rare and valuable treasure brought back from the crusades by an errant knight. It had come by way of the silk-road to Judea, and from there to his family estates, and thence as tithe to the Abbaye.

She wore a satin sea-green gown reaching to her feet, boned lightly and slashed with a revealing bodice. It was most becoming to her, or, perhaps, she to it. Over her frock, she wore a full cloak of heavier material to ward off the chill of early spring. At her throat, the material was clasped by a brooch of bronze in the style of a small cat *sejant*, guardant and erect, and it pooled to form a small cape about her shoulders.

Standing alone, adrift in a small sea of baggage, I could tell from how she held her body that she was looking for someone who was long overdue. She was unaccompanied by servants, but her air and dress indicated she should have had at least one by her side. She was a lost and scared little maid. And if she were a day over eighteen then I was full-blooded human.

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Then, I cursed myself. My little man had gone, disappeared into the crowd. I had let myself lose focus and he'd gotten away from me. I could be absolutely idiotic on occasion.

I licked my lips. The Lord never closes one door before he opens another. Opportunities like this were few. The porcelain maid could be far more beneficial than the quarry I'd just lost.

Removing my broad brimmed hat and holding it in my hands in front of my body, as non-threatening as I could manage, I approached her and asked quietly, "*Quel ennui, Mademoiselle?*" Dressed simply, but in clothes which were fairly new and well made, I presented as lower merchant class in dress and generally upper in manners. It had taken me a time to acquire the various articles from clotheslines and drunks, but I turned out well despite the randomness of the couture. And I always wore shoes. They could be old and scuffed and broken, but only peasants went unshod. It was the one true mark of class. A young man, for I looked only slightly older than she, from a good family on hard times. It bought respect from those lower in station, and sympathy and trust from those above.

Mostly it brought anonymity.

She turned to me, "Excuse me?" Her eyes were the color of the forest, and her English, even in those two words, carried a strange musical lilt, the origins of which I couldn't place. Her gaze passed over me and as designed I met her expectations of someone who was not terribly threatening. She offered me a vague smile of dismissal.

"I asked whether you needed assistance."

Her smile became slightly more curt. "I speak French, I understood ye."

I spread my hands, hat in my left, the right empty. "Pardon, I thought you might need some help. You seemed to be distressed. Like someone was supposed to meet you here." I shrugged. "I must have been mistaken." Bowing slightly, I returned my hat to my head and began to turn away.

She looked around her, one hand raised unconsciously towards me. I was the only anchor she had in this rough sea, the only person in the clamor of foreign voices who'd reached out to her. Even if she didn't know it, she didn't want to lose me. "It's just that..." Her voice trailed off uncertain.

"Just what?" I prompted. I needed to keep her talking, talking to me.

Worry tugged at her mouth. "He is nae here."

"Who is not here?"

"My clansman, he should be here." She looked about again as though the man might appear at any moment. I nodded, making a sympathetic sound, but said nothing. "He came before me, to arrange things." Her nervousness was making her less cautious with her speech than she should have been. She looked back at me, this time there was a slightly startled cast to her gaze. "Ye speak English very well."

An interesting subject switch, but I would ride it. "*Merci*. It is the law. Not that it be spoken well, just that it be spoken. And my tutors were good." I smiled at her. She smiled back. Her smile was incredible, that one expression changed her entire body. I earned it as I had just proved I was educated; may I never live to regret having this hated language beaten into my stubborn hide. I cocked my head slightly and closed the distance between us. "What does your man look like, maybe I have seen him."

She described him to me: tall, near my height but bulkier, dark haired with a beard, most likely wearing a Feileadh Mor—a belted plaid. "He is a Scotsman?" I now knew why I couldn't place her accent. I'd never met anyone from that region. "You are Scots?" I earned another brilliant smile. I stepped closer yet again, my hands held from my body palm up. "A man like that should not be too hard to find, especially in France. Why do we not find someone to look after your things, and then we can see if we can find him." I held out my hand. She hesitated for a minute, then took it.

This was going to be a good day after all.

Then I heard laughter from the direction of the water. It came from a dark youth—dark hair, dark eyes, dark countenance—leaning against a mooring cleat. He was garbed as a soldier and supported a musket against one leg.

Applauding, he stood and approached us. "Well done lad, well done. Just a few moments an' yer have her eating from yer hand like a pet deer." He was not long into manhood, possibly a little older than she. He, however, had the look of one had been taught harder lessons in life. From his cracked and patched buffcoat to the brimmed, iron birnhelm harvested in an unnamed battle, every inch of his frame screamed mercenary. He carried himself with the air of one so used to fighting that even men of rank unconsciously stepped aside to allow his passing.



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*Pas bon*, I had no doubt that he had made me as easily as I had marked her. I did not want to lose twice today. If played right, there might be more than just a meal in this prey.

She glared at him. Good, she trusted me more than him. "And what would an uncouth Irishman such as yourself know?" One has to love the nobility, so sure in their own ability to judge a man's character, and so often wrong. I would guess him hard, bitter, hungry but reasonably honest. She saw him as poor, unlettered, and thus unworthy of trust.

He leaned in over her shoulder. "I am an uncouth Irishman and that is," pointing at me, "if I ain't mistaken, a French varlet, and should yer go with himself, miss, yer can pogue yer virtue good-by."

I stole her glare and threw it at him. "I believe I should take offense to that."

"Only if it weren't God's honest truth."

"Curran," she put her hand on his chest. "Dinnae, he's only trying to help."

Pest! She was familiar enough with him to use his name and to touch him. I couldn't place him as her servant—unless my senses were truly off—but there was something there. He couldn't be her servant. She was waiting for her servant. This was not right.

She smiled at me again, it was apologetic this time. "Curran has been looking out for me on the crossing, since Mary died..."

The Irishman stopped her with a gentle touch on her hand. Suddenly I understood the relationship. I'd moved in on his territory. He had chosen her when chance presented itself, as most opportune men would, as, indeed, I had. Maybe not for the same reasons, but when you're poor a meal is a meal no matter how it's obtained. Well, what chance had given him, I was about take away.

This was my profession. I had no delusions about my life, I accepted what I was. That said, I know what played and what did not. It was time to take the ground of the poor nobility, the lesser son. I let my face fall into a proper expression of disgust. "You would push yourself on this woman and take advantage of her in such time, how dare you." My voice hinted at punishments for such trespasses as I'd implied. Stepping around her, I placed my hand on his chest and pushed him back and away from her.

She plucked at my sleeve, trying to pull me back, sensing what was about to happen. Leaving one hand on Curran's chest, I chanced looking away from him and gently seized her arm in my other. "Mademoiselle,

he has insulted me I can not let that pass." The mere extension of that arm carried her backwards and created more distance between my opponent and my prize. I had to get us farther from her. I didn't want her to get in the middle of this. Returning my attention to the Irishman, I used the not-so-subtle pressure from my palm to walk us farther along the dock.

My voice was low and wouldn't carry much beyond us. "Do not interfere with my work...boy." I left the threat hanging in my tone.

He slapped my hand away. "Yer don't know what yer doin'." Apparently, Curran wasn't going to let her go without a fight. I would have thought less of him if he had. I grabbed his wrist and twisted down; pulling us together. He was a bit taller than I, and I had to look up to meet his gaze. The hard set of his features, his blue-black eyes and hair, the hate building behind his stare, it was exciting, charged. The Irishman was a good looking boy. If there wasn't work to be done, I could have been quite distracted by him.

He saw it in my face, read it in the touch of my body against his. It threatened him in a completely unexpected way and he stiffened. Momentary terror drifted across his features. He retreated.

Laughing at his plight, I threw a punch and caught him on the jaw, knocking him back slightly. He recovered quickly, grabbed my fist as I pulled back and wrenched it down, landing a blow to my gut with his other hand. Winded, I dropped to my knees. I took a few gulping breaths, grabbed his leg, and pulled it out from under him.

He twisted as he fell, landing on all fours. Launching from his position, he caught me across my chest and sent us both sprawling across the docks. He was heavier than I, and a better brawler, but I was quicker and I rolled away.

Not quick enough. He caught my ankle and drug me back. Turning, I kicked at his face, missed and hit his shoulder. He wouldn't let go and I couldn't shake him off. Curran crawled on top of me, pinning my arms under his knees. Pressing my chin to the boards with one hand, he slammed the other fist into the side of my head. I sensed the thinly veiled retribution for the unease I'd created as he held me down, pummeling my face with repeated blows. *Mon Dieu*, but it hurt.

I was vaguely aware of the crowd we had attracted. He was pulled off me, and I was yanked to my feet and thrown back into the small press of onlookers. The Irishman shook off the men holding him back and came back at me. Then Curran stopped his advance—we saw why we'd

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been separated. I hurriedly tried to hide the blood oozing from where he had split open my cheek as the dock-master came trotting up, demanding to know what was going on; and why were we all standing about; and who started what. A low mumble of discontent rolled through the crowd—the man had interrupted a minor brawl turned into a good beating.

Curran stepped forward, spreading his hands, the classic we- weren't-doing-anything grin tearing his features. "To be sure we were just havin' a wee discussion. We'll be gettin' off yer docks as soon as we find a place to put our mistress's bags." He grabbed my hat from the boards, and began making an overt show of dusting it off before he handed it to me. His tense smile said he didn't trust me, but that he didn't want to end up in the stocks, either.

"I don't understand, are you for me or against me?" I whispered as I took it.

Sliding his look sideways, in the direction of the interfering bureaucrat, he spoke between bared teeth. "It depends, yer ever gonna touch me again?"

I thought a moment, mostly to make him uncomfortable, "What are you proposing?" I smacked the hat against my leg, smiled at the dock-master, and set it back on my head. It didn't quite sit right. It probably had been stepped on.

"The lady has naw one, her maid got away on the channel crossin', not that she wasn't sick before. And this," he made a small wave with just his fingers, just out of view of the prying official, "is not my country. I wouldn't know where to find what the lady might require."

My laugh came up as a snort. "After the beating you gave me, you want me to help you? *Vous êtes aliéné!*"

"To be sure scon I am. And I'll take that as aye." He turned back to the dock-master. "It's just a wee matter between lads. We didn't mean any harm."

Not mollified in the least, the minor official did what *les noblesse de cloche* do, he lectured us. Even as we turned away and headed back to where we'd abandoned a rather stunned *jeune dame*, he lectured us. Even as Mademoiselle fussed over my not-as-damaged-as-I-pretended-it-was face, he lectured. Even as Curran explained to the Lady how there had been a small misunderstanding, he lectured us. The man might have lectured forever, except that the Lady pulled rank on him, informing the flustered dock-master that she would send someone to collect her things

as she had business to attend to—and her tone made it clear that her most trifling business was more important than anything he would be doing that day—and walked away from him as though that settled the matter. Curran and I both shrugged and trotted after her.

When we had gone a distance in no particular direction, she turned on the both of us and began yelling, without actually yelling, in a bizarre tongue, probably whatever people spoke in Scotland; although, I was fairly certain they spoke English as a rule. I looked at Curran. He shook his head. Apparently neither one of us had a clue what she was going on about.

We stood there while she berated us. I assumed we were being berated—the tone was right, her demeanor was right. Neither one of us wanted to look at her. I considered a small rivulet of filth snaking down the middle of the rue. The Irishman developed a sudden interest in chewing on his fingernails. I'm ashamed to admit that I could not overcome the years of conditioning that she was better than I and thus it was my place to take the abuse without protest. Of course neither could he.

Finally she just stood there, sniffing—a little girl who wanted to cry but didn't want anyone to see her do it.

I looked up from under the brim of my hat. "Shouldn't we be trying to find your man?" She nodded in response but said nothing. "Do you have any idea where we might start?" Again she nodded silently. "*Oui?* And that is?" I coaxed, stepping in and patting her arm to comfort her.

She wiped her eyes with her fingers, then drew a small slip of paper from her purse. *Robert Mark, Solicitor* was written in elegant script and an address, or what sufficed in Calais for an address, was inked below it. An English attorney, it was a place to start.

## Two

Finding Monsieur Mark was the easy part. Convincing him to lead us to the house that had been rented for the Lady was far more difficult. He was not about to hand over the key until he spoke with Niall, the man who signed the papers. The fact that I was obviously more French than English, and had as yet not ascertained the Lady's name, caused us some trouble in gaining his confidence. However, Curran explained it away as I'd only, today, been hired by him on the Lady McPhearson's behalf as a local guide. Then loyal Niall had failed to meet us, and we were all at a bit of a loss since his description of the house had been rather terse. As to the lack of female attendants for Keiko (the oddest name I'd ever heard), the truth was best: her maid had died during the journey. That had to be explained to Madame Mark, obviously the smarter of the pair.

Her pecking at her husband, my courting of his vanity, the Irishman's reassurances, Lady Keiko's bearing, all eventually convinced him to quit his warm quarters and drag his overfed frame through the darkening streets. As we left I was forced to assure the Madame repeatedly that we would hire a maid as soon as we set foot in the house. We would not let Keiko reside there without a female chaperone.

We arrived at the narrow two-story house overlooking the pebble strewn beach, having listened to the attorney curse Niall the entire way. It was his esteemed opinion that the man was a drunken and slovenly Scotsman and missed his appointment because of such. He pounded on the door, and when there was no answer, he put the key to the lock.

From the stench that blew through the now open door, I had a pretty clear idea of why Niall did not meet his mistress at the docks. Curran pushed Keiko back into the street as the attorney retched in the gutter. Actually, it wasn't that bad. The man could not have been dead for too long or the neighbors would have noticed the smell and complained to the watch. I put my hand over my mouth and nose, and nudged the door farther with my foot. The room was dim, but there was no body in sight.

I entered and went first to the front window, throwing it open. The dead man wasn't going to go anywhere, and I could use the fresh air to clear the reek some. The door at the back of the room was closed, and stairs led up to my left. I decided to search the bottom floor first; there was probably a kitchen door that could be opened as well.

When I cracked the rear door, the smell grew stronger. Sucking in a breath of slightly clearer air, I pushed against the wood with my shoulder and slid, reluctantly, into the room. Niall had died in his bed near the hearth, probably a few days before. The cold had kept the decay from advancing as fast as it might in a warmer season. Throwing open the kitchen door, I threw myself into the back alley and copied our dear Robert's behavior.

Monsieur Mark and I, when our stomachs had recovered, took care of the necessary arrangements for clearing the body, arranging a burial and cleaning the house. Cleaning was made an easier task than it might otherwise have been given the occupation of my new mistress. She was a devotee of the science of alchemy, and had come to Calais to study with a renowned master of the art. The distillations and crystallizations of Mademoiselle Keiko's making scoured the floors, walls, and even the air itself until only the barest hint of decay could be detected. Curran and I had to stay in the fetid structure during the interim, although Madame Mark graciously offered to let Keiko reside with her family. The repairs and making the house livable took most of our attention for a time.

It bothered us, or rather it bothered the Mademoiselle and she bothered us, as to how "poor Niall" had come to his end. But when the char woman tried to light a fire in the kitchen hearth we discovered what killed the man. Smoke blew back into the room...the flue was blocked by a few fallen bricks, and fumes from the fire had probably suffocated Niall while he slept. Curran and I were to occupy the room where he had died. Just to rest our own minds, we made a pact that the kitchen door was never to be closed when we slept.

Nonetheless, it always seemed to have swung shut during the night, and we both complained of a sense of being watched during our residence. I suspected that Niall's devotion to his kinswoman had not ended with his departure from this earth.

Some days later, when the house was cleared and Keiko installed in her new quarters, I bought her a dainty maid, fulfilling my promise to the solicitor's wife. Madame Mark would come by daily and remind me of it, sometimes twice in a day, and at Mass, and in the market. Most likely I

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wouldn't have acted so fast if she were not such a pest, and most likely that was her intent.

The girl I found was around ten years of age: pretty enough, freckled, with bright brown eyes and brown hair. Her mother sold her to me for a pittance, no questions asked, to buy food for the six other children plucking at her skirts.

I might have taken her sister, a trifle older, much prettier, but for the years advanced in the ways of the world she was. It was evident by the way she leaned against the shanty and displayed her not-quite-existent feminine wiles at me. Probably she would have cost more as she was an income contributing member of the family. She also did not seem to have the wit of the younger sibling. Her casual beaus and drink had already smacked a good deal out of what little sense she originally possessed. If it were not for me, I would hazard another winter before my *petite femme* was put to the streets with her sister to feed her mother's growing brood.

I suffered small wounds at the child's hands as I dragged her through the streets screaming and kicking. I was forced to reposition the small bundle I carried several times and stop to grab her wrist, or ankle, or hair, so she couldn't flee. No one seemed bothered by our antics as we passed. Most were amused by the distraction. But I finally had to cuff her into silence, so as to make any headway at all.

I carried her, slung under my arm, to *le banc des Pierrettes* outside the walls, below our house, where the fishermen brought their nets to mend, and dumped her and the package onto the egg-sized rocks. "Take off your clothes." I ordered.

She began to cry. Her lower lip trembled. "Please, no." she whimpered. I guessed that her sister had filled her in on the expectations for her future while I bargained with their mother. If the girl was as nasty as her sour face indicated, she had probably made it as terrible as her thick witted mind could invent.

"Oh, *Mon Dieu, enfant!* Take off your clothes and get in the water! You're filthy. I wouldn't touch you in this state even if I had a mind to." I pulled at the ragged shift she wore as I pulled her towards the surf.

Again the girl whined. This time, "I can't swim."

"I don't want you to swim, I want you to bathe." We reached the tide, and I pushed her so that she tripped and fell into the waves. "Wash your body. Our Lady, your new mistress, will not let you sleep in the house if you have muddy feet. Everyone in her service is required to bathe." I pushed her face into the water, then hauled her back up dripping

and sputtering. "It is a nasty chore, but one that must be done." She kicked back and caught my knee with her heel, dropping me to my knees and soaking my trousers. "*Chatte!*" I grabbed her by the neck as she tried to crawl past me. She spit in my face.

We were beginning to attract a small crowd of the fishermen who had been mending their nets on the shore. This was familiar. Perhaps I missed a calling as a street performer. So far no one was offering to help or hinder either of us. I hoped they liked the entertainment. I also hoped no one stole my package. Looking up, I saw Keiko standing on the terrace watching the commotion.

I raised my hand in mock salute. With my attention diverted, *la petite sauvage* tried to bite my arm. I started to bring my hand down to cuff her again and stopped. In the short time I had known her, I had witnessed Keiko protest in seeing others treat their servants roughly. She would not approve of me beating the girl.

Instead I grabbed the child's chin and forced her to look to where Keiko stood. "See the pretty lady, up there, on the hill? That is your new mistress. You don't want her to think you're too much trouble and send you back in disgrace to your mother. She's probably already spent the money I gave her, and then I'd have to ask for it back. What would she do? No bread for your brothers and sisters. She'd have to send you out with your sister just to pay me back."

Her eyes went wide, and her teeth were chattering from her dunking. "Don't send me back, please, sir, I'll be good."

Since I was already wet, I went to work scrubbing as much of the accumulated grime from her as I could, using her dress as the rag it was. She was reasonably true to her promise, only struggling a little. Her hair was a rat's nest. She cursed at me, with an impressive vocabulary for one so young, as I pulled the tangles with my fingers. I had no comb, and no one offered me one. She was a shining example of what a life on the streets could teach a girl, even if she wasn't a whore.

I heard the crunching roll of Curran's steps across the rocky strand. "*Oui?*" I asked without turning around, I was working through a particularly nasty snarl.

"Yer French are quite mad. Why are yer playin' in the water with the wee lassie, when there's galore to be had without so much fuss?"

Now I turned. I put the tip of my thumb against the bottom of my upper teeth and snapped it out at him. Then I pressed my lips together and blew him a small kiss. The second gesture caused him far more



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offense. "Are you offering? After all, you're far better looking, although you'd probably scream more." One day I might regret my teasing, but not today.

He gave a nasty laugh. "Ah, now, lad, there's naw call for gettin' personal about it. The lady says you're to use this on her hair; she's crawlin' with wee livestock." He threw a vial filled with greenish-grey slurry, towards me, aiming for my chest. I caught it with one hand. "An' then yer to use it on yerself, 'cause they migrate, yer know."

I opened the bottle. It smelled rancid. Actually, it smelled worse than rancid, like something scraped from the bowels of a privy. I dumped some of the vile brew on the top of the child's head and worked it in as best I could.

She took to struggling again. The girl wrinkled her nose and stated the obvious. "It stinks."

"I know." I replied and pressed her head down under an oncoming wave.

I got to my feet, almost losing my footing as the stones rolled beneath my weight, and stepped back to view my work. It wasn't awful, though she looked much like a kitten that had fallen into a stream. She stood, waist deep, shivering and holding her skinny arms across her body, although she was too young to have anything to cover yet. The salt would stiffen in her wild hair and she wasn't particularly clean from her dunking, but she would do. She was no longer filthy.

I sent her back up the beach to where Curran sat next to the package, which, thankfully, no one had made off with. The men had wandered back to their work when she failed to put up more of a fight. I pulled my knife and tossed it to him, telling the Irishman to cut the string on the bundle and give it to her. It was a simple dress—blue, old, and far too large on her thin frame—bought off a Jew who had fenced some of my take in the past. My guess was it was better than anything she had ever worn in her short life.

Now for me. I had bathed recently enough, but I'd never hear the end of it from Keiko if I did not make a show of it now.

Actually, I didn't mind bathing, although I said I did. It was not the custom of the time, but the Jesuit brothers who raised me had continued in the medieval habit during my youth. As a result, I found being dirty distasteful, and if I hadn't bathed in a while I became uncomfortable. Living at the seaside gave me an excuse. Many people took the salt water for their health, if nothing else. It wasn't uncommon to see bathers in the

sea. Near Calais it wasn't terribly common either. The sea was damnably cold, even in summer.

What I did mind was putting this noxious mix in my hair. What good was being an alchemist if you couldn't make your potions at least smell passable? I had never suffered lice, and fleas and mites avoided my skin. The general pests that plagued mankind seemed to find me unpleasant. Thank you, Father, for small favors. I emptied the bottle into the sea.

Pulling off my boots, I poured the water from them and threw them at Curran. I hoped they weren't too damaged from the salt. These had belonged to ill-fated Niall; I couldn't afford to purchase a pair. "Care to join me?" My similarly acquired shirt and trousers followed, Curran and I had split the serviceable portion of late man-at-arm's wardrobe between us. I'd also commandeered a rapier and matchlock pistol from the haul. "We could have a great deal of fun."

He dropped to the strand, hands pillowing his head, and glared at the sky. "Bathe yer miserable body an' be done with it. I don't want to miss me supper."

Walking out to the depth of my thighs, I looked back towards Keiko. She was still watching, although she had removed herself to the windows, where she was shaded from the view of most. While people swam nude—how else would you—it was considered impolite to gawk. I was used to it. Women, and some men, did tend to stare, surreptitiously, when they saw me unclothed. I don't believe that she knew I could see her as well as I could. Keen eyesight, keen hearing, a refined sense of touch—all was part of my heritage. I could tell very plainly that she was not just staring off along the strand.

My physic had once been compared, by a rather silly *griselle*, to those of the abandoned Roman statues. The monastic life may have been stringent, but because of it I grew up strong and healthy. I never had a lot to eat but I rarely went without, and constant hard work had put muscle on my frame. However, I don't see myself as handsome, and it embarrassed me when people told me otherwise. Sometimes I think it has more to do with never having suffered the ravages of the pox, or the worst of seasonal famine or a thousand other cruelties that plagued mankind, and wrought themselves into their bodies, than any feature of my face. I do have one point of vanity; most men are not as well favored as I. That is what usually causes stares.

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Be they men or women, lovers were strewn throughout my past, but the thought of bedding Keiko was more exciting to me than all my past conquests. It had never been hard for me to take a lover. Certainly, Curran resisted, but then I was more amused by his fear than attracted to his body. Well, actually both, but why run your head against a stone wall?

I knew I wanted Keiko. I wanted her because she was beautiful. I wanted her because other men wanted her. I wanted her because the world said that I, a peasant of human and *fé* parentage—an orphan, a street thief—couldn't have her. I've never taken well to being told no. And that she might have an interest in me...that was exciting me more than I cared to admit.

That was also beginning to present a problem. Standing in the water, watching her, knowing that she was watching me, but didn't know I knew, was thrilling. The extent to which I overshadowed my peers was going to be quite evident. Soon!

As I said, I swam as often as I could. I loved the feel of water, especially of the sea. How it kissed the edge of my skin, pushed at me as the waves rolled by, licked the back of my legs. It was liberating, sexual. It was not helping my physical state. Luckily, the spring sea was bracing, cold enough to bite into the skin. It would definitely do. I dove under the water, and tried to swim the thoughts out of my head and my body. I was only marginally successful. I swam until my arms ached and my eyes stung, and by the time I returned to the shore, Keiko had gone. That helped clear what ramblings of my mind had not been washed out by the freezing surf. I walked up the beach shaking the water from my hair and retrieved my clothing. While I dressed, Curran fetched the girl who had wandered away in search of child's treasures.

Our trek home was much less contentious, but no less active, than the one to the shore had been. We passed through the walls of the city and *la femme* alternatively ran ahead along the old twisted streets, although she had no idea where we were headed, or followed us, growing ever more excited as only a child can. I briefly explained that she would serve as a petite maid for a foreign lady of noble birth and what duties would be required of her. I must have been forgiven for my rough treatment and now seemed to have become her hero. The curiosity about her fate caused her to pull at my sleeve and pepper me with an unending flow of questions. I answered them as fast as they came.

*Oui*, the lady we had seen was her mistress.

*Oui*, she would be a lady's maid.

No, Mademoiselle, was not a princess, she was the daughter of a Lord.

*Oui*, she would have a real bed to sleep on, most likely Mademoiselle's.

*Oui*, she would get new clothes.

No, we couldn't eat now.

*Oui*, we could eat later.

*Oui* meant *yes* in French. If she'd been raised in a proper house she would have known that.

*Oui*, I was French.

My ears were pointed because I asked so many questions as a child that the priests would pull on them to make me stop.

No, I did not know what we would have for dinner.

My name was Julius.

*Oui*, she could call me Jules, Mademoiselle did.

Mademoiselle's name was Keiko.

*Oui*, it was a strange name.

No, she must call Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle.

Meg was indeed a pretty name, it was a very English name, I was sure Mademoiselle would like it.

*Oui*, Curran also lived with us.

*Oui*, he also served Mademoiselle.

Curran spoke so funny because he was an Irishman. I earned a dirty look from him for that one.

No, I did not know where Ireland was. I did, but I didn't want to have explain the geography of the entire modern world to a child who had never stepped a mile beyond her hovel.

By the time we reached our door, I decided that hell for me would be to be surrounded for eternity by *petite femme* who never shut up.

Keiko was entertaining Madame Mark in the front room, in what she styled as the parlor, when we arrived. Two straight-backed chairs, a divan, a few mismatched tables and a small writing desk were the only furnishings. They, and those pieces inhabiting the bedroom and kitchen, had either come with the house, or had been purchased by the deceased man servant. Everything was old, but acceptable, for a lady of Keiko's station. She would not be proud, but neither would she be embarrassed, should someone call on her.

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Meg, contrary to her previously exhibited personality, became quite shy in Keiko's presence. She hid behind me and I had to wrest her small hands from my leg so that Keiko could inspect her. Like all of us, the presence of the nobility turned her into a pathetic shadow of herself. She became a meek child instead of the feisty ten-year-old.

I handed over Meg's indenture...twenty years, a long time for a little girl...and Keiko knelt before the girl, taking the child's hands in hers, and offering up one of her beatific smiles. After that moment Meg would have died for her.

## Three

"Do you have any money?" The Irishman picked up a pebble and sent it skittering down the lane.

Curran and I wandered aimlessly through the streets. Our lady had been kind enough to give us our freedom for an evening. Spring *fêtes* were the rage. Young, beautiful, and of the first estate, she'd been invited to quite a few this season. They often lasted into the small hours and guests would sleep at their host's abode rather than risk the night streets. Keiko had released us with orders to return the next day. We stayed or went dependant upon her whim—such was the life of a man-at-arms. Wide-eyed Meg had been left in the charge of the household servants. Mademoiselle would require her when she was ready for bed. The poor child could best hope to catch some sleep in the kitchen before she was called.

I was actually rather disappointed at not being required. If you stayed you got fed. Table scraps to be sure, but free and often quite good. Further, we'd gotten to ride out as footmen to her rented carriage. We had walked home. At least I'd manage to steal two bottles of passable wine. To be sure, it was not what the guests would be drinking, but it was far above the swill you could buy at a public house.

Pulling my cloak a little closer, "*Oui*. Why?"

"Well," he picked the mortar between the bricks as we walked, "I thought as we were released from our duties tonight, we might have a wee bit of company."

Yanking the stopper of one of the bottles with my teeth, "You have my company." I mumbled around the cork before spitting it into the gutter. "And I, my friend, have yours."

He snorted. "I was thinking something with a few more curves who might be enticed to spread her legs." Grabbing my prize, Curran lifted it and swallowed. Then he offered it back to me.

"You want a whore?" After a moment I grabbed the bottle. I needed a drink after that proposal.

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"Aye, and why not? Living like a monk is killing me." Our mistress was a woman of sensible and demure habits. She'd slapped me more than once for my foul tongue. Strange that such punishments only made me curse more often.

However, Curran was right. Being Keiko's manservant was like living in a nunnery. I'd say like monks, but I had grown to manhood in an Abbaye as a ward of the Holy Mother Church. No one knew who my parents had been. *Mère* had frozen to death sometime before we were discovered by the resident tenant farmers. The only clues to her identity were me, and a small silver bracelet inscribed "Julius Montclair LaRousse." The incessant war with the English meant that no effort was made to actually locate my family. Being alone, friendless, and poor in a cloistered order of men was not the most pleasant way for a boy to come of age. I could quite truthfully attest to the fact that monks, in those days, did not live like monks.

With a rueful smile, Curran continued, "I'm used to the life of a soldier, lad. Wine, women, song...killing," that was delivered with a smirk. "If I don't have company soon, I'll go mad."

"You want me to pay for you to have a woman?"

"I'll share." That stopped me dead. It took Curran a few steps before he realized I was no longer by his side. Turning, he shot me one of his dark glares. "Aren't yer a little starved for soft company? Neither of us can afford it on our own. Together we might be able to scrape enough nicker to have a go between us."

"Why should we pay for something we can get for free?"

"Because, it's not always a sure thing that you'll get if yer don't pay for it. And sometimes it's more expensive than that yer purchase." He shook his head. "I mean, they want yer to entertain them. Tell them yer love them. I'm not certain I'm up to that much effort. I just want a wee tumble."

"I'd tumble you for free." Offering up my brightest smile, "I wouldn't even make you say you loved me." *Mon Dieu*, I know, I was baiting a bear, teasing him like this. I couldn't help it. Such was my nature. I'd taken not a few lumps from Curran because of it. He could beat me black and blue and I doubt I'd leave off.

"Don't make me regret my offer, Jules." If I were the devil, that evil stare would have given me pause. "Remember, I can just take yer coin from yer. I've beat yer before."

Still, I wasn't the devil. With a laugh, "So would the beating be before, during, or after you bed me?" I tipped the bottle to my lips and pulled at it. Licking my upper lip to catch the drops, "You know, I like a little pain now and then. It adds spice."

Curran growled, "How's about right now in the street?" His step towards me garnered half of one of mine back. Then he stopped. Pensive, he chewed on the inside of his cheek. "Or is it yer don't like women at all?" It seemed that possibility had never occurred to him.

"No. I like women." I liked women quite a bit. I liked men quite a bit. Mostly, I just preferred sex of any sort. This wasn't the time to explain such things. Instead I kept to a topic he could understand. "They're very soft. Especially nice on a cold night." I walked up, offering the bottle in peace. When he took it, I patted his arm. *Mon Dieu*, there was a hell of a lot of muscle there. Curran jerked back like my touch burned. Mayhaps a little explanation would serve. Shrugging, "Each sex has its own fascination. A woman, however, sounds entertaining." Sharing one didn't sound like a bad plan. Nor did it sound like a particularly good one. "I would hazard by the docks we could find the sort we want. Pass me the bottle friend and let's be off then." Drink often made bad plans sound so much better.

We found her where you might expect to find those of her profession: by the docks. Pretty enough to command a fair price, she plied her trade along the wharf-side public houses. All I could see was bosom and sway when she approached us. It took me breath to even note her face. Surprisingly, she was rather more handsome than I first surmised. One did not expect such things in women of her profession, especially not there. After enough conversation to determine her name was Marie, I knew why. What she possessed in looks, she lacked in class and wits. If she'd been possessed of a bit more sense, the girl might have managed a position as some *bourgeoisie* man's mistress. As it was, she had trouble enough comprehending what we wanted. A serious failing for a prostitute.

"Two?" She wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes back in her head. Perhaps she thought better that way. "You mean, together."

"Aye, lass." Curran wrapped his arm about her waist and pulled her close. "A wee bit more work but in half the time."

"Twice as many," one finger wound into her light, brown curls, "should be twice as much." She did not, however, pull away from him. A good omen, that.



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Waiving my hand dismissively, "*Petite*, please, you're not worth twice as much." Harsh and true, she'd need more brains to command a better price.

"One and a half yer normal rate." Already walking her along, Curran knew we'd won.

Just to cap the deal, "And, we have a bottle." We were down to one. Curran and I had finished the first off during the hunt. Neither of us was unsteady. Nor were we exactly sober at that point, either.

Thinking on it, "You share the bottle with me and I share myself with you?"

"*Oui*, it is a fair exchange, *no*?" Ah, drink, the failing of so many such women. It was one of the few escapes from a hard life. "This is thirsty work, after all."

One arm snaked around Curran's middle, the other she linked through mine own. Her giggle grated up my spine. Well, I didn't want to court her, I wanted to fuck her. I could live a few hours with that. "Follow me, *messieurs*, and we shall have a grand party." I guessed then that the deal had been made.

I had seen dingier garrets in my time then that she led us to, though I'd have been hard pressed to call them to mind. A bench, a table, and a taper were the extent of her furnishings. What did I care? I'd roomed in worse in my day.

We were hardly through the door when she began to disrobe. Little enough ceremony for a working girl. "Come on then." One hand stretched forth for the bottle, the other worked the laces on her dress. "Are you both made of stone, standing there like statues?"

"Hardly," Curran growled, taking a pull from the bottle as she held it. Then he stepped in and pillaged her mouth in a hard kiss. They fell back onto the pallet and I was forced to save our drink. So that was how it was to be then?

I set my ass against the table and watched them writhe on the mattress. Curran's hand cupped her breast, his thumb playing with a pink nipple. The other was lost somewhere under her skirt. She was pushing his trousers down off his hips. I swallowed. *Mon Dieu*, he had a nice ass. All the desire she hadn't sparked, flared at the sight of him bared like that. Bent over the bed, pants at his knees, shucking his shirt like he was on fire...I groaned. My cock throbbed. I could imagine kneeling behind the Irishman, spreading his cheeks and thrusting inside. Instead I took another drink.

Another nerve shredding giggle, then she wiggled out from beneath him. Curran rolled over and watched her slide out of the remaining garments. The gleam in his eye was positively predatory. However, Marie held little interest for me. I want a chase, an attachment in my conquests. Sex for sex's sake...well, it's much like masturbation with more effort.

Surreptitiously I watched him. His chest was well muscled and bore the scars one would expect of a soldier. With his arms cocked back on the pallet, and his weight balanced on his toes, everything was displayed. His prick throbbed hard between his legs. My own cock was near bursting from my trousers.

Marie sidled up. Nuzzling into my neck, her hand slid down to cup me. "Oh, you're so very large and hot." Mistress of the obvious she was. She backed towards the bed, pulling me along with her. "Come on, you've both paid for your fun."

As we moved, Marie unlaced my britches. I could do this. At that point, I had no choice. My shirt hit the floor as my ass hit the bed. Toeing out of my boots, before shucking my trousers, I drew her to me. One leg dangled off the edge. The other was bent at the knee against the wall. *Putain*, but there was hardly any space on that pallet. "You come on." I smiled and stroked myself.

Curran chose that moment to break in, "Don't yer be getting ideas and touching me."

The nature of how we were arranged—him, her and me—meant that I had little choice. My right leg pressed in upon his left shoulder and sandwiched her between us both. Protesting what should have been quite apparent, "*Mon Dieu*, that bed is hardly big enough for one. If we are both touching her, by the nature of the thing, we'll be touching each other."

"Don't do it," he growled. Jerking his chin in the direction of the small transom, "Or I'll clod yer out that window."

"Clod?" It is hard to be frightened when you don't know what you've just been threatened with.

His smirk went wicked. "Throw yer miserable carcass three stories down into the street."

"Oh, *merci*, for the warning." I tried to press myself further against the wall. It was an impossibility that he wanted. "How am I supposed to not touch?"

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Marie broke the tension. "*Messieurs*, if you wish to fight you should return to the wharf. If you want to fuck, get to it." Curran snorted. I chuckled. Marie dropped down and sucked me into her mouth. *Mon Dieu*, I was not prepared for that assault. My hips bucked into her mouth and I moaned.

"Evil wench!" Curran growled. Then he leaned in and nipped at her breast. "I see herself has made the decision of who goes first then." He began to turn her onto her stomach then reconsidered. Kneeling, Curran drew her leg up onto his shoulder. I could look down her stomach and watch as he rubbed his purple head against her clit. Curran was endowed enough to be interesting to someone of my leanings. I damn near came watching him tease her mound with that thick prick. "You're going to watch, are yer?"

What was the point of two on one if you didn't at least watch? "But of course." My voice was heavy. Marie's tongue was agile, her mouth hot. She licked and sucked my shaft with abandon. Perhaps she enjoyed her work then. I pushed her hair from her face so that he could see my cock buried between her lips. "You should watch, too. No sense in not enjoying the show." Oh, how hungry his stare was. I could live and die by it. Hand traversing the planes of her belly, Curran licked his lips. His cock rocked against her sex and she moaned. The sound traveled up my shaft, vibrating in my gut. Such a moment begged for a kiss between us and I found myself leaning in.

Then I remembered his threat. I slammed back against the wall, biting my lip.

Curran laughed. It was evil. He pulled back, rocked his hips, and slid deep inside as Marie swallowed me. I closed my eyes and listened to their sounds. That way I could pretend it was he who drove me. I could imagine his lips sucking down on my cock. Those thoughts started shivers under my skin. If I didn't quit them, I'd find myself moaning his name. That would be unfortunate.

Opening my eyes, I met his own. Lids dropped half mast in pleasure; he clenched his bottom lip in his teeth. *Mon Dieu*, why could it not be I who gave him so much? His thick cock pierced her time and time again. Each thrust was answered by a moan. Hers or mine, I wasn't certain. His cock glistened with her juices. I wanted to lick them off, taste her on him.

Curran's hand ran up her side and met mine where I clutched her breast. So I couldn't touch him, but he could touch me? The world was

unfair! "I thought you said no touching?" I teased. My voice was raspy with the pleasure of being sucked by her as I watched him drive her passion.

"Fuck yerself, lad." Curran hardly faired better than me.

I gasped as Marie almost took me all. Then managed, "I'd rather fuck her."

"She's well used enough, she could accommodate it." My eyes went wide. I jerked hard enough on her hair that Marie came up sputtering.

Curran used the distraction to lie back, pulling her down with him. Marie's legs spread over his hips, he thrust back inside. Few chances like this were ever offered. I crawled up between them. For a moment I just left my head grazing his shaft. Frost shot through my frame. I bent down. My hands dropped between his body and arms. Curran's skin was an inferno. I put my lips on hers and felt his rhythm. One breath, two breaths, then I thrust.

Marie arched and cried out. *Putain*, I'd never felt anything quite like it. Ungodly tight, hot and wet. The best of it was Curran. His cock slid against mine. With a groan his fingers clawed into my back. Marie was caught tight between us. I trembled and bucked. She shook, calling out nonsense in her rapture. Then I felt it. Curran's hips jerked beneath us. His seed filled her, surrounded me. My balls tightened. Three more thrusts and I joined him with a yell.

Sex surrounded us, folded us in on each other. We lay, twisted together for some time. Finally, Marie began to snore. Drink and sex were apt to do that to one. When I thought Curran slept as well, I crawled from the bed and perched on the sill.

The problem was, now I wanted more. I wanted all of him. Sometimes a taste only served to fuel desire. And my desire had needed little fueling. Staring into the night, I heard him rise and come up behind me.

"Didn't you enjoy yerself?" His voice was soft, satisfied.

"*Oui* and no," I sighed. Damn, he was even more beautiful in the afterglow of sex. It softened the normally hard set of his features. What a fine thing he was. And how had he seen through me? Most other men assumed if you spent yourself, you enjoyed yourself. For a soldier he was a very perceptive man.

Curran stretched. "Why not?" For a moment his whole frame pulled taut. His cock was still half hard. Mine attempted a revival and I drove my nails into the heel of my palm to back it down.

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"I could not set myself to it." Shrugging, "I was thinking on other things." Things like how I so wanted it to be me instead of her in his arms. What that cock would feel like between my legs. Again my prick jerked. My mind needed to occupy itself with other things.

"Ah, yer were thinking on herself then. Our lady who has yer so fascinated." Curran was far too perceptive at times, and far too unperceptive at others. No, I was thinking of himself. And I was not about to voice that. His hand brushed my arm. The chill was immense, consuming my whole body in a second. This time the blood landed in my hips and reared rampant. I drew up my knees to hide it from him. Seemingly oblivious, he continued, "Lad, focus on what you have, not what you can't have. You'll just make yourself miserable otherwise." He smelled of sex. I wanted to turn and run my tongue over his skin, lick him clean of her. Instead I bit my lip to drive back the want.

What could I say? I gave him a lie instead of the truth. "I'll do that, my friend."

## Four

The warmth of spring slowly melted into the heat of summer. The harvest had been good this year; the market was brimming with summer grain and fish, although as always a good portion was seized to stuff the belly of the armies of England. But famine was a memory this year. The days were long, the air was warm, and the sea breezes were cool in the evening. We had our little house in order, comfortably furnished. At least, by Curran's and my standards it was comfortably furnished. Keiko complained that she found it rather Spartan.

Our days fell into routines revolving around Keiko and her lessons. We escorted our mistress to and from her studies. We sent Meg on small errands to the market or the dressmaker or the apothecary. Sometimes Curran or I would have a bit of coin and get drunk or gamble with the locals, who tolerated us. And occasionally a day was interrupted by odd smells or small explosions from an experiment gone awry, but the greater portion of our time was spent in routine seaside living. It was as easy a life as I've ever had.

Once Curran stopped reacting to my jibes, I stopped my teasing of him...not completely, but enough that he trusted my intentions. I couldn't quit completely. It was too much fun to watch the disgust play on his face on the rare occasion when I would catch him off guard. And as I never tried to touch him, he tolerated the jests.

After a time, Curran and I became, in a way, friends. We were separated by generations, although I don't think, truly, he knew how old I was. From comments he made, however, he suspected my lineage. He never said directly but somehow I knew he knew. The Irish have far more familiarity with the world of goblins and elves than most modern men. That my races were mixed didn't seem to bother him half as much as my preferences did. Quite the opposite, he seemed to seek my opinion and my company more.

He and I would loiter in the road, across from the villa where Keiko took her lessons, and talk while the poppet played at our feet. He told us

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stories, stories only an Irishman would know. Some were funny, others full of wailing spirits and vengeful fairies. He told us of Ireland, and its emerald vales, as though they were the plains of Heaven itself. The man could talk even if no one was listening.

Sometimes, but not often, I would tell him of my boyhood in Normandy. Of the time that *frère* Jacque mixed too much wine with the water for dinner and the brothers had spent the night singing ribald songs. Or of waking to the sound of chanting on a crisp, Christmas morning.

From our talks, I learned how to cast a musket ball. I learned how to tell a well-made musket from a poorly fashioned one. I learned how to gauge a shot against the wind. I learned what it was like to watch your countrymen fall on a battlefield far from home.

I also learned that he hated the English near as much as I.

I think that this was what made us fast. Two men adrift in the captured lands of our most hated foe. He was nineteen, and had been conscripted to the service of the English war on France for almost three years. A Gallowglass—artilleryman, cannon fodder for a hated English King. Dragged from his home and sent to a foreign land to die. He had fought for the English because he had no choice. One day he had walked off the battlefield and kept walking until he reached the coast. Then, for a time, he had jumped from ship to ship, earning his keep with his musket, until he had come by way of the channel to Calais, and the ship which had borne Keiko to us all.

This day we talked of God. He had not so much the faith as I, although we were both Catholic, had been baptized, and taken communion. "I swear on my life, First Samuel, 'And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it unto David, and his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle.'" Elbows on knees, chin on my balled fist, I challenged him. "You tell me why a king is giving his clothes to his servant if what I say is not so."

"Yer pervertin' the word the Lord!" This little debate had succeeded in getting Curran's back up. Torturing him with it was as much fun as I'd had in weeks. Of course, he'd brought it down on himself. I'd commented on the fine figure of a page that passed. He told me that any man who

slept with another was an abomination in the eyes of God. Whether or not it was true, I wasn't about to let his remark pass without comment.

"I am not. That is what Scripture says. Do you wish more? 'And as soon as the lad was gone, David arose out of a place toward the south, and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed himself three times: and they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded. And Jonathan said to David, Go in peace, forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of the Lord, saying, The Lord be between me and thee, and between my seed and thy seed for ever.'"

Meg looked up from drawing figures in the dust. "Who were David and Jonathan?"

Both of us just stared for a moment. Well, mayhap she had only been half listening. Ever more apt to play school master than I, Curran leaned down. "David, who slew the Philistine Goliath, Jonathan son of Saul, King of the Hebrews." The child still seemed confused. "An' I refuse to believe that," he clapped his hands over her ears, "the beloved of God buggered the son of King Saul."

"Actually," speaking as much with my hands as anything, "I would hazard the relationship was the other way...prince and peasant after all."

Arms crossed defensively before his chest. "Yer off yer nut."

"I swear," raising my hands in mock surrender, "on pain of death, go read it yourself."

"I have no means to."

"*Aucun problème*, I have a bible."

"I mean, I can't read." He hissed. "But I've heard sermons and I've heard Scripture and I've never heard what yer saying."

I knew I should let it go, but I just couldn't. "Well then, you have heard of John and Christ?" This next part, if you'll pardon the expression, would crucify him. "Now there was leaning on Jesus's bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved.' And later, 'When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! And saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.' They were together as one."

"That's just blasphemy!" The Irishman shuddered.

With all the innocence only a child can muster, "What is blasphemy?"



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Curran offered up a wicked laugh. "I'm not gonna explain it to her." He stretched his lanky legs into the street and smug, leaned back against the wall. "Yer on yer own, lad."

"It is nothing, poppet. We are just discussing a little difference of opinion in the doctrine of the Holy Catholic Church."

Nodding sagely, "My mum says all Catholics will burn in hell because they worship the Pope and that's idolatry." With that blow delivered, she returned to her amusements.

Curran was the first to find his voice. "I think we have a wee problem." Honestly, I could hardly find my breath. We, the three of us, had taken Meg to Mass with us. But like all *les enfants* she hid under the pews and played tag between the women's skirts. None of us had realized she was a heretic. Of course, it wasn't her fault that her parents had jeopardized her soul. Curran and I resolved to begin, at once, to correct the problem.

We took her to chapel.

Meg wanted to play in the baptismal fount.

We explained the sacrifice of Christ.

She lay on the pavers and counted saints.

We explained the transmutation of wine into blood and bread into flesh.

She asked if it was time for lunch.

Finally we gave up and entrusted her to the father reciting that day's liturgy, having explained the situation to him. It was resolved that we would bring her each morning, after we had escorted Keiko to her lessons in the arts of magic, and give Meg over to her catechism. Exiting the chapel through the side entrance, being of no station to use the front door, we made our way back to our mistress. The early afternoon sun cast shadows at our feet as we walked. "*Mon Dieu!*" I slapped my palm to my forehead, "You missed a perfect opportunity."

"For what?" He pushed his thick black hair back from his face. It was forever falling in his eyes.

With a broad, sly smile, "To ask the priest if I'm correct."

For a moment he was utterly confounded. Then his face dropped into a look of absolute disgust. "*Múchadh is bá ort!*" he swore. His palm landed hard on my shoulder as he shoved me into the side of house. I slid down the wall, laughing so hard I could not catch my breath. *Putain*, but I cherished the moments when I could blindside him like that. As I sat on

the dusty cobbles near choking, the Irishman glared at me. "Yer just the most wantonly wicked lad I know. I'm goin' to hell just listenin' ye."

"If that is so," I struggled to my feet with a bit of composure restored, "why then do you call me your friend?"

"I'll have to ask God when I see him," he growled, "'cause I'm sure I'm at a loss."

That evening, I sat at the table, reading the bible by the flickering light of the kitchen fire, my mind more of the hell Meg had been saved from than my Psalter. Firelight was not the easiest way to read the Scripture, but my eyes are better than most. Like the wolves that stalked the winter nights, I can see much of what is usually hidden behind the cover of darkness. A little light goes a long way for me.

I heard her steps on the flags as Keiko entered but I did not look up. It was rude of me, I know. Although I pretended to be her servant for the rest of the world I would not do so in private. I will never answer to someone else.

After a bit of time she cleared her throat. Keeping my eyes on the page, I mumbled, "Mam-moiselle," drawing out the word, as an acknowledgment of her presence.

Seeing that she'd get no more response than this, she proceeded. "I went to speak with Master Veurmant today. It was rather embarrassing, ye understand. I had to tell him that the funds from my faither had yet to arrive, and that my payment for this month's lessons would be delayed. He said ye had already taken care of it, and I was not to be bothered, ever, about payment. That he should come to ye if there was a problem." She waited expectantly.

Keeping my head bent to the book, I shifted only my eyes to look at her. "Do you have a question of me?"

"Why did ye pay? How did ye pay? Ye have no money."

Chewing on my lower lip, I thought for a moment on how to reply. Then, I sighed and placed my finger on the line of text I had been reading to hold my place while pinching the bridge of my nose with the fingers of my other hand. This would be difficult, and delicate, she was far too naïve to handle the unedited version of the truth. Closing the book on my finger, I pushed my stool back from the table slightly and braced my back against the lime-washed wall. I regarded her for a moment.

I decided to answer the second and third questions first. "I am a resourceful man. I know where money can be obtained." My look conveyed that she would get no better answer than that.

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Keiko was not pleased by my evasiveness. It was evident in her pout. She pressed on, "Why then?"

That was a far simpler issue. A portion of the truth would suffice. "If you have no lessons in the arcane secrets of alchemy, then you have no reason for being here. Being a lady's valet, guaranteed at least one meal a day and a pallet in a stuffy, haunted kitchen is immensely preferable to going to bed hungry in the gutter. Your father's money will come soon and I will keep a roof over my head. Let's just hope he does not make delay a habit." He already was, but that I kept that to myself.

It was apparent that she was not happy with that answer, either. Not that I could blame her. I had just admitted to using her for room and board and insulted her father in the same breath.

She turned to leave, took a few steps, then turned back on me. "Ye cannot read that. Why do ye ape your betters when ye recite your prayers?" Her tone was that of a spiteful child seeking to hurt. I probably should not have insinuated that her father could cast her adrift in a strange country. I also noted that her otherwise mild brogue slipped a few rungs lower down the ladder of class when she became upset.

I do not like to be insulted, and her words stung of boyhood taunts. My tone, in response, was poisonous. "Why do you assume I cannot read?"

"Most merchants on my father's lands cannot read. Ye are not even of their standing."

"I am no imbecile. I have some education and I can read and write in French and Latin rather well, *cherie*. I will admit that I am less proficient in English, but I fair well. I can even do sums when the fancy takes me. Perhaps your countrymen's problem was that they were Scots and not French."

She laughed, and it was not pleasant.

I opened my bible and began to read, out loud, from the Psalter where I had left off.

She interrupted my recitation. "You've memorized it." She was getting herself back under control.

"Please," I tossed the book at her, "you choose a passage." It landed on the floor at her feet. I winced. I shouldn't have thrown the book. Printed volumes were very dear. Having liberated this one from an abbess on the road to Calais, it would be hard to obtain another should I ruin it.

Eyeing me suspiciously, she bent to retrieve the volume. I received a momentary glimpse of her décolletage for my deliberate lack of aim. I do so love the exposed style of modern dresses. Keiko flipped through the pages without looking at them, choosing a spot at random. "Here, this one." She held the bible out to me, her middle finger tapping the place she wished me to begin.

I took the book from her. Slowly, "*Levavi oculos meos in montes unde veniet auxilium mihi. Auxilium meum a Domino qui fecit caelum et terram, Non det in commotionem pedem tuum neque dormitet qui custodit te.*" Placing the tome in my lap, I put my feet up on the table and rocked my stool onto its back legs.

"So ye can recite. I am impressed." Her tone clearly indicated that she was not.

"Are you out of humor now, or are you merely training at being a shrew?"

In my annoyance with her I was becoming flippant. Not wise when she could legally beat me for being insolent, and for just being French. I held myself out as her servant and thus she could treat me as such. I brought the book back up. "I lift. Have lifted up my eyes to the mountains, from whence help...will? Shall, come to me. My help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. May he not...suffer...thy foot to be moved. Neither let him slumber that keepeth thee." My translation was halting but passable, and better once I realized I knew the psalm she had chosen.

She sniffed. "Memorization. A trick."

I slammed the book on the table and dropped the front of the stool to the floor in unison. "Why does it bother you so that I am a low born man with a high born mind?!" She jumped, but only a little. That was intriguing. "Write something, then. I can't have memorized what's between your arrogant little ears." I wondered if anyone had ever dared speak to her like that. I wondered why I dared speak to her like that.

After a moment's hesitation, she went to the writing desk in the front room, chose a quill, inked it, and scratched a sentence on a scrap of paper. It was darker in there, but I had yet to put out the candles before retiring. It was the last thing I did each night as I made my way through the house, making sure each door and window was shut tight; an abundance of caution borne of experience.

I should be able to see well enough. I stood and walked to her, my hand held out expectantly. I took the note, looking at her for a time, then

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I looked at the writing. Damn her, it was in English. I never cared much for speaking the language, and really was not very good at reading it. I should not have boasted her I could.

Thankfully, it was a simple question: *where did you get the money?* Instead of reading it, I answered her. Locking her gaze, I said, "*Gen Femme*, I told you, you do not want to know."

In the dim light, her eyes were a deep, mossy green, like the still waters of the ocean before the rise of a summer storm. She returned my stare in the way only a woman accustomed to commanding the attention of all those who came into her presence could. It was direct. It was heated. It was powerful. It told me I had no choice but to submit to her will. Submitting myself to her will was tempting.

I wondered what she thought of as she glared at me.

My eyes are blue. One paramour had likened them to the winter sky...and my hair to the red gold of a summer sunset. He had a fondness for seasonal metaphors and bad poetry. My hair was fashionably long and tended to fall onto my face at inopportune moments, such as now. Lovers have told me I am beautiful. I have yet to comprehend what they mean.

What I see in the glass is a man whose youth in the fields and at the hands of those who would use my body against my will, had hardened my features and begun to etch the smallest of lines at the edges of my mouth and eyes. I rarely smiled, having never learned the habit of it. But my lips have been called sensuous and I have good teeth, in a land were most do not. I attribute that to my *fé* heritage. Also a gift of my father, a less appreciated one, was the slight point to the tip of my ears, which I hid under my hair. Did she notice?

Keiko was almost a full head shorter than me, but her air of superiority and entitlement made her eyes seem level with mine. They never wavered in their challenge. My lovers had all been commoners, and had not the force of personality to challenge any man, much less me, in a staring match.

It was an unexpected delight to me, this battle of wills. If I had chosen to, I could have stood there for days. However, I needed to win this skirmish, and soon. To relent would be to acknowledge her as my master. I played at being her servant. I would not want it to become the truth.

Still holding her gaze, I closed the space between us until my body was mere inches from hers. I could feel the heat radiating from her face

as it flushed. My eyes locked on hers, I smiled. I never said I couldn't, just that I didn't do so often. When I smile I usually get what I desire.

With a small sigh, Keiko closed her eyes and lifted her chin ever so slightly in a very clear invitation; a very tempting and clear invitation. But that too would not do. My time. My terms.

To take her now, like this, would give her the excuse of momentary indiscretion. My trap for her I decided, when sprung, would be much more subtle and well planned. Seduction is an art I have honed through necessity; sometimes it is easier to convince someone to give you a thing than it is to take it by force. One does not have to be good looking to be skilled at the task.

I released my breath, I had not been aware that I was holding it, and took a pace back. She affected me more than I had anticipated. Her eyes drifted open. They were shocked. They were confused. They were unsure. I suspected that these were feelings she was not used to having. I also suspected that she had never been refused before. Her voice cracked slightly, but it was still strong, with a nasty undercurrent to it, "I, I though all Frenchmen..." the accusation trailed off unfinished.

"Mademoiselle." I put my hand lightly on her neck, my thumb resting along the line of her jaw. Her skin was hot under my touch. "One as beautiful as you will never lack for suitors. You, however, are in desperate need of friends. As I can, regretfully, never be one of the former, it would be my honor to be included amongst the latter." I drew back, slowly, barely skimming her skin. Then I took her hand in both of mine. Again locking eyes, I raised her hand to my mouth and kissed the back of it, holding it there a moment longer than good manners proscribed. Then, I dropped back yet another pace and slipped my hands from hers. I smiled, a sadder smile than previous, and turned to make my way back to the kitchen.

*Mon Dieu*, sometimes I am wicked!

## Five

Once I was sure the house slept, I slipped out to accomplish my usual errand. Myself, I find that I do not need sleep as much as other men. Unfortunately, even without the necessity of slumber, I was finding this chore more and more taxing and more and more necessary of late. Even with the ships coming to port as summer drew to a close, there weren't quite enough transient residents to sustain our needs. Calais is a small town. It is an English town, populated by transplanted Englishmen for nearly two hundred years. The French kings had tried to win it back since then, but had never met with success. The English dogs, with their devil's ways, have a tradition of dark sorcery from the time of *Le Mort Arture* that shores their forces beyond mere numbers.

A Frenchman on unspecified business at such late hours would not be dealt with lightly. I do not like to think of such things. I do not like to have English in control of my country. It worried me. It also worried me that I might have to resort to more deliberate enterprises, and soon at that. A city thief would be beaten, a highwayman hanged. That there was a difference had always perplexed me. This night, however, had been good. There were new ships at the docks, sailors with money in their hands and drink clouding their minds—money that was soon removed to my purse.

Returning in the small hours before Lauds, I crept up the stairs and through Mademoiselle's boudoir. I have learnt to walk quieter than *une souris* and can usually pass unheard across the most protesting old floor without great effort. As a child it was useful for thieving small bits from the pantry or cellar. As a young man it was useful for sneaking past sleeping husbands. The windows were thrown open to the roof and the summer breezes. I could hear Curran snoring softly out on the portico where we both had bedded down earlier that night.

I paused at the foot of Keiko's bed and watched her as she slept. She was curled around her little poppet, her face buried in the child's auburn curls and her arms protectively encircling the small body—two angels

entwined bathed in an ethereal twilight. They both looked safe, comfortable, as though this were the one place in the world where they had no care. I wondered if that was what it was like to sleep in your mother's arms. I had never been safe, not even as a child when I slept. Especially not when I slept! The hours between Compline and Lauds held terrors for me that still stalked my dreams.

I roused myself from my musings. My work for the night was not yet done and the house would begin to wake soon. I stole to the door to Keiko's laboratory. It occupied a small corner in the front portion of the upper floor and looked out onto the street below. Inside it was crammed with dibikos, tribikos, cucurbita, matula, ampula, kerotales, diopters and other far more arcane bits of things that were beyond my ken. It also held the cash box and accounts of the house.

It had been a bit of a problem when I found that she kept an account. I should have suspected it, most high born ladies did so. It was a habit drilled into them from their training to be mistresses of the manner. Even the illiterate had ways of tracking the goods and coins in their households. Fortunately, Keiko was not illiterate and kept her books in an elegant, flowing hand. It was hard, but not impossible, to copy. She also had a penchant for drawing series of stick figures on the page opposite where she kept the accounts. Arrogance is a sin whose punishments are often reaped in this life. I should have paid greater attention to those markings.

I had pulled the small chest where we kept funds and the accounts ledger from their hiding place in a locked drawer—I had no key to either, but that had never bothered me particularly—and begun the task of scraping out the previous notation so that I could make my own. I have keen ears, normally none can take me by surprise. But it is not an easy task to remove a line of ink from a page so that none can tell it had been done. It requires intense concentration. I blame this on my failure to hear Keiko come behind me. When she placed her hand on my shoulder, I stiffened and slowly looked up from my task.

"What are ye doing?" Her voice was soft with sleep, and strangely the question did not bear the timber of malice or accusation I would have expected.

"I lost money gambling, I need to cover my losses." It was as plausible a story as any—weak, but plausible.

I was standing at the tall table she used for her experiments and potions. In front of us was the glass paned window overlooking the



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darkened *rue*. I could see a hint of her reflection in the warped surface. Her face was not angry. She came forward, pressing her body against my back. "Ye lie." Again a statement, not an accusation!

She bent around me and placed her free hand on the page opposite the one I had been altering. "Do ye know what this is? I think not. This is writing, in Japanese, the language of my grandmother. It is, or should be, a match to the records on the other page. She taught me to keep my books in this manner, that way, if someone should alter the notations on this page," she placed her hand lightly on mine, then moved it back to the page with the strange writing, "I would know what had been changed by the entries on this page." She fell silent for a moment, most likely to make sure her words sunk in.

The moment she said the symbols were writing I had realized just how stupid I'd been. I knew I'd been discovered. I should have known that these were dual books. I'd seen the practice with merchants who used Hebrew numerals. *Putain!* The writing she used was not so unlike it that I should not have guessed what it was.

"Why are ye doing this? What do ye gain from it?" She pulled me around to face her. In the dim light, clad only in her shift, she looked like a bewildered seraph. "When I first discovered you were changing my entries, I was horrified. I was so radge. I was out to call the watch on ye, a thief in my own house. And then I thought, nae, I'd trap ye at your game, ye thinking ye were so clever. I'd let ye continue for a while and then shove the books under yer pompous French nose!" She drew back her hand and slapped me across the face. The blow stung, but the tears came to her eyes not mine. She sobbed, "You're nae stealing, ye bastard, you're adding. And you're doctoring the ledger and not just dumping money in, but reworking it so it shows we're spending less or that my faither sent more. Why?"

My tongue explored the inside of the cheek where she'd hit me. I contemplated how to best answer her. There was no good way to explain, she would be hurt and angry at someone, and most likely me, as I was in a position of default by proximity. "Your father wants you home. He sends barely enough for you to survive, and not in any fashion befitting a lady of your station. He delays what he sends, and sometimes sends nothing at all. I think he wants you to fail. Go to English France, study alchemy, a grand tour for a spoiled daughter safely protected by his vassals." I paused for a bit so she could follow me.

"But his people were dead before you set foot in my country. You are in a land of strangers, and the Scots have no more love for the English than I. You are playing at house miles from your native land with two men you call servants, with only a *petite femme* for chaperone, and he wants you home."

I had to very careful now. "But he doesn't want to order you home, he wants you to come begging 'Papa, rescue me' So that he can be your savior. And you will know he was right in telling you, you should not have come. That you were being used! He did tell you that, hmmm? So, he dribbles in just enough money that you will have to go on credit and when the dressmaker and the baker and your tutor start calling the markers due he will swoop in and save you, your knight errant."

Keiko bit her lower lip and looked stricken. He had probably said other things as well, before she even crossed the channel, and in his letters to her. I could imagine what they were, although as I retrieved the post from her solicitor and could have read them if I wished, I did not. I also guessed that she had some powerful need to show her father that she could do this. She was very proud. Keiko would have to be desperate to admit to her father that she could not survive on her own. I would never tell her that, of late, most of the monies sent by her father came by way of my skill.

"I think you want to stay here, in Calais, with me." Putting my hands on her shoulders, I continued in a soft, hopefully reassuring voice, "And you can pretend to be master over me, and I will pretend to be your faithful servant and we can keep pretending that we have a normal household while you study. And when you are ready to go, you can go and say 'I have done this thing.'"

"Why do ye think I want to stay? Because ye want a roof over your head? As long as I'm willing to put up with it, you're willing to use me! Is that what ye think I want?" Now she sounded angry, angry at me when she should be cursing her father. I did not want her angry at me.

A good defense is often a good offense...I pulled her to me and kissed her. She was angry. I could feel it in her body. She was almost vibrating with rage as she struggled to pull away from me. I held her tightly as the moments drifted by. Then, slowly, she gave in to the kiss.

Her mouth was sweet and firm as I slipped my hand from her shoulder to the back of her neck and slid the other down her spine. I could feel the warmth of her skin beneath the thin fabric. She smelled of strange flowers and the night sea breeze.

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She leaned into my body, causing some not unpleasant reactions, and I slipped my tongue between her teeth. She moaned. I lifted her slightly as I leaned back against the table, putting both of our weight on my legs. She dug under my shirt and began to trace the lines of my muscles with a touch so light it made me gasp a little each time she moved her fingers.

I didn't want to breathe, to let go of her. Finally she drew back from me. I sucked in air in ragged gasps and my body burned. When I moved to kiss her again she evaded me, kissing my chin instead. Again I tried to catch her lips with mine and again she drew aside, this time brushing my cheek. Then she moved her mouth lower, and rolled her tongue along my jaw. Slowly she worked her way along the line of my face.

Using my hands the best way I knew how, I explored the contours of her body, never lingering on one spot too long, and drawing murmurs of satisfaction for my efforts. She was soft and supple. Her kisses were driving me to distraction. I wanted her so bad it hurt. I buried my face in her hair and inhaled.

"Your ear," she whispered.

I was lost in her scent. "*Oui*, my ear." Then it struck me, *peste!* My ears! I stiffened. *Pas bon!*

She ran her finger along the outside of my right ear. "It's pointed." She sounded pleased with the discovery. I couldn't imagine why. She placed her lips just to the side of my left ear and whispered, "Have ye been hiding something else from me? Are ye Daoine Sith? They say the fairie have pointed ears. I've never met a fairie." Her breath sent little shivers down my insides.

I was almost prepared for the question, but not the excitement with which it had been asked. "*Oui*," I breathed my response, "half. My mother was a Frenchwoman. She died when I was so young. I have no memory of her. I know nothing of my father except that he was *fé*."

This time she traced the curve of it with her tongue. When she got to the tip Keiko drew it into her mouth and sucked on it slightly. The sensation robbed me of my power to speak, every nerve in my body throbbed. Releasing it slowly, she giggled, the sound tickled the fine hairs on my face. "My grandmother says *Yousei*, Elves, are very special men," she kissed my mouth lightly, "that it is very auspicious to know one—*shotaiken*," as she spoke her lips brushed mine, "for yer first time."

I was not prepared for either of those revelations. She did not seem unsure. I had assumed, I didn't know what I had assumed, but not that.

And special, never: Evil, a travesty, an abomination. No one had ever seen my mixed parentage as a good thing. "Why are they special?"

"Zengi." Again she giggled, like she had said a naughty thing.

"Zen-gi?" The word sounded made up, especially as I said it.

She walked her fingers up my side, causing my muscles to spasm. "The art of arousal."

I kissed her under her chin. Then I began a slow, deliberate descent of kisses down the side of her neck. "Like this?" I felt her hand course down my belly. I wanted to feel her touch on me more than I ever wanted anything. I don't know if I met her expectations but she was far beyond mine.

"Keiko?" It took a moment for me to realize neither of us had spoken. The name was accompanied by a rustling in the bedroom. No. Of course, the damnable little pet would choose this moment to wake up.

I tried to hold her as she drew back. "No, Keiko, don't go yet. Tell the brat to go back to sleep." She stepped away from me.

"Meg is nae a brat." She slapped my arm. "Ye are a very naughty *cheil*. An ill mannered, naughty sith who accosts fair maidens in their shifts in the middle of the night." A sly smile toyed at the edges of her mouth. "I'll have to teach ye some manners."

## Six

Stealing kisses became as much a part of my life as stealing money. Sometimes Keiko would surprise me with her passion—pulling me behind a door or a wall, and ravaging my throat and chest with petite bites. When I would become hard and frustrated she would dance away from me, laughing at my plight. Other times she would make me chase her for the briefest touch of her lips. I wasn't her servant, I was her plaything.

I said please so many times I forgot what it meant.

When I slept, and I slept less than usual even for me, her hands stoked my fantasies. I would find myself listening for her footsteps at night, hoping that they might bring Keiko to me. As winter approached, I was bound in hell by a wicked little lady—one I wanted but couldn't have. Were she to cry out against me, some might think she paid the price of being too independent, but that wouldn't stop them from throwing me in the stocks or worse. I tried, as much as I could, to remove myself from the temptation. It was not something I have ever been very good at.

I convinced Curran to go out with me for the evening, ostensibly to drink, but mostly so I didn't have to be in the house with her. "Why do yer let her torment yer like she does?" he'd managed to ask one of those unanswerable questions. Offering the only response that would suffer, I shrugged. "Yer need to understand lad, there are three creatures beyond rule...a mule, a pig, an' a woman. But only the woman thinks she can rule a man."

He was not helping my mood. Not wishing to endure his glare, I stared off into the tavern. *Mon Dieu*, what we called a tavern then. It was not much more than an open room with a dirt floor. A few planks stretched across barrels served as a table. If you were lucky, or had a strong arm like Curran, you might find yourself a stool. Children and dogs and poultry and pigs ran loose about our feet.

Sometimes, like tonight, you could secure a bit of sustenance other than adulterated wine. The bread, baked months ago, was so hard and moldy they'd cut it off with an ax. We tossed it in the soup, softening it and thickening the cold broth to a consistency of porridge. Insipid, monotonous, and not very filling, such sops were the common man's lot.

With a sigh, "I wouldn't kick her out of my bed for eating biscuits."

Curran snorted. "I can think of better things to eat in bed."

"So can I, but you're never willing." Curran kicked my shin and I had to lift my bowl from the table to keep it from spilling. For moments we were locked in identical glowers—eyes narrowed and lower lips pinched tense. Then Curran began to laugh and I to chuckle, "*Mon ami*, I think that you are entirely too vocal with your denials."

"I'm vocal? Yer just wanton, always coming after me. I can tell yer a thousand times no and yer'll come after me one thousand and one. Yer a miserable wretch to call a friend." Wiping the last of his supper from his chin with the back of his hand, "And to think, I'm here trying to give yer advice, and yer making jokes about me." Serious again, "What are yer to do about it? Tell me what's yer mind."

"I don't know." My stomach had turned so that what was in my bowl was no longer appetizing. Not that it ever truly had been. Setting it on the floor, for a time I watched the battle between a cur and a child for the remainder. A kick of my boot to the animal's flank left the gruel to the *enfant*. With a growl she set upon the bowl. Turning back to the Irishman, "I'm thinking that maybe I should do something. Deciding on how or what I want is the problem."

Elbows on the plank, chin on his knuckles, he considered my evasiveness for a bit. "Five frogs are sitting on a log. Four decide to jump off. How many are left?" Not waiting for me to respond, "Five. Why? Because there's a difference between deciding and doing."

Snapping, "If I wanted to be miserable, Curran, I would have stayed with her." I should be more forgiving, but damn it all, I was miserable. Tormented by teasing from her, frustrated beyond measure—I hadn't touched another woman or man in months. My whole life was wrapped around a croquette's finger. I was lunging on a line for the promise of a chase I'd not yet seen and might never. There was no need for him to remind me of it.

"Why are yer so cheesed off?" I'd stung him harder than I'd intended. "What have I done to yer."

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*Putain*, I hadn't meant to make him mad. Get him to change the subject, *oui*. Irritate him, *non*. Throughout it all, the only person who suffered with me was Curran.

Focusing on flotsam drifting about my cup, "I don't know why. Everything angers me of late."

"It is because yer lettin' herself get to yer. Stop yer fancies and concentrate on what yer have in yer hand. The lady is a lady, she'll only have yer as her lapdog so long as yer keep her fancy. And with naw nicker," rubbing his fingers together for the coins we didn't have, "ye'll naw keep it long."

"And reminding me of this is supposed to ease my mind?"

"Naw," he thumped my forehead with his finger as he smiled, "I just think I have to remind yer who yer are."

A shake of my head denied it. "That is a fine person indeed—bastard, not even really a human one, who has at one time or another violated most every commandment." In moments such as this I understood just what I was, not much of anything at all. Surviving by my wits and fairly indiscriminate about my associations, I would never be a respected member of society. Of course, many of the respected members of the estates I'd met were no less rouges than myself. They, however, had the money and the titles and the esteem that meant who they truly were didn't matter. "Why would you care whether I know I am Jules *le voleur*, rolling drunks and picking pockets, or whether I wish to believe I am the Prince of Siam?"

"Because I like Jules the scoundrel. The man who, even as he makes fun of me, makes me laugh at it. Yer wit is sharper than most men's steel. I've never seen a tongue that cut some overfed fishwife to the quick without the woman even knowing she's been wounded. If yer had half a loaf of bread yer would give me half of yer half...and mayhaps short yerself some. Then yer'd likely nick a bit of meat for us from beneath the butcher's nose. And all the time I'd be rolling with tears with yer barbs while yer taunted the man. I don't believe I'd find the Prince of Siam such fine company."

He was lying. But I liked that he would lie to me so. "You just say such things as you have no one else to say them to." Now I was smiling. It was a rare enough habit—it was surprising that, given my mood, Curran could bring me to it. "Were any of your countrymen to drift into this miserable hovel you would abandon me in the space of breaths."

"No lad, yer wrong on that. I prefer yer insufferable sulks to the company of near anyone else I know." I guess this is what it was like to have a friend. I had to guess as I'd never had one before. Survival and friendship did not often go hand in hand. "Yer and I, we understand each other. It's like I don't have to talk even. Yer just knowing me mind. I'd let yer have me back damn near anywhere."

"Really, here, now?" Even when I was feeling low, I just couldn't leave off the teasing. Not when I was teasing about sex. Particularly not when I was teasing Curran about sex with another man. "Throw you over the table...it would certainly take my mind off other distractions. Although, like as not, we'd garner some attention, but I'd take your back here."

"Why," a dark smirk gracing his mouth, Curran leaned in, "why is it I cannaw have one serious conversation witcha, without yer making a remark like that? Yer tell me, 'cause I sure as scone don't understand."

"When you wander before the hunter's sights, *mon ami*, prepare to be shot." Shrugging, "I do it, I hazard I do it, because it's all you'll let me have." I don't think I'd ever admitted as much before him. Backing from the statement, "And I'm not one for serious conversations. They get me into far too much trouble."

"Aye, yer a troublemaker, yer are. I've know many a man in me life who was too afraid of trouble. Men so afraid of a shadow they would rather kill a man they didn't know than walk away from the one they did." That black stare was years away from me. "If yer lucky yer learn that yer don't have to die for someone else before yer do. Yer don't have ter live the life someone else forced on yer." Shaking it off, "I respect yer for that. I don't even know if I can put into words how much. Yer my friend. My best friend. I'd stay in this miserable hamlet just because yer were here." His hand found my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. His gaze wandered beyond me again—this time I sensed he was looking ahead not at the past. "That said, lad, I don't think I'm going to be staying at this table much longer."

"Pardon?"

A wink followed by the flash of a stunning smile. "What do you call the pretty ones? The girls with all the mischief in their eyes?" Aha, so there it was—abandoned for the lie.

I thought for a moment. Bringing my mug to my lips, I growled over the rim, "Expensive."



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With a snort at my joke, "Well, den an expensive one has been eying me since we began our little chat. I'm thinking I may have someone to keep me body warm tonight." As I opened my mouth to rib him again, Curran reached forward, pinching my lips together. "Don't yer start there...something a little softer suits me fancy." Then his hand slid to my cheek. One of those warm friendly touches I'd had so few of in my life. There was no way I could ever tell him what fires it started under my skin. His eyes were so earnest, and so pained. "I canny tell yer how to live yer life, Jules. But if yer ever take one ting I've said to heart take this: yer don't need that wagon. Yer far better than herself or her like ever deserves."

"Well," tipping the cup in a toast, "here's to you getting what you deserve tonight. You'll have to fully account for your time. It may be the only soft sport I'll see for awhile."

"Just remember, women are shy and shame prevents them from refusing a man. There's many here yer'd not get too much resistance from. Yer a fine looking lad, it's too bad yer canny see it in yourself." As he spoke he stood and came to stand beside me. "I'll mark every moment and give you a detailed telling." Leaning down, whispering in my ear, "We wouldn't want yer to forget how to use it, after all."

Pest, I'd be left to drinking on my own. Set back to sulking, "You're far too late on that." Being saddled with naught but my own mind for company was hardly appealing. Watching Curran stalk an all too willing victim, that was not appealing, either. The little touches he dropped on her arm, the whispers in her ear, they gave me more reasons to be sullen. It reminded me far too much of what I wanted than I was willing to stomach. And, now my wine was gone. What a miserable evening.

*Peu importe*, I had work to do on any account.

Abandoning Curran to his entertainment, I returned to the villa to retrieve my pistol and rapier. It was not necessarily in compliance with the law to carry arms through the city, especially as I had no patent nor escorted anyone of station. But with the whine of early winter stealing through the darkness the wolves were roving closer with each passing day. Soon they would not hesitate to stalk the marshes. Sometimes they even found their way past the walls and into the twisted village lanes. Prudent men armed themselves, a reasonable excuse for my purpose.

It was late. The house should have been abed and I wouldn't have to deal with Keiko's taunting. I let myself in through the front door, quietly as I am wont to do, and made my way through the dark front room.

Firelight shone through the doorway to the kitchen, we'd banked the hearth before we left, but the glow was more than enough to light my way. I was about to step through into the kitchen when I was stopped by a wondrous sight.

The ever present fire burned in the hearth, making the kitchen the warmest room in the villa. A large copper tub had been dragged before it. Keiko sat on one of the benches, one foot in the tub, fine wisps of steam caressing her bare legs, the light of the fire moving over her naked body like lover's hands.

She had been bathing, no small task given that the fire couldn't fully banish the chill from the room. One had to be very committed to bathing when it was this cold. At that moment she was committed to a different endeavor, her legs were spread, one leg curled on the bench, back against the wall for support. Her eyes were closed, her mouth was open, and one hand was exploring the soft, downy space between her legs. The other was rubbing against her breasts; her tiny nipples were hard and pink. A delicate finger traced the edge of her sex.

All the blood in my body rushed to one point. It happened so fast it was painful, and it took me a moment to comprehend that I was touching myself. I was torn between wanting to rush to her and pin her underneath me and just wanting to watch her pleasure herself.

She turned her head to the side and a few stray hairs fell across her face. The exploring finger slid inside her. I had never watched a woman touch herself. No matter how much I wanted to be inside her, I couldn't break the moment I was witnessing. I loosed my belt and pulled myself free. *Mon Dieu*, I was hard! I ran my hand over my shaft as she withdrew her finger. She was covered in her own moisture. Caressing her clit with the wetness in ever tighter circles, her breath started to come in little sighs.

I wasn't fairing much better. I pulled back my foreskin and worked the moisture forming at the tip around my head. My entire body screamed at me to go to her and ram myself into that precious little box, bury my length to my balls, but I couldn't tear my eyes from the almost silent drama before me.

Now two fingers were inside her. Keiko's other hand worked its way down her body and she began to stroke herself inside and out. She was giving herself over to the pleasure of the moment. Her cries, although feverish, were soft. And then she opened her eyes. She looked directly at me. She saw me, one hand gripping the door frame for support, the other

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stroking myself. We both froze for a moment, then ever so slowly her lips parted and her tongue roamed the outline of her lips, and a third finger found its way into the dampness.

The back of my legs tingled and my thighs tightened. I slowed myself down, let her see what I was doing to myself, what she was doing to me. I was so engorged that my fingers almost couldn't touch, and when I pushed my cock back against my belly it reached past my navel. I knew I was bigger than most men—I wondered how much experience she'd had with the sizes of men, if she appreciated what she saw.

She stared. The fingers exploring inside her moved deeper and she began to work herself harder. Her moans were becoming more vocal and her hips were straining. The burning pulled at the base of my spine, I was going to cum. I probably couldn't have stopped myself if I tried. Each of her breaths ended in a small cry, she raised her hips and her body shook violently. For me a fire started just behind my balls and burnt itself up my shaft to explode over my hand and the flags.

I strode to her and lifted her from the bench, pressing my mouth into hers, my thighs against hers. Her silken skin, where I lay against her, revived me. "Jules, nae, I'm sorry." She pushed against me, forcing me back, turning away and covering her chest with her arm. I persisted, kissing her again.

She broke from the kiss. "Ye willnae hurt me."

"I don't want to hurt you." I moved her hand aside and bent down taking her tiny nipple into my mouth. The steam mixed with her natural scent and the musky taste of sex. I slid my hand down her belly, little beads of water cascading from my touch. As I reached between her legs, she grabbed my wrist.

"Gonnae-no."

I stopped suckling, but I did not remove my hand. She'd baited me long enough. The little passion play I'd just witnessed convinced me she was not some naïve child playing at love as she pretended. I wanted her and tonight we would stop playing. "No, I'm not going to stop. This is what you wanted, when you were watching, *no?*"

Something cold broke behind her eyes. "*Cha do lorgadh cla`r!*" Her voice was low and menacing. I could guess what the words meant even if I didn't understand them.

I smiled—a wolfish sort of smile. We weren't going to play anymore. I was putting that charade to an end. She stared into my eyes as

if she were waiting for a sign. Without breaking her gaze, I resumed my downward explorations.

And then I felt it...the barest tickling in the back of my throat. I shook it off; a bit of dust in the air. But then the tickle became a swarm, a thousand tiny feathers bubbling up from my gut. I pushed back from her grabbing my throat. I gagged, my stomach heaving as I dropped to the floor, catching myself on the edge of the table. I looked up at her. Keiko was no longer trying to cover herself, just staring at me with an intense, but oddly distracted, fascination.

Opening my mouth to plead for what I don't know, a torrent of small frogs and roaches ran over my tongue and erupted onto the floor. The sea of vermin spilled toward Keiko. She did not move as waves of tiny creatures that broke against her feet and dissolved into iridescent foam. I vomited up thousands of the foul things. With each breath that I took more would fight their way up to release from my insides. Keiko waded towards me, awash in the sparkling froth.

She squatted down before me, taking my chin in her hands and forcing me to look into her eyes. Her body was coated with the powder of a million butterfly wings. "Dinnae think ye are ever safe from my wrath. Dinnae think ye are ever beyond my reach. Everything ye eat or drink, the reek from the fire, even the clothes on yer back, could hide one of my potions. The next time ye cross me it may be scorpions, vipers and venomous spiders, spilling from yer mouth. I will nae buck with ye until I say it's time." She let go and I began to retch again. I heard her grab her garments and leave. Before she reached the doorway she paused. "And if ye keep acting like a rutting beastie that will be never."

## Seven

I set my forehead to the cold floor, waiting for the convulsions to subside. Tiny feet tickled the back of my hand and I could hear the slap of the frogs as they scurried to find cover and warmth. A few sizzled in the fire, having mistaken it for refuge. My gut ached. I was shaking. Gaining my knees, I resolved never to bait that woman again. A resolution I quickly discarded, I would have revenge on her for this. And what potion had she poisoned me with? No, it was better not to anger Keiko, I couldn't be sure what she'd done to me, what she could do next. But I couldn't let her win this. She had wanted me, I was sure of that. *Diable m'ont* if I was going to stay in that house with her one more moment—that petite *plote* could fend for herself.

My thoughts spun out in like manner as I gathered my arms and set forth. It was to the highway this night. I would need money...more so now, if I was to leave. My last few sorties at the docks had been less than fruitful.

There was only one passable surface road through the marshes surrounding Calais, that ran past Fort Nieulay, with its sluice gates so that the land could be flooded for leagues around the city. The sluggish river Hames, which could be forded at low tide, and the river Nieulay—swift, wide and impassible—snuggled against the town walls. A single, long wooden bridge road ran to the farm lands beyond and, of course, that was a toll bridge.

I slipped out of the city by way of the docks, which lined the river Nieulay where it spilled into the sea. Sneaking about the rocky beach, I would cut cross-country once I reached the marshes. It was treacherous passage for a man on foot, I would not have wanted to bring an army across it, and the new moon shed little light to guide me. It was cold, this winter would be harsh. My breath sparkled in the chill air and the thin rime crackled beneath my weight. At least winter prevented the ground from being overly soggy, although it still managed to seep through the

sides of my boots, soaking my woolen socks. A lot of good they were doing me.

I headed in the general direction of the road towards Nieulay. It would be too taxing to take a man on the bridge road. It was narrow and elevated and afforded no protection from view. You could hear a man clumping across the planks for leagues around. Although it led to the key garrison in the area, the English patrolled infrequently. They were certain of their hold on Calais. Their bewitchment of the sluice gates would cause the land around the fort to flood if the enchantment was tripped by an advancing army. It was the only thing that kept the French from retaking the city on New Year's Eve near a hundred years past. If it hadn't been for the sorcery, the English would have been caught drunk and dead handed in their celebration. As it was scores of France's sons had drowned that night.

As I neared the track, I caught sight of a man not too far distant from me. By the way he was shoving his shirt back into his breeches he must have stepped from the road to accomplish an errand of nature. He was alone, and from what I could see fairly well dressed: French boots, winter cape, wide brimmed hat pulled low over his ears against the cold. I would use blade over barrel tonight. A sparking match would alert him to my presence. Creeping towards him, I drew my sword from my belt, and made ready to waylay the traveler. I was as cautious as I could be in my approach. But as I was almost upon him my foot found a brittle twig. The snap shot loud across the winter silence.

I stood. Surprise was gone. He spun away from me and drew his rapier, then settled into a very relaxed *en guard*. The man was right-handed. I favored my left. This gave me the advantage. Most right-handed men would not be used to facing opponents whose target was closed to them. Depending upon how good he was, the advantage might be slim. I was no master duelist and I was betting that he was not, either.

I closed the distance between us, choosing to take a less formal stance. This was no practice in a cleared field. This was a fight in a frozen bog at night. Uneven terrain, a coating of hoar-frost and bramble thickets would not allow for the niceties of formal footwork.

He beat my blade off to the left and made for an attack. I parried and he avoided my riposte by *degagé*, continuing his thrust towards my chest. He was centered on my chest. I was off line. My riposte was a *coupé* over his blade, combined with a judicious step to the side, otherwise known as a removal of target. The move countered his

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avoidance of my blade, avoided his and forced him to parry again. His mistake in that parry was one often made by right-handers inexperienced against fencing left; he parried me high inside to quart. I rode his parry with my blade and sliced into his left bicep.

By my calculations, our skill or lack thereof was relatively equal. My off-handed advantage was now rather well established.

Even without the addition of a dusting of snow, my fencing style had been described as that of *un chien lunatique*. Father Renault, my fencing tutor, had been driven to distraction by my refusal to refine my movements. I had always argued that the point was not to overcome your opponent with an elegant display, but to kill him. I would never face a master. If I were to I would be dead, either at such a man's hands or because I would be hanged for attacking someone of noble birth. Finesse at my level was only good to a point. Power I would leave to the Italians. Speed was better than either, and I was fast. A little bit of grace and a great deal of speed was a good marriage for me.

The companion to this mix was a refusal to allow my opponent to think. The best parries are distance and removal of target. I was often willing to sacrifice a small wound in order to place myself inside the defense of my opponent and deny him those. It allowed for a more body contact form of sword play, less of an art and more of a brawl. It would work against all but the best. I had enough sense to run from the best.

We circled each other, looking for weakness. I jumped towards him and lunged. If executed better the attack might have earned the title of *balestra* or perhaps *patinando*. As it was I barely kept my balance on the rough, frozen ground, stopping my plunge to the earth with my right hand. His parry was equally graceful. A hurried retreat, foiled by a root, and his errant blade swept mine out of line as he fell on his ass.

He struggled to his feet, retreating as he did so. I recovered, scrambling forward, taking the distance he just gained. Then I lunged, screaming and binding his blade with mine, pushing it above my head to cinq...not a traditional move. From within the lunge, I balled my right hand and drove it into his groin. Fighting fair is for gentlemen. As my opponent collapsed in pain, I slammed my pommel into his temple.

He slumped to the side. I thought him unconscious. But when I knelt to check he grabbed my right hand. I still held the sword in my left. Jumping up and back, I put all my weight behind the blade and drove it through the small hollow at the base of his collar. His hands reached up, trying to pluck the metal from his throat, slicing his gloved palms as he

struggled. The blood froze along the edge of the blade and where it bubbled from his mouth. Gouts of earth were churned as his feet hammered against the ground. He was pinned. Now he was dead, it might take a bit for him to actually die, but he was dead.

I watched and waited until he stopped struggling, then yanked on the sword. It didn't move. I wiggled it and tried again. It didn't move. I grabbed the pommel with both hands and pulled. It did not move.

I couldn't loose my sword from where it had lodged in his neck. It felt as though it were wedged in the man's spine or the ground or both. I cursed myself. I had to free the blade. I couldn't leave it there to be found. The hilt bore the McPherson crest, the stupid little fighting cat, it could be traced back to Keiko, then to me. Placing my foot on the dead man's face, I bore down on it with my weight and pulled the rapier at the same time. I heard the sickening crunch as my boot heel broke his skull and then worse, the brittle, metallic crack of the breaking blade.

I hacked up an errant beetle and spat it out. This was not a good evening. The *fortè* and bell of the rapier had all the engraving. The weapon was a loss but the lower foible would not be traceable back to me. At least I could take the dead man's blade. I'd have to leave his body where it lay. Hopefully the wolves would find him before some other traveler stepped off the road on a similar errand. I rounded up the remainder of his possessions: A serviceable wheel lock pistol, unwound but with key—I was lucky I hadn't been shot—a decent sum of coin, two small rings and a sealed parcel. I had come to rob him. Just because he was dead didn't make me any less inclined to do so. If it wasn't so damnably cold I might have stripped his body. His clothes could have been sold. I did take his boots.

As it was my fingers were going numb inside my thin gloves. His had been better quality but were ruined from his vain struggle to cheat death. My legs and feet were soaked inside my jacks, my clothes were too thin, and my cloak had needed repair for some time. *Peste*, I wished I could have afforded a horse of any constitution. The night was freezing and I still had to walk back to town. I looked across the forbidding terrain. There was no help for it but to get started.

By the time I reached our house the fire had burned down to nothing but embers. The kitchen was cold and empty and I was muddy, soaked and shivering. Curran had not made it home that night. I stoked the hearth to warm the room and retrieved a candle so that I could review the several letters in the bundle I had made off with. They were English. I



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couldn't read all of it but I understood enough to guess their import. Military: rambling paragraphs that I half understood and lists of numbers apparently of troops. Nor were these outgoing field reports of battle, but rather the orders for generals and promises of reinforcements for the men on the line.

I'd intercepted my man before he had reached Fort Nieulay, that had to be where he had been headed, and he had to have come off a ship from England earlier that evening. Morning was fast approaching and when the daily business of commerce and rumor began it would be clear that the courier had made France but had not arrived at his destination. The earliest they would start their search, I assumed, would be mid-morning. Eventually they would find the body, *sans communiqués*, and would turn the town inside out searching for his murderer.

Massaging my face, trying to drive away a building headache, I heard Keiko treading on the floor above and descending the stairs. Her skirts rustled as she entered the kitchen, "I couldnae sleep. I have been waiting for ye to come home." She drew out the bench and sat beside me at the table. I spread my fingers and glared at her between them when she touched my arm. She had dressed, and combed out her hair, but her sleepless evening was evident in the blue stains under her eyes. It looked like she'd been crying a good part of the time as well. Damn her, she was still beautiful. "Jules, are ye alright? Did something happen?"

"*Non, merci*. I killed a man this evening. *Et vous?*"

Her face had been pale and drawn from lack of sleep, the news subtracted another shade. "What do ye mean, ye killed a man?"

The broken rapier clattered as I threw it on the table between us. "The remainder resides in a soldier not far from the English fort." I tossed her one of the letters. "Read it! Tell me," I rambled as she read, "how long you think I have, until they hang me as a spy? I am not local. I am French. I am not even fully human. There are men in this town who know by what enterprise I have kept us fed. I cannot say that their honor is such that they would not sell me to the guard with little persuasion." I took one of her cold hands and kissed it. She was shaking. "What do you think, *mon amour?*"

"Do ye know what this says?" Placing the letter on the table, she covered it with her palm, trying to hide the words. Her other hand bore down on mine...painfully, now that my fingers were beginning to thaw.

"I can read it well enough to make an educated guess."

"They'll be looking for ye."

"No," denying it I shook my head, "*oui*, eventually...they'll be looking for a military spy, not a cut purse. I have some time."

She picked up the broken blade. "Jules, he was a courier, carrying military intelligence. Ye left half the blade in the man." Her voice was soft, patient, like she was trying to explain a difficult concept to a rather thick child. "If he were just some rich man, well, his family wouldnae have the money. But, the soldiers they'll bring a sorcerer, and they'll use magic to find ye."

I rubbed my temples with the heels of my palms. She was right. "*Viens m'enculer!* How long would you guess?"

"They'll have to send to Lille if they want a sorcerer...or...they'll come to Veurmant. He has potions that would serve. Ye have to go. Do ye have someplace ye can go?"

I thought for a moment, chewing my lower lip, "*Oui*, I can go to Dieppe. I've been there before."

She gathered the correspondence and the two rings which I'd set beside it. The money she left where it lay. "Where do ye take the things ye wish to be rid of?"

"There's a man named Samuele. He has a shop, along the wall, near the gates. Look for the pawn broker's sign. He has ways of disposing of objects you should not be in possession of. I've done him favors. Tell him it's for me and he'll give you a fair price for the rings. You can use the money to buy your passage home."

"And how can I get word to you in Dieppe?"

"Samuele's sister, Joaia, is in Dieppe. Her husband is a goldsmith. He's told me about her that she does favors for him sometimes. I have delivered items to his brother-in-law, Joseph, before for him. I would not intrude on her family, Joseph does not know what Samuele does, but I could get a message there. I won't stay there for very long."

She stood up, then sat down again. "Hit me."

"What?"

"When they come to find ye, I have to tell them why ye've gone. And I cannae just say 'he ran off.' They wouldnae believe me, and they'd make me tell. I'm going tell them ye robbed me, about earlier, or, or some of that. That ye been threatening me, and I was too scared to tell anyone about ye. A good bruise on my face, a ripped dress, and a few tears, and they should believe me." She rubbed her eyes. "The tears I have already."

"I have not ripped your dress."

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She took my hand in hers and placed it at the neckline of her bodice. "Go on, do it."

I gathered the material in my hand and yanked downward. The seam gave way at the arm and it hung down, exposing her shift and stays.

"And..." She closed her eyes. My backhand caught her across the cheek and knocked her off the bench. Even given how angry I'd been with her earlier, there was no satisfaction in it. I knelt down to help her, and she pushed me away. She was crying.

"Nae, ye must go now. I will get word to ye in Dieppe. Go!"

I knew I'd never see Keiko again. By the end of the day I would be a known spy, a wanted criminal. I could never come back. Kneeling on the floor beside the only woman who could say she had bested me, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her farewell.

The first blue tinge of dawn was on the morning as I reached the docks. There were blessed few hours until day's full break. I could hear someone approaching in the cold, grey streets. None should be searching yet, but caution would still serve me best. Stepping into a gap between two ramshackle buildings, I held my breath. It would not do to be spotted by the fog slipping between my lips which this chill morning had brought on.

Regular falls indicated an easy gate; someone cautious but relaxed. Flush against the clapboard wall, offering as little of my frame to view as possible, I waited. My lie was not perfect but it would have to suffer. He passed the mouth of the alley and wary eyes shifted in a quick scan. This was someone as used to the streets as myself. Pausing, turning towards me, he settled his shoulders showing he was no prey. Pest, I had been noted, *pas bon*. Then I blew out my breath. The cut of his hair, the tall, lanky frame, the way he held his body ready for action—Curran. Blessed Marie, I wouldn't have to go without seeing him.

His guard dropped and he stepped forward. No doubt he'd recognized me as well. I grabbed his arm and hauled him into the alley with me. My palm across his mouth, my finger against my lips, told him to maintain silence. Pulling my hand away, "Jules, what's wrong?" His tone was hushed and his eyes concerned.

There was no time for preamble. "I killed a soldier tonight." How did I get myself into these things? Life had gotten so good. Yet again I'd ruined it. "Soon enough the watch will be looking for me. I have to leave. I need to be as far from Calais as I can manage before dawn is full upon us."

Nodding, thinking, "Wait here, I'll collect me things. I'll go witcha." No questions, Curran just understood.

"*Non*," for the first time in my life I had a friend who completely understood me and I had to abandon him, "you cannot come. If we both go, it will draw too much attention. And I can move faster by myself." There was so much I wanted to tell him and no time to do so. I'd wasted far too much already, but I couldn't leave him without saying *adieu*. "See that Meg is taken care of and that Keiko gets safely on her way home." I put my hand to his cheek. Both were so cold. "*Mon ami*, I need you to do these things for me. Then come find me if you wish. I've told Keiko where I can receive word. If I must leave Dieppe before you come, I'll leave word for you. I'll leave word wherever I go." I'd lost too much time already. "You're my only friend. I'll wait as long as I can mange." If I said goodbye it would be final and I could not stomach that. "Until I see you again, take care of yourself."

As I stepped away, Curran grabbed me and pulled me into a bear of an embrace. "Yer be safe," he hissed in my ear, "I'll come find yer, I promise. A promise is a debt of the soul, one that must be honored. Yer like me brother an' I'd bloody rather die than see 'arm come to yer." Then he pushed away. "Go on now, get. Godspeed."

For a moment we stood, staring at each other. It was if my mind refused to accept what must be done. I opened my mouth to say something more and was stopped by the pained look in his midnight eyes. Neither of us would have the strength to do as we must if I said one thing more. One last, sad smile shared between us and I turned and fled down the alley and from Calais and all I had.

*Mon Dieu*, I did not want to go.

## Eight

I left Calais by the same route as I had taken at the start of that ill-fated evening. By foot, avoiding the main road, it was a cold and wet journey of nearly four days. I was well past Nieulay by that day's break, and as far beyond it as I could manage by nightfall. Even though I didn't need sleep in the same way of most men, I had to push myself to not drop and was less than a third of the way by the time I crawled into an abandoned hovel and collapsed from sheer exhaustion. Thankfully the ruin was not infested by *unsidhe*, or spirits or undesirables of the more human and/or animal kind.

With a day's head start, and calculating that even if everything went badly and they found the dead soldier early on, it would still take at least another day for the English to determine who they were looking for. Then they would have to spread their resources looking in all directions as they couldn't be sure which way I'd run. I guessed that they would concentrate on searching routes that led towards French held lands harder than the road to Dieppe, which was English territory.

By the end of the second day, I gave myself a rest and slowed my pace some, even taking a shared bed in a public house late that night. I had seen no sign of the English soldiers being on alert. I'd even managed to acquire a small sum of coin along the way. The soldier's dog lock proved a very useful piece of equipment in my profession. A hammer drawn back on a clockwork pistol was far more pressing a menace than an unlit match and a threat. If I had a horse I would have been truly a knight of the road. As it was I was only so much of a padder. *Pest*, with the ten Aungells and three Unties I had taken from the courier, I was damn near a rich one.

Once I made the city I sought lodging in a house where I had stayed before on my errands for Samuele. Run by a one-time whore with a bit more brains than most, when youth abandoned her she had opened her own house with the backing of some gentlemen. She had been pretty once. Blonde and blue-eyed—a typical Norman girl with an abundant

figure treated by life, like most of us at the bottom of the social order, harshly. Her foresight and industry would see her through her old age, now marking itself in the lines on her face and the gaps in her smile.

The lodgings were seedy enough that it would take more than just the routine roust of undesirables for Lisette to give over one of her tenants. As nothing reputable occurred in her quarters, even were the watch to persuade her to give over a lodger, she was known for giving the hunted fair warning to remove themselves before she did so. It was safe enough to take a bed in her louse-filled garret for a short time. Truly, I had more to fear from the other lodgers and rats than the English soldiers. I could have afforded a better room lower down the stairs but I didn't want to advertise my newfound wealth, stashing it instead behind a loose board in the wall.

Once settled, I made my way to Joaia's home. Her husband, Joseph, was not happy to see me. Joseph was not fond of Samuele. I had spent enough time in both men's company to know why. Samuele was a Jew because he'd been born one, and not because he cared one way or another about religion or politics or anything else for that matter. He lectured me often enough that having an opinion on either was bad for business. My staunch Catholicism and English hatred would not get me ahead in life. According to Samuele, if you stood in the middle of the road, either side was open to escape. I thought it meant you stood twice the chance of getting hit by the contents of a chamber pot.

Joseph was not so lax. Only his love for Joaia and her love for her younger brother kept him from tossing me from his step on sight. Given their customs, I couldn't speak with her without him chaperoning, and I was fairly confident that he would be very unsympathetic to my plight. I don't think his wife ever told him where her brother obtained the goods in the packages I had delivered for him. So I had lied and told him that Samuele had sent me on business that would take some time and might send for me. I let them know where they could leave word for me.

I would like to say that I went on with my life, moved forward, but truth be told I moped. A lot! Lisette even took to giving me errands for her acquaintances to keep me out from under her feet, claiming that if she did not, she would have to pay someone else to drop me in the harbor as I was becoming insufferable.

To make the time pass I helped her with the fall quarter evictions, dumping the persons and pitifully sparse possessions of lodgers who couldn't afford the meager rent into the streets. When a patron got too

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rough with one of her girls, it fell to me to teach him some manners. At her urging I took up with a man who said he could get us horses so we could take to High Law. He was hung before anything came of it. I would throw rocks at the carrion crows harrying his corpse each time I passed through the city gates. It kept me in bed and bread. With winter coming on it was good that I did not have to invade my little hoard for living. I would need it later when the season grew hard and men were reduced to eating mice and straw if they couldn't afford better. Sometimes even if you could pay there was nothing to buy.

I thought of Keiko often and it made me miserable. I have never been so taken by a woman. I sorely missed Curran and the easy friendship we had. *Pest*, I even missed Meg and that unstoppable sea of chatter. The slate stone walls of the Arques-La-Bataille brooded on the western cliffs staring down on Dieppe, as sullen and gloomy as the winter skies—the frequent rains and bruised blue clouds that hid the sun from sight fit my mood to perfection. I would wander through the church of St. Jacques with its saints and side chapels and tower and flying buttresses or the newer, smaller St-Rémi built near the time of my birth, and muse over what could have been.

Not that there ever could have been much. I was no fool to believe that there was a future with Keiko. Even if she had dallied with me that was all it would have been...a dalliance, a flight. *Mon Dieu*, even if she had wanted to take me back to Scotland with her, and even if I had wanted to go, I would have been a pet to be kept waiting in the back halls when her husband's back was turned. And she would have to marry either a blind man or a fool for him not to recognize the situation and put an end to it.

My thoughts of Curran would always be kept close to myself. My dreams of late were often filled with him. I would no more hazard losing him by the telling than losing my life by falling on a sword. Truth, it meant so much to me to have a friend that I would sacrifice almost anything to keep him as such...even if it meant denying myself forever. Near every day I would inquire of Joaia if the Irishman had been seen. It became so much of a habit that she need only shake her head upon sighting me and I would know there was no word.

I worked the harbor and the market set along the quay, Lisette's patronage smoothing the way. What money I took, aside from a pittance needed to maintain my miserable existence, I stashed with the rest behind the wall. Most nights after I had made my rounds I sat alone in my room

playing mumbley peg. The repetitive act of flipping my knife off the back of my wrist and seeing if I could bury the point in exactly the same spot time and time again was somehow soothing to my broken heart. Not so for the lodger below me. After repeated banging on the ceiling did not quiet the repetitive thunk he had finally come to my room to insist I desist in the practice. I put the stiletto through his wrist and told him *va chez le diable*.

Almost a month had passed and I was still as miserable as when I arrived. Wandering in the shadow of St-Rémi, I noted a scuffle towards the middle of a *rue*. I had spent the afternoon at Mass, as it was the feast of St-Jude, and I had nothing better to do until evening. Two ruffians were harassing a pair of young boys. Goodwives were hurrying off the street, shepherding their children with their skirts. A trio of merchants raised their eyes then looked away, continuing with their bargaining. *Bourgeoisie* gentlemen were pretending nothing was happening as they passed on. That was a good idea. This was nothing I needed to get involved in.

One child was in the sewer cut down the middle of the narrow lane, he was crying. The other had been forced against the bricks by the two men who were trying to tear a package from his grasp. He was screaming for help. Neither boy could be more than seven or eight. Why did I care? How many times had I cried out and no one had helped me? That was just the way things were, after all. Life is hard, life is unfair; the law forbids the rich and the poor equally from sleeping under bridges.

I looked back. The boy with the package had dropped it but they weren't letting him be. Brown hair curled on his shoulders, wide blue eyes, his little lip trembling; a pretty little boy in apprentice's clothes. Too pretty for his own good. Ah, *Putain*, I couldn't make myself walk away.

Leaning against the wall, mustering all the careless bravado I could manage, I pulled my stiletto from its sheath and began to pare my nails with its sharp edge. I'd have felt better if I had my rapier, but I was of no station to be that well armed in public. My pistol was snuggled in the small of my back, hidden by my winter cloak. While not the most convenient place should I require its service, it was better than not having it at all. I called out my challenge. "So you like to play with little boys then?" My tongue traced the bottom edge of my teeth.

The taller of the two looked over his shoulder. "*Occupe-toi de tes oignons!*" He spat as he returned to his entertainment.



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*Pest*, he was ugly. I wasn't about to mind my own business. "*Mon Dieu*, if my ass looked anything like your face, *j'aurais honte de chier*." That got his attention. He turned on me. Tall, bulky but flaccid, I'd guess he spent most of his nights sliding down the throat of a bottle. It showed in the red spider webs crawling across his nose and cheeks, in the sunken hollow cast of his eyes. And, *Putain*, he was wearing the colors of the city guard, criminals to protect the city from criminals.

He advanced, wiping his nose on his sleeve. "I said, move along."

"And I said you were an ugly son of a whore." I straightened and took a step into the street. "Now that we've cleared that up, why don't you quit playing ring round the rosies with *les enfants* and find something more odious to occupy yourself with?" I spun the blade in my hand and gestured at his chest with the tip before sliding it into its sheath. "Aren't there merchants you could extort? Whores who haven't paid their fees? Drunks who need to be rolled? A *hôtel* to be roused, no?"

His compatriot was starting to pay attention to our exchange. He still held the child by the sleeve but the man was distracted. "*Votre ami* seems to like them young and pretty." I waved my right hand, indicating the thinner, shorter man. Lank brown hair dropped over a pinched faced scarred by the pox. He smiled. A line of rot marched across the top of his teeth just under the gums. "Tell me, *Monsieur*, do you like it when they scream or do you cover their mouths so you don't have to hear them plead when you fuck them?" That wiped the smile from his mouth.

He released the boy who slid down the wall away from his assailant. "You need to learn some manners." His voice was as rotten as his teeth.

"Manners I have...it's sense I lack." Slowly I began to retreat from the pair, drawing them towards me, away from their forgotten prize. The boys were just standing there, their mouths agape. *Putain!* Talk about lack of sense. "Idiots!" I yelled at the children. "*Déface!*" They ran.

Fat man looked as though he wanted to give chase, so I spit in his face. It hit him just below the eye and left a slimy trail down his cheek. His friend sucked on his tongue, laughing, showing those disgusting teeth. "Louis," he cackled, "I think he wants to play with you, eh? He's pretty enough, little red-headed French boy. You think it goes all the way down?" From his accent he was English by birth.

Louis growled as I spread my hands and smiled and took another step back. I watched his eyes, not his body. Look for it. Wait for it. There, the burning snap of decision flashed in the big man's mind and I

bolted. *Mon Dieu*, there were two of them. I may have been insane but I wasn't stupid.

I ran out of the street into a larger thoroughfare, sliding, catching myself with my hand as I rounded the corner and slid in the slush covered muck, scrambling forward. I shot in front of a wagon, the mismatched bays rearing and skittering as I dove beneath their hooves and lit out into the rabbit's warren of the city. Dieppe, like most towns, was a maze of narrow alleys, switchbacks, blind turns and dead ends. Narrow houses leaned against each other for support. Laundry was strung from window to window, blocking the thin winter sun, and chamber pots were thrown carelessly into the dim streets to freeze in the gutters. Men and women with nothing better to occupy their time loitered in doorways. Displaced farmers, beggars, vagrants, thieves choked the city. Come winter, people would die in the streets and the survivors would step over their corpses without noting their passing.

The driver lashed out at me with his whip as I ran past, cursing, in English, my parentage. If he only knew! Behind me the guardsmen were yelling for me to stop or for someone to seize me. I wasn't about to obey, nor would most men on the streets hinder my flight to help the watch. I ducked into another narrow alley, jumping a rag-picker's cart, landing on my feet and still moving. I could hear the squelch of their boots in pursuit. One of them was already falling behind. I'd bet the dice it was Louis. His breathing retreated in the distance as I ran dodging first left then right, trying to shake my pursuers. Finally the fat man's wheeze died behind me. Now only the scarred Englishman gave chase.

I dropped down another side street, colliding with a trio of prostitutes, knocking one into the ditch and spinning me into the side of the building. *Pest*, if it wasn't for her cursing I could have lost Louis' friend. I jumped for the low wall blocking the end of the narrow lane, my hand catching the boards as I vaulted, feet swinging clear. As I leapt I felt a tug on my cloak. My back slammed into the fence. My throat burned where the fabric cut across it. I struggled with the tie, choking, hung just short of good purchase. One hand held my weight on the fence to keep from being strangled. The ground was just out of reach of my boots. The level was near three feet lower on this side than the other. With the barrier it formed a blind alley.

"Well, well, well." The ragged voice came from somewhere above and behind me, the pocked face appearing over the top of the wall. "It's the pretty red-headed boy." I looked up into the man's cruel, hungry eyes.

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I knew that look. I'd seen it often enough as a child. His filthy hand grabbed a hank of my hair, tilting my face up towards his. I stopped trying to free myself, my unoccupied hand snaking towards my back. "What pretty blue eyes? What a pretty little mouth, what could you do with that little mouth, eh?"

"*Baise-toi!*"

He laughed. "Aye, that's what I was thinking." He leapt the fence. *Putain!* I felt my pistol sliding down my pants, my fingers slipping across the stock as it moved just beyond my reach. "Snared like a rabbit you are." His breath reeked of garlic and fouler things. I went for my knife and he grabbed my wrist, "Now, we'll have none of that," disarming me with his other hand, tossing my blade to the side. It disappeared in the dirty slush. I was starting to tremble. I didn't want to be here. This was far too familiar.

He pushed back my hair, tugging on my ear. "Look at what we have here, Jack." I yanked my head back and gagged as the cloth around my neck pulled tight. "You're a fairy...not even human, you are. We're going to have some fun, you and I, little troublemaker."

He slammed my chest against the fence, forcing my arm up and across my back. *Zut*, that hurt. I felt him working the tie of the cloak. As I came loose and dropped he shoved me harder, the fence giving slightly under our combined weight. I struggled, but with one arm locked between my body and the wall, the other held tight behind me and his knee in the small of my back, there was no way for me to break free.

I could feel him working behind me and, *Putain*, I wished I could see what he was doing. He reached around—using his weight to keep me pinned—and grabbed my free arm, dragging it behind my back. Struggling against him, I screamed in frustration and we slid to the ground, splinters from the rough planks digging into my chest and cheek. Now he was on top of me. *Putain! Putain!* Get him off!

I thrashed but couldn't shake him off my back. All the while he was binding my wrists with a cord, probably the one that kept his pants up. English bastard!

Then the weight was gone and I rolled on my back, pushing up against the corner where the fence met the wall, shivering from the cold and wet, or so I told myself. I was on my ass, legs churning, trying to push myself standing. He snagged my hair again, dragging me to my knees in front of him. *Mon Dieu*, I knew what he was going to do.

"You put that anywhere near my mouth, I'll bite it off," I snarled, my lips pulled back across my teeth.

He yanked my hair, hard, the pain burning in my scalp. Pulling me half-off the ground, he laughed at me as he loosed his trousers. "Bite me, little see-liked, and I'll kick all those pretty white teeth out of your head." I squeezed my eyes shut as he shoved his swollen head against my cheek then forced the foul thing between my lips. I gagged, trying to push back and away. His fingers wound deeper into my hair, trapping me as he slid back and forth in my mouth. The man's loathsome voice was cajoling, working himself with vulgar nonsense.

My own voice sounded in my head. Remember to breathe. No tears, they like it when you cry, think of something else, anything else. I prayed, prayed like I had as a child, prayed that it would end. Jesus make it end.

Finally, he grunted, spasming, and I coughed and choked on his spunk as it spewed into my mouth and ran over my chin. Then he released my hair and pushed me away. I fell to the ground, landing on my side, the freezing mud squishing into my nose and ear. I spit, and spit again and again and again. I couldn't rid my mouth of the taste of him.

He laughed. "Thank you, love, it was wonderful." He stepped away, rearranging his breeches, then kicked me in the ribs. Pain wicked through my chest. "Next time someone says mind your own business, I'll trust you'll do it."

I watched his boots fade from sight, leaving me trussed with my arms behind my back. It took me the better part of an hour to work myself free. Next time, *Putain*, next time the damn children could hang themselves.

## Nine

I sat in the dark doorway of Lisette's house that evening, hiding from the night, taking long pulls from a bottle of cheap wine, swishing the vulgar liquid in my mouth and spitting it out into the street. It would take days to rid myself of his taste. I hadn't stopped shaking yet; just one more item to add to my already impressive stock of nightmares. Thank *Mère Marie*, that bastard English hadn't tried to do more. I shuddered, clamping down on the memories that began to claw their way up from the back of my mind. I knew if I let them come I'd start screaming and not be able to stop. I hadn't had a fit like that in years. At least I'd gotten my cloak and knife back. Miracles sometimes happen, but small ones only.

Trying to distract myself, I watched the street. Not that there was much to watch. The weather had turned, first raining, then sleeting later in the afternoon, driving all but the most desperate indoors. If I could have stood to be around people I would have been huddled around Lisette's grate with the rest of the rabble who lodged there. This was about the only spot where I could be alone. A light was bouncing along the *rue*, flickering in the distance. As it neared I made out a boy, his boots and cloak too big for him, running towards the house and slipping on the frozen muck in the street. I stepped out of the shadows, tossing the bottle against the side of the house where it shattered.

"*Monsieur, Monsieur Jules!*" a tiny voice called to me.

I recognized the voice. It was Avraham, Joaia's oldest. He was out of breath from running; drawing in gulps of the freezing air, and blowing it back out in dragon breath plumes. Word must have reached Joaia, probably a letter from Keiko telling me she was on her way back to her father. Why she would have sent her boy out in this weather instead of waiting for me to come by...well, he wasn't my child and it wasn't my worry. The evening was still new. Maybe he was out on other errands for his father and she'd slipped this to him as well.

"*Bonsoir*, Avraham, you have something *pour moi*?" I caught him as he slipped to a stop.

He grabbed my sleeve, pulling me as he fell back in the direction he'd come. "You must come. Now!"

I shook him off and he grabbed at me again. "What do mean? Where?"

"The docks, a ship. You're to go to the ship. Hurry or it will leave. Your dark haired friend said you must go to the ship."

Curran! *Mon Dieu!* It had to be. What angel in heaven I owed this to... "Run, tell them to wait." I bounded into the house and up the stairwell, almost colliding with other tenants in the narrow hall, realizing that I hadn't asked which ship. Well, the docks weren't that big. *Putain*, I'd figure out which ship if it killed me.

Hitting the room at a run, I caught up my things and stuffed them in a sack and pulled the rapier from under the pallet. Then I pried the board from the wall, snatching the purse from within and shoving it in my doublet. This quarter's rent would be a loss, but *Mon Dieu*, I was ready to be rid of this city.

I sprinted to the docks, overtaking Avraham as he was winded and I was fresh. He led me to the left, past where the market stalls aligned themselves in the day. The freezing rain had turned to snow and there were no lamps so the docks were dark and still. The damp cold kept most sane men inside. Avraham's torch sputtered protesting against the weather and his teeth chattered so hard I could hear them.

A lone figure stood on the edge of the quay amongst a few crates and barrels ringed in a pallid circle of light. The thump of my boots on the boards sounded my presence and the man turned. Dark as it was, the way he moved, his height and build, I was fairly sure it was Curran. When he threw back the hood of his cloak I knew it was. Snowflakes landed in his black hair, making it shimmer in the flicker of the lamp. His brooding, handsome features broke into a grin when he recognized me. I slowed to a walk and with a wave sent Avraham back to his mother's fire, yelling my thanks to his heels.

"Jaysus I thought yer weren't gonna make it. Aren't yer a sight for sore eyes?" Curran's infectious smile flashed in the thin light of the lamp he carried as he stepped to meet me.

"You didn't think I'd let you leave without me?" His grin spread to my face. As I came up to him we clasped forearms, pausing for a moment to look at each other, then he pulled me into an embrace. *Mon*

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*Dieu*, it felt good to be held by him. I'd almost forgotten just how much I liked the insane Irishman. "Get me out of this city, Curran. I can't stand another moment here among these strangers." *Putain*, I was going to cry, the horror of the day welling up inside me. Ruthlessly I stamped it down and locked it away with the rest of my tortures. I shook my head as I pulled back. "Well?"

He settled back, using one of the barrels as a stool. "We have a wee wait." He swung the heavy bull's eye towards the blackness of the water. "She's out there, the *Temps Juste*, a merchant vessel. I've signed us on as far as New Rochelle, where she's bound." He snorted. "It means you'll have to actually work for yer bread."

"I work." Taking a crate next to him, I shook off the flurries collecting along the brim of my hat, then blew in my hands. Even with gloves it was cold.

He took my hands in his, rubbing them with his own, warming both of us. "Yer langer, you'd bloody steal it than earn it." It felt so good to be touched by him. I'd near forgotten how comforting it could be. Even when Curran was abusing me for some pointed jest or cutting remark, it was always the touch of someone who cared for me, liked me. There had been few enough people in my life of whom that could be said.

I wished I could tell him how much I had missed him. That was not the way between us. And truth, the moment I saw him, it was as if we'd been apart only a few days. The world was right. I was right. There was nothing that was not possible with Curran by my side. Laughing, teasing him back, "I earn it by stealing it." I studied his face. "So, you didn't get much when you got rid of everything?"

"Naw, there was quite a bit of nicker from the sale of the house things." He snorted again; it was his version of laughter. "The Lady could bargain the devil out of his own soul. But naw sense spendin' what I have unless I have to."

"True," I chewed on my bottom lip for a bit, "so she got off alright then?"

His single word answer was sullen, "Aye."

"Good, then she's gone." I sighed. We sat for a time in that still comfortable quiet that good friends can share. Finally, "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come tonight. It's been so hard, so lonely. *Pest*, you're the only friend I have in the world. What does that say about me, that my best friend is a *fou* Irishman."

"Aye, I know." His black eyes sparkled in the flickering lamplight as he leaned over his knee towards me. "It means I'm the only one who's daft enough to have yer." He kicked my boot and we both broke out laughing.

"You won't leave me, will you?"

"Naw, not so long as yer don't cheese me off."

I was chuckling as I heard the slap of oars in the water. "That would be tomorrow then?"

"The-morra for sure." He slid off the barrel and rolled it towards a ladder at the edge of the dock, motioning to me to help. "If yer get too brutal, I'll just clod yer carcass overboard."

We loaded the caskets on the rowboat then clambered down the ladder ourselves, Curran introducing me to the captain of the dray. Both of us taking up an oar, we pulled out into the bay. Curran grew more sullen with each stroke. I tried to draw him out and received, at best, a grunt in response.

Bumping alongside the *Temps*, the ship's master grabbed the rail and swung himself over, tying off the line and tethering the rowboat to her side. Curran followed. I passed him the last of the cargo then clambered on board the ship. Its open hull held various bales and crates and half a dozen head of livestock tethered in the center of the ship, just behind the single mast. Someone had strung a tarp to shield the pilot at the aft of the craft. A few other persons huddled there out of the worst of the wind. We hauled the smaller craft over the side and lashed it down.

A gentle touch on my arm made me turn. A lady stood there and at first it didn't register that it was she. It took me three breaths to get out her name. "Keiko?"

"Aye, none other." She laughed, touching my face. Then she kissed me. It was one of those stunning, forget-the-world-exists type of kisses, and I willingly drowned in it.

Finally, I had to breathe. "What are you doing here?" I was grinning like a fool. For a day that had started so badly, it had turned out beyond my wildest dreams. I could almost forget the day's events, almost. "I thought you'd be on your way back to Scotland by now."

"Ye didn't think I'd let ye leave without me?"

Curran was perched on the rail, his arms crossed over his chest, legs wound through the posts. "How come I didn't get that warm of a welcome?" he teased.



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I was in high spirits. "Disappointed? I'll fix that." I caught Curran's face in my hands and pulled him down, kissing him in jest. The moment my lips touched his it no longer felt like a joke and, startled, I pulled back.

Two heartbeats passed, then he slammed the flat of his palms into my chest, sending me sprawling backwards against the hull, "*Tá tú glan a do mheabhair!*" and stalked to the other end of the dray. Everyone but us was laughing.

Although I never spoke of it, I savored the memory of that kiss. I hid it away in my mind with the few treasures of my life. Sometimes, sometimes as I watched him work the lines or shoulder a burden, muscles straining, I would bring it forth. For something so brief to have meant so much to me, even I could not fathom the reason. Such was how I tormented myself with vain imaginings that it could have meant as much to him as it had to me.

We made our way down the coast of English France, stopping at various ports to offload goods or take on new cargo. I changed the money from English coinage to Moutons in Saint-Nazaire. This month Saint-Nazaire was still in Brittany but the border moved in this region enough that within a year or so the city might once again rejoin France. It had happened so often in the past century that the merchants were not about to let a trifle such as who was their current sovereign stand in the way of making money, thus coinage of both realms passed hands. With the money Keiko had made from the sale of the household goods and the pawn on the rings, combined with my take, we had more than a hundred Livres, even with the percentage the money changer took.

A few days shy of the feast of St. Andrew we made the port of La Rochelle, the Huguenot stronghold. Even the night of screams, the massacre of the Protestants by mobs of Catholics rioting across the country after the marriage of the Huguenot King of Navarre, Henry de Bourbon, to Marguerite de Valois, only sister to the King of France, had not stilled the city's heart. She was still one of the most vital ports in the country. Curran and I manned the sails as the pilot guided the single-masted vessel through the narrow entrance. As the fortified towers of S. Nicolas and le Cheÿne, sentinels to the harbor, rose to either side of us I knew I was finally, truly, in France.

## Ten

Curran found us horses in the market at La Rochelle: a black and white mare, a bay gelding, and a half blind little gypsy pony. The mare was, near as Curran could figure, almost thirteen and worked hard. He claimed she was still hale enough to carry one of us and Meg, so long as we did not tax her overly much. "I'm thinkin' all she needs to do is walk."

The bay had been a war horse, and a good one. Now he was skittish and unsuited for battle, having been maimed by cannon. The scars rippled across his nose, down his neck, and about his chest and forelegs. He'd have been put down if he had not run off. By the time his owner had found him the animal had healed enough to make him reconsider. His master had tried to ride him again, but at the first sound of cannon the beast had gone mad. No one could break him of the fear. As a gelding he couldn't be used for stud, he was too high strung for plough or wagon and too ugly for anything but.

I told Curran he was insane to have bought the gypsy trash. The pony had cataracts. But when we put his nose behind the mare he followed, his little hooves sure and steady. Truly, we didn't even need a lead and it was far better than having our chattels and ourselves on the other animals. Destined to be sold for meat, the three had had cost near forty-five moutons. One fine charger would have gone for more than sixty. The tack was a disreputable as the mounts it served.

As Keiko insisted that she ride with me, I got the bay. I was a reasonable enough horseman to handle him. Since I did not intend to pass within a hundred *toise* of a battle I felt I could control the beast. He still bounced and skittered, being unaccustomed to two riders and because he was just generally an unpleasant creature. The pony was much more placid and would even allow Meg to braid ribbons into his mane and tail.

We were a fine sight. A red headed High Lawyer in French boots, with a raven haired, green eyed noble woman clutching his waist, astride a snorting, dancing demon of a horse, accompanied by a Irish soldier on

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an aged skewbald, cradling a diminutive lady-in-waiting in his lap who was forever leaning over the road and upsetting their balance so that she could sing English nursery rhymes to the whored up pack animal at the rear.

It was better than walking.

From La Rochelle we traveled thorough the rolling hills and forest. Farms slept along the banks of the Dordogne River under blankets of snow as we moved towards Périgourd. Then we would follow the route of the Tarn to Cévennes, then Nimes with its Roman amphitheater and aqueduct, and finally Marseille, the second city of France, where the Court retired in exile whenever the British armies moved too near Paris for comfort. I did not know why Keiko had chosen to come this far with me. Curran could have stayed behind as well, but it was less of a mystery that he wished to be rid of the grip of English soil on his boots. Meg had little option. For the next twenty years she went where Keiko went.

We stayed at inns and taverns when we could, Curran, Meg and I taking servant's lodging and giving Keiko a more desirable bed. We kept Meg close to us in the common lodgings, one or the both of us physically dissuading, if necessary, anyone who thought there might be sport in her. If there was no inn we would seek out a nunnery or abbey, as many opened their doors to travelers for remuneration. And when that failed most farmers were willing to share their fire for a piece of silver. We discovered that Curran had a fine voice, one that matched well with our lady's, and often their singing was so pleasant that other travelers paid for our dinner or drink.

With a horse under me I became a knight of the road. In the dark the bay was unremarkable, his scars hidden by mud and grease. And while some highwaymen shielded themselves with wigs or false beards, me I tied my hair back, pulled my hat down low, and hid my face with a scarf. That and the veil of night merging all colors to grey or black were most effective. I avoided coaches, preferring lone riders who had the misfortune of being out too late. The command of "stand and deliver" and a pistol secured their cooperation.

It was easy enough to slip out most evenings and remove my mount from the stable. I would not conduct business every night, nor would I always take my own steed. Occasionally I borrowed one if its master wasn't likely to note its absence. As I was on the road and had no thief taker to ransom my goods, I stuck to coin, and I avoided the two downfalls of my profession, spirits and gambling. Not that I ever took

much to drink. I'd witnessed too many others who, when in their cups, gave themselves up to some newfound friend.

I was occupying myself on such a moonlit errand when, with my keen eyes, I caught sight of another robber laying along the high bank long before he could spy me. It was a trick I'd employed time enough. Wait for a horseman to come by and knock him from his mount with a cudgel or rock. Should the victim resist, hit him again and again if necessary until you had him at your will.

I pulled the charger short—it was a prime opportunity to let someone else do the dangerous work. One I couldn't let go to waste. Leaving the road, I tied my mount in a hedgerow; *si qui diable* was to take me, it wouldn't be this man! I settled myself in the arm of a tree, a vantage from whence I could watch the night play out. Soon enough another man came by, passing me along the road without marking my presence. His jaunty little pony dragging the rat back to his hole from an evening too well spent.

As the animal trotted past the lie, the foot-boy sprang, lending the inebriate a blow that brought him down off the saddle. The horse, possessed of more sense than its rider, made off down the road. Struggling to rise, the downed man was caught by another blow from the robber and, as we say in our trade, was thereafter wholly at his mercy. The thief had beaten him unconscious.

While the ruffian rifled the other man's pockets, I retrieved the gelding from his hiding place, keeping my eye out for which way the thief would retire. I suspected that he would duck into the corpse of trees near where I was hidden rather than make his way on the road or the open fields opposite us. From there he would either move to another spot of ambush or home for the night. I wanted to stop him before he made either.

As I had guessed, he took to the woods and I directed my course to intercept his, leading the bay instead of mounting. I stood in a small thicket and, as he passed my hiding place, stepped in behind him. He was smaller than myself, wearing a tattered coat and hose, and hadn't bothered to hide his visage...there being little need as he pummeled his victims senseless before they could see the face of their assailant.

"Ah, *mon ami*, I think you have something which is mine, *no?*" I chuckled, pushing the pistol against his temple. "Please, your hands where I can see them, and on your knees."

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He hesitated for a moment, his coarse face with its lower lip slung forward and his glance sliding to the side, trying to see who had accosted him. My hat was pulled low, my nose and mouth covered in cloth, so that the most he could glimpse of my face were my hard blue eyes. Gloved hands, dark wool cloak lined with fur, jackboots and a hint of decent doublet and breeches beneath, the charger snorting mist while pawing the frozen earth behind me; I looked every bit the gentleman robber I was not. He complied, sinking to his knees in the snow as he placed his hands behind his neck. "You forfeit your purse to my pocket now."

He shook his head. "I am poor, *Monsieur*," the rough man protested, his thick fingers clenching and unclenching in agitation, "a farmer, I beg you, I have nothing."

"Mayhaps earlier, but what you took from the drunk certainly added to your wealth."

"It was desperation. My wife, she is ill. I must pay the doctor." He plied his words with a whine, shuffling on his knees, trying to turn his torso so he might look at me.

"*Pest!* Keep still!" I poked him with the barrel of my gun. "You annoy me! I should kill you just for that lie."

"Have you no honor, *Monsieur*?"

Again I laughed. "No more than yourself." I put my boot in the center of his back, knocking him to the ground. "Give me your pennies and I will give you your life."

He scrounged and tossed the purse he'd just taken as well as two others at my feet. "Good...now you truly have nothing. I suggest you run before I change my mind and put a bullet through your miserable head." I snatched up the bags as he scrambled off deeper into the trees, then swung into the saddle and rode in the opposite direction.

As I made the road I was careful to avoid any spots where he, or some other, might set an ambush, and kept my mount's pace such that it would be difficult for an unhorsed rogue to take me. When I neared our lodging I cut back to a trot, then a walk, and finally dismounted, leading my horse to the back of the yard and stabling him without anyone being the wiser for my errand.

I slid through the shadows to the kitchen door, loosing my hair and pushing my hat back at a jaunty angle. My scarf I had shoved under the tack and my gloves were tucked in my belt next to my pistol. Should anyone confront me now I would seem as any other who might have slipped out the door for relief. From the kitchen I knew I could gain the

taproom and melt into the throng of men still up drinking and gaming. Most would not be aware that I had been gone and those that did would probably not be able to state for how long. Curran would back me should I be questioned.

I put my hand to the latch and realized something was amiss. *Putain!* Someone had shot the bolt. Damn them. The last thing I wanted to do was make an entrance through the front door.

Well, I would have to find another way. I studied the building—two-storied, a mix of wood, stone and plaster with shuttered windows typical for this country in winter. Pacing off, I knew about where the stairs hit the gallery and as I had remembered to count the doors Keiko passed to her quarters I was fairly certain I knew which of those windows was hers. I hefted a small stone, gauging its weight, then tossed it at the shutters. If I had guessed wrong at least I would have an alibi for my presence in the yard.

The projectile bounced off the sill with a small thump. Waiting, I chewed on my lip just to keep my teeth from knocking together. It was damnably cold outside now that I wasn't engaged in any enterprise. Nothing happened. A second stone followed the first. This time I saw movement through the slats. Again I tossed a pebble. Maybe if she'd been expecting an assignation she would have opened to the first...or maybe I'd chosen the wrong window. No, the shutter eked open and I could see the glimmer of candlelight against a dainty wrist and the edge of her face.

The moon broke through the clouds and bathed the world in a blue glow. "Sssht, Keiko, *le bas.*" My voice was soft as I smiled up at her.

She set the taper behind her and threw open the shutter, leaning out. Her hair cascaded over her shoulder, bare where her shawl had slipped down. "Jules, are ye daft, what are ye doing?"

I put my finger to my lips. "Keep the window open," I whispered. The wall was rough enough that I found finger and toe holds easily as I scrambled up. Hoisting myself through the window, I realized I was grinning like a fool, imagining myself as some outlaw from a broadside ballad. The thought amused me. I shuttered the window, then slipped my arm about her waist and drew Keiko into a kiss. "*Bonsoir, Mademoiselle,* I have come for you."

She pushed me away in mock disgust. "Jules, ye are daft." Perching on the edge of the bed, she gave me a stern look and adjusted her gown. "What were ye doing outside?"

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I sat down next to her and, taking her hands in mine, I cupped them together. "Earning my keep, *ma chérie*." Smug and self-satisfied, I emptied all three purses into her palms. The gold and silver spilled over her hands and glinted in her lap. I leaned in and kissed her again, this time working my tongue between her teeth caressing the roof of her mouth. Coins rattled to the floor as she slid her hands around my chest. I'd worry about the money later.

My hand brushed her neck and ran across her shoulder, pushing down her gown on one side, exposing her breast for my touch. Her fingers worked themselves under my shirt, encountering my pistol shoved in my belt. She laughed lightly. Touching her forehead to mine, her green eyes sparking mischief, she drew the gun and dropped it on the coverlet. "I thought ye were excited to see me, but no, it's just a gun in your britches." Then her fingers walked down between my legs. "Are ye hiding another pistol there?"

"You'll have to find out, won't you?" I growled, pressing my lips against hers. The want inside me was terrible, making my skin cold and hot all at once. I drew her gown farther off her body until her chest was bare. I kissed my way down her neck, her collar, in the warm vale between her breasts. With each touch of my lips she sucked in her breath, but she wasn't telling me no.

I moved my mouth so that I was suckling one firm breast, the tiny nipple rolling in my mouth. My hands tugged the shrift down her arms until it pooled about her waist. I pushed her back on the bed as one of her hands wound into my hair and the nails of the other dug into my arm. More fabric slid beneath my fingers, barring her belly and the tight dark space between her legs until she was naked below me.

Sighing, pressing her palm into my chest and pulling my hair, she drew me off her, forcing me to kneel on the bed beside her. Her gaze burned my blood and her voice smoldered. "Take off yer shirt." A smile played at her lips. "I want to feel your skin on mine."

*Mon Dieu!* I stripped every shred of cloth from my body, then I pulled her against me, her nipples brushing against my skin, my mouth buried in her hair. My fingers traced the line of her body down to run in the valley between her cheeks, and my flesh was iron between us, pressed against the soft skin of her thigh. Her tiny fingers crawled down my belly, wrapping around my shaft, and I hissed my pleasure as she traced little patterns of heat on my tender flesh. I consumed her mouth, her face, her neck, anywhere my lips could reach. As we lay on the bed

she caressed me, her palm tight against my cock, stoking the fire in my belly. She rode my leg, her soft moist sex burning against my skin, working in time to her pulls against me.

I had to have her; I would die if I didn't have her. I pulled her hand away from its silken grip, rolling her onto her back, spreading her legs with my knees and her lips with my fingers. *Mon Dieu*, she was beautiful laying there, eyes closed, her pale body framed by the blanket of midnight hair. One leg bent upward, exposing herself to me. She was moaning softly as I slid my thumb into the dark damp recesses of her body, my hand cupped against the hard little mound of her sex. My tongue ran just behind her ear as I bent down over her. "You are the most beautiful woman in the world," I whispered against her skin as my head kissed the magical opening to her most secret places.

"Oh, God! No!" Keiko screamed as she went wild beneath me, hammering on my chest and forcing her knee up into my groin, wracking my balls in the process. She scrambled backwards against the bed head as I reared back on my knees. Her eyes were wide in terror. Mine were wide in pain.

"No? What do you mean no?" I forced the questions out from between clenched teeth. *Putain!* At least she hadn't caught me full on, but still it hurt like hell.

"Jules, I cannae. Ye don't understand."

I threw myself on the bed, landing with my wheel lock impaling the small of my back. *Diable!* Now I hurt in two places. "*Vous avez raison!* I do not understand!" I dug the pistol from beneath my body and tossed it to the floor. Like a small child I pouted, my bottom lip stuck out, my eyes angry, my body so hard that it jumped with every beat of my heart as I massaged the pain between my legs. "Why do you promise so much and then draw back from me? *Vous me voulez?*"

"It's my faither."

"Your father? Your father is a thousand *toise* away, what does he have to do with this? With us?"

She huddled on her side, her knees drawn up to her chest. "He would know."

"What? How?"

"Before I left, he made me, made my tutor, make a bottle. It was blue glass, filled with my blood and a potion, it sits on his *étagère*."

Rubbing my eyes with the heels of my palms as I sat up, I shook my head in disbelief. Her words made no sense. Again she was torturing me.



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I had let her do it to me. It was maddening. I slammed my fist into the bed, and although I had learned that lesson well enough not to push the issue with her physically, pest, I wanted to. "And what does this bit of glass have to do with why you will not love me?" I ran my hand up her leg. Both of us were trembling. "Why he would know what we do in this bed?"

"It is enchanted...if...if I give myself to you, it will shatter and he will know." She sobbed like a broken hearted child. "My mother would know." The last part came out as barely a whisper.

Ahh, her mother. The way she said it that made sense to me. Keiko would flaunt her indiscretions in front of her father, wear them as a favor on her sleeve, everything she had done until now called him out for some slight. What that slight was, trifling or leviathan, I had no clue. But it was not so with her mother. Keiko valued her opinion. That damnable vial wasn't there to keep his daughter honest but to shame her in front of the one person who she cared about.

Since Keiko had been willing to do almost everything else up to that final moment, I guessed that Scotsmen, or at least her father, thought much like the English. With Englishmen there is only one way to make love to a woman's body. It is a very limiting and unfortunate attitude. Limiting because if all you think about is getting inside a woman's purse then how can you enjoy the process of desiring getting there? And sometimes, well, it's just impossible to have it and the failure to comprehend that all is making love? Sad. Unfortunate because, for most women, it's the entire journey that drives their peak. They are much more ardent creatures than men.

I snuggled up to my lady, her warm back pressed against my naked chest. It had been months since I last touched a woman and I had been far too focused on what was between my legs than what was in her head. "And if it were not for this would you want me?" Her head rolled against my shoulder as I kissed her neck. I moved my hands along her body, across her stomach, up her chest across her breasts. Her breasts were so small and firm, they fit in the cup of my palm and as I looked down upon her I could see her tiny nipples hardening from the attention I was providing. Her skin was flushed. As she turned her face towards mine, I could see the dreamy look in her eyes. I whispered into her cheek, "Can you feel how much I desire you?"

"Jules, I told ye, I cannae."

"No, you will not, that's different. But, I love you enough to understand why." I slid my hand between her legs and stroked her gently. "Are you sure?"

Her voice was ragged, "I cannae."

"What if," I kissed her ear, "what if I could get what I desire," I placed my lips against the little hollow where her collar met her neck, "and what I think you desire," I kissed the back of her neck and she shivered, "without your mother knowing that you'd given in to sin? Would you let me?" I pressed the length of my naked cock up against her soft rump and back. I resumed my attentions to her hard, hot, little clit, pulling it between my fingers.

She stiffened. "Jules?"

"Would you?"

"How?"

"Shhhh, just answer me. Would you?"

Swallowing, Keiko nodded.

"Then *ma chère*, I won't ruin you." I spread her moist lips with the tip of my finger, tracing small circles on the hot pulsing skin. "Your honor, maybe, but not your precious proof of virginity." I pushed between her legs, slowly, coating my length with her juices, sliding against her sex, pushing my head up against the hardness of her. She jerked, a little gasp escaping her as she spread her thighs.

"*Non.*" I pushed against her leg, binding me within her warmth and wetness. Her juices coated her skin and mine. "Keep them tight," I chuckled, "like a nun." It was a poor joke, I know. I drew back, sliding within the confines of her thighs, my head rearing into the forbidden valley as it passed and we both caught our breath. Holding there, at the entrance, I let my pulse push me against her. The want was delicious. When you know the rules you can savor it, cultivate it, it becomes an end of its own. I pushed forward again, drawing her sweetness with me, that and my own leaking juices bathing her in softness. Her eyes were turned down, watching my shaft push through her embrace, parting her sex.

I took her hand in my own, taking us to where we could explore how we touched. Her fingers touched first me, then herself, then where our skin touched. I nipped at her shoulder and her other hand reached across her chest, caressing my face with velvet strokes. Tightening my embrace, pulling her against me, I kissed Keiko's palm, sucked on her fingertips as I drew back again. This time I didn't linger but withdrew until I almost didn't touch her. Frost was coating the underside of my

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skin with tiny needles of flame as I slid back between her thighs. The sweet, slow, almost painful rhythm rocked us, both so pent that we vibrated with need.

I kept us there as long as I could manage, until Keiko was begging for me to enter her, thrusting against my hips, trying to push me up inside with her fingers. I wanted it. *Putain*, I wanted it. But she would never forgive me if I did. I drew away from her. Pulling her onto her back, I covered her with my body, wedging my shaft so I could draw it along her clit as I thrust against her, but where I couldn't push inside her. She began to tremble. Digging her nails into my arms and back and sinking her teeth into my chest, she abandoned control of her body to be wracked by pleasure. Every muscle in my frame was seized by her frenzy. Two more thrusts and my brain and body convulsed, pumping my white hot desire across her hips.

Brushing her lips, I pushed myself up off of her and rocked back on my knees. Her legs were locked beneath mine as I straddled her staring at the slick shine across her belly where I had coated her. I slid my fingers through it and Keiko jumped as though burned, twisting and shivering. "You liked that, *no*?"

She laughed. "No. It was horrible."

"Horrible?" I bent down and licked her just under her breast. She quivered and gasped. "Of course it was horrible, that's why you ripped me to shreds." I touched where her teeth had marked me and drew away blood. "You bit me, *chiene*!"

Her laugh carried the purr of a self satisfied cat.

## Eleven

The night was moonless and the street was dark and close. It was a good evening for working. Curran was crouched opposite me in a low doorway. The wharf was a ways behind us. The riotous sounds from the dockside taverns droned in the distance.

I was having second thoughts about bringing Curran. I was still shaken from my encounter in Calais. That it had gone so badly bothered me, I should have been steadier. I had waylaid men on the road before and since with little problem. However, in all my years of this life, it was the first time I had killed a man. It bothered me more that it had been badly fought and evidence left behind than the fact that he had died. From that night until judgment day the errors of that robbery would plague my mind each time I set forth. Now I was wanted as a Highwayman and spy by the English. I had a price on my head. The reality was not as romantic as the stories would have one believe.

I was in a strange city and I hadn't had time to take the lay of the land. Each city had its particular feel, its countenance and rules. It was quite possible that we were working someone else's ground. I could outrun a beating if I had to, but I was not sure Curran could keep up. He was not near as agile as I. That meant we would have to talk our way out if challenged. I thought of myself as French. Most other Frenchmen would think me more English, especially in the company of an Irishman, deserter or no. I am a country boy. I had never been in a city so large. I wish I could have waited longer before venturing out. The risks weighed on my mind.

Curran added another element of risk. This was not his line of work. A musket man, with a musket, was as likely to shoot as to run if things went badly. And I had always worked alone. Training a partner took time and practice neither of which we had. If I could have found some way to dissuade him I would have. Not that he had much choice this night.

We had made it to Marseilles, entering the city by way of the road through the gently rolling hills, past a fairytale castle, the city spread

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below us. The brace of red tile roofs and washed plaster threw its protective arms about the rectangular harbor. Ships moved their cargo through its narrow mouth and into the city's center. A dusting of snow had covered all. There seemed such promise in the city.

Promises the city had failed to keep. We had sold off the horses, the pony being the last to go as Meg was so fond of it. She'd cried and hid in Keiko's skirts as Curran took him away. We didn't have to tell her what the blind thing was destined for. None brought as much as we had paid for them—that was the way of things—and the coins had dribbled through our fingers sooner than we had hoped. A cold garret in a dingy avenue was all we could afford as shelter. We all found some way to contribute to our upkeep—my skill, Curran's hard labor, a little mending by Keiko—but it was scarcely enough and growing thinner by the day.

Then my half serious suggestion that we put Meg out to earn her keep, and the fact that Curran had thought it a highly amusing one, had gotten us both kicked onto the street. Keiko's station and patience had both been abused too much. I did not know why she did not send word to her father to bring her home, where there would have been winter feasts and stag hunts and new dresses for dances. We were fortunate if we had a little meat to go with our bread. Some nights we were fortunate we *had* bread. It was not the life I think she imagined for herself. I was no Robin from her childhood stories. He probably went to bed hungry, too. The poets who glorify thieves ought to spend a few freezing nights huddled in doorways or ditches to claim a few coins.

Had I not brought Curran, he probably would have fallen prey to one of my ilk.

Earlier in the evening we had tarried in a small, dark tavern that smelled of grease and soot. The one cup of watered wine had cost us dearly, but it was the only thing either of us had on our stomachs that day. And it served to secure us a place out of the wind. Still it was damnably cold as we couldn't afford a seat near the fire. Standing there, huddled against the wall and each other for warmth, I realized that Curran and I hadn't been truly alone together since Dieppe. I missed that; the nights in that haunted kitchen in Calais where we'd trade barbs until one, or both, of us was near choking with laughter. Just talking over nothing of import whilst we tarried over some errand had been a pleasure.

Truthfully, we weren't alone now. But habitants of these sorts of places tended to pretend that no one else existed. The rule was: I will

ignore you and you ignore me. Should you do otherwise you were liable to find yourself in the gutter with a busted head. "So, *mon ami*, what do you think of this life I have given us?"

"You've given us?" He snorted and handed the cup to me. "Not like I haven't lived half me life in this manner." Bumping my shoulder with his own, "Yer' just teaching me a different way to survive in it."

"I am, am I?" The wine was bitter and thin on my tongue. Still, it was better than I'd had in weeks. And as miserable as I was physically, my heart was warm with his friendship. "Well, if you were game there are more lucrative opportunities for a man such as you."

Suspicious, "And just what are yer talkin' about?"

"Well see, we could never have made any money with Meg. Girls such as she are available for a crust of bread." Growing wicked, "You, on the other hand, are valuable."

Choking on it for a moment, "Yer forgetting I have no desire in that area. If it's valuable then yer canny sell yourself." He took the cup back and downed a meager swallow. "I'd be fair happy to let yer support me like that." With a sly wink, "I wouldn't think less of yer for doin' so."

"There's the rub." I leaned into his body. Instead of pulling away, Curran offered up a dark glare. It was too damn cold to draw back from physical contact of any stripe. "See, I am far too experienced in the matter. There's no novelty in a man like me." Speaking low in his ear, "You, with as much as you'd protest, struggle, and having never experienced it before," I slid my arm about his waist just to feel him tense. "There are those who'd give fortunes for that."

"Are yer saying you'd sell me against me will?"

"Against it, *non*." I had to stifle my laughter. It wouldn't do to bring too much attention to ourselves, "Mayhap over your protests, but not completely against your will. *Mon Dieu*, it's not as if I have the means to force you." His body was shaking against me. It took a moment for me to realize it was amusement and not anger that caused the tremors. "But the more you could feign it the better price you'd fetch."

He threw his arm about my shoulders. Comrades, brothers, good friends embraced like this in our time. "I could see it now, me whored up like those boys in Dundee, swinging me hips and calling me wares." The cup touched his lips again, then he looked within as though it had betrayed him. Empty. "I think I'd rather starve then sell me first time to some stranger." He tried again, but the wine was still gone. "Not like I want there to ever be a first time."

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Even if it was only in friendship, it was good to be wrapped close about him. "Come now, you can't say no until you know what you're missing. *Bon*, we won't sell your virginity to a stranger. I'll take you out in the alley and break you in," the thought landed in my hips. To see him, hands against the wall, dark, beautiful face twisted in rapture; I had to turn slightly so as to keep Curran from discovering what my imaginings did to me. "Then we'll sell you."

That affable embrace began to tighten about my throat. It was firm enough that I gasped, but not so much as to actually injure me. Curran hissed in my ear, "You'd have to get me far more drunk to be allowed that, lad." Then his tongue ran up the outer edge. Suddenly I was very warm. Every touch I'd ever had from him swarmed over my skin. Another snort, "With nothin' to eat today I'm tipsy enough to tease yer with it, but you'll not have it."

Curse my abysmal poverty. *Putain! Oui*, I admit I am not above getting a man drunk to ease the process of bedding him. Sometimes that is the only way you ever get them there. I would have sold my soul to buy another drink and keep him in that filthy tavern with me instead of venturing to the streets and risking us both.

No matter now, we were in too deep and we were in desperate need of funds. I had tried to rid the nastier contingencies from our plan. It meant easier marks but less take. So I had chosen to wait near the docks, a familiar haunt, not too far off. The public houses were nearby. I waited until the hour was sufficiently late that even the most streetwise sailor we might encounter would be well into his cups and thus less of a problem and chose a dark alley that created a shortcut to a larger street. Those who were sober or wise would not choose this route. I wanted drunk and stupid.

I recognized the faint echo of leather heeled shoes on cobbles. That could be a good or bad sign. Either it was the watch or someone of some wealth. I signaled Curran to be ready and slid my back against a wall.

I began to measure my breathing against the falls. As I did so, I would count the time it took for the next stride to land. Assuming the man was walking at a normal pace, and there was nothing to indicate he was not, it gave me a general idea of his height. Their heaviness gave me a gauge to his weight. He was fairly tall, I estimated, and of slight build. That was good fortune; it probably was not a city guard. It also meant he would be less inclined to put up a fight when faced with two armed

assailants. Unfortunately his steps were very regular. I doubted he was drunk.

The man drew nearer. He couldn't see me in the low light but I saw him well enough. He walked to the mouth of the alley and paused, as if unsure. He was most likely considering whether he wished to risk the shortcut. *Très bon*, in so far as it meant he had something to protect. *Pas bon*, because it might mean this spot was known for ambush. Poor judgment on his part, he decided to take the alley. He made his way towards the blind, then passed me without seeing me.

Slipping out of the doorway behind him, I pulled the hammer back on the wheel lock. The metallic snap caught his attention and he spun to face me. At that moment Curran stepped into the alley, his boot heels announcing his entrance into the ambush. Our victim realized he could let neither of us have his back and he threw himself against the alley wall. Both of us were now in his sight but neither in his full field of vision.

I smiled, the dog lock aimed at his chest. "*Donnez votre argent et vivez.*"

He seemed to me to be indecisive, weighing his money over his life. Muttering, delaying the inevitable, he put his palms together and rubbed them, blowing on them as though to banish the chill from his hands or the fear from his heart. As he carried no sword or pistol that I could see, if he were going to fight, it would be at a great disadvantage. I stepped forward, "*Monsieur,*" I insisted.

The breath from his mouth became green blue tongues of flame licking at his fingertips. He had not been delaying; he'd been working at *grammaree*. *Putain*. The sorcerer's face was lit by the ghoulish glow and as he spread his palms the fire danced between them, pulsing in time with his chant. I had chosen our victim badly.

I was the one with a primed weapon. The man turned his attention to me and a wicked smile bared his teeth. "*C'est votre argent,*" he hissed.

Backpeddling, I screamed "*Courez!* Curran!" as I fled. Instead of running, Curran touched the match, raised his musket to his shoulder, and fired. The lead shot whizzed through the night and struck the mage in the center of his back just as the fiery mass was leaving its master's fingers, throwing him forwards into the gutter. The flaming projectile skimmed my side, setting alight my shirt, and slammed into side of the building with thunderous force, blowing me off my feet.



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A rain of plaster, small stones, and roof tiles fell about me as I struggled to my knees, shaking my head to clear it. I swatted out the embers bent on igniting my shirt and saw that the building was beginning to burn where it had been hit. The flames took on the normal orange red glow as they licked the wood frame of the house. I turned back to Curran as he jumped the prone body of the wizard and ran towards me. We could both hear the shrill echo of the watch's whistles and a woman screamed somewhere in the burning structure.

I stumbled as I tried to run. I must have smacked my head when I fell. Curran had to grab my arm to steady me. We were met at the mouth of the alley by a brace of sailors. Backlit by the fire, both armed, with a dead man in the road behind us, even their drink addled minds understood the import of the scene. I didn't even get my round off before one man put his fist in my face. The best I can say is we went down fighting.

## Twelve

They didn't need my confession. We'd been caught at the scene. Curran broke when they crushed his fingers. Upon refusing their request, I was stripped and shackled and again entreated. I stood bound and naked in the presence of grim, implacable men and watched the irons heated, the bearings of the wheel greased in preparation for their threatened use on my own bones and body. They promised mercy if I confessed.

For me, let us just say that there are far worse things a grown man can do to a little boy's body than a civic executioner can conceive of doing to an unrepentant thief. I'd seen heretics tried as a child. These men were amateurs compared to the clergy. They had but the basest equipment and none of the zeal. Thus, I did not flinch when shown the instruments of torture, would not even cry out as they beat me. I barely whimpered as they put hot brands to my flesh. They could hardly do more or risked me dying before the date set for my execution. As a common murderer and not a heretic, they would want me alive to hang in public. It was more a matter of pride than need that made them seek confession, to announce that I'd sought the mercy of King and Country before my death.

Upon their decision to let me live until it was time to kill me, I was tossed into a dank *oubliette* to consider my fate. The stone walls sweated the sea at high tide and the salt crept into my wounds, making them burn and fester. I had to fight the vermin for the small share of moldy bread and filthy water I was given. I could not stretch my body or stand at full height. There was no sleep for me except for fevered minutes torn apart by the screams of those succumbing to the invitation of the executioners. My only solace was prayer. Two days I was in that hole, although at the time I could not have told you the passage of the clock.

When the cover was drawn back and I was pulled from the filthy well, my lips were cracked and bleeding, the welts on my back and the burns on my chest and legs wept. I could hardly see from being in darkness or stand from hunger and fatigue. Half carried, half drug, my

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arms shackled behind my back, I was taken to a small, windowless chamber. The room was lit by a few sputtering tapers and occupied by a scribe, my two guards and a friar. Except for the scribe's stool and desk, there was nothing in the room you could abuse a prisoner with. In my state, to say that I was confused would have been a massive understatement.

The taciturn pair dropped my arms and I slid to the floor, hardly able to support myself on my knees. The friar knelt before me lifting my chin in his hand. His eyes were full of compassion and concern. "My son," he began, "they say you have refused confession; that you have a great tolerance for pain. Will you not unburden your soul of your crime? Give rest to the Marquis, whose cousin you took from him? Let your last days pass, without torture, with the comfort of knowing your soul is saved?"

I laughed, the sound of it grated dry and almost hysterical in my ears. At least I knew why they were so adamant about a confession. A noble needed to be appeased. "Father, if you wish, for your conscience, to act as my confessor, send these men away." I wetted my lips with what little spit was in my mouth. "But my soul has been damned since I was born, and I will not give him satisfaction."

He closed his eyes and sighed. There was a deep resignation in his face that scared me, and he nodded to the guards who took up stations at the door. I guessed I was in for further torture this day but could not comprehend what they could do to me in that vacant little cell.

The friar removed the crucifix from his neck and kissed it. He then held it to my lips, and I was too good a Catholic not to press my lips to the tiny cross as well. Winding it between his fingers, the priest put his clammy hands to my forehead, one palm on top of the other, and began a deep off key chant in Latin. I knew the words. "O almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men," the scribe, also a friar, picked up the cadence, "Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found."

Spreading out from the heel of his palm, a white hot light burned its way across my mind. A deep buzzing started in my ears, tickling the nerves deep inside my head as though the wind were blowing. It had a musical quality, like someone off in the distance was singing without

words. Then it became more as though someone were humming the song and couldn't keep a tune; a song that sounded for all the world like I should know it, but I couldn't place it.

"O Lord, we beseech thee, mercifully, hear our prayers and spare all those who confess their sins unto thee; that they, whose consciences by sin are accused, by thy merciful pardon may be absolved; though Christ our lord." He was not speaking of the confession of absolution but that of inquisition. He pressed his lips to the back of his own hand. "Confess!" he commanded. The priest's order was picked up by an unseen choir of angelic voices, crowding the tiny room, pleading, whispering, "Confess, confess, confess."

Again in Latin, "Have mercy upon me, O God, after the great goodness; according to the multitude of thy mercies do away mine offences. Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my faults, and my sin is ever before me. Against thee only I have sinned and done this evil in thy sight; that thou mightest be justified in thy saying, and clear when thou art judged." Just under the priest's prayer, but louder than the chanting host, I could hear father François' voice behind me. He whispered over my shoulder, telling me I was worthless, lazy, no-good, everyone knew what I had done, tell now, confirm the abomination I was, I was destined to be.

I stared at the crucifix dangling before my eyes. Just out of focus, it swirled and glinted in the dim light of the cell. Everything, everything I had ever done that was sinful or nearly so, swirled in my mind. My own voice joined with the others, reminding me of all my sins. It emanated from the tiny figure of Christ. I didn't know why the other men couldn't hear it. It was shouting at me, demanding that I open my mouth and let the words spill forth.

I tried to stop, tried to swallow my words. The compulsion to confess grabbed at my chest, tightening its terrible fingers around my soul. Screaming in terror, I threw myself forward onto the flags, my arms straining against the shackles, driving the metal into my wrists, tearing the skin. I beat my head against the stone floor, trying to do anything to stop the words from breaching my lips.

The two guards pulled me back to the position of supplication. One held my shoulders, the other my head, so that I was forced to look into the eyes of my confessor. Again he commanded, "Confess!" His voice boomed off the walls, rose from the earth, screamed from the very marrow of my bones. I was powerless against the compulsion. The blood

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ran down my face and mingled with my hot tears as I cried out, "Forgive me father for I have sinned!"

I told them everything.

## Thirteen

Having been convicted and confessed, I was placed in a dungeon amongst the general population of thieves and debtors to count the days until my appointment with gibbet would be kept. The Irishman was confined with me and told me he had managed to get word to Keiko as to our fate. Then Keiko had bribed the guards sufficiently that she was permitted to see Curran while I was undergoing my inquisition, set his mangled hand, and see to it that once together we received slightly better treatment than those who had no sponsor or money. I did not know whether to be relieved or angered that he had spoken with her. Maybe if we had just disappeared from her life she might have had the sense to go home. Now she would wait and watch me dangle at the end of a rope.

God help me, Curran would swing next to me. There were few things in my life I regretted. Getting caught was one of them. Curran getting caught with me was another. I'd been stupid, hadn't thought things through, and this had happened. It was my fault that we were under a sentence of execution and yet here he was next to me, helping as best he could to clean out my burns and welts using a little pot of unguent Keiko had left with him. "*Pest*, can't you be easy with that." I snapped at him. It stung. Although I knew I should be grateful, I couldn't help myself. I was irritated and anxious beyond what I should have been. *Mon Dieu*, it's not like I hadn't been in the gaol before, never been sentenced to death, but I'd been in prison at various points in my life.

"*Tá failte romhat*." Curran's tone was sarcastic. "Yer didn't scream so much when they branded yer." He rubbed some of the cream on my stomach and I flinched, slapping at his hand. "Where else?" I stared at him. He stared back, eyebrows raised in question. *Pest*, I was too tired for this. I didn't have the energy to fight with him or anyone else. As I slipped my breeches down there were marks on my legs and other more private places that had stuck to the fabric and pulled, the thin scabs giving way, so that they oozed and bled. "Bejaysus. *Is fear rith maith ná*

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*drochsneasamh*," he hissed under his breath to himself then, to me, "Jules, why suffer this?"

I didn't have an answer for him so I just shook my head. It was cold, very cold, and I was tired. My teeth were knocking together so much I couldn't rest. All I wanted to do was sleep. Each time he touched my skin it burned again and I kept drawing away. "Aren't you cold?"

Rocking back on his heels, Curran studied me in the dim light. We sat in a small corner of the dungeon. Straw littered the floor, but it was not enough to stop the chill seeping from the stone. I could hear a baby crying and the hacking coughs of those whose lungs were filling with the winter. All survived as best they could...some just didn't survive.

Touching his wrist to my cheek, Curran pushed my hair back from my eyes. "Yer not looking good, even for a goddamn fairy yer too pale." Not satisfied with whatever his pulse told him, he pressed his lips to my forehead. Why couldn't I be well for a touch like that? "Jaysus, yer burnin'." There was something in his tone that should have worried me, but I couldn't wrap my mind around what it was. I just wanted to go to sleep. He finished with his ministrations and helped me readjust my clothes. I laid my head against the wall. As cold as I was, the cool stone felt comforting. His arm slipped about my chest pulling me to him, settling me between his legs my back against his chest. "Yer goin' to be grand, Jules, I promise yer that." I shivered against him and he tightened his embrace. "Just sleep. I'll watch for yer."

Curran cradled me like a small child. On many occasion, I'd wished him to hold me like this. The time that I had it, I couldn't enjoy it. Still, the beat of his heart the touch of his body was a comfort. The few times illnesses had afflicted me as a child, I'd been left to suffer. Whether I was to live or die was given over to God. The brothers tended to me with medicines, to be sure, but the thought that I might need a kind touch was beyond the men who raised me. What touches I received had rarely been kind. Wracked by fever, I drifted in tormented memories at the edge of sleep. When I would start Curran would stroke my hair and whisper prayers to calm me.

A terrible thirst woke me. Parts of me were cold, parts were warm. As I shook off dreams, I realized the parts that were warm were pressed against Curran's body. For a moment I fancied burrowing into his chest and neck and retreating into the depths of slumber, but then I felt a soft touch on my forehead. I sat up, pushing away while turning towards him. He smiled. "'Oweya feelin' this grand mornin'?"

"Better." I licked my teeth. It felt like something was growing on the top of my tongue. My whole body ached. "Thirsty. Hungry. Otherwise like hell."

Curran slapped my leg, standing and stretching. "Let's clap if we can't take care of two of the problems." He held out his hand. When I took it he pulled me up beside him. *Mon Dieu*, I was stiff and sore. After some scrounging we found ourselves with a bit of bread and some water and retreated to a place where we could find a little light and air filtering in from a casement above us.

We sat, shoulder to shoulder, backs against the stone chewing on the hard crusts, making them last, watching the mice run around the margins of the wall. My knees were tucked under my chin. "Curran," I touched his sleeve, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For this. I'm sorry I got you into this." I flicked a loose pebble with my finger. It caught *un souve* in the leg and it squeaked and ran for its hole. "I should have left you out of it."

He snorted and shook his head. "Yeah, 'cause I just let yer club me into it, force me to go witcha." He slapped one hand over his face and threw the other out before him as though he were trying to ward off a blow his unruly hair sliding in front of his eyes as he smiled. "Naw Jules, don't make me go! I told yer and told yer and yer just wouldn't listen to me." His elbow caught me in the ribs and I hissed. But I was laughing.

"Why is it you can make me laugh when no one else could?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's magic." Gnawing on the stale bread, "I think it's because I'm too much like yer. You're closer to me than any of me brothers." Gingerly, taking care not to bump the injured hand, he wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "I'd no sooner leave one of them miserable than yer."

"So, you forgive me?" I flashed one of my seldom seen smiles at him and his dark eyes brightened. Curran brought out more of my smiles than anyone.

"There's nothin' to forgive." One of my shrugs came back at me. "Need doesn't know the law."

"I didn't want to be the cause of your death, *mon ami*."

He thought for a moment, "All men die someday, Jules. It's not yer doing." How could he be so calm in the face of this? How could he forgive me so much? "Most just don't get to know the when of it." His other hand wrapped about mine. *Putain*, he was so beautiful. Even here



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and now, in a damp, dark dungeon, he was a little ray of light warming my soul. Remembering how much that one kiss had meant to me, I wanted it again. I wanted to have that just once more before we were gone. Hesitant, I leaned in.

Curran's tongue rode his lips. He drew the bottom one between his teeth. He swallowed. But in none of it did he draw back from me. *Mon Dieu, oui*. I could feel the warmth of his breath on my face. The nearness of him caused shivers in my heart. A blissful, gentle touch as Curran's hand drifted up my skin and his arm tightened against my shoulders. Please, *Meré Marie*, let it be as wonderful as before.

I'd had kisses of hard, rough passion. Tentative brushes of ventures into love had teased my skin. Whether they were playful, ardent, experienced or shy, not a one had been like this.

Angel's wings beat against my lips. For one moment everything aligned in pure perfection. My senses were aware of all of him. His hand, where our fingers twined, burned ice into my flesh. Ghosts of gunpowder and steel drifted from his skin. Curran's breath caught in the whisper of my name. Strong chest against mine, our hearts sounding against each other as my pulse threaded a counter tempo rhythm to his. *Mon Dieu*, I could stay like this forever.

Both of us started, backing from each other.

Someone was approaching, soles slapping on the stone floor. The jailer—damn him to hell for killing the moment. I might never have it again. He kicked my boot, motioning with his head that I was to follow. In case I had hesitation a guard accompanied him to arrange compliance. In case I sought to do some mischief I was shackled. I looked back at Curran as we left the dank hole. He was biting his lip, looking worried, and then the large door swung shut, cutting him off from my sight.

As we mounted the winding set of stairs, I wondered what was to come next. I'd been tried and I'd confessed to the murder and more. I should have been forgotten by the civic authorities until my hanging. They could only kill me once. Though, there had been exceptions made for truly heinous crimes against the crown. Maybe the judge had decided to record my other crimes in charge for the state's records. It hardly seemed necessary that I be present for that.

The room they escorted me to was in an area where the more noble occupants might take up residence in a manner fitting to their rank. It was not where the judges held their trials or where common men like me were often brought. The jailer bowed low upon entering and cleared his

throat to gain attention. A man in the dress of a cavalier of high station, all white and trimmed in gold, stood staring out the window towards the bay. He dismissed the jailer and the guard with a wave of his hand, hardly acknowledging their presence.

I had met this man. More correctly, I had met the youth that had grown into this man. Armand-Jean de Plessis, now known as the Bishop de Richelieu, recently brought back to favor from his exile in Avignon, secretary of state for foreign affairs to King Louis. Thin of frame, pale of cheek with cold calm eyes, concealing an inexorable will and a mind of vast capacity. He was rumored to be armed with all the resources of boldness and of craft that I wished I could possess. As a boy he had dreamt of great things, and succeeded.

One remembers such meetings; they mark themselves on your mind. I was, as a child, instructed by the fathers who raised me in riding, fencing, and sportsmanship, as well as reading, writing and matriculation. It was thought, perhaps, that I could aspire to the level of a valet for a gentleman's household. I would be educated and well mannered, and my rebellious streak would have been beaten of me by the time I came of age. Maybe, if I chose, I could take the vows and devote my life to God.

In my fourteenth year, those plans had been laid aside.

Manhood fast overtook the boys I had grown with. Indeed, that was the problem. I had not grown with them.

I was their equal emotionally, even a little beyond them, but physically I remained a boy. At first no one was overly concerned. My true age was unknown and some figured they had overestimated by a year or so; I was very precocious. But when one year passed, then another, they began to wonder if, perhaps, I was not normal. None of the major changes were evident. My voice was not changing. My body was not changing, a fact that a few of the brothers could have testified to personally.

By age eighteen, I had been poked and prodded by such local experts in the field as could be found. I had been bled and leeches until my flesh looked as though it had been beaten with thorns. I was fed foul potions to balance my humors, which had succeeded only in making me vomit for days on end. I breathed smoke from noxious woods and developed nothing but an incessant cough. I had prayed, and been prayed over, until my knees were bloody and my voice gone. There was no rumored cure, no noxious remedy that they did not try. Not until one of

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the brethren suggested, only half in jest, that they stretch me into manhood on the rack, did they decide that something more drastic was needed.

The good brothers were at their wits end with me. They sensed the devil's hand in this. A revelation was called for. Perhaps I was not half the age they suspected me to be, or was some freak of nature, or had been cursed, or possessed. The prior sent word to the Abbot who, confounded by the situation, sent word to the Bishop that intervention was needed.

It was a dangerous request. In those days, French Catholics kept quietly to themselves and the clergy even more so. The Church of Henry was at war with the bastion of the Catholic faith. And new reforms threatened all. The followers of Calvin were dumped upon the shores of France to spread their discord far from their ostensibly Protestant English King. Better Calvinist Englishmen than Catholic French. Normandy was English territory. So long as they were dogged by secular war, our English masters delayed dealing outright with religious issues. But, there was no bishop in Northern France. The last man who held the position had been forced to flee to warmer regions decades ago. My mother church was, in a sense, fatherless.

I was told that Bishop Cospèan of Aire would attend personally. This was an alarming situation. If the devil could insinuate himself into the very house of God, it was unthinkable where he would attack next. No good Catholic could count himself safe. And if the English were to find that the Abbaye harbored a minion of evil, in whatever guise it chose to take, it would mean an end to the brother's presence in Clermont.

He arrived between Second Vespers and Compline. I was roused from my bed in the kitchen by Brother Dominique and pulled by my collar down the hall while I stumbled along trying to shove my gangly legs into breeches. Arriving sans shoes and half asleep, I was pushed into his presence. He was an older man, but not frail or palsied. His hands did not shake as he took mine. He seemed gentle and had a soft smile and a kind word for me.

Attending him was a younger man, while not much beyond my eighteen years he looked as a young man grown. I still possessed the body of a child, yet it did not trouble him to speak to me as an equal. He and I sat in the nave, and talked, whilst the Prior and his Eminence discussed my situation in hushed tones.

The boy's name was Armand-Jean de Plessis and he was from Paris, his family was of the court. I was enthralled. I was a country boy who had never been beyond the sight of the Abbaye, and here was someone close to my age who had lived and studied in the seat of power of France, to me the center of the world. His mind was sharp, he was already ascending through the ranks of the Church; the Bishopric of Luçon was to be his. He had been to Rome and spoken with the Pontiff himself. I could not even begin to dream of such things. I told him of my history, such as it was, and he me of his life and the things that he had seen. He had great dreams, little of which I understood, but they made my hopes seem small and without direction.

After much nodding and whispering, and glances in my direction, the Prior had indicated I should approach. I knelt on the stone floor of the chapel before his Eminence. He placed his hands on my head and began his supplication to God, in a sonorous, monotonous baritone. I tried to stay awake, but ultimately drifted off to sleep, my head in the lap of the gentle man. I awoke the next day in my own bed by the kitchen grate as the monks were beginning the orders of Prime. The Bishop and his aid had gone. They would travel by night to the safety of the French border. I wondered if anything had been revealed.

Revealed it had been. Of course, I was not told—not then, not for weeks after the Bishop had left. I would follow the Prior through his daily routine, begging to know what had been discovered. What was so unsettling that many of the brothers could not bear to look at me and others shook their heads and muttered, "Poor Jules." He would wave me off and wander away not even giving an excuse.

Finally, Praetor François, a rabid anti-English sentimentalist, and the man I considered myself closest to in habit and nature, took it upon himself to tell me what had been seen. He came to me in the stable where I was working and stated bluntly, as was his manner, that I was not human. Not fully. My mother was. My father was not.

My sire was *fé*, "a soulless creature of hell, not even capable of salvation." I, he told me, had better settle my soul with God, if God would allow it, because the possibility that I might have inherited all the evils that such a heritage conferred was great. After all, I was not aging in a manner pleasing to God; this was a slap in the face of the righteous order of life, to God's holy plan. He believed that they should have suspected it earlier on. He, of course, had. My lack of discipline and general unruliness should have told them. I was a test to the faith of the

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righteous and God fearing monks of Clermont. The fact that they had baptized me was an abomination. I had to be a bastard, as no good Christian woman would have married such a beast. I should have died in the fields with the harlot that birthed me.

In many ways he was correct. Such a lineage as mine was almost a death sentence. To have been born the son of a bonds woman impregnated by her master would have been acceptable for a displaced orphan with no status to speak of. Slaves had more right to occupy space than a half-human whelp. I could never be anything. I could never aspire to any position. I could not be trusted with even the most menial of tasks. I was nothing.

And now, I had proved it to a man who'd witnessed it revealed. I wondered if that time had marked him as much as it had marked me.

Richelieu stoked his kitten Soumise—rumor had it that he owned a considerable number of the animals and they even had their own room appointed for their use—and stared out across the water where the menacing presence of the Chateau d'If, the prison of the crown, cast its shadow.

A lady was seated on a small bench on the other side of the room. Completely out of place in this environment, her bearing declared her to be nobility, but I did not know her, by reputation or otherwise. Her grey-blue eyes half closed, she looked me over as one might a horse at market, mentally checking off the qualities one might desire in a working animal. I met her gaze and held it. She smiled in a secretive, knowing manner at my affront.

I did not know why I had been brought before them. I had been sentenced. I had confessed. My crimes were capital offenses but not of such a nature as to warrant intervention beyond the normal city judges and executioners. What the lady's presence signified, I could not even begin to guess, although I had heard that there were women who enjoyed the discomfort of prisoners. Some even paid sums to watch, discreetly, the torture of men. Richelieu, as a man of the church, was knowledgeable of tortures unknown in this dismal place.

The bishop did not even turn his head as he spoke. "I have here your confession." He splayed his fingers across a small sheaf of papers on the table in front of the window. Next to them sat a small, tattered bundle of documents which seemed familiar. In my state I could not place why that would be so. "If you give me six lines written by the most honest man, I will find something in them to hang him; I needed but the first six words

from your mouth to condemn you." Placing the kitten on the floor, he turned and sat on the rude stool that was the only other furniture in the room.

He steepled his fingers, touching them to his lips. "It is my firm belief that harshness towards individuals who flout the laws and commands of the state is for the public good. No greater crime against the public interest is possible than to show lenience to those who violate it. Rigorous punishment of even the smallest transgression will forestall the greater one."

I was dead. He was here to torment me, then hang me. Why, I had no clue. Perhaps it amused him, if he remembered me at all, to watch my birthright fulfilled, or he wished to amuse the noble woman with this sport...a cat with a half-dead mouse brought to his mistress.

"And yet, some days past, I received a charming Scotswoman, a child really, who begged for an audience with me. She has delivered into my hands a most interesting set of communiqués, pleading that I trade them for lives of two worthless men whom she claimed served her." He waved his hand dismissively in the direction of the sheaf of letters.

Now I recognized the parcel. It contained those papers I had taken from the English soldier. Keiko must have kept them. She had chosen to risk herself by keeping them and seen opportunity to use their contents. Silently I thanked God for her foresight. I might yet avoid the gallows. The sound of the man's voice snapped me back into the moment.

"I promised her nothing more than to view them and yet, having read them, I find myself in possession of intelligence, the likes of which I have been seeking for months. And now, having read your confession, I also find that through the providence of God, they come from your hand."

The woman spoke. Her voice was low and rumbled pleasantly, like the purr from the kitten circling Richelieu's ankles. "I have had such interesting talks of late with the charming little Scotswoman. I have taken her into my house at the suggestion of the Bishop. No lady of class should be forced to live as you made her." She rested against the wall, her fingers gently caressing each other as she regarded me with those half-lidded eyes. "There are girls, who will tell to other women in detail, what they would not dare whisper to their confessors. She tells me you are a most remarkable young man, that you are possessed of...talents. How is it a boy such as you could bring one so touchingly modest to question her virtue? To abandon herself to the life of a highwayman?"

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One so beautiful that she could have great men as her paramours?" Ever so casually she spread her arms across to either side, displaying herself. Her breasts, barely constrained by her bodice, rose and fell with each breath. "And pray tell, what is this 'nun's sex' that she speaks of?"

I admit, I did not believe that ladies such as she could speak of such things so boldly, especially not before a Bishop. I blushed and dropped my gaze, studied the tips of my boots. She mocked my discomfort with her laughter.

Richelieu considered her and her posturing. "This boy is as old as I. As I recall we had a very interesting conversation many years ago." He had remembered me. Then he continued, as though the lady had not spoken at all. "Few people expected good results from the changes I announced I wished to make, and many believe that I will fail. I have ventured to promise his Majesty, with confidence, that would he but give me the power, he will soon have control of his state and provinces. That in a short time his prudence, courage, and the benediction of God will give new aspect to the realm. I promised his Majesty to employ all my industry and all the authority which it should please him to grant me to ruin the English, eject the Spaniards from our new territory, to abase the pride of the nobles, to bring back all of his subjects their duty and to elevate his name among foreign nations to the point where it belongs. Everyone must have their role, their contribution: the clergy through prayer; the nobility to bear their arms for the king; the common man to be obedient. Do you understand this?" He leaned forward slightly as though seeking a response.

I nodded, my eyes still cast to the ground. My voice was but a whisper, I could not manage more. "I value God above all other things. I would die for his son on earth, King Louis."

"The King's power is a rock which crushes all that opposes it. You shall have your chance to die in his name."

Shocked, my gaze jumped to meet his. A cold, calculating smile graced his angular face. "My enemies are the enemies of the state. I will strip the most arrogant of the nobility of their ability to defend themselves. I have already taken to bypassing many officials with my intendants. Do you know who these men are? Men of common birth, but yet with talent, paid to do their job. They do not hold their position by rank or birth. They earn it."

I swallowed, seizing on the hope against hope, that there was salvation in his words. "What is it your Grace is suggesting?"

"You understand your life, as it is, means nothing to me."

I nodded, keeping my expression as neutral as possible. "Why would I expect that it did?"

"You are aware of our lands across the ocean, that France and Spain both lay claim to them."

"Some, your Grace. I have heard of the lands in New France and Arcadia. Beyond that I know little."

He began stroking the kitten, who had gained his lap. "Although many of our resources are tied here, with the war between England and France, we are still desirous of securing certain portions of the land known as New France. Bluntly, much of the good farmland of Northern France lays fallow under battlefields. Men who would otherwise till soil are pressed to the lines as pike and musket. New France is vast, teeming with fish and game and arable land." He sighed. "I will tolerate Huguenots so long as they are loyal to France. And as men loyal to France they have settled this land called La Florida and held it for their King." His attention was diverted by the ball of fur trying to eat his hand. Smiling down at the animal, he tussled with it for a moment; then lifted his eyes to mine. There was a challenge hidden in them.

"I believe either the English or the Spaniards are raising the Indians against us, against Fort Caroline and the King's subjects there. Instigating them and supplying them in their attacks on our settlements so that they cannot supply our King and country. I need someone to discover the source of the disquiet, inform me of it and, if possible, subdue it."

"Do you think I am capable of this?"

"Do you think you are not? You are a citizen of the English crown, yet at every turn you have denounced that definition and called yourself French and survived. You are not fully human, and few discover that, you keep it so well guarded. Yet, those that do favor you for it. You are a self-confessed sodomite, thief and murderer, but those in your company commend you to high honor. Even your jailers, judges and confessors give you honors for the strength you have shown in the face of torture, conferring on you the soul of a noble man..." He shook his head in disbelief.

"You command the fidelity of a man, a man whose confession I have also read, who deserted the battlefield because he feared death, but willingly follows you towards it, would go in your stead if he could. And you have gained the love and trust of a Lord's daughter who, my sources inform me," and at that he cast a knowing glance at his companion,



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"would cast it all aside to be with you...a man who, in his own words, claims to have used her, stole from her, and if she had not foiled you, would have forced himself on her. You have no respect for the nobility, you sham it here, but I see it in your eyes, you believe yourself as good a man as any who holds a title. You believe yourself capable of it."

I licked my lips and met his gaze. "Would I be pardoned?"

"You will be pardoned in the manner of all criminals so sentenced. Ten years of labor for your King and country. If you set foot on the shores of France at any time before those years expire without a billet from your King or I, your original sentence will be reinstated. If you leave New France for aught but good cause within those ten years, your pardon will be revoked and your sentence will be reinstated. I would warn you that there is little I would consider good cause in your situation. Would you accept the terms of such a pardon?"

"My friend, Curran, would he also be able to take advantage of such an offer? I might find him useful in what you suggest. I trust him as I trust few men."

"If he is useful, and would swear allegiance to France, it might be arranged. So, on those terms, you would become one of my intendants?"

"I would rather have a title."

The lady choked on her laughter. The bishop's eyes grew cold. "You jest with me."

"No, Your Grace." I put all my powers of charm and persuasion into my voice. It was all I had. "I am a condemned man I have nothing more to lose. I will die by either the hangman or by the darts of a savage. But you wish me to do these things for you. Maybe even commandeer men, fight a war, command obedience. I have no power in my own name; lend me the power of yours. I would be so bold as to guess that *le Roi* has given you lands in this new world, but a Bishop cannot hold lands. Give me charge of them as *Vidamé*, to hold them for your name. You will not be disappointed in my service. And as it is a title you can revoke at any time, for I would hold it only through you, it is a badge of your power only."

"As many men do you measure your merit by your audacity." There was a hint of approval in his tone.

"It is all I have, Your Grace. My life has given me little else. I would serve Your Grace unto death."

"Your death or mine?"

"Given the charge you have offered me, I should think your life shall be far richer and longer than mine." I paused and came at him again. If he were displeased, I would only die sooner and I would rather get it over with then spend my time in a dungeon contemplating my demise. "What you propose will not be liked by many, and many on those shores are men of noble birth. Why should they cede anything to me were I to ask? I would just be *noblesse de cloche*, someone to be ignored as at any other time."

The lady raised herself from her bench and walked to Richelieu, placing her hand on his shoulder. She bent to his ear. "He is amusing, audacious, almost charming. I can see why the little one was taken in by him. If you cleaned him up, he might even be as handsome as she claims."

The bishop laughed. "And what of the little Scotswoman, the one who, such a short time ago, sat in my apartments, on my couch and pled for your life?" His gaze slid from me to search her face, then back to consider me. "What would you have me do with her?"

"She is a Lady of rank. I cannot decide her fate for her." His question perplexed me. "Send her home to her father if you wish, or if Madame is so inclined, keep her in your service. It is not my choice. What is my choice is to serve your Grace on those terms, to do what you ask of me, whatever you would ask of me."

His viper's smile returned. "I am glad we have an understanding."

## Fourteen

Captain Alain Gillardray stood on the deck of the *Jean-Baptiste*, looking down upon us. His first officer, Matthieu DuFour, oversaw the loading of the cargo, grumbling about the weather as he did so. Every few minutes he would glower in our direction and mutter under his breath. Thirty-five conscripts—men and boys, Curran and I among their number—to crew the ship and re-garrison the fort stood in the freezing rain waiting for our fate. The more violent of us were to be shackled until actually on board the vessel in order to forestall any attempt to flee. Ten years service in La Florida to win pardon. Were any of us to abandon our duty and attempt to return to France before that time, our sentences would be reinstated. For some of us, that meant death.

Bayard Quelou, the second, oversaw the loading of our less than worthy persons. He greeted each with a cheerful good morning, which it wasn't, asking every man in turn for his name and from whence he came. Curran and I stood together and slightly apart from the rest of the rabble, talking between ourselves. The jovial little man took my hand and clasped my shoulder, asking, as he had the others, for my name, which I gave.

"Your accent is English, *no*?" Curran choked down his laughter as I withdrew my hand from Bayard's grip and glared at him. The man did not seem to notice. "And, your friend, he is not French?"

Curran smiled wide. "And I thank Jaysus every day for that. Curran Shee is me name."

"Shee?" I turned to the Irishman. "Your family name is Shee?" I hadn't thought Curran's family prosperous enough to have a surname. Actually, I just hadn't thought about it at all. I know that sounds terrible, but few enough men had one. I just assumed that if it was not mentioned it wasn't there. One would think it was important enough to mention after all.

"Tis been almost a year yer have known me, and yer have never thought to ask me that." He shook his head. "Yer a langer, Jules. I bet yer

could tell me what the lady ate for supper two months ago Sunday, but yer would not be able to call to mind one of me brother's names."

It was the second's turn to laugh as I asked, "You have brothers?" Wait. He had told me that, three brothers. And he was right, I couldn't remember a one of their names. If it hadn't been asked I might have.

Bayard's round cheeks turned red as he chuckled, "You two gentlemen, I think I will like you." We watched him as he rolled off to see after the other passengers.

Six forlorn little *filles de correction* huddled by their trunks as the officer spoke with them. They would certainly improve the morale if not the moral character of the settlement. Madame Anna, a widow, a Protestant and an unlicensed midwife, was charged to chaperone the prostitutes. They were joined by three farmers and their families, torn from their land by the war and nervous in the company of convicts and whores. A Jesuit, Father Jean Paul, and two lay brothers—Fabien, a carpenter, and Jean Pierre, a smith—would see to our souls.

A carriage without arms rolled up to the quay. Its curtains were drawn against the cold and damp. As it halted a footman, wearing the colors of the Bishop's house, jumped from his perch. Before he could reach the door it blew open and Meg burst onto the boards. She was dressed as a miniature lady with a cinched waist and pearls in her hair, the drizzle ruining the dress almost immediately. Catching sight of Curran and I, she laughed and ran to us, throwing her small arms around my waist, babbling about what a fine time she'd been having and that she'd been given sweets and pretty dresses and listened to music and ridden in carriages and learned to dance and how had we been?

I stroked her hair, telling her we'd been well and that we'd had a fine enough time, although not so fine as herself. As I was lying to the child, Keiko alighted from the carriage, demure and poised. She was dressed as a true lady in burnt gold with a deep green cape thrown about her shoulders. In her hand she carried a smaller cloak, most likely the one that should have been protecting Meg's new dress. She turned and spoke to a person in the coach, nodding then smiling. With a small laugh she approached us, holding out the garment for the little girl to don. Every man's eyes, and most of the women's, followed her progress. She was sunlight moving through the cold, grey day.

DuFour leered from the *Jean-Baptiste*. He was a lumbering giant, his face always unpleasant, but the unvarnished lust in his gaze was truly sickening. Had I not been chained I would have rushed on ship and beat

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that insolent look off his flaccid, pocked face. Our eyes met over Keiko's head and a mutual hatred bloomed. I vowed to myself that someday I would revenge myself on him.

Keiko took Curran's still splinted hand, manipulating it slightly. "It's healing well, then?" She inquired as she pushed his fingers against her palm, seeing how much flex they possessed.

"Aye, 'tis." He flinched some.

Turning to me, Keiko drew a small parcel from beneath her arm and held it out to me. "I've brought the Bishop's letters for ye." As I took them, awkwardly shoving them in my shirt, as my hands were bound with only a short bit of chain between them, Bayard trotted up. Keiko smiled down on the man. "Unchain them please. I donnae want to see them like this." Her tone indicated that she expected compliance.

He shook his head and spread his hands in apology. "I am sorry, *Mademoiselle*, I cannot. Not until they are aboard. Are they your men?" From his vantage on deck, slitting his eyes to thin lines, I could tell the Captain was calculating his options, trying to determine whether he should leave the ship for the dock and see what his second and the strange lady were speaking about. That it seemed to involve two of the conscripts made him uneasy.

"No." With a slight turn of her wrist she indicated me. "*Vidamé du Caroline*, Julius LaRousse, he is Bishop de Richelieu's man. Neither he nor his valet should be chained like a common criminals."

This was priceless. I don't think Curran liked being referred to as my servant, but his snort told me he saw the humor in this impasse. Bayard's eyes went so wide they were almost all white. While Richelieu's reputation was not yet what it would become, the mention of his name still carried implications of his harsh hand. I was certain that the mate had orders not to unshackle the prisoners. Given his position on the crew, he was either the son of a wealthy tradesman or a lesser family of the state and as such would rather be burned alive than offend my patron. Now, I could be gracious and give him an out, but, *pest*, why would I? I smiled and held out my wrists expectantly.

The *churchit, churchit* of the other bound men making their way up the gangplank added to the chink of the keys shaking in Bayard's hand as he unlocked first my manacles then those of the Irishman. Gillardray's voice boomed from deck, screaming for the Second Officer. He'd witnessed the exchange but could do nothing to stop it other than yell.

Bayard was sensibly more frightened of the Bishop than the Captain, at least while we were not at sea.

Rubbing my wrists, the repeated contact with the irons was giving me a rash; I stepped towards Keiko only to find that I was still anchored by Meg hanging on me. I detached her, easing from her grip, "*Enfant*, please, a moment so I can breath, *no?*" She pouted and leaned against Curran's legs. I took Keiko's hands, caressing her palms with my thumbs and chewed on my lip. "So this is *Adieu*, is it?" My smile vanished before it even touched my mouth.

"*Adieu?*" Green eyes considered me, laughing green eyes. *Putain!* What was she up to? "*Adieu?* Not yet." She glanced back at the coach, the driver and footmen had removed two trunks from the rack, closed the carriage, and were mounting their positions. The lady from the prison was spying on us, her hand pushing the curtain back. Her smile was wicked. Keiko nodded to her and the smile grew even more vicious. The curtain dropped and the coach began to roll. Regarding Bayard, Keiko pointed to the baggage. "Please see to it that my things are brought on board. The *chirurgien's* quarters."

Damn her, no! I grabbed her arm, spinning her to face me. "Keiko, you cannot. I won't let you."

That stubborn will I'd witnessed before reared in her eyes, her back going straight and her chin tilted up. "Ye willnae let me? And wasnae it ye who told the bishop that it wasnae your place to decide what happened to me? If it's nae your place, it must be mine." She yanked her arm from my grip and glared at me. "Come, Meg, we should get settled." She took Meg's wrist and pulled her towards the waiting *Jean-Baptiste*.

"*Lunatique!*" I yelled at her back. "You're going to get yourself killed!" Digging my fingers through my hair, I tried to think of something to say that would make her turn back. I turned to Curran. His expression was blank. "Damn fool *Chienne*. What does she think she's doing?"

Grim, "I think she is doin' what she damn well pleases, like she always does."

We followed the women onto the ship, Keiko and I trading glares. The flat plain of the vessel's deck was broken only by a few hatches, the masts and the pilot house. All living space on the *Jean-Baptiste* was below. Our captain had the aft of the ship with a small chart closet to starboard, a bunk to port and a bench spanning the rear of the cabin. One had to squeeze past the table, which was bolted to the floor and onto the

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bench in order to reach the bunk. A wooden screen gave him the illusion of private accommodations.

Keiko's quarters, as the ship's surgeon, were what could best be described as a cabinet, fore and starboard of the captain's berth. Given that she was a woman, they'd furnished her with curtains behind the ventilation slats. It was at least private in some sense. A man, if he were not so tall, could even lie down. Standing within, reaching from starboard to port, I could touch both walls with my arms still bent. The officers' shared quarters on the port side of a size and shape similar to Keiko's berth. Given that they were both large men, I was at a loss to explain how they could both occupy that tiny space.

Between the cabins, and aft of where the main mast went through the decks, was a large coal stove suspended by chains so that the sway of the ship would be less likely to dump its fiery contents in rough seas. The other women and the families had a section of below decks curtained off for privacy on two sides, and walled by crates on the other. The remainder of the hold was filled with the necessities of the voyage—powder, provisions for Fort Caroline and trade goods.

The crew, Curran and I berthed below the main deck in a tiny portion of the forecabin, which could only be accessed by a small scuttle and narrow ladder. Aft was considerably more desirable than fore, as that took the brunt of the seas. Where the crew's bunks lay was the worst of all. It leaked. It was crowded. It stank of men confined. I could stand to be below for small periods of time in my bunk. I would retire to my sodden berth only when I could keep my eyes open no longer, and rush to deck the moment I woke. As long as I kept occupied and in the open air I fared well. If the weather was fair enough, or even if it was only marginal, I slept on deck.

Bayard was the same man on board ship as he'd been at the docks. Cheerful, content in his place, he was always seemingly delighted to see you, even if it had only been ten minutes since you last spoke. The only time Matthieu DuFour deigned to speak to anyone was to bully them. He never asked or even commanded, he screamed. On several occasions I'd approached him about something, only to have him stare at me with his piggish eyes then wander off without comment. And, although we all had tasks, he shirked his, either completing them only part way or foisting them off on some lowly sailor. Anytime there was physical labor to be done he would mysteriously disappear. I would say he was not well

liked, but that would have implied that someone might have held a fondness for the man.

DuFour was always overly solicitous to Keiko, towering over her, shuffling around her with his old man's gait. He couldn't have seen more than twenty-five years, but he moved his bulky frame as though he'd passed twice that. My lady had confided in me that he watched her like a hungry animal, almost salivating at times, and that he made every excuse to be near her or touch her. "He gives me things, Jules. And then he acts like I owe him something for it." She shivered. "I donae like it. I donae want him near me."

Gillardray did not like me. I'd presented him with my charge from the Bishop before we left port. He'd pointed out that, although it was a very pretty piece of paper, it meant nothing on his ship. It showed just what a ruined state the Catholic Church was in that Bishops could convey titles to undeserving men such as I. He knew I was a thief and, although some romanticized my kind, I was just so much of a criminal on horseback to him. And, as there weren't any horses here, that made me just a criminal. And as a criminal I'd be treated no better than any of the other men on his ship.

He also fancied himself quite a ladies man. Between he and DuFour, Keiko was pestered day and night. At first she'd let the Captain flirt with her, thinking it might dissuade his officer, but the brute was too thick to comprehend. So Keiko had politely explained to Gillardray that, while flattered, she was not interested. Then, when it became apparent that she favored me, well, that did not sit well with either man. They both made it a point to saddle me with any extra duty they could, often giving me double watches so that I would be up all night and exhausted all day when I still had to pull my share. *Mon Dieu*, it was a good thing I didn't require much sleep!

On a ship this size everyone worked. No man was exempt from labor. Pumping the water out of our leaky vessel was a daily routine usually accomplished on the dog watch. Curran and I took our turn with the others and tried to make a game out of it, to see who could outdo the other. The Irishman often won our little contests even without the use of one hand. It was a backbreaking task at best, but I was not unfamiliar with hard work and with the limited diversions aboard ship it served its purpose.

I also learned how to handle the rigging. Young boys, because of their smaller size, were put to work on the highest lines. Pierre, the



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*beçon*, would tell them "one hand for yourself, and one for the ship, keep your eye on the job and don't look down." Being more agile than most, I took to it well enough, and could pull more weight than the children. It was far better work than polishing the cannon or scrubbing the deck, tasks given to the crew to keep their minds occupied. As long as you don't have a fear of heights it can be quite pleasant; standing on the yard, your hands in the rigging, the wind in your hair, looking out over the vastness of the ocean. There was a freedom up there I hadn't felt anywhere else.

Heaven could be like that.

## Fifteen

The day had started badly. One of the younger boys, Claude, who was not much older than Meg I would venture, had been tapped as a cabin boy. I suffered for him. There were often onerous private duties that went with that post. Any father who sent his son to sea for anything but absolute desperation should be broken on the wheel. There were few crueler fates above starvation. It seemed, however, that those services were not required of him or perhaps he did not mind them. He went about his duties with no more than the general resignation of the rest of the crew.

One of his chores was to bring the Captain his meals and clear the scraps from the table to be given over to the other officers. Let me remind you, we were on a ship, in the middle of the ocean, and he was a small boy carrying a large tray. He was also trying to negotiate the ladder down into the hold as the first mate was trying to take it up. Because DuFour was never one to give way, Claude was attempting to back-up.

The ship pitched. The ladder disappeared under Claude's feet. Claude disappeared into the hold. There was a clatter and a roar, and then the boy rabbited from the hatch as though the devil were after him. The devil's name was Mathieu DuFour. Grabbing a short turn of line the Ensign was in pursuit. The lash chosen was near as thick as my wrist, damp and crusted with salt. He chased the boy with the hank of rope, bringing it down about the child's head and back whenever he found an opening. Claude screamed as he ran. "*Pourquoi?*"

"You want to know why I flog you?" Swinging the rope above his head, DuFour turned his body as it came down, lending the blow more effect. "You want to know?" A stray line in the child's path tripped him and like an animal he balled himself for safety. "It is because you are an indolent, clumsy brat! It gives me pleasure to punish you! You deserve it!"

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Claude writhed in pain on the deck where he'd fallen. The boy begged for *Meré Marie's* intercession. At his prayers DuFour raged, "Don't you dare call on God! I am God aboard this ship!"

There was little I could do, but I did it. A pin set to the boards and the pitch of the deck, and Mathieu DeFour was flat on his back. A smarter boy than most, Claude dove for the hold while the Ensign was still searching for his breath. If the lad had as much sense as it seemed we wouldn't see him for the rest of the day.

Knowing it was no accident, DuFour jumped to his feet, bellowing for the culprit to be apprehended. At least he wasn't delusional about our love for him. Suddenly every man aboard had found something to occupy himself with. Unable to bring the guilty to justice, swelled with rage and impotence, DuFour strutted about the deck blustering, "You see what's in for you? See what power I have? I can give any last one of you a turn at the lash for no reason but my pleasure! You live or die by me! If I wished to toss the lot of you into the ocean I have that power! And if that brat finds his way back to you, I'll give stripes to the man who tries to ease him! You understand! He deserved his fate; he deserves to suffer with it..." His harangue went on in that manner for near ten minutes. Finally, puffing his chest and venting vitriol, DuFour disappeared below.

Not long after that, Claude slunk on deck. His narrow back was striped and swollen. Low grumbles wound round the mast at the sight of him. And not a one of us cared if we took a beating for easing his pain. There are things that are right, because they are right by God. Tending to a mate who suffers is right in the Lord's eyes.

Sailors are but slaves aboard ship. Willing slaves most times, but slaves the same. Like dogs they will kill themselves for a kind master. But let an officer ill use them, slight their number in some manner, then the man should praise God he gets any work from them at all. It is not that any would refuse to do as we were told...one just finds ways of tarrying at a task. After that day Mathieu DuFour was lucky the ship didn't scuttle itself on his watch. He'd send a man down to get a block. The sailor would turn the hold upside down for it and come back on deck without it. Ropes were forever undoing themselves. A line worked by three men yesterday needed seven whilst he was on deck.

Curran and I were in the hold making long work of a short task. For us that meant lolling amongst the stores and teasing with each other. Oddments, spare sail and line, various bundles of provisions were crammed into every available corner. We'd found a small space within

the clutter in which to disappear. So long as we kept our voices low we'd be undetectable from all but the most diligent search. Curran had set himself up towards the top of a pile of bales. A sultan lounging on his couch could not have been more comfortable. My chosen seat was a crate slightly below him.

As usual, our conversation had drifted towards sex. Why we weren't having any predominated these days. "I'm sure one of the young ladies would give you a tumble. It wouldn't be so hard to sneak one from beneath Madame's nose."

"It is naw small matter to go behind that wagon's back. She rides heard on them like a mother hen." He coughed and rolled his eyes. "I'm given to understand," his tone said the understanding might have been garnered personally, "that a few lads have tried and received a sound thumping for their effort."

"So you've tried it then?"

"Naw," he shuddered, "they're too well used."

Patting his ankle, "You lie rather badly. You are aware of that failing?" Given that the *filles* had not been chosen for their desirability but rather for the undesirability of their conduct, I was less than surprised. "That being the point of a prostitute, *mon ami*. You know what you're getting."

Indignant, "I'd have to be a wee bit more desperate to take one of that lot. Although each morn' I wake and they're just a wee bit finer then they were the last." He reached out and tipped the hat over my eyes. "Jaysus, even yer starting to look fine."

Pushing the brim back so I could see, "Really?" Curran must be desperate if he was starting the teasing, "How long has it been for you?"

"Since Calais."

"*Mon Dieu*, you must be bursting. I'm fairly pent and I at least had some opportunity before Marseilles."

"I'm a little frustrated. But I don't see how some of the lads stand it as well as they do." Another shudder, "Or how they choose to do what they do to stand it."

Already relationships were forming among the crew. Some were more out of necessity than desire but they all served the same purpose. "It is the situation they are in, not the life they have chosen for themselves." Most of these men, had they been back in France would never have looked at another man. Desperation, loneliness, want drove them together. I slid up to Curran, put my lips next to his ear. "Well then,

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do you want know how they stand it...most of them?" The aura of wind behind his ears and the taste of steel on his neck coursed over my tongue as I inhaled his scent.

"Naw, I don't think I need to hear this."

"Oh, come now. It's not so bad. You would just do as the rest of them do, *mon ami*. Pretend."

"Pretend?" The whisper of the question thrilled me. His cheek was not breaths from mine. Kneeling in that dim, dank hold, I fought my desire of him. More than anything I wanted to push him down and ravage every inch of him with pleasure. I'd lose him if I did. I did not want to lose Curran.

"*Oui*, pretend that one of them is a woman. Find one with a fresh face and soft hands and you'd never know the difference...at least, not if you close your eyes. You simply tell yourself that the beautiful feelings are from the fingers of the woman left behind." As I spoke my hand drifted up his leg. He twitched but did not pull away.

"I don't think I'd find any of them quite what I'd want." His hand landed on mine. While he stopped me from going farther, Curran hadn't removed it. There was a little tremble to his voice. "I don't think I'd want any stranger touching me like that."

Not a stranger? That didn't rule out a friend. "What would you want?" Shivers of anticipation rode my skin. "I'm no stranger, am I?"

"Jules, I don't think this is a good idea."

"Shh, it's no worse idea than any other. Let me help you. The first time we kissed, it wasn't so bad, was it?" After a tense moment he shook his head. "You wanted it again, did you not, *mon ami*?" *Mon Dieu*, that perfect kiss, there was no way he had not wanted it. Perfection, born of desire.

Swallowing, "I, I don't know what was in me mind then." Another swallow, "Maybe because we were going to die. Don't be getting ideas from that. I've not changed me mind."

"Understood, this would be a trifle, nothing of import." Even if it was only a fantasy to him, I wished to be the one who gave it. I could suffer that. "Close your eyes." My fingers swept across his lids, pulling them shut. "Now, think back, think of the prettiest girl you were ever with, the one you wanted the most. Imagine her hands running down your body." As I spoke, my hand drifted between his legs. "Imagine her breasts spilling from her bodice." Finding the tie, I loosed it. His beautiful lips parted and he sucked in his breath. "She's beautiful and

sweet." My fingers slipped against his flesh as I pushed back his britches and pulled him free.

He was hardening under my touch. It felt so good to have his weight in my hand, to feel him come alive with my caresses. The chills started in my palm and coursed up my arm. Ripples of their passing washed through my body and landed in my hips. "So willing to do whatever you desire. Anything at all for you." Curran twitched and hissed as I stroked him. His teeth ground against his lip. Why couldn't it be I who drove that dream?

Licking my lips, wanting to taste him, I knew I could give Curran more than this. As of yet he had not drawn away. Soft, low moans broke as I took him into my mouth. Strong fingers twined into my hair. I ran my tongue over his head and down to where my hand wrapped around his shaft. I cupped his balls in my palm. Squeezing both as I sucked down hard on his head, Curran whimpered. His eyes were drawn tight and his face contorted with the feelings. My hands braced on either side of his hips, I took him all the way. Brutal suction, tongue pressing him against the roof of my mouth, I could feel the shudders tearing his frame.

"Ah, Jules, ah Jaysus, Jules." His fingers pinched the tip of my ear. "Oh God, Jules, stop!

"Oww." I wrested my head from his grasp and backed up choking. Curran was folding in on himself, hand clutching his britches. Unknowable things were passing behind his brooding eyes. "What is the problem, *mon ami*? Didn't you like it?"

"I'm liking it," his voice was barely a hiss, "that's the problem."

Laughing, "You're meant to like it." My hand on his boot was meant to calm him. He jerked back as though burned. "Be easy, that's what this game is about."

The bale tipped as he scrambled off it. "Stop calling it a game. It's not a game."

"Why is it not a game? You're pretending I'm some buxom wench with an Irish manner."

Boots skidding on the deck as the ship rolled, crawling over the cargo and hand cast back searching for the ladder, "I can't stop thinking that it's yer." Bumping instead against the hull, he slid towards the hatch. When he found it, Curran hesitated. Tortured eyes stared at me. "And, and Goddamn yer, I liked it because I knew it was yer." He fled up onto deck.

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Stunned, I could do no more than kneel there and watch him go. He liked it because it was me? Me?

Heavy, hard footsteps of Mathieu DuFour sounded on the boards. I scrambled off my perch. Whatever thoughts I might have, I'd return to them later. As nonchalant as I could manage, I picked up a few pins and made ready to head on deck. I'd find Curran and well, I'd find Curran first and then I figure something out. A thick lipped growl sounded at my back.

"Do you think you are going somewhere, *Monsieur*?"

I shrugged and turned to him. "I believe I have duties I must perform. Mayhap they are even those you assigned me." DuFour was wearisome at the best of times. Those tended to be when he was the furthest distance possible from me on this little boat.

"Oh, I thought you might be after your Irish companion." Satan's laugh emanated from DuFour's mouth. "Such a close relationship you have."

"*Monsieur*, I believe that is none of your business."

"It is all my business aboard this vessel. And I have business with him." Smug, his piggish face suggested he was going to enjoy telling it. "Apparently, he's been caring for that lout of a cabin boy." That was no news, we all had been. "In fact, stealing food from the cook to give it to him." Hands laced behind his back, DuFour rocked back on his heels. "I must find him and tell him he's been put to bread and water for disobeying me. And what I witnessed earlier...I'm certain the captain should love to hear it. It is far more serious a matter."

My heart went cold. The rations were a trifle. I'd slip him some of mine, but what the Ensign was insinuating might net more than a beating. Not that it wasn't unknown onboard a ship; you just didn't get caught at it by an officer. "I think," as even as I could manage, "you best consider what you are saying, *Monsieur*. He answers to me, and I answer to Richelieu. Woe to the man who upsets the Bishop's plans."

"The captain may be swayed by such threats but they mean nothing to me." Gillardray was far smarter than his first officer, apparently. "It is an abomination in the eyes of God. And I will see you punished for it. I swear on my life I will."

## Sixteen

I don't know how long I was out for. I remember that, once, I tried to open my eyes. It felt like some devil was trying to dig them out with a spoon. Then I felt a cool, soft touch on my forehead and heard a woman singing low, like a mother would to a sick child, and a child's voice. It seemed strange and far away. A cup with a warm, musty liquid was put to my lips and I slipped back into sleep.

Hours, or maybe days later, I woke. I was unsure of where I was but I was fairly certain that my mouth had been packed with wool. I could move my arms and legs, but they felt too large for my body and my stomach was made of water. Something living had taken up residence just under my skin, crawling and chewing at my frame. The bed upon which I lay seemed to move of its own volition. My first thought was that I was having possibly the worst hangover of my life. Then I remembered that I was on the *Jean-Baptiste* in the middle of the ocean. That at least explained the rolling of the bunk. I knew there was an explanation for the rest of my symptoms but I couldn't quite reach it behind the pounding of my head.

I sat up, a little too fast, and my gut twisted. It was a dry, heaving retch that threw my body into convulsions. There was apparently nothing for me to bring up. I heard Keiko whisper, "You're awake," and the rustle of her skirts coming close. Opening my eyes brought on more pain. Actually, the opening of my right eye, as my left seemed glued shut.

"That is a statement of the obvious." The voice that came out did not sound like mine. I started to touch my face but she grabbed my wrist before I could.

She smiled at me. "Shhh. Ye should lay back." Her touch on my bare chest was firm but gentle as she pushed me back down. It would have been pleasant had another wave of nausea not crested over me, and if it hadn't felt as though all my joints were been popped by a blade. At least we had a small bit of privacy. We were in her tiny cabin at the aft of the ship, curtains drawn; none had to see my pitiful state. I couldn't stand



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to be surrounded by the jostling, rowdy crew. She sat on the edge of the bunk at my feet and motioned to someone just behind my head. "Curran's here, too."

Boot heels scraped the deck. He had to have been standing just behind my head. He came around to where I could see him. "Bejasus," he shook his head, "yer look like hell."

"I feel like I've died, gone to hell, and come back with a brace of demons in my skull."

Keiko put her hand over her mouth and stifled a small cry. She looked at Curran, and then at me, and back at Curran. Then she fled from the cabin.

I almost rose to follow her. Just the tensing of my muscles at the thought of moving caused waves of pain to crest over me. "*Cues ca se?*"

He commandeered the spot she had vacated, he laughed. "Lad, yer did."

"Pardone?"

"Yer soul got away. And then yer came back."

"I died and then I came back." It hurt to talk. My throat was dry. I wished I had a drink, a really strong drink. "Are all Irishmen mad or just you?"

"Damn it lad, yer were dead. I've seen enough dead in my day to know." He shook his head seeing my disbelief. "Yer eyes, starin' wide, nathin' behind them but glass, yer jaw hangin' loose and lips all blue. Yer were dead, I tell yer. Drown like a kitten, yer were." Curran was warming to telling of his story, given that I was probably the only man on board who had not already heard it. "Like sum deadly, blasted hero, yer toss the lady yer sword and pistol, grab her, pogue her, stick yer knife in yer teeth and dived in after the beastie that would have swallowed the ship whole."

That sparked a memory; it was vague, but there.

A cold grey day, no wind to be had. We had been lolling in the doldrums of the Ocean, drifting with the current. And then the watch had screamed. Not called. Not yelled. But screamed and pointed to starboard.

My head began to clear.

We had all run to the rail. The captain had raised his glass. I hadn't needed one to see. Off on the horizon, a dark shadow was undulating toward us, diving and breaching with some speed. "A whale?" someone had asked.

We had seen whales on this voyage. It was no whale. It was too long. It moved wrong, like a snake slipping through the water. A serpent; a large one, heading straight for us! Our only hope would be to outrun it, but there was no breeze to drive our sails. We were dead in the water.

There was no choice but to stand and fight. "Cannon!" The captain bellowed, "Man the cannon!" and men had scrambled along the deck to the guns. "Fire the moment you have a clean shot."

I remembered looking at the priest. He had fallen to his knees and was praying in ashen silence. It struck me that it had been weeks since my last confession. I had been remiss. Of course I was going to hell anyway, so it shouldn't have mattered to me whether I confessed, but it did. There was no time now. I grabbed my rosary and took a moment to ask God to forgive me for all the thoughts and deeds I could not call to mind. I was sure I'd had them. I was sure I'd done them. But I could not remember them at the moment.

Curran was loading his musket, packing the powder down with the ramrod; as though that would save his soul. I dug out the wadding and powder and began the same ritual with my pistol. Not our souls, but maybe our lives might be saved. A light touch landed on my arm and I turned. Keiko stood next to me and held out a piece of shot in her palm. In her other hand was a pistol, with match and pan primed. I wondered where she had gotten it from. I said, as I took the proffered lead, "You are a very surprising woman."

"I know." She smiled.

I waived my pistol in the direction of hers as I pulled the hammer back and primed it. "You, of course, know how to use that."

"Very well, thank ye." She was being very brave, although I could tell she was terrified. I wondered if I looked as scared as she. And then both of us had jumped as the first volley of cannon roared and acrid smoke drifted across the deck. I found my body pressed against hers, my pistol arm raised, my other around her waist.

"Is it a good day to die?" I had asked, touching my forehead to hers.

"Never!"

Another volley stung my ears, and I knew the beast had to be upon us. I looked to port as it heaved its bulk out of the water. It was covered in oily black scales and it whipped its neck sensuously from side to side, a mesmerizing dance of death, slowly raising its massive snout to the height of the main royal. It stared down upon us with dead green eyes,

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opened its maw, brimming with wicked yellow teeth, and let loose with a bellow that drove through my body like a knife drawn across glass.

I found myself on the deck, my head on my knees and my arms thrown over my ears. I was screaming but I could not hear myself. The creature had deafened me.

Looking up, I saw it drive down and tear a man from the rigging. The brute tossed him in the air and slammed its jaws shut across his middle. We were sprayed with gore. It gulped twice and the body was gone.

The deck was chaos. Men were scrambling. Some rushed to turn the starboard cannon to fire across the deck. They were as likely to hit their comrades as the beast. Others grabbed arquebuses and loaded as fast as they were able. A few braver, and less well armed, souls grabbed gaffs and pins. The Captain tried to sound orders but he was ignored. So much for a ship full of convicts and whores, it was every man for himself. Well, I had not cheated the hangman on land just to meet his equal at sea.

I grabbed Pierre as he skidded past me, his bare feet slipping on the bloody deck. He was one of the few career seamen on board and had often said he didn't believe in shoes. Yelling in his ear so he could hear me over the din, I screamed that he should get the unarmed men to cut the lines. The way that foul thing was thrashing about it would snarl them and bring the main royal down upon us. I couldn't tell if he heard me. I couldn't hear myself. Hopefully he would get it done.

The dragon grabbed another man, severing his head. A fountain of red rain coated the deck in more filth. Then another fell screaming soundlessly as he was torn in two. One cannon took out two more men and part of the rail with one ball, missing the beast altogether. The other cannon shot grazed its flank.

I spun, searching for Curran. He was reloading. He must have loosed one shot already. I slid a short distance across the bloodied deck to him and slapped his arm to gain his attention. He looked up and said something. I touched my hands to my ears and shook my head and shrugged. I hope he understood. Gesturing at the ragged group of men, sloppily priming their guns, I yelled, "Line, we need a firing line! Get them in a line!" It was very strange to speak but not hear the sound of my own voice. Nodding, he scrambled aft and began shoving and pulling them into something vaguely resembling military order. Curran had possibly seen more battles than the rest of the ship combined, he would see to them.

Curran went down on one knee and his malapropos company followed suit. They aimed. They fired. Their shots took small bites from the foul thing's muzzle and body, and it dropped what remained of the last hapless sailor to the deck. Most shots went wild. I felt the blast as Keiko loosed her shot from behind me. It either went wild or bounced off the serpent's armored skin. From the look of it the cannon had done little damage, pistol shot nicked bits from the scales but little else. It bled but was not overly wounded.

The ship heaved and men slid into the water. The rest of the beast must be below us. If it got us in its coils it would shatter the hull.

"And yer killed it. Yer man hauls yer back over the rail with a gaff, and we find that the bleedin' beast has returned the favor."

I had killed it.

Wrapped around the ship, it was too close for cannon. The crew couldn't get close enough with swords or they'd risk those razor fangs; some tried and died brutally for their effort. Shot, pistol, or musket, would only penetrate so far through that thick hide. Unless someone pulled a lucky shot into its eye or maw, we'd never hit anything vital. Damned modern warfare. There wasn't a bow or arrow to be had on the ship. Guns just weren't accurate enough.

Maybe it was because I couldn't hear anything save a low ringing in my ears. Maybe if I'd been surrounded by the sounds of battle, the screams of dying men. Maybe if I could have heard Keiko screaming my name. Maybe then I wouldn't have gone up into the rigging. I was focused on one thought. I kept thinking the only chance is the eye.

Curran had embellished his tale. I most certainly did not sweep the fair maid into a kiss, toss her my weapons, and dive over the side. I dropped everything that was not absolutely necessary to the deck, lunged for a cut line, and began a hand over hand ascent into the sails. I pulled myself onto the spar and crouched there, holding the mast. I think it was then that I pulled my knife, but I have no clear memory of doing so. I looked to where the beast should have been and saw nothing but the confusion of the living and the dead below. I remember thinking it was strange that it was all so silent, there should have been the sound of muskets, of men in a fight for their lives; I'd forgotten I couldn't hear.

I felt it behind me.

Felt the hot breath that stank of carrion seep up the back of my neck and across my scalp, making it prickle with fear. Any man who would say he had no fear in my place is either a fool or a liar. My whole body

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trembled in terror and my hands went slick with sweat. My nails were cutting ribbons into my palm in a white knuckled death grip on my knife. I turned and found myself staring into swirling emerald mirror of an eye the size of my head. I was frozen. I knew I needed to move, to get myself out of there, but I could not make my body obey.

It roared again. Although I could not hear it the force of the bellow rattled my teeth and near knocked me from my tenuous hold in the rigging. It snapped its giant head to the side and slammed me into the mast with a massive blow. Searing pain spread from my left temple to the bridge of my nose. My vision filled with blood. I could taste it as it ran down my face and out of my nose and into my mouth. I would have fallen but in my fear I had wound my arm into the sail line. My shoulder was torn from its socket, and the air knocked from my lungs, as I spun around the mast and landed across the spar.

The grey black ribbon of the serpent's neck was rolling beneath me. Gaspng bloody foam, I cut the line and dropped onto the foul thing's snout. I found myself lying on my back between the eyes of the devil himself. My left arm wouldn't work and my right held the knife. The beast was going to shake me off. I was slipping. I flipped onto my belly, kicked with my legs and drove my arm to the elbow into one of those evil green orbs. Then I fell. The water was like stone when I hit.

"I'm thinkin' we pulled yer out of the sea, just to clod yer body back in. And then the priest, yer man takes out this crucifix, and it's got three strands of the shroud, from the Lord himself, yer man said...and yer man points to the wee gold box in the center of it. And lays it on yer chest. And yer man prays, and prays, and prays. And I'm thinkin', de man's dead father, yer can not bring himself back. But yer man keeps prayin', he does. Just when I'm startin' to think the man's gone off his nut," he paused for the effect, and I found myself being sucked into his telling of my own story, "a golden light clothes yer body, and yer chest heaves up, it does, and yer suck in this huge breath of air. And yer sit bolt upright," he smacked his fist into his palm to punctuate his words, "gapin' like a cod pulled to land."

His lip curled and his eyes grew bright. "And the lady...who has been cryin' over yer, like yer her own dead brother, starts screamin'...like she's seen de devil himself. And then...and then..." he started to laugh, "yer turned to that pompous French langer captain, who did nothin' but cower behind the wheel when the beastie would have eaten his ship, and yer purged all the sea in yer gut all over his fine clothes. I almost got

away splittin' my sides, I did. Jaysus." He put his hand over his eyes and fell out laughing, kicking my leg with the heel of his boot. "If I never clap another sight like it in me life..." The kick upset my balance again and again I began to heave. Curran could hardly breathe from the sounds he was making.

My voice was raw. "*Dèfface!*"

He stopped laughing, and narrowed his eyes. Slipping off the bunk, he put his hand on my shoulder. "I'll forgive yer you're rudeness this time lad, you've had a rough go. But don't yer be treatin' me again that way. All of us have been hoverin' over yer day and night, like if we left for one moment yer'd be gone again."

I closed my good eye. Given what I had been through, I guessed that the other was ruined. Curran's steps faded out of the cabin and the latch clicked.

A tear slipped down my cheek and I began to sob, quietly. I did not want anyone to intrude. I did not weep because of the pain or because I had lost my eye. I wept, *mon frère*, because I had remembered.

I remembered hell and it has nothing to do with ten-year-old girls and petty questions.

## Seventeen

Keiko dabbed at the scab covering the ruin of my left eye with something that smelled vaguely medicinal. What remained of the lid had been sewn together. According to my fair doctor the ball itself was intact, bloodstained, the iris turned a milky yellow, but intact. All in all, it was not a pretty piece of work. I knew from my own experiments that my eye had been rendered completely sightless.

I was sitting on a crate at the aft end of the narrow cabin so that she could better view my face and its wounds. It had been near a week since I regained consciousness and close to two since I had fought with the sea serpent. She clicked her tongue on the back of her teeth. "I must have gotten all the bits of wood out, there donnae seem to be any infection."

Fortunately I hadn't broken any bones. I was partly unconscious when I struck the surface of the ocean. Had I hit the deck I probably would have shattered almost all of them, including my neck. I also seemed to have been very lucky in the angle at which I went into the water; a slight variation on my incline and it would have been as bad as hitting the deck. Pierre, who'd checked in on me earlier that day, claimed that the only reason my skull hadn't been driven into my brain was that it was too damned thick for sense or anything else to crack.

I still hurt and my ears rang and the scabs itched. Every muscle had been pulled, every joint bruised. I'd dislocated my shoulder and I'd cracked a rib or two, making me wince if I took too deep a breath. *Pest*, if they could bring me back from the dead why couldn't they have done it in one piece?

However, being an invalid had its benefits. I'd been confined to bed for the better part of the week, only venturing on deck recently; which meant that I had been confined to Keiko's bed! Not that I could convince her to share it with me. She'd moved for the duration in with the other women but she spent a great deal of time ministering to me.

The hours become endless at sea, and we had long conversations about what Arcadia and Florida and Fort Caroline would be like to fill

them. I began to pry from her the reasons behind her departure from Scotland and why she would be willing to risk everything following me in my flight.

She was the beautiful and enchanting, which of course I already knew, daughter of a Scottish Laird, with four brothers, the youngest older than Keiko by many years. She was privileged in everything and denied nothing as a child. A pony, ball gowns, parties, playmates, whatever she wished was given to her. She roamed freely over her father's lands often, having evaded her nurse and never being called to task for it. She called it an indulged childhood. I told her she was spoiled.

Her intelligence had gained the attention of her brothers' tutor, an alchemist who made his living as an itinerant schoolmaster/perfumer/poisoner/bone-setter, while indulging his obsession of attempting to transmute lead into gold. As was typical, when she demanded it, she was indulged in lessons beyond those normally accorded to the fairer sex. No simple rote recitation and embroidery, but Ovid and Plutarch mixed with Cabbala and mysticism and incantations.

I was not the first to fall under her sway.

As I said, she was very, very headstrong, and very, very spoiled. Keiko had teased and toyed with several hearts, none of whom did she feel were "worth her sacrifice." Those were her words. Given her encounters with me, I guessed she'd done everything but the final act, and not a few times. Now, in my view of the world, which I expressed to her, doing everything except that was as sinful as playing the beast with two backs. She explained that it wasn't sin, but practicality that kept her legs closed.

In spite of her penchant for using them as playthings, she found most of the men she knew to be greedy, more interested in her as an elegant trophy with a dowry, than as herself. She had consigned herself to the reality that she would eventually be married off to some titled heir whether she cared for him or not. While she would not jeopardize her marriage prospects by the committing the final sin of a woman, she felt she was entitled to experience some love and affection before that fate arrived.

And she had gone about it with a passion that amazed me. She was nineteen now and I'd counted the names of at least five different beaux. I had the sense that there were a few more fleeting encounters which I did not hear of. She'd either started young or had been very, very busy.



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When she was finally caught *en flagrante delicto* with a young lord of some reputation, none of it good, her father had decided to send her away. It was her mother's intercession that caused her to be sent to Calais. She would be safely ensconced with trusted members of her own clan and she could slake her thirst for knowledge as long as she kept the hem of her skirts below her knees. To make sure she was true to her word, the little blue bottle in its ebony box was created.

The accidents of fate that had brought us together had enraged her father and scandalized her mother. Keiko had, wicked child that she was, told them all about it in her letters home, knowing that her parents would be horrified by her situation. Since he had been unable to force her home by cutting off her funds—I had been the primary author of that impasse—the Laird MacPhearson had been on his way to bring her home. My flight from justice was conveniently timed to her necessity. Once she had committed to running away to Marseilles, she didn't see why she shouldn't go on this grand adventure to New France with Curran and me.

So now we were alone together in her cabin and she was holding my chin with her hand, forcing my gaze to her cleavage. Not that that was her intent. She was trying to look at my wounds. I was merely taking advantage of the situation. Keiko was tsking over the bump just above my eye.

"Does it make me look handsome?"

Keiko dropped my chin. "What?" I caught her off guard with my question.

"The eye, well not my eye, but wearing the eye patch, like some dashing robber from a ballad? Does it make me seem mysterious and daring?"

When she stopped laughing I asked her if that meant no. She covered her mouth with her hands and spoke into them. "Well, it doesn't make ye look any...less handsome than ye were before." She reached out and pulled the makeshift patch she'd devised down over the eye.

I caught her wrists. "*Comme vous êtes vilaine!*"

She struggled with me. She was laughing again. "You're healing fast under my attentions."

I pulled her into my lap, encircling her waist with my arms. I nuzzled her neck. "*Mais*, do you like my attentions?"

"Ooh, aye." Her tongue began to tickle the tip of my ear. That ministrations always made my blood run a little hotter and my nerves dance under my skin. "Very much."

I caressed the inside of her arm, barely riding her skin with my touch. Reaching her wrist, I brought it slowly up to my lips. Her pulse was strong and visible in the delicate blue veins. I kissed the tips of her fingers as Keiko traced the outline of my mouth. "Let me show attention," I began to work my hands in the tight space between her bodice and skirts, whispering against her fingertips, "to some of your more delicate places."

She stood, playing the coquette, pulling away from my caress. Due to the cramped space she could not go far. "Yer rank," she gave a small teasing laugh, putting her finger to my lips as though to hush *un enfant*, "is not high enough to permit me to be yer wife, but my heart is too high to permit me to be yer mistress."

I jumped up and pushed her up against the bunk. "I am no bauble to be played with and cast aside!" Keiko gasped and there was a little fear in her eyes. "I will have you. *Noblesse* or no, *Mademoiselle*!" I remembered the plague of vermin and swallowed. Nothing scrabbled at the back of my throat.

I took her by the wrists as she struggled against me, causing me no little excitement. "Ye are a knave." She pushed at me.

"*Oui*."

"Ye are a *Varlet*." She tried to kick me, but was tangled in her own skirts.

"*Oui*."

"Ye are a scoundrel."

"You have forgotten: *Voleur*, Highwayman, *Meurtrier*. I am all of those things and you have teased me long enough." I pinned her arms at her sides and leaned into her. I kissed her, and not with the playful kisses of earlier, but the hard ardent kiss of a man in passion.

I placed her palms against the flat of my stomach, "Do you see what you do to me, *cherie*?" Pushing her hands downward, over my trousers, I brought them to a stop over my throbbing manhood. "I am not a little boy. I am tired playing our sweetheart's games. I am a man, and I lust for you. All you do is tempt me with tastes of what I could have. My body is hungry for yours," I smiled wickedly, "I died for you, *c'est une dette que vous me devez*." I kissed her roughly again. She did not struggle against my attentions and her hands remained where I placed them without

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resistance. I drove my tongue into her mouth, released my grip on her and slid my hands along her bodice, up to cup her breasts. She was warm and tasted faintly of mint. My knees buckled when she began to suck on my tongue.

I pulled back, breathing hard. A faint sheen of moisture coated her upper lip. Her eyes were closed. She tipped her head back baring her throat to me and made a small sound of pleasure.

"Is that it, *cherie*? No bugs this time?" I drew my finger along her *décolletage*, resting it lightly against her skin. Again a little gasp. Her hands began to move on me, riding the hard outline of my desire. She was such a naughty little vixen, always dancing with me on the edge of a precipice. The tiny cabin was becoming warm, far too warm. I caressed the valley between her breasts, and toyed with the tie that held her stomacher into her dress, "You won't give me your little ribbon? You'll make me take it from you? Is that why you like me? Am I a dangerous plaything? Not one of your foppish little princes?"

She wrapped one arm around my neck and slipped her other hand into my trousers. Her hands were smooth and strong. Gripping my erection, she slid her hand along it from base to tip, then rubbed the head with the heel of her palm, her fingers pushing my foreskin back, exposing the most sensitive portions to her touch. "Aye," she whispered as she kissed me.

I growled through our kiss, "*Agissez comme une pute.*"

Keiko squeezed, hard. Hard enough I bit my lip. "Don't call me a whore," she commanded then relaxed her hold.

I was trembling as I kissed her face and neck. "If I did, would you hurt me again?"

"Aye."

"Then you're a whore." I had to steady myself on the small shelf by her bunk when she squeezed again. I moaned. It was deliciously intense, I have never been fond of gentle ministrations and the rough play was exciting. I still savored the memory of her teeth on my skin. She resumed her caresses, not so gentle as before. Ecstasy. With my free hand I began to tug at the bindings of her bodice. I was hampered by the confines of the cabin and that the garment's lower half was wedged between her body and her bunk. Knowing how tightly women bound themselves into their dresses, if I could just undo the tie it would come loose on its own.

Keiko sensed what I was doing behind her back and, laughing, put her weight against my hand, further hampering my efforts. Well, if she

wouldn't let me undress her one way, I'd try another. I tried to pull my hand back. She pushed harder against the bunk trapping me. "Why do you do this to me?" I whispered into the nape of her neck. She was kissing my ear again. *Mon Dieu*, but she knew what made my heart run!

I had to think a moment and thinking was becoming more difficult with every caress of her palm along my shaft. I was off balance, in more ways than one. I used it to my advantage and let go of the shelf I'd been using to steady us. For a moment we stood as though nothing had changed. Then the ship rolled. I fell back towards midships, pulling Keiko with me. There wasn't far to go in the tiny space and we ended up crashing into the far wall and sliding to the floor, knocking several of Keiko's instruments and bottles to the deck.

Our fall reminded me that I wasn't fully whole yet and I hissed in pain. She landed on top of me, her skirts tangled around my legs, her body wedged between my knees. Luckily her hand had slipped when we fell, so I hadn't been emasculated—that was a contingency I hadn't considered—but as I took her face in my hands and resumed kissing her, she sought me out again. "*Laissez-moi vous faire l'amour*, Keiko, please."

Her lips slid against mine and I felt more than heard her "yes." *Putain*, she said yes. How was I going to get up from here? We could manage this way but I didn't want that for her. It had been so long since I had touched her that I could hear my pulse thudding in my temples.

It wasn't my heart. It was someone pounding against the hatch. I almost screamed "Why me?" as Keiko jerked back and turned her head towards the doorway.

"Mademoiselle, I heard a crash..." The latch turned, we hadn't bothered to lock it, and the door swung out. The frumpy face of *la femme des filles* popped through. "Are you..." If it had not interrupted my hope ecstasy I would have said the expression of horror that stole her visage was worth any sum on the face of the earth. Keiko's hand was still between my legs, dainty fingers still curled around my hard cock. When my lover had twisted to face the intruder what we had been engaged in was all too apparent. Madame screamed.

My wheel-lock had come to rest on the deck next to my hand. I grabbed the pistol and aimed it at Madame Anna's head. "*Sors de là! Ca ne te regarde pas!* I will blow your brains across this boat!"

The widow screamed again and ran from the doorway. *Putain!* This little drama was about to end, and rather badly. I still held Keiko on my

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lap, but she had removed her hands to a more decorous position and covered me with her skirts. Little Meg peered through the vacated opening, looking stricken. "*Mademoiselle*, what is wrong," she whimpered, clinging to the door frame.

"Don't worry, poppet." I winked at her. "That harridan doesn't want to see people having fun."

The thudding of boots down the ladder brought the matter to a close. The captain shoved Meg aside. He was flanked by Ensign DuFour and two crewmen. "Unhand her!" he ordered.

I declined to do so. "*Pas bon*, you are given to triteness, *Capitan*. You should add *villio*' and then we shall have a scene befitting Corneille. I think he would call it, *La Comtesse un Voleur*, no?"

Gillardray hated me. He hated that he was stuck with me. He hated that I'd killed the serpent and not him. He hated that he owed his ship and his life to me. "Release her now or I will have you hanged." There was death in that voice.

I considered the threat for a moment, then dismissed it. "You can't hang me. You have a grant from *Le Roi*, but I have a charter from Bishop Richelieu. The emissary of the state meddling in the affairs of the Church and when the Church has the ear of the state. The money for your venture wasn't raised by the thought of profit among men. It was raised by the delicate and very Catholic Ladies of the Court to save the heathens' souls."

Anger colored his face. I had him. He could not hang me without risking the ire of Church and King, or rather the various mistresses of the King. He was not man enough to damn them and do it anyway. He was also a not Catholic. Only his family name allowed him to command his ship. If he had not been so far out of favor with the Church he probably would have been given a proper crew.

We stared each other down, locked in impasse for a moment. Then wicked smile spread across his face. "*Oui*, I cannot hang you. But you have committed a trespass against one of the fine ladies I have sworn to escort safely to La Florida. I cannot let it go unpunished or I would loose control over my ship. While at sea, I am *Capitan*."

As if he had control over the men on his ship. He stepped back so the escort might come around and seize me. The men began to pull at me, awkwardly since they could not actually enter the cabin with Keiko and myself occupying a good deal of the floor space. I shrugged them off as I struggled to my feet. I then assisted Keiko to hers. "Let us be

civilized Frenchmen, not barbaric like the English." I released my prize and pushed through the hatch adjusting my clothes as I did so. "And just how do you plan to punish my transgression?" I leaned against the open door and crossed my arms over my chest.

"I will have you whipped as befits *un chien*." That he could do.

I put up a brave front for Keiko and Meg. It is much easier to be brave when you have an audience, or perhaps I was too much a coward to let them see me afraid. "So long as you do not use *le chat*, it is, I understand, unduly cruel to the animal."

He ignored me. The Captain took Keiko's hand and drew her through the door, "I hope that this cur has not offended you." He kissed it, looking at me, not her. I realized that this was not about mere competition for a lady fair, but in some ways for the loyalty of the crew. He wanted to be rid of me. Keiko, who'd refused him, was a mere token of a greater prize. I had saved his ship; the men owed their lives to me. To humiliate me in front of the gang of murders, thieves and debtors who crewed his vessel would reassert his dominance. He would have done well in prison.

Keiko turned away. "Please, lady," the captain's attitude conveyed that this was not a request, "come witness the punishment of a man who takes your virtue so lightly." Not to say that this wasn't competition for the lady's favor...he wanted to humiliate me in front of her as well, put me in my place. We climbed the ladder to the deck and waited for the crew to assemble.

I have suffered under the lash before. It was much preferable to *le chat*. I do not jest. Shipboard rat catchers were often used for punishment, grabbed by their tails and swung across a man's back slicing out ribbons with their claws. It was a cruel punishment, doubly so for the poor animal. The cat is just looking for something to hang onto, having done nothing wrong, and the flesh of a man's back doesn't offer much purchase. It was only the animal's nature to try and stop the pain in its tail.

A whip's cruelty comes, however, not from its nature but from the man who wields it. The *beçon* delighted in his work. His leather was supple and oiled and knotted in several places. I had seen him savor the use of it on the more incorrigible members of the conscript crew.

Today he did not seem to care for the task.

My shirt was removed as he approached. I slid my crucifix from my neck and wound the beads around my fist, crossed myself, then held out

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my wrists to him. I would not make this hard, not for him or myself. He had fought valiantly against the serpent and had come to make inquiry of me as I recovered. Since then, the times I had felt well enough to come on deck, he, Curran and I would share a bit of bread, or cup wine if we could get it, and stare out at the barren surface of the ocean, speculating on what would befall us when we reached the shores of New France.

We were men of low station, our "betters" commanded and we must obey. This often meant that we must engage in tasks we found unpleasant. I did not begrudge him this.

He bound my wrists to the pegs with a grim air, then pulled a hard piece of leather wrapped around a shank of drift wood from his belt. "Bite on this, it will help." As he leaned in to put it between my teeth he whispered, "The men are not happy with this. They say *Mademoiselle* does not object...you saved our lives, not him..." His eyes drifted towards the captain. "It's you we owe."

I smiled at him. "This is but a little thing," and took the bit into my mouth, it tasted of salt. I was not too proud to use it; I would rather suffer the severing of my pride than my tongue betwixt my teeth. I tried to relax as I listened to him retreat to his station. It would not do to tense; it only made the sting worse, gave the strap something to bite into. Besides, that would come without volition later. I began to recite my rosary, pulling the beads one by one through my fingers.

*"Credo in Deum, Patrem omnipotentem; Creatorem coeli et terrae. Et in Jesum Christum, Filium ejus unicum, Dominum nostrum; qui conceptus est de Spiritu Sancto, natus ex Maria virgine."*

I heard the snap of the leather before it struck my skin. I was still not whole from the battle, the scabs oozed blood from my tumble with Keiko and the bruises had only just begun to turn a yellowish green. The teeth of the whip sank deep and drew down across the older welts. My jaw tightened on the bit, and I snapped the rosary near breaking in my hands. *"Passus sub Pontio Pilato, crucifixus, mortuus, et sepultus; descendit ad inferna; tertia die resurrexit a mortuis; ascendit ad coelos; sedet ad dexteram Dei Patris omnipotentis; inde venturus judicare."*

Again the crack and the burning tail crossed the path of the first. I sucked in air, *"v..i..vos et mortuos. Credo in Spiritum Sanctum; sanctam ecclesiam catholicam; sanctorum communionem; remissionem peccatorum; carnis resurrectionem; vitam oeternam. Amen."* And again, fire snaking across my shoulders. My teeth sank hard into the bit. *"Pater*

James Buchanan

*noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua, sicut in caelo et in terra..."*

And then it stopped. The lash still rose and fell across my back, my body jerking each time it bit into the skin. I was driven to my knees by it. But the pain stopped. Do not think that this was a miracle. It was a mere trick I had learned as a boy. When the pain would be too great to bear, the hurt too strong, it was as if my mind, through prayer, could exist beyond the punishment inflicted upon my earthly body. I survived cruelties far beyond this.

I was beginning the third *Ave Maria* when Curran came and lifted my chin. "Tis over."

I gritted my teeth. The pain I had held at bay began to seep through my body. It was not as raw as it would have been had I felt it fresh, but it was making itself known. "It is not over."



## Eighteen

The Captain had been inconvenienced since the morning after my public beating. Had I chose, I could have warned him not to dine with Keiko that night, but what would have been the point? He would have ignored me.

He hadn't kept down a meal for three days.

As the ship's surgeon his care had fallen on Keiko. I had inquired of Keiko whether the Captain's sudden bout of dysentery was not happenstance. She merely smiled and Satan himself would have marveled at it. The man was not likely to recover until she deemed he had suffered sufficiently. I wondered how far she would push her poisoning. Men have died from illnesses such as she inflicted upon him. I reminded myself, yet again, never to anger her. I believe I got off lightly with a temporary plague of vermin.

We had been at sea over a month, and by necessity we had been avoiding the most frequented routes of the Spanish. The ship was still not recovered from the battle with the sea monster. We'd repaired the sails and strung new line, but we had lost a dozen men in the fight. Some of the crew and passengers were suffering from a sickness which Keiko claimed came from poor food. Meg and the boys seemed immune to the ravages of it, and our good surgeon forced noxious tonics on Curran and I to forestall any illness. Thus there were, perhaps, fifteen of us, crew and conscripts, hale enough to crew the *Jean-Baptiste* when we came upon her.

She flew a Spanish flag. A caravel listing in the current, her main royal gone and the foresail ripped. Maybe she had tangled with a creature such as we had fought, or maybe her own powder had blown her hull, but she was barely treading water. Her name was *La Estrella del Norte*.

DuFour was of the loudly voiced opinion that we should leave her be. The captain was inconvenienced. Bayard was equivocal. I looked at Pierre and Curran. "*Messieurs*, are you game?" They nodded. I looked across the men, by their faces I could tell most were up for it.

"You cannot do this!" Matthieu screamed at me. "You have no right. I am in charge on this ship while the captain is ill."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "By all means, *Monsieur*, instruct your crew."

He began to sound orders, pushing one man and cuffing a boy near him. No one moved. A rumble of discontent swept across the deck. Then the man pushed back, another stepped forward menacing the officer. I steepled my fingers and touched them to my lips. This was about to get fun. Slowly I approached the four of them, placing my hand on an irate man's shoulder, whispering to him to be calm, bending down to lift the backhanded child to his feet. I spread my hands in mock humility and concern. "Ensign, is there a problem?"

He glared about him. Surrounded by men he ill treated the entire voyage, he wasn't so stupid that he couldn't see the hatred in their eyes. "You'll hang, this is mutiny." He spit. Ahh, the last resort of the loser, an empty threat. He glowered, his fleshy lip quivering. *Mon Dieu*, like most bullies, the man was a coward. He wasn't going to stand up to me if he thought he would lose.

"I've already had this conversation with our good captain." I tapped on his nose. "I think we came to the understanding that you can not hang me, *no*? Curran, am I correct?"

The Irishman's dark black eyes glinted, his shoulders shaking slightly with laughter. "Aye, yer correct."

"Bayard," I cast the question over my shoulder, "am I correct?"

We were about to see which side the second was on and he knew it. The man swallowed, glancing nervously at DuFour and not so nervously at the crew. "*Oui*, I believe you are correct, *Monsieur Vidamé*." His tongue ran across his teeth. "And, I think, that although the captain is captain of *le Jean-Baptiste*, you are of rank and are in command of the expedition to La Florida as he is not well."

Oh, he was sneaky. I liked Bayard. He had a facile mind. "True Bayard, true." I cocked my head, a smile breezing about my lips. "What say you, Matthieu DuFour?"

He stood there quivering, his hands balled into impotent fists, the rage welling red up through his thick features. "I will go on record as being against this."

"By all means, go on record." I turned my back on him.

Thus it was agreed we should take *La Estrella del Norte* as prize. Men have been called pirates for what we did. We were such in the same

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sense in which Drake, Champlain and other sea-rovers before us merited the name; that is to say, they would plunder and kill an enemy on the high seas without waiting for a declaration of war.

We came along side, tacking leeward to catch her to port where her deck was closest to the sea. *La Estrella* couldn't run and her guns were to starboard, their weight used as ballast to keep her afloat. Her crew, such as it was, rushed about on deck and we traded small arms fire as we drew down upon the vessel. Once broadside, the men gaffed her rail and I, Curran and others caught lines swinging on to her listing surface.

A Spaniard came at me with his cutlass held over his head. I lunged and spit him on my rapier. Curran blasted another as he rushed to take his comrade's place. I caught sight of their captain, his clothes hanging from his emaciated frame, swaying as he clambered the ladder from below. God only knew how long they'd been adrift. I drew my pistol firing into his chest and the man fell back into the hold.

DuFour rushed past me, heading for the hatch. *Pest!* That man was annoying. I started to follow and was jumped from behind, forced to my knees. Driving my elbow into my assailant's stomach as hard as could manage, I threw my body backwards against the mast. The man fell from me and I charged after the Ensign, grabbing the opening and skidding down the ladder throwing myself at the last minute to land on the boards. Pierre had taught me to not bother with the steps.

I held my poniard ready and moved slowly. Who knew who might be hiding down here? A trail of blood led aft. As I followed it, I could hear the water lapping somewhere below me in the lower holds. The timbers creaked ominously with the weight of the water she had taken on. This ship was larger than ours, but not appreciably and laid out much the same. I was heading towards the Captain's quarters when the shot cracked. A ball whizzed through the air. It stung my cheek as it went past. I dropped to the deck, realizing as I did so that I was a moment too late for it to help. I touched my face coming away with a streak of blood on my hand. If it had been meant to kill me, I would have been dead already. Still, I kept low as I pressed aft. No sense making an easy target.

Through the open hatch I could see DuFour. If he was in there...well, it must be safe. I stood and stepped through. The first officer knelt, rummaging through the cabinet below the captain's birth. The Spaniard's body lay to port. He'd fallen against the wall and was slumped across the other bunk. His dual barreled pistol lay next to his hand. Only one barrel had been fired, the second hammer was still back

and primed. I stepped to the dead man. The mate growled something about not interfering; the contents of the cabin were his by rights. Ah, the command issue. I hefted the pistol. It was a finely crafted piece; ebony grip, silver butt cap, the twin hammers cast in the shape of mermaids, a true gentleman's gun.

With a growl, DuFour took his feet. "I said these things are mine!" He leaned across the small table bolted to the floor between us. "Leave them be."

"I believe the Captain is the person to decide just how the spoils are divided." Laughing, I leaned against the bunk, pistol cradled in the crook of my arm. "Ah, but then again, Gillardray is indisposed. So I believe the crew decided that I decide." Yet again that impotent flush was creeping into Mathieu's cheeks. "Unless, *Monsieur*, you wish to revisit the issue of rank."

"The Captain has not the stomach to do what he needs to do. You're an abomination; a peasant with a title. It's an obscenity." He spat more than spoke the words. Self-righteous, indignant, jealous; DuFour was an enemy who bore close watching. "You won't follow orders. You always flout my orders, you flout every rule on this ship. Whipping, Bah! He should have thrown you overboard." He was trembling with rancor. Now an evil laugh, "And I saw you two together, you and your man. My, what things you were doing when you thought no one was watching. What would that beautiful Scotswoman think if I told her? *Me faut retourner á la pute qui m'a accouchée* and stop playing in the estates where you have no business."

"*Va te faire.*" I truly had no idea whether my mother was a whore, but it was not for him to say. "Mathieu," I was insulting him more by using his first name than through the previous vulgarity, "you are a weak and impotent little man. The only power you have is in your mind. You could no more injure me than you could make the wind blow."

An evil smirk wound across that fat mouth. "You think that do you? I can bide. You're nothing but a thief and a catamite. I take my grievances to the Captain and he ignores me. But when we reach land, I doubt the governor will be so forgiving or the church fathers. They'll try you and you'll burn. I'll watch you burn. And I'll dance knowing that for every moment you twist in agony here is an eternity you'll burn in hell." A dark, sinister light danced behind his eyes. I think, at that moment, I truly saw DuFour's soul. It was as dark, and infinitely more twisted, than my own. "You'll both be tried and die and I'll laugh and laugh."

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I had no doubt that he would do it. Never had I done anything to him nor had he, truly, to me. But from the moment we had first set eyes upon each other there naught but hate between us. There was something unhinged about him, an obsessive need to prove he was better than I. It was madness in a way. And a sane madman is a very dangerous adversary. "Mathieu," I whispered. The softness of my voice startled him. He looked up to me and found a barrel between his eyes. "I don't believe I can allow you that." I pulled the trigger, putting the remaining bullet through the first mate's skull.

*Mon ami, putain*, just because he had no weapon in hand, he was no less a real threat. Men such as he would scream until they found an audience for their grievances. Given the times it would not be hard thing for him to find one. DuFour blinked as if surprised, then stood. Flaccid lips parted as if to speak. Finally his body realized he was dead and collapsed on the floor.

Curran was the first to respond to the shot. He looked at the mate then at me—I was still holding the gun—then at the captain, who was still lying face down. Nodding towards the dead captain, "I guess yer man wasn't quite dead yet." It was a statement, not a question. Pierre was next and crowded up to the open hatch. Curran put his lanky hand on the man's shoulder, leaned down, and whispered in the man's ear, "The captain didn't like havin' his things disturbed."

The sailor was staring at his former officer. From the look on his face it was apparent that he would shed no tears for the man. The arrogant mate had treated Pierre, a man with more knowledge of ships and sails and tides than all the officers combined, as though he were a lowly deck hand. There was no love there. "*Non*, I guess not." He sighed. "The last act of a dying man, *no*?"

I shrugged. "*Oui*, the last act of a dying man."

He turned from the hatch and walked back into the hold. Curran and I exited the small quarters behind him. Through the open hatch the corpse was visible, blood pooling onto the deck, the fleshy face even more ugly in death than it had been in life. We faced a few of the men who were standing back apace; the rest had stayed on deck with Bayard subduing what remained of the Spanish. Criminals and thieves all, and all had heard the exchange and the undertones of our voices. I doubted that none but the thickest didn't know what really transpired. I wiped the barrel of the pistol with my shirttail and shoved the weapon into my belt. "Does anyone care to question what happened in there?" I asked.

One tough coughed into his hand and mumbled that the first mate had never been an overly cautious man, something like this was bound to happen sooner or later. The half dozen others nodded and made noises that were generally in agreement. Given that they had not asked to be conscripted to a ship sailing for New France, I doubted that any would contradict my story unless there was gain in it. I also doubted that there would be a man below the officer's ranks that didn't have some half version of the truth by the end of the day. I was the only one who knew the full story. Curran and Pierre would likely go to their graves supporting it.

After our assault only six Spaniards still lived. We took *Le Estrella's* bastards, minions, iron and powder. She had no stores to speak of, the Spanish crew confirming they'd been adrift for weeks. Most were dead from starvation or nearly so. They had been in such extreme despair that they had decided that one man should die, then all should perish. Upon drawing lots one of their number had been sacrificed, his flesh divided among the others to sustain them. Too bad for him.

Not that it saved them. We slit their throats, returning a favor once conferred on a French vessel stranded off the coast of Arcadia.

No provisions. Little powder. No stock. But her hold was brimming. What *La Estrella* was filled with was gold. The ship might have been almost seaworthy if they had been willing to cast some of their booty over the side. It was a dead weight in her bowels, listing her to port. Everything useful or valuable was transferred to the *Jean-Baptiste*. Half was tribute for *Le Roi*. Each man would take a share of the rest. I would get Gillardray's as I had captained the ship during the melee, and he would get DuFour's because we couldn't see away around it. Then we scuttled the Spanish ship, sending it to the bottom, never to serve her king again.

## Nineteen

I wandered on deck, past the bustle of men making anchor, and handed the gun I carried to Curran.

The Irishman glared at me. "What is this?"

"*Une arquebuse.*" I shrugged.

"I can see 'tis a harquebus, who's harquebus?" His expression suggested he was conversing with a simpleton.

We had been at sail for two months and were on the eve of the season of Lent. Except for the distressed vessel, we had not seen another living soul. Now the shores of La Florida rose on the horizon, a verdant living land that oozed humidity with every breath. The sun was bearing down on us. Sweat stained the clothes and glistened off the skin. It felt like the middle of summer not the advent of spring.

Earlier we'd traded the sounding of cannon with the fort to announce our arrival. Now Gillardray and Bayard were below decks checking maps and updating logs. Keiko stood in the knot of women on the bow pointing out the shore to Meg. If there was any time to tackle a bit of subterfuge this was it.

I shrugged again. "*Mon Capitan's.*"

"Yer man keeps his gun in the arms locker."

"*Oui.*"

"The arms locker as 'tis name suggests, locked." Narrowing his jet eyes and scowling he looked far older and wiser than his twenty years suggested.

I smiled, spreading my hands in mock innocence. "But of course."

"Captain Gillardray is the only person with a key."

"Ah, Curran." I leaned in to him. His skin smelled of almonds in the brutal heat. A little shiver ran up my spine and I shook it off. "You know I rarely need keys."

He cocked his head, smirking, his black hair sliding into his eyes. As he tossed it back, he purred, "An' just what do yer want me to do with his pretty gun?" Curran guessed what I was up to.

"I think it requires a bit of repair."

"Repair, eh?"

"*Oui*, repair."

Leaning against the rail, Curran hefted the weight of the gun in his hand, testing its balance. "Aye, she might need a bit of work. Himself, he'll be wantin' it before we take to land."

I didn't need to answer him. If there was one person I could always count on to understand what I was planning, it was Curran. He fiddled with the locks and barrel, prying at the workings with his knife. Some of the crew looked us over as if trying to decide what we were up to. I stared them down and they wandered off to see to the task of readying the boats for our departure. Now that we were in New France's waters my authority truly vested. Most had accepted it as a fact from the moment I confronted DuFour.

After a few minutes Curran retuned the weapon declaring it fixed, and I, in the confusion of making port, slipped it back in its proper place.

Anchor was dropped at the mouth of the River of May. We would have to row to shore and hike inland to the fort. Fighting the weight of water and air, each pull of the oars drug us closer to the beach. Somewhere down the river's throat was Fort de la Caroline, a sixty-year presence in Florida and almost lost to the Spaniards more than once.

It was a fort in name only. Founded two decades before I was born by René Goulaine de Laudonnière and a company of Huguenots, it had fallen nine months after it was settled to the Spanish. The Spaniards had hanged the men from trees and decorated the corpses with placards inscribed "*No por Franceses sino por Luteranos.*" Two years later Caroline was liberated by le Chevalier Dominique DeGourgues and all the Spaniards garrisoned there, slaughtered. DeGourgues had been forced to return to France as he lost too many men in the assault to hold her. Although out of favor with *Le Roi*, he had managed to return to Florida in 1571. Bringing refugees instead of soldiers, he rebuilt Caroline and restored his family name. The colony weathered the decades through the death fingered grip of men and women who no longer had homes to return to.

There had been missteps in the early years...simultaneous treaties with warring tribes, an unfortunate kidnapping of Outina, a Temecuas King in an ill-conceived bid to ransom food. By sheer desperation the Fort had survived. Our differences with our Indian neighbors were, for the most part, resolved by now. Uneasily, but they were resolved.



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The Indians hated the Spaniards as much as we hated the English, if not more, and far more than they hated us. Anger over rape of their women and their lands and their health smothered any lingering doubts about the French intentions and made us uneasy bedfellows. And, had it not been for the heathen magic of our wild allies, the fort might have disappeared. These were men, base and uncivilized by our standards, but men. Their wants, petty jealousies, and warring factions were a play in miniature of the struggles in Europe and between France and Spain, for this their home.

We understood each other.

The Spanish understood nothing. To them, these were dogs with souls. They treated them as such. Actually, they treated their dogs better.

And now that the Papal Bull, ceding all the territories of the New World to Spain, had been rescinded, Fort Caroline had a new legitimacy. We still had to fight for it. The Spaniards thought Florida theirs. Papal backing was a pleasantry. Guns and men alone hold territory. So now I was here. My absolute death sentence commuted to a highly likely one to yet again wrest the fort from impending doom.

Florida was a living thing. I had never seen a land like it. You could smell it even this far from shore; the water in the air, the animals hiding in the foliage, the crawling mass of vegetation that seemed to extend even onto the ocean floor. The sea was so clear I could see the swarms of fish startled by two dead eyed hunters undulating through the water beneath us. The heat lay upon me so thick that I felt as I was swimming among the shoals of brightly colored fishes. My clothes melted into my skin. Sweat seeped through the pores of my leather armor to stain it a dark black-brown.

We drew the boats up on a flat beach at the river's edge. Running up to the sand itself was a forest unlike any I had ever envisioned: cedar, palm and bay grew thick and were wreathed in vines burgeoning with grapes, tangled with esquine. Their perfume was so intense that my body reacted with a shudder. It was as though I had stepped into a spice mongers shop. Three boys broke from the cover, laughing and yelling "*Antipola Bonassou!*" They were for the most part French, but the words they spoke were not. All of them were as hale and lithe as young stags. One carried a harquebus, another a brace of partridge. I guessed they'd been hunting and seen us come to shore.

They led us to a large plain covered with high pine trees grouped close and thick. Deer browsed under their branches, braying and starting

as we passed. We came upon a little hill adjoining a large valley, flat and lush where a small herd of cattle grazed. The whole was traversed with brooks of fresh water and dotted with stands of mulberry and cedar and pine. A thick moss grew on many of the trees, draping like greenish azure curtains from the highest branches to the ground and shimmering like silk in the sun. Crossing the valley we entered the forest again and finally came to the brink of the river where the fort lay.

Fort Caroline was only slightly larger than the tower of Fort Risben, and less than half the size of Fort Nieulay outside of Calais. It was far less impressive than either. Nieulay's arrow-tipped square had brick and mortar breast works near two stories high, with earthen banks for cannon stations, barracks, arsenals, store houses, a cistern and chapel all housed within. Risben was a somber fortified tower. This was a roughly triangular plot surrounded by a rickety palisade of wood and earth barely as tall as a man. Few buildings were inside the perimeter, most of the two-hundred odd families lived at varying distances from the garrison. The only similarities in the three forts were that they all were stationed overlooking the mouth of the river.

Further south and west a small village had sprung up. From what I could see, maybe two dozen homes clustered around a central plaza. Some looked like what I knew as a house, others...they were rounded and thatched, I wouldn't have known what they were if I hadn't been told. The boys pointed out the house of Le Comte De Gourgues. For the home of a count it was utterly unimpressive. It looked like the residence of the *Maire* possibly, but not that of a nobleman.

Fields sowed with mill spread out across the meadow, spanning the distance between the fort and town, then wandering off across the meadows. Small wooden towers stood at various places in the fields. I asked why a tower was required and one of the boys explained that the Temecuas Indians had taught them such. The numbers of choughs in this land required that the fields be under constant watch. Without a guard to drive them off the birds would devour the mill.

The boys darted ahead. Heading across the meadow to meet us were the habitants of Fort Caroline. Women wiped their hands on aprons as they chased after children who ran about like it was a fair day. Men came in from the fields, drawn to the fort by the sound of the guns. An older man, dressed well but not richly, exited the large house and shaded his eyes. Le Comte, it was his father who had re-established the fort. He

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smiled and waved. Taking the hand of a matronly woman who came beside him, they walked out to meet us with the rest.

The people were in a joyous mood. We were greeted with laughter and kisses as though we were long lost family, not strangers. They drowned us in questions: what province are you from, what village? Do you have news from Peillon? My sister Marie in Vezelay, do you know her? What of your voyage? And always, how goes the war? If anyone answered in the affirmative they were pulled aside for more hugs and questions.

"*Bonjour, Messieurs.*" Le Comte came upon us. He took first the captain, and then I, by the shoulders and kissed both cheeks in welcome. I was not used to being greeted as an equal by a man of station. "Welcome to Fort de la Caroline. My wife, Jeannette." He indicated the plump woman who stood beside him.

"Captain Alain Gillardray, at your orders, *Monsieur.*" The captain gave a little bow. Then he looked at me, an evil smile sliding across his lips.

*Pest*, I was going to have to make my own introduction. I was not truly sure how to do so. I'd been taught how to respond to this man as my better not an equal. I removed my hat and gave a short bow. "Julius LaRousse, *Vidamé du Caroline.* I have letters for you from *Le Roi* and Bishop Richelieu." When in doubt stick to business, brusque conduct would be excused if there was business to attend to. Keiko gave a little cough. I pulled her forward and presented her hand to the count. I had been trained how to introduce someone else. "May I present to you the Lady Keiko MacPhearson." She curtsied.

The count took her hand and kissed it lightly. "Welcome."

"If I may be so bold, *Mademoiselle*, the name Keiko is very unusual." His wife gave Keiko a friendly hug as she rose.

"*Bonjour*, I am honored to meet you both." She smiled at Madame De Gourgues and, pulling back, "It was my grandmother's name. My Christian name is Mary. Mary Keiko MacPhearson." Curran and I traded startled glances with Gillardray. Not a one of us had known her given name was Mary. I felt like a complete idiot for not knowing that. I wondered what other secrets she was holding from me.

*Mon Dieu*, now I had another problem, what to do with Curran? He wasn't my servant. Although Keiko had once called him my valet, I would not do that to him. Still, he had no rank in his own name. I lent him mine. "*Monsieur, Madame*, this is Curran Shee, he is my eyes and

ears. If you are speaking to him, you are speaking to me." Curran bowed with the appropriate amount of respect.

Le Comte was smiling. "Good, good." He extended his hand towards his home. "Please, it is not much, but come take some refreshment. We will try and find lodgments for the men as best possible. There is some room at the fort. I regret I only have one apartment in my home. I should think that you will not mind if I offer it to *Mademoiselle*, no?" Neither I nor Gillardray made any objection as we entered his home.

The house was bright and open and pleasantly furnished. A large room was on the right, a smaller one to the left. Before us was a stair leading to a gallery disappearing on either side. Again it was not rich, but comfortable, somewhere between elegant and homey. We were escorted into the smaller hall where there were tables, benches, and even a few chairs. Our hostess introduced us to her two youngest sons Rene, closest to Keiko's age, and Adrian who was somewhat younger. The rest of her children had married or left home.

La Comtesse had food brought in by the servants. Pumpkins, beans, venison and smoked fish, she kept apologizing that she didn't have better to offer. After two months at sea, as long as it wasn't salted or moldy we were ecstatic. She even had a few early melons and berries to offer. The berries I ate. The melons I avoided. Their smell alone is enough to make my stomach turn.

The rest of the day and most of the evening was spent greeting an endless flow of personages, all of whom had the same questions of us. What news? As word circulated that I was Richelieu's man it was directed more and more often at me. Thankfully, the communiqués I'd stolen gave me a bit more insight than most. Although my information was out of date it was still months more current than their last update. A little embellishment never hurt anything either.

Gillardray and I managed to avoid each other most of the day. Now that it was getting late we found ourselves talking with Le Comte, and thus, unavoidably, with each other. The older man had been expounding the virtues of the country, endlessly. As dying of boredom at the feet of our host might be considered rude, I was trying to devise a way to gracefully withdraw from his company. Each time I found an escape the Captain would draw me back in. *Pest*, I guess he was willing to suffer this torment if it meant I was snared as well.

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"Well, *messieurs*, my son Rene has arranged a bit of entertainment for you." De Gourgues clapped me on the shoulder. "He has suggested a hunt."

The last thing I wanted was to go hunting with the *Capitan*. By the look on his face the last thing Gillardray wanted was to go hunting with me. *Putain*, something we agreed on. "Do you not think that we should start working on your problem as soon as possible?"

The count waived the question aside. "There's plenty of time for that, *Monsieur*."

"Ten years, if I'm not mistaken." Gillardray's tone was snide.

The count's face went blank. He'd been receiving conscripted settlers for long enough to know the terms of a pardon. Often it was the choice of the galleys or the wilderness. Most would choose this. After a moment he licked his lips. "It is growing late, perhaps you should return to the ship for the night and we can talk again in the morning."

The captain was less than pleased. "I will not have him back on my ship." He scowled, his face riddled with contempt.

"I'd sell my soul to the devil to never have to go back to your ship." I crossed my arms and gave him his look back.

"That," he stepped close, "would imply that you had one to sell."

"Do you wish to discuss this outside, *Monsieur*?" Both of us started, Gillardray's eyes going wide. *Mon Dieu*, I'd just challenged him to a duel. I was starting to take this title too serious. I'd never actually fought in a duel, not beyond that abortive escapade outside of Calais, but that could hardly be called a duel. Gillardray's family was of such station that he'd probably had some experience. And I'd seen him practicing with Bayard, the man was good. Better than I. My left handedness wouldn't count for much against him.

The intervention of La Comtesse saved me. She'd drawn close and caught the last portion of our speech. "Perhaps," her voice was gentle, persuading, as she stepped in between us, "*Monsieur* LaRousse would be more comfortable at the fort. Everyone is so tired. And it is so close on board ship it can cause tensions between even the best of friends."

And magnify them between men who would never be friends. Neither of us could persist in the argument or we'd both risk offending our hostess. Thank *Mère Marie*. We'd be back here, but it forestalled the confrontation for a time. If I had any say he'd be dead long before that happened.

## Twenty

The next day crawled into being. Even before the sun peeked over the horizon it promised to be muggy and hot. I hadn't slept well. *Pest*, I'd gotten so used to the rolling of the ship that when I lay down my bed seemed unstable. And as restless as I was normally, the heat had compounded it. It seemed I'd barely closed my eyes when Curran forcibly ejected me from my bed by flipping the bunk over.

Rene was to take us alligator hunting. He'd arranged a hurried expedition through the Inija, second to the chief, of the nearby Temecuas village. This would be a men only excursion; women were forbidden to participate in the hunt. At least some women, our Indian neighbors had an odd habit of deciding that they did not want to be the sex they were born with; so long as you acted as the opposite sex, you were treated as such. Thus there were women who were known as men and men who styled themselves as women. As none wore much in the way of clothing it was often hard to distinguish who was supposed to be male or female. The Inija was such a woman.

Keiko had stormed about when she was told she would be excluded. She'd cried that it wasn't fair; she'd hunted more than most of us combined. That it was just I, Captain Gillardray, Bayard, and Le Comte's son Rene, attending hadn't mollified her in the least. We had left her behind, but I knew the matter was still far from settled.

The Temecuas considered the hunting of alligators great sport; taunting the dragon-like beasts fully the length of two men. The bravest tormented and harassed the creature, running up to it, poking it with spears that did nothing against its armored hide. It hissed and snapped its sharp toothed maw and thrashed its powerful tail, churning the black water into froth. Their goal was to enrage the thing to such extent that it would leave the water, where it was most powerful, and come onto the land. For a beast with such short lizard's legs it moved with alarming speed up the bank as it charged us.

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As it attacked, several men beat at the alligator's muzzle with a thick log. Once it closed its huge mouth on an object it would not let go of the prize. It grabbed the wood and tossed the men to the ground with a powerful sweep of its head. More Temecuas and Bayard jumped on the pole. With great effort they flipped the animal on its back. The shiny underbelly, with its thinner scales, was exposed as it flailed on the ground. The Head Chief offered the kill to the Captain as an honor.

Monsieur Gillardray lit the match and raised his harquebus to his shoulder, aiming for the soft spot indicated by the Indian. The flame snaked into the pan and sputtered for a moment. Then the chamber gave. The fire blew back. Flaming powder and lead and wood spewed in all directions. I and everyone else threw themselves on the ground, the alligator forgotten by all. The beast slipped back in the water, leaving a half bitten pole on the shore. I was nicked by the shrapnel sustaining cuts on my arms. Rene and the Holata had been standing nearest. Both were bleeding from numerous small wounds.

As I got to my feet I looked towards my rival. The Captain stood for a moment, his back to me, and then turned. His face and chest was a mass of chewed meat, raw, oozing blood and gore. He stepped forward, but his legs gave out from under him and he dropped; first to his knees, then prone on the ground. I would have to congratulate Curran on his work. There would be no duel.

At Rene's insistence, the chief had the captain brought to his rude hut. All in all, it was better made than some of the hovels occupied by peasants in the French countryside. A ring of saplings had been pounded into the earth and laced together to form a crude dome spanning almost two rods in diameter. Still more branches and vines had been woven through the side supports and the whole structure thatched with gigantic fronds. Only two holes were left: one for a door and a smaller aperture to allow smoke to escape. The structure was dark but airy and watertight, rather like being a mouse under a tipped basket. About ten of the structures surrounded the communal grounds of the tribe and faced towards the one large public house. The chief's house was, by rights, the largest of the private structures. The entire village was ringed by a crude palisade.

The injured man lay on one of the benches lining the walls. His wounds were grievous. The misfire had ripped his harquebus into shrapnel, blowing off several fingers on both hands, and tearing into his face, neck and chest. I marveled that he was still conscious. The pain, if

he could feel, would have been terrible. He may have been beyond physical sense; sometimes the body does that, to keep the mind from collapsing.

I sat on the fired dried mud floor my head resting on my knees looking into the eyes of the man I had killed. He wasn't dead yet, but that would come in time.

It was a most interesting circumstance. Bayard and Rene De Gourgues had returned to the fort to fetch Keiko. I presumed that she would be here as fast as she could manage, if only because she had been incensed that we left her behind the first time. I was left to guard our dear captain, to see that he didn't expire while we waited for help to arrive.

When he died there would be no bringing him back. Our good priest would not waste a valuable relic to wrest a blasphemer's soul from the maw of hell. Even if he did, the man's body was wrecked. He'd be a maimed invalid unable to tend to himself. That was an attractive possibility; but *non* I'd rather he was dead. His only hope was that Keiko could save him. It was a vain hope. Keiko was skilled, her potions potent, but he was beyond a surgeon's help.

The man still had his sense. The captain knew I had done this. I could see it in his eyes. I was amused.

The Paracusi Wayon sat a small distance apart from us. His grandfather had been one of the first of his people to see the French land on the shores of Arcadia. The war chief had a halting but workable command of French. "Is there honor in this?" His question took me by surprise. He had not spoken since the captain had been brought in.

I thought for a moment. "For me or for him?"

"Is there honor in his death?"

"No, there is no honor in his death. It is a sad way to die, blown to hell by your own gun. Is it not, *mon ami*?" The last bit was offered not to our host but to the captain. A line of bloody bubbles ran from the corner of the officer's mouth as he hissed an unintelligible response.

"Why kill a man if there is no honor in it?"

I turned my head. "Do you think I killed him?"

"Your eyes say you killed him."

They most likely did. The chief was reputed to be a powerful witch, able to read men's souls. I rose and walked to where the chief sat. "If I killed him..." I took a seat. Resting my elbows on my knees and my chin on my hands, I contemplated the dying man across from me. "If I killed him, I would want him to die in the least honorable death I could fashion.



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I would want a man to go to his grave knowing that his death could never be avenged as none could ever say I had done it. I would want his ghost to cry out for vengeance and for that cry to go forever unanswered. I would want him to suffer."

I stretched, pushing my broad brimmed hat back on my head. Leaning against the inward sloping wall I continued, "And I would want him to know I had won. That what gave him pride and power were going to be mine. That he could do nothing to stop the inevitable. What was his is mine; what he coveted I now possess. No honor, just vengeance. If I killed him, I would be satisfied with vengeance."

"Do you have vengeance?"

"*Oui*. Almost." The chief sucked on his stick and waited for me to continue. "When he dies his men will look to me to be their leader and Keiko will be mine as I please. And he will die knowing that is the inevitable future. Then I will have vengeance."

He chewed a bit of the bark, then shrugged in that non-committal way of the French, settling in to wait for Keiko. We'd been in this land too long.

Finally Keiko arrived, crawling through the doorway her skirts blocking the light for a moment. Bayard followed hauling her small bag filled with various potions. When he saw the captain he became visibly agitated, worrying Keiko with questions and getting in her way. The Temecuas had not moved from his spot and I squatted on the floor next to him watching Keiko work. None of her knowledge or tinctures would help. I could tell by her ashen pallor as she looked him over.

Keiko placed a hand on the first mate's arm. "Bayard, go and fetch some water, have one of the women boil it for ye." She pushed him towards the door. "Ye have to watch it careful, it cannae boil for more than five minutes, no more than that." After he scrambled through the door she sat down on the floor her hands in her lap.

"What's the water for?" My jackboots creaked as I rose and walked to her. I still wore the leather armor I'd donned for the hunt: the boots, a breastplate, and gorget. I removed the neck piece as I touched Keiko's shoulder.

She looked up at me and took my hand. "To keep Bayard occupied."

"Ah." I knelt beside her. "How long?"

She shook her head. "I don't know why he hasn't died yet." Tears were slipping down her face as she searched through her things. "I may have something that will ease him some, take away the pain." My guess

was she had something that might speed him along. I wiped the tears with my thumb and she sobbed, burying her head in my neck. Why was she crying?

A rattle in the captain's throat drew our attention. His hand was gesturing weakly. *Pest!* Die already. "*Au revoir mon ami, je vous verrai dans l'enfer.*"

"Shhh. Are those the last words ye want him to hear?"

"No," I stroked her hair, "the last words I wish him to hear is you screaming my name as *la petite mort* consumes you, but he won't live that long."

Keiko drew back and hit me, hard, the blow landing across my chest. I was unbalanced and landed with a grunt on my ass. I tried to grab her as she crawled past and out the door. Damn *Chienne*, I wasn't even going to get to see him die.

The chief began to laugh. "So, now do you have your vengeance?"

I glared at him as I dove for the door and ran full tilt into Bayard.

"She's leaving." The mate shook me rattling my teeth. "Why is she leaving?"

Tearing his hands from my arms I pushed him away. "There's nothing to be done." I shot over my shoulder as I disappeared into the forest after Keiko.

## Twenty One

I chased Keiko towards the ocean, branches cutting across my face, roots tripping me as I ran. As I jumped a fallen log, it reared its head and hissed at me. *Putain!* That *Chiienne* was going to get one or both of us killed in this wilderness. She tore through the brush as though *le diable* was on her heels. I called for her to stop but she ignored me, breaking out on the beach and running along the tidemark until she finally collapsed, heaving, on the sand.

I stopped running. My breath burned in my chest as I loosed the fittings of my leather breastplate, dropping it behind me as I walked towards her. I sat next to her, my head between my legs, my hands dangling on my knees, gulping the water that passed for air in this jungle. The beach was empty, save for us. She was breathing as hard as I and was still crying. "Why," I wheezed, "are you crying?"

"Ye killed him!" She hissed, turning on me.

I shrugged. "*Oui.*" I would gain nothing by denying it to her.

"Jules, you're a murderer."

"I killed at least five men before him. They never bothered you. Is this different because you would have watched him die?" She studied my face, puzzled. I realized at the same time she did that I'd said five men, and I'd only ever confessed four to her. As two happened before we sailed, and the others were Spaniards, that left only one option. Her eyes grew wide and she swallowed hard as she struggled with the truth of it.

"Ye killed the first officer and the captain. You're a monster!"

"Why am I a monster for them but not the others? I had no choice in any of them."

"No choice?! No choice! What do ye mean ye had no choice? The first two men, in France, and the crew of the *Estrella*, if ye had nae killed them, I understand they woods have killed ye, but here, on the ship, what had they done? Why did ye do it?"

"They would have taken you away from me." I knelt, pulling her to me, my arm around her waist, and pressed my face into her shoulder. She

smelled like winter. Like snow and pine trees and warm smoky fires. How could anyone smell like winter in this God awful heat? Her hair was the only thing that seemed affected by it, curling into little damp ringlets around her face. "Please, please, don't run from me." I inhaled her scent again. "Don't leave me."

Her fragrance, the heat, the feel of her body held ridged against mine—I wanted her. I could feel the pressure in my groin as my body responded to my desire. My lips brushed against hers. She turned her face away and I tasted her tears. I whispered her name again and again as I tried to kiss them away. "Why do you cry for them? The mate the things he said to you, how he tried to touch you, you said he disgusted you and the Captain...tried to take you from me. Do you think that if he had been more of a man, he would not have made good on his threat? Would you have cried for me as I dangled from a rope?"

She was looking past me off towards the tide, the sun dying behind us, but she wasn't fighting my embrace. "Why do ye care? Ye call me a huir. Ye say I drive ye mad, that I'm pig-headed, and spoilt, and petty and..." she sniffed back a small sob.

Keiko was all of those things. She demanded impossibilities. She threw tantrums when she didn't get what she wanted, and pitched fits when things weren't to her liking. She was the most headstrong, impossible woman I had ever come across. I didn't want dutiful and helpful. I didn't want scared. I didn't want resigned. I didn't want a good-wife. I wanted her because she resisted me. She was the only woman I had no doubt, would never, ever do what I told her to do. I kissed her cheek. "I think those things are why I love you."

She pushed back, a startled half word breaking her lips. "Do you not believe me, Keiko? Why would I do these things if I did not love you? I must prove that I am worthy of you, *no*?" I pulled her back in tight, resting my cheek against hers. Her hands were still resting on my chest, the weight of her palms tingling my nerves. I whispered into her skin, "You consented before? Am I still worthy?"

As an answer her mouth sought out mine. Her kiss was hesitant at first, as though we had never kissed before, then slowly it grew surer and bolder. I parted my lips, and her tongue slipped between them and stroked the roof of my mouth. Even through the layers of skirts she had to feel my desire pressing against her.

I moved my hands to her hips, devouring her mouth with mine. I didn't just want her, I wanted to ruin her...I wanted to ruin her for any

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man who followed me. I wanted her to cry out my name as she made love to some rich, titled husband and he would know that her desire lay somewhere far from him. I wished him to always wonder whether she felt the ghosts of my hands as he touched her, the whisper of his lips or mine on her skin. I could not have her; but I could possess her.

I fumbled with the laces of the bodice, and once loosed they slipped from their eyes almost of their own volition. How had she managed to run as far as she had in that prison? Tugging at the bindings from her dress, I whispered against her lips, "Will you have me?"

"Yes." Her own hands were untying her skirts, pulling her underclothes and stockings from her legs as she knelt before me, lips on my throat. Her ebony hair swirled around her as she moved. She drew her last garment from her shoulders, and it slipped about her waist. The pale pink tips of her small white breasts stood erect as she pushed her hands down stripping the shrift from her supple body. Clad only in the scarlet and gold of the sunset, her beauty at that moment took my breath away.

She buried her hands under my shirt and pushed it over my head. I was caught, my arms behind my back, bound within the material. She laughed and kissed my nipples, lightly playing with me as I had done so often with her. She leaned into my body, running the tips of her fingers first over my arms and then my torso, almost but not quite touching the skin. Her breasts stroked my chest and my body tightened and shivered. I didn't think I could ever be so excited by a woman. Looking up into my face as her tongue caressed my nipples, she breathed on my skin, "Do ye desire me?"

I struggled to free my trapped appendages, almost ripping my shirt in haste as I shucked the sleeves and dropped the garment to the sand. Then I embraced her, pulling her even closer. "More than anything." I kissed Keiko with a searing, hungry kiss. She met my passion again, pushing her tongue between my teeth and caressing the inside of my mouth. She was forward and demanding, playing her hands over my heated body. Her caresses would turn from so gentle they felt like a moth's wings hovering over my skin to a searing trail drawing across my spine and back to the lightest touch. It was maddening.

I covered her neck and chest with kisses working my way down her body. Taking one of her small, hard nipples into my mouth, I sucked on it gently, teasing it with my tongue. She sighed as I ran a hand down her belly and between her legs, parting them slightly so I could stroke her.

The dew between her thighs was already thick. Still gently sucking on her breast, I coated my fingers with her moisture and began to rub the center of her pleasure between them.

She moaned and ran the fingers of one hand over the margins of my ear and the other slid into my pants. Grasping firmly, she began slowly stroking.

"*Mademoiselle*, I am at your mercy." I growled and pulled her down to the sand. She knelt at my side, walking her fingers along the ridges of my stomach muscles, towards my trapped erection. I kissed her arms and her chest and her cheek. "I am bound by you."

"Then we shall have to set ye free." I lay on my back braced on my elbows, looking up at her as she pulled off first my boots and then pants. Keiko set her hands on my chest and pushed me. "Down." She commanded. I was willing to obey, give her anything she asked, as I lay back. She threw her leg over my hips and sat facing me. I was snared between my own hard body and her soft, wet box. The heat from her desire soaked into my skin. There was a mischievous glint in her eyes as she began to rub herself along my shaft, pausing every few moments to tease the tip with her clit. The pleasure was intense. I longed to be inside her.

She laughed, hands on my chest, bending over me so that her hair and breasts grazed my body. "Aye think ye need to sheath this sword of yours." *Oui*, I needed to! I grabbed her waist and lifted her, meeting the entrance to her body with my crown. She made a small sound as I drew her down upon my erection. I entered her slowly, my foreskin pushing back, revealing the most sensitive portion of me to her as she straddled me, and savored the slick heat of her velvet insides. When I met with resistance, I stilled her trembling decent and reaching up, brushed the hair from her misty green eyes.

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

In response she tightened her legs against my body and pulled herself onto me. With my free hand I braced her small body, supporting her as she thrust her tight, white hips against mine. She threw her head back and gave a small cry as I felt her maidenhead tear. I would have held her there, let her body become accustomed to my presence inside her, but she took the choice from me, beginning a slow, deliberate grind with her hips. I watched as I disappeared inside her, sheathed in the soft folds, spreading as they devoured me until her dark curls meshed with

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the red blond of mine. Why she'd changed her heart, I neither knew nor cared at that moment.

It had been so long since I had been touched by a woman. Our last encounter had been aborted without satisfaction and I could barely resist the pull of her body, but I tried to restrain my hunger for her. She, however, was a wild creature on top of me, controlling our pleasure; first moving so slow and gentle that I thought I might go mad with sheer rapture, then slamming into me with such abandon that I could barely take the pleasure. She would take only part of me within her, holding my lust in check, then slide down my shaft until our bodies joined.

I pulled my body up to hers, taking her breast into my mouth, bracing our bodies with one arm, wrapping the other around her waist. I was amazed that she could take all of my length; she was so tight it almost hurt me to be inside her body. Keiko rode me so that I could do nothing more than breathe her name. When I could stand it no more, I dropped back on the sand, my hands grasping her hips, and began to impale her, controlling our rhythm, driving it harder and faster. She matched my tempo and by her cries I knew she was nearing release even as I could feel the tingling heat building within my own body.

Her body went taut above me. Her nipples pointed to the sky and her skin shimmered gold in the fading light. She was seized by the strength of her orgasm, and as the convulsions wracked through her form, her body tightened against me throwing open the burning flood of my own juices. She collapsed breathless on top of me and we lay together, savoring the warmth of our joined bodies.

I pulled her hair from her face and cradled her on my chest. "Why? Why now?" She raised her deep green eyes to stare at me. Keiko didn't understand my question. "Why is it that tonight you don't care that a box in your father's house now holds fragments of glass? That everyone knows what has happened?"

A smile slipped across her face. "Ye said ye loved me."

"I've always loved you. I've said it before."

"But ye never meant it."

"I didn't?"

She shook her head. "No ye didn't." She sighed and rested her cheek on my chest. Who was I to argue?

## Twenty Two

Captain Alain Gillardray was buried the next day. His funeral was officiated by one of the Huguenot clergy. It was a somber graveside affair as there were far too many attendees to fit in the humble chapel that served the Calvinist faithful. The priests, as sorry as they were for the loss of the man, were not about to turn over the house of the Lord to a bunch of heretics. The only other building large enough to serve would have been Le Comte's house. That would have required at least two moves of the body over long distances in the midday sun, and no one wanted to go through that much effort. The man was dead, after all, consideration needed to be given to those still living.

It was an interesting affair. I had never witnessed a Protestant service and was surprised at how brief it was. I joked with Curran that if they were all so short I'd have to convert. Of course, it may have been due to the fact that the only persons not expiring from the heat were our nearly naked Temecuas friends. The sun and flies were terrible. However, the smell was not as bad as I would have expected; the cemetery having no catacombs and few tombs. Most bodies were well buried under several feet of suppressive earth.

The Paracusi and his wife had arrived on litters born by their subjects. They were arrayed in all their finery: stag skins dressed as well as any made in France, feathers, and a French linen shirt that had been given to the Temecuas war chief sometime past. The captain of a ship being a fairly important person, many of his warriors had come as well. Their tattooed bodies and thick black topknots towered over us. Our neighbors were a race of giants, the Queen being nearly a head taller than I, and I was tall compared to many other Frenchmen of my time.

As was their custom at the death of great men, the Indians had stuck into the earth about the grave a great many arrows. And as Gillardray had no family to mourn him here, and it would be months before his kin would know of his death, the King had given over the task of crying to three young women. For the next six months they would bewail the death



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of the captain upon rising, at the meridian of the sun, and as the stars began to show. It was more than he deserved.

Soldiers from the fort and sailors from the *Jean-Baptiste* loitered in haphazard military garb, guns cradled in their arms like babies. Tradesmen and peasants stood a respectful distance off, using the day as an excuse to catch up with their neighbors. Sprinkled among them were a few of the Indian women who'd been taken as wives by the settlers. Children of all stations and parentage ran wild between the markers. Death...it was frontier entertainment at its best.

The social elite, of whom I was now ostensibly a member, dressed in the finest they had. One would have thought it was a ball for the hair and the rouge and the dresses the women turned out in. Many still wore the Spanish style; *très* out of date now, but in fashion before they'd set foot in the new world. A few of the *jeune dame* had more modern attire, slashed and boned with un-starched lace.

Keiko outshone them all wearing a gown I had never seen before—a vented doublet, cut so low you could almost see the ghosts of her areoles, and full skirt of brocaded linen in a rosy color that set off her green eyes, dark hair, and pale skin. She told me it had been given to her by her benefactor in Marseille should she have occasion to need such a dress. My best was, except for the French boots acquired so long ago in Calais, my somber High Law garb. I felt like a moth standing next to a butterfly.

After the service, our little trio was invited to retire to the manor. Curran begged off, inventing some business with the fort and ship that required his attention.

"Coward, you're abandoning me," I whispered in his ear. We were standing chest to chest, slightly off center of each other, watching the crowd break off. Keiko and Le Comte were chatting with an older couple a short distance from us.

He smirked at me. "I'm not the one who asked for a title. I don't have to go."

I chewed on my lip. "Save me you, bastard," I pleaded.

"Yer wanted her," his laugh was low and wicked as he hit my shoulder with his, "now yer have her. Is it fine enough to put up with all this?" Grabbing my forearm roughly, he pulled me in close. His tone was sharp. "Have a grand time tonight, *Monsieur Vidamé*. I'll think of yer while I'm doin' soldier's work." He'd left me then. Walking off, his musket slung across his shoulders like a yoke, he flashed a stunning smile at two *jeune femme* as he passed. They fell to giggling between

them. At that moment Curran had turned, his eyes searching for mine, the smile dissolving into a pensive frown. Then the Irishman dropped his head and sauntered off towards the fort.

After that, I had tried to convince Keiko that I should assist Curran in his effort. I reasoned that we were here to defend the fort. It was my job to insure that everything was perfect. I could have joined Gillardray in his grave after the look she gave me.

Since our arrival I had been the subject of veiled looks and whispered comments. Certainly I'd made a few social blunders, but nothing horrendous, there'd been too few days for that to happen. This would be a nightmare. The brothers who had raised me schooled me some. They thought, perhaps, that I could aspire to the level of a valet for a gentleman's household. I would be reasonably educated and well mannered, and my rebellious streak would have been beaten of me by the time I should leave them. But this? Nothing had prepared me for this. My manners would stand probably as well as any provincial *petite noblesse*, but I could not hold my own in conversation through an entire evening. I resolved to take the most prudent course of action and keep my mouth shut. Better to be thought a fool than speak and confirm it.

I avoided most of the attempts of the men to draw me into their conversations. The one subject I did broach, inquiring as to the nature and extent of the attacks, was waived off as talk for another time. Claude Falchon, an older gentleman, accused me of being too eager to prove myself, too eager to do battle. So I listened, drinking too little, politely declining to join in a game of cards, my eyes always straying to find Keiko, to anchor myself in this sea of politeness. It was less than comforting.

The half dozen women remained in a knot about Keiko all evening. She was coy. Her laughter was always at the right pitch. Gracious when she turned the winning hand at Tarot, appropriately flattered when complimented, flirting politely, but not encouragingly, when approached. Demure and polished, she moved about as though she'd lived among these people her entire life. Well, in a sense she had. Not among the French nobility but the privileged nonetheless. I sighed, wondering what demon had possessed me into thinking I could ever pull off this charade.

*Mon Dieu*, I wished I was with Curran—counting arms, cleaning guns, anything but this. I wondered if he had found someone to entertain himself with this evening. His night-black eyes, the thread of Ireland

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running through his French when combined with the mischief hidden in his smile, well all of the unattached women, and a good portion of the married ones had found excuses to flirt with him. I could imagine some pretty *grisette* running her fingers through that thick black hair and teasing his lips with hers. She would stroke him, tracing the lines of his body, hands exploring all the intimate places. Their passion would build until he'd take her down and drive into her, and she'd scream his name over and over...

It took me a moment to realize that someone had called my name several times. I started, sitting upright in my chair and looked at the speaker. Our hostess, Madame DeGourgues, was looking at me solicitously. "Pardon?"

She stood next to her husband, her chubby hand resting on his. "You've been so quiet all evening, *Monsieur*, and you seem so preoccupied," she smiled, politely approaching to take my hand, a motherly gesture that caught me off guard, "I was inquiring if you were ill. The heat can be unsettling for someone not used to it."

I stammered for a moment and was saved from answering by Falchon's laughter. "Oh, the man is ill." His eyes were mischief bright in his wrinkled face. "I've seen it before. Deathly ill." He leaned forward patting my leg in the familiar way only old men can get away with. "Sick with *amour*, dying of it." He laughed again, looking towards Keiko who, somehow sensing the topic of our conversation had shifted to her, returned his gaze arching one delicate brow as she flipped her next card. "There are far more unpleasant ways to go. If you wish, I'd gladly take your place for that favor." His laughter was joined by the others and I felt the color rise to my face.

"I think I am feeling a bit unwell." I rose, with a tight smile, squeezing the lady's hand as though in thanks for her concern. "I should take a little air and recover my senses."

"If you think that's how you come to your, senses boy, you've not been doing it properly." The old man's parting shot stung me as I exited the room.

I stood just outside the front entry, its doors thrown wide to catch what breezes might happen by, lurking in the fringes of the darkness. My skin burned with shame. Uncomfortable enough in my position, I did not like being made fun of, more so because it was true, or some of it was. I wanted to be back in France, sitting in some nameless public house, drinking watered wine with Curran, joking, planning our next adventure.

Even if it meant being cold, wet and hungry, so long as it was familiar, I wanted to be home. This place was hell. I did not belong here, and I did not belong with Keiko.

"So, Julius, is it?" The old man eased himself through the doorway. "I'd ask your permission to be so familiar, but I'm an old man, I can get away with a lot of things you young men can't." He limped towards me, smiling, and took my arm. "Come, come, *Monsieur*, walk with me, escort me home and make sure this old drunk doesn't break his neck. I'm tired and my sister won't want to leave before the sun comes up."

We walked along the dirt path that served as the main street of the village. Tradesmen, many of the better families, a few of the Fort's officers, had established a town of sorts around a common fallow area. Le Comte's house served not only as his home but the seat of provincial government and anchored the far end of the plaza. As such it was grand or grand for Fort Caroline, a wooden two-story affair with large parlors which could house *fêtes* or trials or town meetings or whatever was most needed at a given moment. Tomorrow we would meet in the smaller hall and discuss the plans, ostensibly my plans, to deal with the newest threat. I had no idea what I was going to do. Falchon patted my arm as we walked. He did not need me to steady him.

"How long have you been in La Florida?" It was the only thing I could think of to ask and I didn't like the silence tonight.

"Twenty years, now. I followed my sister's husband for adventure." He stopped in the middle of the path.

"Adventure? Did you find it?" My tone was eager although I really didn't care what his answer was. "I think I would like to find adventure. *Putain!* I don't even know what I'm doing here, what I am supposed to do here. I'd take adventure over failure or with it. At least then men can say I had a noble death." I snorted, kicking the dirt. "Maybe Curran and I should just take a dozen men and charge into the wilds, slaughter whomever we find and call this thing done. Finish out my sentence wandering through New France."

"So much passion, so much bravado, so little understanding. What of your lady?"

I laughed again. "Keiko. *Mademoiselle* MacPhearson. I can't have her. She is better than I." We started walking again. This time side by side, he wasn't pretending he needed my support any longer. "Soon she'll tire of her little game and be sick for home. She'll go back to her father and her father's lands and marry some high born lord and forget me."

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We came to his door. The home was sturdy, like a farmer's house in France. Falchon patted my cheek, being fatherly, I guess. "Don't be stupid and let that one get away from you, she's as sick for you as you are for her."

"She could have anyone."

"She could have anyone. But she doesn't want anyone, she wants you. If you will take a piece of advice from an old man, who has no one to love him, and regrets it, go back there tonight, drag your *amoure* away; make love to them until they can see no other." He gave me a parting pat and slipped into his dwelling, "I can see that she would be yours if you would just ask her to."

I stood for a moment outside his door, the unfamiliar sounds of Florida pressing around me. The fort called to me. I would be safe there. Curran would tease with me and we would laugh about my fears.

From within I heard Falchon yell at me, "Damn it, boy, I said go to her tonight, didn't I?"

He was right, *putain*, I should go to Keiko. I ran back to Le Comte's house, slipping into the parlor. Many of the guests had retired in my absence although a few were still chatting, Keiko among them. I bent to her ear, standing behind her chair, and asked if she were not feeling a little tired. I took Keiko's hand and drew her from her seat. "Come, walk with me." She smiled as I led her from the room. One of the older women, she bore a passing resemblance to Falchon, raised her eyebrows and smirked. Two younger *femme* giggled. To hell with them all.

## Twenty Three

When we were in the entry, stairs leading to the darkness above us, I put my mouth to her ear, kissing the margins of it as she had done so many times to me, and whispered that I wanted her. With my body pressed into her, there could be little doubt that I spoke the truth. She giggled and pulled me up the stairs to her apartments. We tried to move quietly, but as I wouldn't stop kissing her, or let go of her waist, stealth was hard to maintain.

I closed the rough planked door behind us, putting my back against it so I could watch her move to the center of the small room. Keiko cast her gaze over her shoulder; a perfect princess with upswept hair and sweet body embraced in a prison of cherry brocade and wooden stays. Our first time had been frantic with desire; the dam finally breached and need flooded us, controlling our bodies. Now I wanted to seduce her, linger over this encounter, and show her the lover she had chosen.

"Don't move," I whispered, drawing towards her, circling her, trailing my fingers across her chin, her shoulder, her back. On the second pass, she tried to turn her head, to follow my progress, and I stepped close, my chest pressed to her back. Gently I turned her face away. "Don't move at all, *cherie*, not a muscle." My lips danced along the graceful sweep of her neck as I freed her hair from its binding pins and clips, fingers combing through her tresses, dropping the midnight fall over her shoulder so it spilled down her chest. "Let me loose your bonds tonight."

I drew out the laces of her dress, slowly releasing her from the encumbrance of modesty. As each eye was liberated of ribbon, I kissed Keiko's spine through the sheer fabric of her undergarment, lingering while I worked the next binding. By the time she was free of the bodice her skin was flushed, her body shivering under my touch. The sigh of the boned cloth as it slipped from her form was mirrored in her own breath. The ties of her skirt came next, my lips still pressed to the small of her

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back. My tongue danced on the edge of her senses. Again she gasped as the fabric fell away.

Kneeling in the pool of cloth, I worked my mouth across her back and around her hips until I kissed the flat planes of her belly. The fragile linen barrier between her skin and mine held the lingering ghost of my mouth against her body. Her hands wound themselves into my hair as I worked my way up her stomach and across her breasts, teasing her tiny nipples through the material with light kisses. Loosening the ribbon of her shrift, I pulled at the neckline with my teeth, drawing the thin garment off her shoulders with nips and kisses until it collapsed at her feet. Then I retraced my path; my lips gliding over her now exposed skin, till once again I knelt before her. Dropping back onto my heels, I reached out and pulled at the tie holding her final undergarment, pulling it from her hips and down her legs. I stared up at her nearly-naked form. My hands followed the contours of Keiko's body drawing the warmth of her skin through my palms, as I stood and embraced her, kissing her soft lips, tasting their sweet essence.

I swept her into my arms and carried her to the bed. Her hair was a silken blanket beneath her as she dropped her head to the pillow, emerald eyes focused on mine. Keiko reached towards me. I caught her hand and lay it back at her side, "Shhh, be still, you are not allowed to move, remember?" Kissing her belly, I slid her shoes from her feet. Then, as I untied her garters, I lowered my mouth to the valley between her legs. My tongue sought out the treasure hidden therein and I slowly slid her stockings down her thighs and calves. She moaned softly as I sucked on her clit then ran my tongue further into the downy cleft. I teased the sensitive area with my tongue and teeth, and she buried her nails into my scalp, pressing me against her. Every sigh, every twinge, every gasp made me work her burning, moist flesh that much harder, licking, kissing, probing until her body shook with her climax.

She lay below me, eyes half closed, and lips parted, a night creature made of moonlight and shadow, head cradled on a pillow of darkness. I stripped off my doublet and shirt and ran my hand, lightly, in the shadowed valley between her breasts and down to circle her belly button, then back up again. She shivered still sensitive from her brush with *la petite mort*, trembling at the lightness of my touch. Her skin glowed as the moonlight filtering through the oiled paper panes wrapped her in its embrace. My boots and britches soon followed, joining Keiko's garments

in a tangled pile on the floor. I hesitated then, my hand laid across her warm stomach.

"Jules, what is wrong?" Her voice was husky, throbbing with sex.

A woman in France, a noble woman, who slept with a commoner, was no better than he. My title, if I survived to keep it, was low at best, Keiko would lose rank. Outside of the church and France the nearest equivalent, Viscount, was scarcely better than a knight, although at least it could be passed down. If there were children...I'd spent my life as a bastard with no parents no future, for the first time I cared that I might father a child who shared my fate. I stroked her belly, a frown creasing my forehead. "I wouldn't want you to be...inconvenienced." I was angry with myself that I couldn't just say it.

She stared at me for a time, the implications of my innuendo threading through her mind. Finally she covered my hand with delicate fingers, stroking my cheek with her other hand. "Dannae worry, Jules. I know ways of making it not happen."

"That's a sin, Keiko."

"And what I'm doing with ye is not?"

"True. But there are levels of sin..." Placing her hand on my mouth, she stopped me.

"If ye want to discuss theology, ye ken go to Mass. If ye want to buck with me, shut up, and do it." Keiko caressed my thigh and then between my legs, cupping my balls for a moment, sliding her silken fingers along my shaft, stopping to rub a drop of moisture from the tip. Raising her finger to her lips, she touched her tongue to the pad and drew the fluid into her mouth. Giggling, she whispered, "Now."

I brushed her lips with mine; they bore the hint of my seed. "Now? This minute, *petite*? You have to have me now?" Although I wanted Keiko madly, I couldn't resist teasing with her. "And why should I give into you, now, when you made me wait for so many months? Why shouldn't I make you wait?"

In answer, her hand slid across her own body, retracing the passage of mine. I watched its decent with rapt fascination. She continued on where I had left off, moving her fingers through her dark curls and slipping one inside her. Withdrawing, she brought it to my mouth and slid her wet finger across my lips. I licked it, tasting her juices again. "Now," She repeated.

"*Oui*, now." Would there ever be a time when I could resist Keiko? I hoped not. Spreading her legs with my knee, I rubbed the head of my



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cock against her wetness, teasing her with my body. Then I thrust into her tight, wet sex, earning her gasp as she grabbed my arms. I lowered my body onto hers, my mouth onto hers, caressing her body inside and out, her legs twined in mine driving me forward with the arching of her hips. She pressed her mouth to my chest, muffling the cries of pleasure that rose from her throat each time I impaled her.

The pitch built slowly this time, climbing with each thrust of my body, each clench of hers. I tried to hold back as long as I could but her body was maddeningly sweet as I moved within her, and finally I let go and drove us with abandon. She threw her head back and screamed, raking my back, trying to pull me deeper inside her, shuddering as she fell dragging me with her into heaven. As I sucked breath into my lungs, I kissed her lips, over and over, telling myself that I loved her.

I woke in the early hours of the morning, drowsy and warm in Keiko's embrace. Her skin still held whispers of our late night tryst. Was there anything more wonderful than waking in your lover's arms? In your lover's bed?

*Pest!* I went rigid. It was morning and I was still in Keiko's bed, which was in Le Comte DeGourgues's household. *Pas bon!* I needed to get out, and get out now. It would not do to be found here, not the least damage would be to Keiko's reputation. I slithered from Keiko's arms, moving quietly, dressing quickly and casting a last look back at my fragile angel. Her arm was thrown above her head, clutching the pillow in her sleep, lips curled in a soft secret smile. I closed the door behind me.

The upper floor was quiet with that sleepy stillness houses have in the early hours. I slipped down the stairs and when I hit the ground floor, slunk towards the kitchen. The front door would make too much noise, and although there was a chance I'd run into a servant towards the back of the house, they'd be less likely to comment. Most of the cooking was done out of doors anyway so the chance that they'd be at preparing the morning meal was slim.

"Are you leaving without breakfast?" A voice caught me from behind. I turned. Madame De Gourgues stood in the hall, wiping her hands on her apron. It was still odd that here, in Florida, the line between classes was sometimes so indistinct. She looked like a rich farmer's wife, not the noblewoman of the previous night.

"Leaving?" I flashed my most brilliant smile, "I just arrived, I let myself in the back..."

She snorted, cutting me off. "*Monsieur*, please. I've raised four boys and three daughters." Her chubby hand patted my cheek as she passed. "I would know that wicked giggling in my sleep. Which, by the way, it was. And your clothes..."

"I, ahm, did not mean to disturb your household, madam." What limited training in etiquette I possessed did not cover how to apologize for trysting in someone's home. I coughed and stammered a bit more and finally just shrugged. What more could I say.

"You should be thankful that my husband is almost deaf. Do you always get such ovations?" She smiled up at me motioning that I should follow her to the back of the house, to the kitchen. Her laughter rolled back at me. She sounded like a little girl when she laughed. "I will thank you for putting me in possession of the most marvelous piece of gossip that has hit these shores in years, it more than makes up for a little loss of sleep. Come, come, you must be hungry." She pushed me onto a stool, ladled out a bit of cold broth, and set the bowl in front of me. I was starving. "You must forgive us we are so provincial here, so I serve you myself. Not at all like at court, *no*?"

"Court?" I choked on my first spoonful.

"You are Richelieu's man, *no*?"

"*Oui*."

"But you have never been at Court?" The shake of my head answered her. Her eyes narrowed for a moment as she considered me. There was a great deal of intelligence hiding behind that chubby breezy exterior. Her voice was suddenly very calculating. "Then why would he trust you in such a position?"

I think I could grow to like this woman very much. I shrugged. "He needed my abilities, I needed to leave France."

"That is what I understand. Captain Gillardray, God have mercy on his soul," we crossed ourselves in unison, "said you were a condemned man, sentenced to death for killing the cousin of a Marquises. Were you dueling over your young lady?"

I choked for the second time on the broth, my eyes meeting hers over the table. There was eagerness a hunger there. Since arrival I had come to understand that power and position meant only so much in the wilderness. There was very little to trade here, all suffered privations, while not equally, enough so that the scales were almost equally empty. But we'd been besieged on arrival for information, any scrap of news. Three hundred souls and all knew everything about each other.

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There is sometimes a value to holding knowledge, and there is sometimes a value to giving it away, especially if you can give it away and still get something for it. By the end of the year, if I survived that long, everyone in this hamlet would know everything about me. I wanted them to have my version first and then the truth would always be colored by it.

I leaned over the table and took her hands, caressing them like I might a lover's. I smiled at her, gave her one of my wickedest, I'm up to something smiles, my hair obligingly sliding to cover my good eye, so that I peered through a curtain of golden red locks. "No, *Madame*," my voice dropped to a whisper, "not a duel." She sucked in her breath and leaned closer. She would have the information before anyone else and there was a great value in that. "I was sentenced to hang."

She whispered back, "But they don't hang noblemen."

"*Oui*." I rubbed my thumb along the edge of hers. Her eyes went wide and she shivered. I guessed that her husband hadn't touched her this way in years. "But they do hang highwaymen, no matter what family they come from." Another little thrill went through her body.

The habitants lived on the edge of dying each day—Indians, Spaniards, famine, disease—so much so that it was routine, but here I was, a living, breathing, romantic danger from the old world, sitting in her house, confiding in her. She could dribble out pieces of the story for months, embellishing it slightly with each telling. I fed her a little more. "Of course, the English, they hang French spies. And I'm sure the Laird MacPhearson would hang me, or worse, for running off with his only daughter."

Her hands left mine to flutter at her bosom. "Spies. Ransom." She hissed out the words. Then her chin tilted and she batted her eyes. She must have been a terrible coquette when she was younger. "You jest with me, *Monsieur Vidamé*." She swatted at my hand, and a smile, telling me that she was flattered by the attempt, played at the edges of her full mouth.

Returning to my broth, I smiled back. Mine told her I didn't care whether she believed me or not. When I was almost done with my breakfast Keiko swept into the room, fully dressed like any proper lady, Meg drifting in her wake. She stopped in the middle of the small room, startled to see me. Her eyes searched mine. I gave away nothing, my face impassive. "Julius, how pleasant to see ye. Yer here to see the count then?"

James Buchanan

The countess chuckled as she stood and a knowing look passed between us. Keiko slid her glance to the older woman. "He's been here for quite some time, my dear." The countess's tone conveyed volumes. "Can I get you anything? You were up so late last night."

"Tea, please." Keiko was suspicious; it was betrayed in her voice. She stared at me, hard. I shook my head denying her unspoken accusation.

As the matron handed the mug to Keiko she leaned in, their bodies almost touching, "Tell me my dear, what is it like to make love to the highwayman who tried to ransom you?"

The vessel crashed to the floor. It was all the confirmation La Comtesse needed.

## Twenty Four

My conversation with Madame dogged me from the moment I walked from her kitchen. How it spread so fast I couldn't fathom, but by midday half the colony had heard some version. Now I was rumored to have been a spy for the crown. Being a spy implied I had intimate knowledge of how to determine who among the endless list of suspects was actually behind the uprisings.

We couldn't be sure who was rousing the natives against us. The consensus in the colony was to blame the Spanish, they'd tried to take Fort Caroline before, but the English could also have had a hand in the insurgency. Frankly, it could have been the Dutch or Portuguese, or any one of a dozen Indian kings as well. I had not the faintest idea of where to start looking, much less how to accomplish my task of putting a stop to it.

If that were not enough, now I was involved in a lover's spat. I stood accused of bragging about my conquest. No matter how much I protested, Keiko would not believe my innocence. She accused me of being deceitful and malicious. I have been, often enough, both of those things but it was maddening that I was being falsely accused now.

Curran, the one person who had never abandoned me, was unusually cool. I'd approached him for help, with all of it. His responses were sharp, meant to cut without being outwardly offensive. "I don't know *Monsieur Vidamé*, it's not my station to make such judgments," and, "low men such as I, we don't understand such things." When I told him he was being an ass he'd thrown his *morion*—which he had been polishing—at me, catching me in the leg and telling me to go to hell as he stormed from the room.

*Mon Dieu*, I should have let them hang me.

As had been arranged, even prior to Gillardray's demise, we met in the side hall of the grand house. Curran was grumpy. Keiko was cold. I was sufficiently put out with both of them not to care. Besides, my knee hurt where Curran had nicked it with the helmet.

Father Jean-Paul arrived with Comte DeGourgues and the Captain of the Fort, Françoise Bourbon. Somehow he was distantly related to Henry of Navarre, but no one bothered to explain these things to me assuming that I should already know how people's families were interrelated. The three men were startled to see Keiko. She hadn't actually been invited to this little war counsel and the provost looked at me curiously. I shrugged. Most of the habitants were fast learning that no one, not anyone, could tell Keiko what she could or could not do. He apparently had yet to receive that billet.

The two sergeants of the guard arrived next and the remainder of notables who had a say drifted in until our little *avocats de guerre* numbered eleven men plus Keiko. I'd met several of the gentlemen at the wake although I didn't recognize any but Falchon. Taking a stool next to where I leaned against the lime washed wall, the old man's face searched mine in question. I rolled my eyes in disgust. He slapped my leg, chuckling and mumbled, "Ah, to be young again."

Le Comte cleared his throat; it was time to get this grand disaster started. "*Monsieur* LaRousse, perhaps you could tell us what plan the Bishop de Richelieu and yourself have devised."

Everyone turned to look at me. *Putain*, I really should have let them hang me in Marseilles. I swallowed. And then I coughed, "Maybe," I stood up straight and clapped my palms together, "maybe you should begin by telling me about the attacks."

Several men looked at each other. Bourbon was the first of them to speak. "We told *le Roi* these things in our letters, requesting more men and arms. You have seen them, no?"

I had seen them, copies, read them a hundred times over on the voyage, looking for any clue within them. *Mon Dieu*, I could recite their contents in my sleep. The obsequious, often times sniveling, blandishments and pleas made my stomach turn. Everything so couched in polite language as though they couldn't say how completely out-manuevered and out-numbered they'd been, and that's what I'd always wanted to know. I'd read them and then re-read them looking for those missing details.

Thinking on these things, I paced the room and absently I ran my hand through my hair. Bourbon hissed, I'd come to a stop in front of him and he had a full unobstructed view of my very pointed right ear. Well, *zut*, it was best to get it over with quickly anyway. I slid my gaze toward him, his mouth was hanging open. He shut it when he saw that I was

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watching him. "Do you have something more to add, *Monsieur* Captain?" He was stunned, the barest movement of his head indicating no. "*Très bien*, then I want you to tell me what has been happening here. And not the whining, begging, about all the politeness *je m'en fiche complètement*. I want to know when, how, how many men, what arms did they bear anything that struck you as different or unusual. *Comprenez?*"

He nodded again. I had to prompt him twice more before he began to recount the happenings over the last year. As he got into it, first I then Curran would stop him demanding more detail or asking questions that happened to come to mind. Curran was a good foil for me, often picking up on smaller issues that I had missed, but when they were brought forth had some import on the situation. The other men would jump in from time to time and add their views or things they'd seen or remembered or heard. We spent the better part of the day reviewing events, going back over important details and by the end of it, while I had a much clearer picture of the battles fought and who our allies were and were not, nothing was coalescing in the jumble of facts I'd collected.

The only thing anyone knew for certain was that the Indians were Apalachees, coming from the north and west of Fort Caroline. DeGourgues's father had fought against them with Utina when the fort was first founded, but outside of a few skirmishes over the years it had been a relatively peaceful coexistence. And while it wasn't uncommon for them to raid the Temecuas villages near their own lands, coming in this far this often was. They had been resistant to the Spanish efforts to missionize them, thus avoiding the worst of the pestilence outbreaks which plagued the Colusa tribes farther south a few years past. Because of this it was difficult to think that they would be in collusion with Spain.

Although more frequent in number, the attacks did not seem to deviate appreciably from those in the past sixty years. The assaults would start at times when the settlement was most vulnerable, mostly at night or early morning. A few dozen warriors would attack. They killed those they could. They took slaves of women or children. They stole whatever they could get their hands on. They ripped the hair from the skulls of the dead. It was standard Indian warfare.

Finally we began to ask questions that they had no answers for, responding that we should ask Paracusi Hiocaia or the residents of Saraurachi would know or the Lewas of the Cominges might remember. As we hit more and more of these gaps it became apparent that we would

have to do just that, go out among our Indian neighbors and ask them. Field recognizance as Curran called it, and we slipped into planning a small expedition.

The Irishman and I would take one of the sergeants and a few men in *almadie* or canoes with a local boy who'd grown up with one of the tribes to act as our *hiatiqui*. Many of the nearest Temecuas spoke French but not all and we'd need the lad to interpret for us. With such a small group it was agreed we could be ready to depart in short order, although Bourbon reckoned we'd need provisions for at least three months.

Keiko settled her hands in her lap. "Fine then, when do we leave?"

Every man in the room turned and looked at her, most with open mouthed astonishment.

"We cannae take yer with us." Curran was smug. "Yer have to stay behind."

"Jules." She turned to me. Keiko's tone demanded things, things I wasn't about to concede to her. I let out the breath I was holding. Well she was already angry with me, might as well dig my grave a little deeper.

This was no conversation for the rest of their ears. Drawing her off to the side, "Really, Keiko," my voice was low, almost a whisper, "you can't come. There's no place for you with us."

A slight tremble was evident in her bottom lip. "Ye cannae leave me here alone."

"Stop being a child," I chided. "You heard Bourbon. It is, at most, a few months we'll be gone. What else did you think would happen when we reached La Florida?" A stray lock of hair had fallen across her face. As I swept it aside, "Besides, you'll tire of this little adventure long before that. I would wager you've already made plans to leave when the *Jean-Baptiste* returns to France. If you haven't you should. This land is no place for you."

"Ye donae understand," her voice was choked, "I cannae go back. I gave ye everything. I gave up everything to be with ye, there's no place I can go."

That was a lie and I laughed at it. "You gave me nothing you wouldn't have given half a dozen men before me if it weren't for that little blue bottle."

"How can ye say that?" She hissed. "How can ye believe that of me?"



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"Because it's true." Our voices were rising with every word. I made an effort to rein mine back. "You know it. I know it."

"Ye said ye loved me!" Tears were filling her eyes.

I tried to hush her. "In my way I do. But at least I'm no fool to think we could ever have more than we've already shared." Pest, she was such a naïve girl not to understand that! "There's no choice for you in this. You're not going. The matter is settled and you're a fool if you can't see it. If you wish to wait for me, well that's your matter, not mine." At that, I turned from her and headed back towards Curran and Antoine. We still had plans to finalize.

"How dare you do this to me?" Her strident words crawled up my spine arresting my pace. "I will not be cast aside, you cannae do this to me." With her yelling, every man that counted for anything in this miserable hell hole was about to get an up close and personal view of my affairs. *Putain!* If she were to act like a child, well I'd damn well treat her as one. I swung back on her, my hands balled in fists at my sides. Every inch of my frame was tensing for the fight.

Luckily father Jean-Paul stepped in before I could open my mouth and say something truly hurtful. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "My daughter, it is not up to him. I would not, on my conscience, let you go alone, into the wilderness, with these men. If one were your father, a brother or even your cousin, he could speak for you and allow it, but I cannot."

She looked at me. A wicked thought danced behind those green eyes; they reminded me of the Dragon's when he had thought to eat me. If I had learned to read Keiko at all she was up to something and it was not good for me. "Or...perhaps a husband?" Her voice trembled as she spoke.

Curran choked out, "Jaysus!" starting to his feet, knocking the stool he'd commandeered to the floor and looking at me.

Oohhh, no, no, no, no, no! "I will not do it!" I interrupted the priest as he was agreeing with Keiko. "Your father would cut of my balls and wear them around his neck!"

Keiko laughed through her tears. "My faither was going to do that before we left Calais. Marrying me wouldnae change his mind."

"NO! *Chienne foutue!*" *Mon Dieu*, if she was going to bring it up there was no reason for me to hold back. "If he ever finds me, he'll just beat me for bedding you and then find some dried up old man with a title, one who doesn't care about your virginity, to be your husband! His

honor will be satisfied. If I marry you, he would have to make you a widow!"

She looked at the priest, then at the Count. "Sirs, I am a woman alone in a fort of men. I have nae relative to defend my honor. I walk among them and they see a whore, a harlot, a woman of low virtue. A few are so bold as to remark when I walk past." She flung herself on De Gourgues's arm, her voice breaking. "How long 'till one of them sets his thoughts to action? If ye willnae let me go, at least give me the armor of marriage." She spun around and pointed at me. Tears were running down her cheeks. "He kidnapped me from Calais. He has ruined me; he took my honor. Give it back to me in marriage!"

"I did not kidnap you, you ran and I have not taken anything not willingly given." She would have to add lying to her list of sins at her next confession. "You don't want me. *Marier un fé, tu délires?* You just want to tell your father to go to *le Diable!* Even if I did such a thing, I would not take you with me."

"Yer off yer nut to think yer would go." Curran spat at her. The rest of the men were, wisely, staying well out of this. None of them was pretending that we weren't fighting in their presence, but they were not intervening to stop it. I doubt they'd had this much entertainment in years.

"No one asked ye." Keiko turned on him, her face hard. "Julius, ye should to speak to your man, he needs to be reminded of his place."

"Stop it," the Irishman slammed his hand on the table, "stop tryin' to make himself yer wee dolly to play house with." Curran was angrier than I'd ever thought possible; normally nothing could break that calm surface. He yelled at her, his face flushed with his rage. "Yer treat himself like yer man has naw mind of his own, he's not a toy, calleach!"

"Mind yer manners around yer betters," she hissed.

"Chienne." I grabbed her arm hauling her back into my body. "Don't ever..." I let the threat hang. How dare she use him to get to me!

She smirked; satisfied that she'd gotten a rise out of me. "Where a man is, he should be the sole master; but for my part, I like to preserve some authority wherever I may be." Removing my hand from her arm, the tears drying on her flushed cheeks, she continued. "Maybe ye need to take lessons from le Comte about how ye treat your servants." Keiko adjusted her skirts, looking at Curran, then back at me. "Ye need to decide where you're going to stand, Jules, yer not one of them anymore. And I will not be treated like some low born girl ye can use and toss

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aside." For a moment we were locked in a stare. Another sob rose in her throat. "I will have my honor back," she cried. Then she fled from the room.

Everyone was looking at me, staring in fact. Wonderful, all now knew what a harridan I'd bedded. They also knew I wasn't born to my station. That was going to make things interesting. Oh *Putain*, I also realized I'd admitted I was a fairy in front of this assembly. *Mon Dieu*, Keiko could be such a *pétasse*, pushing at me like that. Maybe she'd be obliging and go get eaten by something but I doubted it. I ran my hand through my hair. "I think," I straightened my back, rubbing my neck, "*Messieurs*, we have an expedition to plan."

## Twenty Five

It began with the barking of the dogs.

After Keiko's explosive exit, the room had cleared. I wondered how fast the details of our little drama would circulate. Curran, Bourbon, a sergeant by the name of Antoine, and I had tarried with Le Comte, finalizing plans. It seemed to me the nearer a village was to us, the less likely they were to know anything more than we, but the more likely they would be to talk to us about what they did know. Thus we might as well start with nearer settlements and work our way outward. We'd go until we found what we needed or ran out of leads. As it was getting on towards dinner and I hadn't eaten anything except the broth earlier that day, we decided to retire. We would meet back up the next morning to finalize our preparations.

We walked out into the early evening. Falchon was sitting on a bench outside the grand house, talking with a tradesmen and his boy. A few women were gossiping across the village square. Keiko was nowhere that I could see. DeGourgues's two water dogs padded outside with us. As I was patting Falchon's shoulder in greeting both pricked up their ears, turning their heads to the south. Low growls rumbled in their throats.

Then the rest of the dogs in the village began to bark and howl. As if in answer, the voice of a thousand demons wailed from the forest. The sound crawled up my spine and vibrated in the back of my skull. A single shot rang out from somewhere past the fields that surrounded Fort Caroline. The bigger poodle bolted towards the noise, his companion following seconds after.

Most of us were already armed; with the continuing hostilities, few men went without their weapons, even taking their guns to church. We were close behind the dogs, breaking out past the scattered huts and onto the margins of the fields. The shouts of women searching for their children and the blast of the small *sacre* at the fort, discharged as a call to arms, added to the din.

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From across the meadow a group of figures ran towards us. Four women who had been doing laundry at one of the small creeks were running for the safety of the fort. A small child, terrified, screamed in its mother's arms as they fled across the fields towards us. The youngest of the group was well into pregnancy and falling farther behind with each breath. Two boys ran with them, one I recognized from our landing at the beach. They'd been sent out as guards. The familiar boy turned to help the pregnant woman and fell, an arrow through his eye. And still we could not see who pursued them.

Bourbon loosed every cur we had, maybe three good mastiffs and a half dozen or so mongrels, and they tore after the other dogs. Curran and I were already headed into the field. He was loading his musket as he ran; his soldier's training serving him well. I wound the locks of my guns, nearly dropping one of the keys as I switched pistols. Why could they not make keys to fit different guns?

The women were fleeing off to our left, to pass the village and make the fort on the high ground. We headed towards where the boy had fallen. I could hear the pounding of other men behind us. If we couldn't cut the attackers off the women would never make it.

The hideous yells of rage sounded down the wind like the howling of a hundred wolves, and then a flight of arrows hurled from the wood. I felt the burning pain as one pierced my right shoulder, grinding into the bone. Zut! It drove me to my knees. Curran turned and I waved him on yelling, "Go!" I took two deep breaths, grabbed the shaft, and snapped it, screaming as I did so. I'd been hurt worse. I could handle this. The pain was but a little thing. I gained my feet and ran after Curran.

He had reached the pregnant girl. She had collapsed not far beyond where the boy had died. The Irishman grabbed her by the hair and dragged her back. An older man came upon them and caught the girl up under her arms. Curran dropped his grip and headed back towards our attackers. If she was to be saved the old man would have to do it by himself.

The dogs lit into the woods. A few had been felled by the rain of arrows. I could hear the commotion in the trees as the curs attacked the Indians there—the yelling, the screams, the yelps of the *retchets* as the Indians struck them down. We were almost upon the forest margin when the first of our attackers broke from cover.

I loosed first one barrel, then the other of the Spaniard's pistol. There was no way to tell if my aim was true. Shots and howls rang across

the field. I shoved the spent gun in my belt and drew the other. A soldier dropped next to me, a spear through his chest. *Mon Dieu*, what was I doing in the middle of a battle? I was no soldier. I was mad to be here.

A warrior charged out of the trees. Naked except for a small skin at his waist, he carried a massive red club in his hands. The weapon was spade-shaped at one end with a knob the size of my head at the other. Hanging from it were the scalps of ten men. One of the habitants rushed the Indian, drawing his sword as he ran. The tall warrior hefted his weapon and swung. It smashed into the Frenchman's skull with the sound of a ripe gourd breaking.

The victor ran at me, the gore-covered war club raised high, screaming what I guess was a challenge. His heavy black hair was pulled tight behind his head with feathers stuck at odd angles within it. A single forelock of hair was strung through four pearls. Great disks of bone adorned his ears. Ropes of pearls swung about his chest. Red paint covered the base of his jaw and wreathed his forearms. The devil himself would be less frightening than the man before me.

I raised my pistol and fired. The ball caught the Apalachees in the chest and knocked him back to the ground.

There was no time to reload. I ran past the fallen warrior, grabbing the club as I jumped his corpse. It was hot to the touch of my fingers.

Another came at me, his eyes wide and circled with red ocher. Black hair and feathers streamed behind him as he charged. I hefted the borrowed weapon with both hands, swinging it from my right so as to break his ribs. As the blow began to fall, I felt a burning, a tingling, in my hands, the hairs on my arm prickled and the air smelled of the advent of a summer storm. My tongue tasted of metal. I caught the warrior just below his ribs with the cudgel. The air crackled, sizzled and a great peal of thunder rolled across the battle field.

My skin felt as though it had been pulled from my bones and slapped back on. I stood, the club braced against my hip, staring at the mangled man. The Indian, what was left of him, looked like he'd been torn asunder by some great machine. He was split nearly in two. The ground at my feet was scorched bare. Glancing around me, I saw that every man within a *toise* had been knocked to earth. The forest hushed fearful, even the breeze was stilled.

Curran struggled to his knees, whispering, "Jaysus."

The dogs dropped to the ground and their keening sent shivers up my spine. Another warrior, half his face hidden in red, stood. I read the

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challenge in his eyes as he came at me his own club raised. The pain in my right shoulder hampered my parry and his blow drove me to my knees. I swung from the ground, trying for any blow that would knock him back, give me time to gain my feet.

I swear to God, to this day, I did not touch him. Again a power burned through my body. Pain and heat surged through my arms. The warrior was engulfed in a in a blue-white lambent flame. His skin blackened and peeled as his eyes stared out in horror. I screamed as another wave of sound crashed down on me.

The stench of singed hair and charred fat clogged my nose and mouth. The burning man dropped first to his knees, then prone. Little tongues of flame wicked about his fallen form. Its hand reached out, grasping air. I crawled back and away from the corpse, almost climbing into Curran's lap in my haste to get away from the horror.

The yells of the Apalachees changed in tone. The Indians scrambled off into the woods, abandoning the fight. I could only guess that the bewitchment of the club frightened them as badly as it frightened me. After a moment, three French soldiers drove into the woods to dog the fleeing force.

"Mother Mary of God." Curran hissed in my ear.

I dropped the club, wiping my hands on the earth to rid myself of the touch of the unholy thing. The hounds yelped and, as a pack, ran towards the settlement, tails between their legs. Shaking, I gained my feet. "Curran, let's get out of here." I grabbed at his shoulder and tried to pull him with me.

He pointed at the club. "Yer canny leave it there. What if they come back for it?"

"I don't want to touch it." He was mad. "What if there's an enchantment upon it."

"I can tell yer there's goddamn enchantment on it." He pushed against my leg. "And you're the one who has already touched it. If 'tis gonna damn it should be yer."

There was a certain twisted logic to that. Gingerly I picked it up. The wood was covered with blood and bits of bone and the scalps hanging from it had gore in the hair. Other than it was repulsive it seemed a normal enough weapon.

The corpse of one man still smoldered, the other stared at the sky. I kicked the burnt shell, flipping it onto its back. A glint of metal caught my eye. Welded into the blackened flesh was a crucifix. Yellow fat

oozed from the cracked skin as I yanked it from about the dead man's neck. The tiny cross was not French. Englishmen and Dutch traders didn't give such things as trade. It had to be Spanish.

On the other body we found a small metal knife. I couldn't be sure, but Curran claimed it looked of Toledo manufacture. The rope of pearls about his neck was interspersed with green trade glass, maybe English, maybe Spanish, but not French. From those few items it seemed that whatever resistance to the Castilian incursion was overcome. My list of possible suspects narrowed considerably with our find.

As night came on we searched the village, the fort and the nearby stands of woods. The only Apalachees dead left behind were the two that I killed. The Indians' custom was to carry away the bodies of fallen warriors when they could. It saved them the defilement perpetrated by all their brethren. Our dead, as we came upon them, were carried back to Caroline. Bourbon found Meg; alone and screaming in the forest. Near her they had discovered the three soldiers. All had been killed and scalped. There was no sign of Keiko. No one knew where she had gone.

Eventually we had all returned to the fort. The bewitched weapon stood in a corner. Most wanted it moved someplace, anyplace, else. However, no one wanted to touch it and I was not in a condition to handle it. It had taken two men to hold me down while Curran pulled what was left of the stone tipped shaft from my body. Now I held Meg as Madame Anna bandaged my shoulder. Midwifery had broader applications than I'd ever considered.

"*Mademoiselle*, she was so very angry with you, Jules," *la petite femme* sobbed. "She made me get baskets. She said...she said, that we should do something useful, to show you that you needed her. That we would get things for medicines in the forest. And I wanted to stay and play with the boys at the creek but she wouldn't let me." She sniffled. "And then we heard them yell, they were screaming and *Mademoiselle* told me to hide and she went to see. I was so scared. And she came back and said the Indians had started to attack the women at the creek. We ran away, we went through the forest, around the field to get to the Fort. She said we had to stay in the trees and be very, very quiet or they would see us and they would hurt us.

"And then we had to come out of the woods to cross a creek and the Indians saw us and yelled and shot arrows at us. *Mademoiselle* was pulling me and I kept falling 'cause I couldn't run as fast as she. And I



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slipped on the stones in the water." *La petite femme* was shaking in my embrace, the tears running down her freckled cheeks.

"When I woke up it was very dark. There were three men and I thought they were sleeping and I tried to wake one of them up. I shook him and told him to wake up, it was dark and we had to get to the fort and, and, and then I saw that he didn't have any skin on his head, none of them did. I screamed and I screamed and I ran." Dissolving into her tears, Meg crushed her little body into mine. She'd come-to surrounded by the dead bodies of the three soldiers who'd gone after the retreating horde. Screaming and bloodied from her fall, she had made her way out of the horror and through the woods towards the fort.

Bourbon placed his hand on my arm. Everyone was being overly solicitous towards me. In the most confident voice he could manage, "I think that they have carried her off. The Apalachee, they steal women from other villages, it's a respectable way of obtaining a wife. Only a warrior's scalp carries magic for them. Unless she'd tried to fight there would have been little honor in killing her." He jerked his chin at Meg. "They probably thought *la fille* was already dead or they would have taken her, too."

Curran crossed his arms over his chest and studied the toes of his jackboots. Very quietly he said, "She's dead den. That wagon is de last person who would go without a scrap."

Anne took Meg from my lap. The girl wouldn't stop crying. "How can you say such a thing?" she spat at the Irishman as she stroked Meg's hair, shushing her.

I had to agree with Curran. "*Non*, he's right. She would have fought them."

"Only if she had arms," the captain bit on his thumb, "a knife wouldn't have meant much, but a sword or pistol. Even then, if she wasn't wounded, or not so much that she would slow them down they would take her instead of killing her. Our men were probably beyond hope when the Apalachees scalped them. Slaves are very valuable, especially women and children."

I reached up and took Meg's face in my hands. "*Petite*, listen to me, *enfant*, did Keiko take her pistol? Did she have her gun?" The little girl shook her head. "And you didn't see her body, there, with the soldiers?" Again a negative. Maybe there was still hope.

## Twenty Six

The guardhouse was quiet. Curran and I had the place to our selves. Most men were on watch or had gone to their own homes after the attack. None wanted to be anywhere near the foul club, although René said he would bring the Lewas, sorcerer, of the Temecuas to see it in the morning. Meg was with Madame Anne. Keiko was somewhere in this vast wilderness, suffering God knows what.

We'd wounded or killed enough of them that the Apalachees would not be back this night. Besides, there were blessed few hours left until the sun rose, not enough time to mount a counterattack. As usual it was blasted hot even at this hour and we had both stripped to our breeches. It helped only a little in the muggy night.

Curran was sitting on the edge of the bench that served as his bed, the thin straw mattress bunching in places. Cleaning his musket, he threaded the thin rod with its oiled bit of rag down the barrel, removing the un-burnt powder from within. His heavy black hair kept falling into his eyes and he'd toss it back absently, his mind for his work. I watched him for a time. He was so intense, so focused on his task. But then he was always intense.

I was comforted by his presence. I would have been at a loss without him. With Keiko gone, not knowing where she was, what had happened to her...my mind kept picking at the scene over and over, trying to figure what I could have done different, if I should have seen it coming. Her last words to me still vibrated in the back of my mind, shaking me.

He'd been beside me all night as we planned our counterattack, switching from expeditionary force to avenging army in a fluid motion, helping me, taking care of the smaller details. I would find his hand on my arm or shoulder just when I'd think I couldn't handle any more.

Curran had a way of speaking to the soldiers that made them trust him. Whenever he would assign a task, arrange a strategy, he began with "Julius thinks we should..." or "*De Vidamé* has suggested..." making it

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sound as if he were following my direction and as though they had a choice in whether to follow or not. There was no way I could have handled this without him. I'd never had a true friend, certainly not like him. Whenever we were together it was as though the rest of the world didn't matter, whether we lived or died it would all be okay because it was us. *Comrades de Arms. Pour l'amour, pour la guerre, pour la mort.*

Why Keiko had made such a scene about it I was at a loss to understand.

"You'll come with me?" I broke the silence.

He didn't look up. "Aye, I'll go witcha." There was a heavy resignation in his tone I didn't like.

"You don't have to." I shrugged. "It's not your business, it's mine." I was sitting on a split barrel facing him, my elbows resting on my knees and running my fingers through my hair for lack of any better use for my hands. *Mon Dieu*, looking down at my chest, I could see it traced with the scars of my torture, the faded burns pulling tight and shinny on my skin. If my front looked this bad, I couldn't begin to imagine the condition of my back. Skin crisscrossed with evidence of my incorrigible nature, an eye that looked like a yellow marble in a bath of blood hidden under a patch, shoulder bandaged where they'd pulled the arrow from my flesh, pointed ears...*putain*, I was a sight!

Withdrawing the rod and setting to the side, he picked up a rag and began to oil the outside of the gun. Without looking at me, "If it's yer business, then it's my business."

"*Non*. It's not like that; you're not beholden to me. You're my friend, not my servant, no matter what she said, no matter what anyone says."

He set the gun on the ground and looked up at me. His mouth was set hard and there was anger and hurt in his eyes. "I said I'd go witcha, isn't that good enough for yer?"

It should have been, but it wasn't. "We'll probably die out there," I pushed.

"Aye, there's a good chance of that."

My chest was heavy. I didn't know where all this resentment was coming from. I took a deep breath and blew it out, then I went and sat next to him on the bench, moving the cleaning tools to the space below the seat. I leaned forward again, the same position I'd been sitting in earlier my hands hanging between my knees. "If you want to go with me, why are you so angry about going?"

"You're not gonna let me be, are yer?" When I shook my head, he snorted. "Yer langer. We're headin' for the wrong reasons. It's not right."

"Wrong reasons? It's what I'm here to do. Go find out what the *diable* the Indians are doing, who's behind this. It's the perfect opportunity to find out, follow them back, see if we can capture one of them and get it out of them. What's the wrong reason behind that? Do you have a better plan? *Mon Dieu*, if you do, please tell me because I'm going to get us killed."

"You're gonna get her back. Yer could give a damn about what you're supposed to do."

"So what if the two things are the same, is that wrong?" I straightened, placing my hand on Curran's shoulder and pushing against him so that we half faced each other as we sat side by side. He was looking at the floor, his mouth twisted tight. Something was very wrong there, something that was tearing at his heart. A thought came to me and I said it out loud. "You don't want me to get her back. Because of what she said...because you think she's right? Or that she'll make me think she's right?"

His dark eyes slid to mine. "I think you'll kill yourself tryin' and she's not worth it." Chewing on his lower lip, Curran continued, "She's a lady Jules, you're a peasant. I know they gave yer that title, but yer put silk on a goat and it's still a goat. You'll just club yourself up over not havin' her although yer a better paddy than any of them." He shook his head, his hands clasped tight in his lap. "Naw, yer wrong, I want to get her back, I wouldn't leave anyone out there like that. But I don't want yer to be hurt. And she's gonna hurt yer."

My right hand was still on his shoulder and I moved my left to his knee, looking into his eyes. *Mon Dieu*, they were so black, like someone had stolen pieces of the night sky. His pale skin wrapped over taught muscles bound on his tall frame from years of hard labor and he'd cut his hair with a knife just above his collar. Although he tucked it behind his ears to keep it back, it never seemed to stay there. Right now it was falling in his face. His hurt and angry face; after a moment he dropped his gaze. Oh, *Pest*. I closed my eyes and leaned into him, whispering just near his ear. "You're jealous of her. You want me to be with you? More than just friends, *no*?"

Curran pushed my hand off his leg. "Jules, don't."

"Why not? I have held back, everything you've ever done says you didn't want that, but you can change your mind. I haven't changed mine."

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It wasn't all jest." I put my hand back, my fingers tightening a little against him. "We're going to die soon, maybe tomorrow."

"And what happens if we don't?" His face was turned so that it was only inches from mine. "What then?"

"We'll figure something out." I kissed him. It was so unlike a woman's kiss and so much more than the fleeting brushes we'd had before. I ran my hand up his leg, across the flat muscular plains of his stomach and he sucked in a breath at my touch, an indrawn yes. A small laugh escaped me as I pulled back. "I thought you didn't like it when I teased you?"

"*Feis ort, y Sidhe.*" This time he kissed me. Our mouths met and our tongues tangled together, my hand sliding down gripping him within the fabric of his trousers. Curran was excited, and so, frankly was I. I needed someone to touch me now, to hold me, make me believe that things were alright. I had wanted him so much. I had dreamt of him, but I always held back, only teasing hoping he might respond. His friendship had meant more to me than just having him would. But now...now to have both. And the time, it wasn't fair to him. *Putain*, nothing was fair in life, and it wasn't as if there would ever be a right time for us to be together. I abandoned rationalizing and gave in.

His rough hands moved on my arms, one reaching, burrowing in my hair. Our bodies were covered in a faint sheen of sweat, the leaden air holding our heat on our skin. He was so hard, the bands of his work making him taugt and firm in places where a woman would be soft, his hips narrow and angular instead of round. Sharp strong face, high cheek bones. *Mon Dieu*, he was beautiful.

"*Suce moi.*" I pled against his lips.

He came up for air. "What?"

"I said, suck on me." Taking his face in my hands, I pushed him down. Fingers fumbling with the ties of my pants, Curran freed my erection, hesitating for a moment, his doe black eyes lifted up, unsure, and then his lips slid over my shaft. My skin burned as I wound my fingers into his hair, watching him pull back and run his tongue around the head, then swallow it again. *Mon Dieu*, I could feel his tongue in his mouth sliding around my cock; the blissful friction as his lips drug across my skin. More. I wanted more than this.

I yanked his head up by the hair and his teeth grazed my skin. I hissed with the pleasure pain I enjoyed, it made my insides tingle. "Back. Take off your pants and lay back for me." The Irishman did as he was

told, shucking his britches and lying back on the bench, his muscular body trembling slightly in anticipation. He was good sized, well built. As I ran my hand along his shaft I could feel the pulsing ropes of his veins just under the surface. A low moan escaped his lips as he raised his hips from the mattress. I stroked him with one hand, the other descending between his legs to explore the opening to his body, slowly pushing inward with my finger. He hissed.

"Never before?" I pulled out then pushed back in. He shook his head in reply, his eyes closed tight. "Relax, *mon ami*, it will be wonderful." There was grease under the bed with the cleaning kit. Not the best but it would do, I withdrew and fumbled under the bench until my fingers found it. I coated my erection with it, then stroked his insides with my slick digits. "Better, *no*?"

I didn't wait for a reply as I knelt between his legs, pushing against his tight space, I had to leave off stroking him and his cock thumped into my belly, the moisture leaking from the tip cool on my skin. A moan rumbled as I entered him, and for the life of me I don't know whether it was his or mine or both. I went slowly at first, spreading him out, gently forcing my way inside him. Each time I pushed my shaft a little deeper, a little harder. He was tight and hot and slick with the grease as I slid within his body. As I thrust against him, his cock slid in the trail of its own juices glistening on my belly. Finally I gave into the frost coating my nerves and pounded into him, his legs wrapped about my hips, letting me slide deep inside. My orgasm hit like lightening down my spine as I filled his channel with my cum.

Even spent, I could stay hard for a time, and I knew my fluid would make the sensations that more intense for Curran. Raising my torso, supporting my weight on my right arm, I grabbed his cock and started caressing its vibrating length, still moving within him, vestiges of *le petite mort* making me shiver. Curran was shaking as I drew my hand along his erection, working him harder and faster even as I thrust again and again in his now incredibly tight, wet channel. His hand grabbed my arm, fingers digging into my bicep, the other thrown back clawing at the ticking as he screamed out "Jaysus!" erupting over my hand and his stomach.

I let him go, falling forward on my hands; my hair brushing against his chest, and my crucifix swinging gently between us as I slipped from his body. His eyes were open wide and his breathing was ragged, mouth

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slightly parted. *Putain*, but he was gorgeous like this, trembling in the afterglow. I laughed. "Jesus has nothing to do with this, *mon amour*."

## Twenty Seven

A war counsel had been called. Warriors from the local tribe would accompany us. It was the way of things in La Florida. Our enemies were the enemies of our friends. It would have been bad manners not to let them share in the honor of war.

We met in the public place appointed for such tasks, the Temecuas counsel house. Low benches were built in the shape of a crescent lining the walls. The chiefs and their wizard sat at the head on dressed skins, elevated higher than the rest. We gathered round the war chief in a close circle. To the left of him a fire was burning, to the right two large containers of water. Many of the warriors had their heads covered with bits of feathers and skin. The most important men were crowned with the fur covered skulls of bobcats or the spread wings of hawks.

They passed about a great bowl. The Holata drank first, then his Inija and the Paracusi and Lewas and on down through the ranks of the warriors. Among them were Curran, Bourbon, and I. Each was expected to gulp as much as they could stomach of the steaming liquid within. They called it *cassine*, the black drink. It was made from a berry of a plant, not unlike holly, and had to be the foulest thing I'd ever put between my lips.

The Temecuas never went to war without *cassine*. *Putain*, apparently they never did anything of any importance without its ritual consumption and purgative effects. Warriors and great men drank it to steel them for their tasks. The longer a man held it down the greater a warrior he was said to be. Few Indians and even fewer Frenchmen could stomach more than a few minutes before vomiting the vile concoction. Women prepared it. Men drank it. The women were smarter.

My stomach was roiling from the *cassine* I had downed and I was beginning to sweat and shake. Bourbon and Curran, who with me were the only non-Temecuas who shared in the ritual, were already retching along with a good number of the warriors destined to join our campaign.



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I was determined to hold the noxious stuff down as long as I could manage.

The Paracusi stood. He was near seven Paris feet tall. The tail of a Raccoon hung from his topknot and great disks protruded from his ears. A cape of eagle's feathers hung off his left shoulder and bands of pearls wreathed his right arm. Intricate patterns in blue shown on his face and chest. He took a great bowl in his hands and began to speak. The chief's body shook from the effects of the black drink. As he spoke he splashed his warriors with the water. I had not clue as to what he was doing but each time he drenched them the men shouted as if they'd struck a blow in battle.

Their infidel wizard, the Lewas Touppa, was the only one who seemed utterly unaffected by the *cassine*. He knelt next to me and smiled. "Cassine makes you strong. You will not need to eat until the Sun has gone to his bed twice." At the mention of food my stomach heaved and I had to fight to keep the bile down. *Mon Dieu*, this ruined my desire to eat for months.

He motioned for me to follow him out into the compound. He led me to his hut set a little apart from the rest. As I crawled through the door I noted small pots and bowls were set along the walls and a smudge fire was burning in the center of the room. He'd brought the club back to the village and had been chanting and mumbling over it most of the morning. Now cleaned, it rested on the pelt of some small spotted cat on one of the benches. Gesturing towards the weapon he spoke. "It has spoken to me. It told me it is the club of Nicoguada only his sons can wield it."

He fished a rawhide cord from a tangle of such things hung off the wall, using his talon like fingernails to pluck it from the mass. Indicating that I should sit near the fire, the Lewas knelt before the club. As reverently as a priest handling the sacrament he lifted it from its bier. Then he dropped cross legged to the ground. As I settled onto the floor, he placed the club across my legs.

"Son of Nicoguada, you will need strong magics to protect you if you are to carry Thunder's war club into battle. Take off your shirt. I will mark your skin so you will be a strong warrior." Most of the men's and not a few of the women's bodies were covered with markings. The color lay just under the skin. The higher a man's standing the more markings he had.

I did not want to offend the sorcerer, but neither was I thrilled with the idea of subjecting myself to some heathen ritual. "God protects me."

"But Thunder's war club is not of your God." He clucked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "Do not ask of him what he cannot give you." He pulled the shirt off my body, revealing my scared chest. Although his eyes followed their tracks, Touppa said nothing. Scars were respected as they marked your battles. Most of mine marked punishments.

The Lewas took the cord and wound it about my left forearm just below the joint. When he pulled, the fibers cut into my skin, and I hissed but did not flinch. I'd weathered greater pain in my life. It helped distract me from the clawing at my insides. As he worked on my skin he told me a story in halting French.

"This is how the club of Nicoguada, thunder, falcon warrior, came to the people. Men and women living in the sky, Nicoguada's people, once came out at night and traveled about. They came, here, to where there were land beings. They wanted some pumpkins belonging to the people, so they came out looking for them. They came out every night and then went back to the same place in the sky."

"When they told Thunder about this he was angry and he warned them not to eat the food of human beings. 'If you eat food belonging to human beings, you will have to remain among them.'"

Again Touppa wound the cord about my arm, this time a little lower down. He pulled and it bit into my skin. This time I flinched. He laughed and continued. "They replied, 'We will not eat their food; we only want to travel.'"

"But one woman ate some pumpkins in this country and had to stay here. She sat down while the rest went away and left her. She sat alone. When day came the people caught her. She continued to live with them.

"By and by she met a warrior and said to him, 'Comfort me.' And he did and they lived with the people for a while and she said to him, 'Let us go to see my uncle; he lives not far away. But, my father, Thunder, lives at a distance.' So they set out to see the girl's uncle."

Once again he cut me with the cord, now three channels wreathed my arm a finger's breadth apart. "When they got to the place he looked out and said, 'Oho, my niece, that is a good young man.' He said, 'Let the young man who has just come kill some ducks for me.' He gave him a strong cord. There were many ducks on the water, and, taking his strong cord, he dived under, reached them and, diving about, he tied up their

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feet and brought them back. While he was on the way and before he had gotten back the old man looked out and said, 'Oho, go back!' Then he went back and disappeared under the water for her uncle was a strong magician. Upon this his wife wept, ran to the water, jumped into it, and disappeared."

"She went weeping to him. Her husband could not get out but his wife came up, tied his clothes together, and carried them back. When she got to her house she wept all day. She wanted very much to see him and at night when she lay down to sleep she did not sleep much. During the day, while she was sitting down, she would think she saw a person coming but when she looked all around it was nothing. It was that way all of the time, until on the third day when she was lying down she dreamed that she should cook.

"She finished cooking and placed the food on the table, and sat looking down. She thought something in the shape of a man was coming but when she looked out nothing was there. That was the way it continued always until on the third day she thought a man had come. She looked around and her husband sat on the platform. When she saw that he had returned, she was very happy. And they ate together."

Into the first cut Tuoppa rubbed a fat mixed with charcoal, the middle red-ocher and the third a sulfurous compound. All three burned worse than the cutting had. If this is what he'd gone through to achieve the intricate colored designs wreathing his limbs and torso, *Mon Dieu*, I would have done without.

"The next day he said, 'Let us go to see your uncle.' He teased very hard until he persuaded her and they set out. They arrived at her uncle's house, he struck him, knocked him down with his war club, and killed him, and he flayed him. After he had flayed him he threw his bones into the water. His skin he carried down and filled with white tree moss, and when it was done hung it in the sunshine until it was dried. When it was completely dry he said to her, 'Let us go to visit your father.'

"They set out. He took the skin and went on and when they were nearly there he put on the skin of the old man and took a walking stick and his wife walked on ahead, laughing. When they got to the place her brothers looked at him and said, 'We thought your husband was a young man but he is a very old man.'

"'Is he not really a young man?' they kept saying to her. Her husband had charged her, however, to say that he was an old man. But always they kept asking.

"On the third day they said, 'Is he not a young man?'

"'Yes,' she said to them. Upon this he took off the skin and threw it away.

"After that his wife's brothers wanted to play ball and took him along to help them. And he said 'What shall we play for?'

"And they said 'We shall play for our father's war club.' When they began to play he stood helping them, but he did not want to catch the ball. By and by, when the other side had half won, he caught it and threw it a long distance. He kept throwing it in this way until his party won. Then he stopped and came back home.

"After that the man went back to the place from which he had first come. His wife wept and wanted to give him food for the journey but he refused it. He took only the war club and set out, and returned to the Temecuas. This was because she had let them know that he was a young man."

Through clenched teeth, "If it came to the Temecuas, how did the Apalachee get it?" It felt like my skin had been burned by a hot iron.

He wound a bit of hide about the new wounds and shrugged. "They stole it. But that is a story for another time."

"It's a pretty story," I was becoming light headed, but I had not vomited, "why are you telling it to me?"

"The sons of Nicoguada, those-who-live-anywhere, should know their stories. You have forgotten them living among the French."

*"Pardone?"*

He looked at me like I was a rather stupid child that he should have to explain these things to me. "Once, four women came to a dance at Utina, and danced half the night with the young men there, and nobody knew that they were those-who-live-anywhere, but thought them visitors from another village. When the moon was in the middle of the sky they left to go home, and some men who had come out from the walls to cool off watched to see which way they went. They saw the women go down the trail to the river, but just as they came to the water they disappeared, although it was a plain trail, with no place where they could hide.

"Sometimes you hear the drums in the river or at the rocks near the ocean that is the Children of Nicoguada dancing. They look like any other man or woman except that there is always something not the same as a person about them." He grabbed my ear, tugging at the tip. "Sometimes it is easy to see, and sometimes it is not."

## Twenty Eight

Our party set off in search of the enemy. It was the custom of all the savages of this land to wage war by surprise; either attacking in the cover of dark or at the break of day. To bring it to pass we were forced to travel at night and sleep by day, and to get there we would have to march leagues.

We, the French, were placed in front of the line; though we could not move as silently as our friends, the noise of our guns tended to create the most destruction when used at the fore. Should we be ambushed we could lose our shot and fall back into the arms of our friends.

All along the highways of the Indians, arrows had been stuck into the ground. At the ends of each, long strands of hair were fastened. Touppa declared that it was a certain sign of open war proclaimed. They wanted us to follow and fight. The strings danced in the wind tickling our legs and showing our way in a great fluttering avenue. We snapped each and every one as we passed.

Following the trace left by the Apalachees we wound through the wilderness. It seemed the land was covered in continuous forest, bottomed in swamps and morasses. Plains choked with brush tore at our clothes. As we passed through woods, turkey cocks and partridges flew from our steps. There were great stands of mulberry trees and in their branches nested infinite numbers of silkworms. They would drop and slide down the backs of our shirts when we least expected it. Often we slogged through marsh, sinking up to our knees in the snake and alligator infested waters. Leeches sucked on our blood, mouths fastened to inaccessible places on our bodies. Tiny mosquitoes gave us the worst fits, feasting on our skin as though it were a sacrament. The voices of stags, bears, leopards, and wolves dogged us.

This country was masterful in its horrifying beauty.

Curran never left my side. My *athore*, my second in command, he was always there to help me. *Comrades de guerre*, we slept on the bare ground next to each other. Furtive, secret touches passed between us. We

whispered our love of each other in code. When his hand grazed my hip, his breath slid across my neck I wanted him all the more.

We stole away once as the camp slept. The danger of discovery, the fever of impending battle, added heat to our passion.

Dappled sunlight filtered through the thick branches as Curran's lips coursed down my belly and sought me out. The rough bark of an ancient tree cut into my back as he knelt before me and took my length into his mouth. Pulling, licking, sucking, I watched his tongue travel along my shaft. I burned where his lips danced. He stroked himself, his hand moving in the rhythm of his mouth on my body. I could die under Curran's touch. My fingers wound into his black, black hair as I drove into the sweet heat.

My sight was blurring over under the blissful friction and my gaze drifted between the trees. Touppa stood watching. *Mon Dieu!* Then Curran swallowed me, unaware that we were undone, and a shudder coursed up my spine. The hot hard pull as he drew back, I closed my eyes and moaned. When I looked again the Lewas had gone.

My nerves were frosting over as he sucked down hard, pulling my orgasm from my body in the wake of his lips. I pushed his head back and coated his beautiful pale face with thick white ropes. Then I fell to the ground next to him and kissed him. Tasting my juices on his skin, my hand covered his as he stroked. I dropped my kiss to his head, slitting the tip with my tongue. He was steel under velvet. His breath was breaking hard as I sucked on him. "Mother Mary!" hissed from his lips as he filled my mouth with his salty sweet flavor.

I brought us together, the tastes of our seed mingling on our tongues. "Tell me, *mon amour*," I whispered into the kiss, "do you always pray when you make love?"

He laughed, "Aye."

"*Bon*, we'll need it, we were watched." He pulled back his black eyes wide with terror. The Church still burned sodomites.

"Jaysus," he swallowed the word, "who? One of the soldiers?"

I wiped my essence from his cheek. "*Non*. The sorcerer." Curran was trembling and I pulled him to me. If the Lewas were to remark without thinking it would not be good for us. "It will be fine." Thankfully it did not seem the Indian's way to care about such things. "We'll be fine."

Slipping back to camp, I noted that Touppa feigned sleep. Or perhaps he did sleep? Maybe I had imagined it? I told myself I had.

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But, as we broke camp that night, the sorcerer came and knelt next to us. He dropped a basket in Curran's lap. There was a hole in it. The Irishman picked it up and looked at Touppa quizzically. "You should mend it." The Temecuas threaded his French with a sly smile. Woman's work; he was teasing my lover. It had not been my imagination.

I couldn't help myself, I laughed. Shooting me an angry glare, Curran threw the basket into the trees and stalked off. Touppa shrugged.

No amount of apologies, no amount of cajoling could persuade Curran to risk discovery again. I was driven to distraction with the wanting of him.

It took days to reach the Apalachees. All of us were footsore and tired when we looked out of the woods upon them. Fields of mill and pumpkin spread out in a no man's land about the pallisaded village. The Temecuas ringed their towns with crude timber fences. This was a fortified city as good as many in France. Trees three times the height of a man were driven into the earth with barely a breath in between them. We'd be spotted long before we reached the walls.

As with any siege there were only three ways to breach a wall: over, under or through. And we had to reach it first. To divert their attention we set the fields aflame. A green brush fire in the early hours before dawn, the flames crept towards the wooden fort. Acrid smoke filled the morning sky. Hopefully, the fire would distract the defenders long enough for us to gain the wall and accomplish one of the three.

Alarms were raised. The shouts and yells carried out over the morning darkness. First they were suspicious. This was the time of day known for attack. Tense and wary, we waited. A few warriors ventured into the fields to inspect the situation. When no attack came, more came forth from the city. We skulked in the forest at the margins of the field relaying the plan of attack with whispers and signals. More voices took up the alarm and called the residents forth. The Apalachees began to battle the smoldering flames. With each passing moment their guard dropped a bit more. And still we waited. The ruddy streaks of the sun as it slipped above the horizon cut the sky. Women and children came into the field to help.

Now we attacked. The first volley of shot cleared ten of the enemy and signaled the charge. We broke forward from cover at a run howling as any savage might. Our friends jumped into the mêlée whooping with joy. A single scream of war is not soon forgotten. A hundred joining in

giving it voice, under the influence of the passions of battle, can be compared with no earthly sound.

Surprise and confusion overtook our foes as arrows and screams flew from all sides. The residents took flight. A scrambling mass of men, women and children bolted for the supposed haven of the forest. Many of the French and Temecuas lay in wait, slaughtering those who sought shelter there. However, a good number of the Apalachees evaded us. We lacked the forces to hunt them down.

I found myself beside the Provost and Curran. The three of us fought our way at a halting run towards the village. A red faced warrior charged us, his tomahawk raised high. Bourbon stepped into the charge and parried the blow by grabbing the Indian's wrist. He forced the man back and drove his sword through the Apalachee's chest pinning him to a tree. We left the corpse standing, gaping with hollow eyes at the blade. I tossed my rapier to the other Frenchman.

None would challenge me. I wielded the Club of Nicoguada. I guess the reputation of the Frenchman who could make Thunder's magic work had spread. A son of those-who-live-anywhere stalked the battle field. I thirsted for death.

If we came upon wounded we killed them. Once, as Curran leveled his gun, a warrior threw up his hand and shouted: "*Tena Miseria!*" which I supposed was a cry for quarter.

"I'll give yer misery." Curran mocked as he sent a bullet through the Indian's head.

The Temecuas archers provided protective fire for those of us charging the wall; shielding themselves as best they could from their counterparts on the ramparts. At the same time we assaulted heavy timber fortification ringing the village. Our friends attempted to set afire any combustibles they might reach within by tossing flaming brands over the walls. The scent of gunpowder and burning timber was thick in the air.

Given what the club had done to a man, I figured to try it against the wall. Curran stood on my left, Bourbon and the sergeant Antoine, who'd found us, on my right. As I worked they would step out and shoot at the defenders above. Then they threw themselves against the wall and reloaded. With each swing searing pain ripped through my lower arm but stopped dead at the marks given to me by Touppa. Rumbles from the throats of a thousand invisible cannon swelled about me. My hair was



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prickling with the charge. The shock of the blows knocked the Apalachees from their perches and drove me to my knees.

The timber cracked and buckled. The logs were scorched black. On the third attempt I succeeded in breaching the walls, the huge timbers dropping like Goliath felled by David's stone. We poured through the opening. The siege became a slaughter. Every man fought for his own hand, as best he might, with butts of guns, pistols, knives and swords.

As we fought our way into the village, the Irishman caught a rushing warrior with the butt of his musket and beat his head into the earth. Blood and brains splattered our legs. An old man sat wounded on the ground. Antoine, in passing, thrust through him with his sword. As he did, the ancient warrior ran through the soldier's gut with a spear. Both died on the same spot.

Within the walls was a scene of ruin and destruction. Many of the buildings were already consumed by smoldering flames and burning ashes. The pointed and thatched roofs extended almost to the ground, hiding short plastered walls. Rank weeds surrounded the homes and beaten tracks ran between them. The thatch and brush caught quickly and the embers from one conflagration sparked the next.

At the top of a small hillock stood a structure, it was far grander than the other huts. I guessed that it could hold a hundred men. About the perimeter knelt ten Christians, Spaniards by their dress, soldiers by their guns. Making toward the rise, we slipped from house-to-house, combating the resistance as we found it. The European *harquebusiers* peppered us with lead. The smoke, the confusion and the flaming Apalachees' huts gave us cover.

We ran from one shelter to the next, pausing only to fire and reload. I glimpsed other Frenchmen hiding behind cover shooting at whatever targets presented themselves. And each time I looked there were fewer defenders on the rise. Finally, their numbers reduced to fewer than half, abandoned by their allies and having nowhere to retreat, the Spaniards called for quarter. We shot them anyways.

I, accompanied by Bourbon, Curran and Wayon entered the center house, climbing over the bodies of the dead. The ground was fired yellow clay. Our heels echoed in the vacant hall. Dust and debris littered the floor. To my right, on a bench, lay the Spanish Captain.

Smiling as I walked towards him, "*Bonjour, mon ami*. It seems we have you to thank after all for all the unpleasantness of late."

"*Vaya el Diablo, Franceses*." He spat.

"I've already been to see him," I laughed and dropped my voice to almost a whisper, "he says he cannot wait to make your acquaintance. Shall we discuss our business outside where we will all be more comfortable?" I motioned for my compatriots to come forward and seize him.

At our approach he drew a pistol from beneath his body and fired. Throwing myself to the ground I avoided the slug. The ball caught Wayon in the arm. We three French had to hold the Temecuas back or he would have finished the Spaniard off then and there.

The fight in the village lasted but a few minutes, although several hours were required to finish off the dead and the dying. We worked our way through the village and field. Those who could walk were taken as slaves. Those who could not were killed. The bodies of men and animals lay one on top of another. It had been an orgy of killing and our friends were not yet sated.

The Apalachees chief lay where he had been pinned to the earth by the first volley of arrows. The Temecuas, eager to collect trophies, went to work while he still breathed. Wayon placed his foot between the blades of the man's back. Twisting his hand into the black topknot, he cut at the front of his skull and yanked. The scalp tore away. Still standing in the center of the dead man's back the Paracusi popped the joints at the shoulders and hacked through them with a stone ax. In a final act of desecration he shoved an arrow in the rectum of the corpse.

All the fallen were treated this way. There was such an abundance of dead and dying that after an hour they'd hardly made any progress. Finally we were called upon to lend our swords, far better implements for the work in hand. Steel could do the work of five stone knives. This was the way things were done in this land. If we had not acquiesced we would have fared no better than those we killed.

By the time the horror was finished the ground swelled with blood. Gore dripped from the tips of my fingers. It ran down my face in rivers, mixing with sweat and clogging my nose and mouth with its stench. A great pile of limbs rose in the forest. The new slaves would be forced to carry the reeking trophies back to the Temecuas village to be displayed on poles.

The Spaniard we hung. It was only fitting. Great persuasion was needed to keep the Temecuas from treating his body as they did the rest of their enemies. The slight to Wayon was deemed far greater than the ravages he'd visited on us. We, the French, settled on taking his head as

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proof the man was dead, but no more than that. The remainder of his corpse and those of the other Christian dead were buried in a shallow pit. None had time for any but the briefest prayers for even our own losses.

I had no great command of the Temecuas' language. Still, from what grumbles I heard, I could hazard they saw us as wasteful savages...unwilling to give sacrifice to their heathen gods. Touppa merely shook his head as he watched us slave with musket butts and swords to scratch a communal grave from the earth. So little we actually understood of each other.

While we labored, our friends set to work to loot the houses from which the occupants had been driven. Nothing escaped the raiders. No item was too small to avoid their attention. They cleaned out the village. Every man keeping for himself all he could lay his hands on.

One of the soldiers found me and said that they had discovered some Christian women and children among the slaves of the Apalachees. The Temecuas thought one might be my woman.

When I followed, I found Keiko cowering under a bench in one of the huts. She was as naked as any of them. A simple skirt of moss wound about her waist. I coaxed her from her hiding place and she fell into my arms, sobbing. The only thing I had to cover her with was my shirt. It was dyed red from the blood, but I offered it anyways.

Among the dead dragged to the center of the village was a young man. Touppa would let none touch his body and sat near it conversing as though the man still lived. When Keiko saw them, a scream tore from her throat. She rushed the dead man and began to savage his body with her fists and nails. The Lewas fell back shocked by the vicious attack. But he left her to it.

Coming to my side, he shook his head. "He was their Lewas. He took your woman for his wife. I don't think she liked him much." Keiko was driving her fists against the corpse's chest and screaming a torrent of her strange Scot's language. I don't think she liked him much at all. We stood and watched her vent her rage for the good part of an hour. Finally I had to drag her off the corpse and carry her from the Apalachees' town over my shoulder. We had to go or risk counterattack.

## Twenty Nine

Our retreat was dogged by what survivors there were. Small ambushes were set along our path. As we forded a marsh, warriors sprang from the trees and fired upon us. We fought waist deep in water or clambering onto the fallen skeletons of trees. Men on all sides fed the alligators that afternoon. Breaking through an avenue of trees grown so close one suspected the hand of man in their placement, they set upon us. Scouts had brought back the alarm, and so our guns were set for them. We traded shots and insults for near an hour. But soon their arrows were depleted. Having taken care to break those left in the trace, we left them no ready source of supply and they were forced to leave off.

Keiko clung to me. I could not take a breath without her presence. As she was clad only in my blood stiffened shirt her legs and feet were soon bloodied from the trek. I was forced to carry her over the more difficult portions of our passage. She would wrap her arms about my neck and bury her head into my naked chest as I struggled across the inhospitable terrain. And Curran watched us his dark eyes hardening against me with each passing day. It got so that I could hardly meet his gaze.

A tattered but triumphant army, we staggered into Fort Caroline nearly three weeks to the day from our departure. Hugs and tears greeted us for a second time. Keiko was removed to Le Comte's residence to recover, a near hysterical Meg at her side. I made my apologies as I could to Curran but things were not right between us.

From Wayon and Touppa, I begged the loan of slaves. The Paracusi gave me a pair of old men of Calousa decent whose loss would not be noted. They'd lived their lives and now waited to die. Into their hands we charged the head of the Spanish Captain. By now it crawled with flies and maggots. It would be almost unrecognizable by the time they reached their destination and so we added his helmet and rings to confirm his identity. Then we sent them south to deliver the message to the Governor of the Spanish-held territories. Once done, they would be

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free to make their way among their own tribe or the missions if they chose.

My marriage was presented to me as a *fait accompli*. The banns were posted, without my knowledge, upon our successful return. Dates were set. Plans were made. There was no one to voice objection. The women of Caroline were adamant that, with the horrors Keiko had been through, marriage was the best thing for her recovery. Le Comte had insisted in giving his blessing to the match.

I found I had little say in the decision. The matter was settled on DeGourgues's word. Everything would happen in short order. By Palm Sunday we would be husband and wife and installed. A number of the new habitants would go with me, several leagues north where there'd once been a small outpost. I was to reestablish it in the name of my patron. They were building "our" house on the lands I was to manage. We could even, with a little industry, manage to make the second harvest. Keiko was unusually compliant with everything and had been since we'd returned.

Then, weeks after our return she'd come to me and whispered that she was pregnant. She was so quiet now it scared me. The rage she had visited on the Apalachees sorcerer had drained her of all emotion. Her state should have inspired either terror or joy. There was no sign of either in her face or her voice as she gave me the news. Myself, I almost cried. And it wasn't that I didn't love Keiko, I did in my way, but I wasn't ready to be married or a father.

This, this was not what she needed either. With fair certainty I knew what had happened to her. I stood by her chair as she stared vacantly past me. The effort that it took for her to give me the news was draining, as I'm sure the effort just to get out of bed had been. There was only one thing I knew to do for her and so I did it.

*Mon Dieu, mon ami*, don't think me such a monster.

I knelt by her knee and told her. I told her things I had never willingly voiced another living soul. When I was small, I don't even remember how small, I had stopped talking...almost half a year. The effort was just more than I could bear. But then, one day, it wasn't as bad as the day before had been or the day before that. There were things she should expect, the fear, the nightmares and, even knowing that he was dead, the sense that he was always there. Mayhap the memories would never be gone. Some might swarm forth without warning and overcome

her. The most banal of occurrences, or sights or smells could give them life.

She should not listen to those interfering harridans, ever. They had no more clue as to what she needed than their husbands did. It was her right to choose the course of her life...well, neither of us could stop our union. But if it was her wish that we should be bound in name only, I would abide by her decision. A light touch to her arm brought her attention back to the here and now, "Keiko, remember what I once said to you? A woman, one as beautiful as yourself, will never lack for suitors." A red rimmed gaze crawled to meet my eye. "What you are in desperate need of is a friend. *Mon amour*, I would be so honored if I could be considered among the latter." Should she need to talk, I would listen. If what she craved was to just sit in silence, I could provide that. Were she to want to return home, I would support her as best I was able.

I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be with Curran and I couldn't be.

Now he was leaving. He and a few of the more adventuresome souls were headed into the wilderness. Trading, exploring, *Mon Dieu*, I wanted to go with him. We stood at the edge of the River of May as they loaded their *almadie* for the journey. First they were bound for Mathiaqua, almost thirty leagues up river. Then he and his men would head into Apalatci trading for furs and *sieroa pira*, the Indian's gold. If all went as planned they'd winter with tribes in the north and return the following spring.

I was distraught. My world was coming undone and I couldn't give voice to it. "Why?"

"I have to go." Curran was looking off in the distance, avoiding looking at me.

Abandoned...he said he would not abandon me. "In Dieppe you said you wouldn't leave me." But he was.

"I said I wouldn't leave yer as long as yer didn't cheese me off." Still avoiding me he checked and rechecked the provisions.

"And I've made you mad?"

"Naw." He drew near me then and put his hand on my shoulder. "I just have to think on things for a wee bit. I need to do that."

I embraced him. Not like I wanted to, but like old friends can. "You'll come back? Promise me that."

"Aye, I'll come back. Canny promise I'll stay, but I'll come back." And then he left me. I stayed on the bank of the river until the sky had

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gone black and the moon was high. The faint drumming of Nicouada's children at their dancing drifted in from the distant shore.

A light hand on my arm started me. Keiko, Mary, stood at my side. I rested my head on her hip and she stroked my hair. She had not suffered such a touch from myself, or any other, since her return to us. I did want her. I did love her. I loved them both beyond measure. Why must it be that I couldn't have both? Gaining my feet, I took her hand. "Come, *mon amour*, we should get you back to Caroline."

Keiko hesitated. "How long will he be gone?"

"Quite a while." My gaze drifted down the river. I don't know what I expected to see, I know what I wanted to see.

Subtle pressure from her hands as they rested on my chest drew my attention back to Keiko. "Do you think that he will make it back?"

I slid my arms around her waist. "*Oui*, someday." I kissed her forehead. "Until then you'll comfort me, *no*?"

"Aye." Her lips touched mine.

As I predicted, every day passed a bit better than the last. Although life became grim once again near mid summer when she lost the child she was carrying. It was a horrible blow to both of us. I had come to think that a family was, perhaps, not such a bad lot. In some ways I knew Keiko was relieved. There had been no way for her to know whether it was mine or his. Not that she ever would admit as much but the thought that she might be reminded of that time by looking in a child's face had terrified her. Also, after time, she was ready for other things and I was as gentle as I could manage.

Did she inspire the passion in me she once had? *Oui*, sometimes. I still loved her, just not in the way I thought I had. Was I the man she once thought me? I think she realized not. But she, in all things, was stronger than I ever imagined she could be. I could not have respected her more for it. And in an age of arranged marriages both of us could have done far worse than to be wedded to someone who we could call a true friend.

It was ironic that the one thing I had detested so as a youth was what I found myself engaged in now. And damn it all if I wasn't still a good farmer. We'd made a first thin harvest and a second that faired much better. Starvation would not set on us. We could even put some by for the future. I'd walk the fertile fields with my tenants and wonder where Curran was and what adventures he'd found. And Keiko, bless her, would

find me staring out towards the forest and kiss my cheek, reminding me that he had promised to come back.

Near spring, or as much of spring as this place seem to support, a large cat set upon our stock. Spoor was found far closer to our little village than any one of us was comfortable with. As the lord it was my duty to remedy the problem. At least I'd become fair at hunting. *Mon Dieu*, one had to in La Florida if you wanted meat on your table.

The clue to tracking any animal; if one comes across anything unusual, like a fallen tree or a crossing of paths, you must take a few moments and really study. Touppa was my school master in this. Reminding me, as he was wont to say, of things I should already know. The wilds were naught but a foreign country and one needs merely learn the language.

Blackened fingers of a lightning struck tree jutted from a clearing. Unusual and thus it suffered consideration. My inspection was rewarded with furrows etched by claws into the bark. More searching, more finds; a marshy puddle rimmed by the print of a big cat, the scrape around its scat, and the pungent aroma of lion piss. A hundred small events indicative of the wild presence I hunted.

Following a wildlife trail through the woods, a tawny coat caught my eye. At first I hazarded it might be a deer. They were most common, but they also would attract that which I sought. I lay low in the ferns to watch. Then she moved. Graceful undulations of pure muscle rippled beneath her coat. I knew it was my lion.

I raised my petronel to my shoulder; a lighter weapon than a musket, much more useful for hunting. Sighting down the barrel as best I could, my finger sprang the lock. A sputter as the match hit the pan. I swallowed. *Putain*, the match had gone out when the lock snapped.

The hiss and snap drew her attention. Amber eyes rose up and locked on mine. Feral intelligence glared across the marsh at me. If I hunted her, then she too hunted the likes of me. Men were not so prevalent in these lands that predators did not think them just another potential meal. Her rump rolled and her haunches bunched for the spring. Two breaths left my lungs. Scrambling, churning the forest floor I tried to escape. One bound and then another and I could see the pink at the back of her throat. I dug for the knife at my side. The cat or I, one of us would be dead. She leapt, paws splayed wide. A loud crack sounded over my shoulder. The beast dropped lifeless not a Paris foot from me.

Who had come? Who felled my attacker and saved my life?



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Scrambling to my knees, casting about, I saw him. A warrior with scalp half shaved and a brass disk in his left ear lowered his musket. Dappled forest light made sun-darkened skin appear lighter than that of the Temecuas I was familiar with and hid the contours of his face. A sleeveless shirt of buckskin dressed black and touched with red fell to his hips. Under that hung a knee length breech clout and leggings, both in shades of red and black. Chains of copper beads and smooth bones draped his neck. Cold, dark eyes stared out at me. Cautiously I stood, giving the customary greeting of our nearest neighbors, "*Antipola Bonassou, Amy.*" Many tribal kingdoms came for trade here. It was best to welcome them as friends until you knew different.

Silence answered me. The knife was still clutched in my hand. To prove I was no threat, I slid it back into its sheath. More silence, more studying and then a bright grin broke across the man's face. "Are yer thinkin' I've forgotten all me French in the space of a few seasons then." *Mon Dieu*, Curran!

I ran to him, catching him up in a bear of a hug. "*Putain*, look at you." He tried to step back. I refused to let go. Laughing, we tumbled to the ground like a pair of boys. Joy like this had rarely been part of my life. I lacked the words to even speak it, tell him what it meant to me that he'd returned. All I could do when we'd found our composure again was kneel before him and touch him; his face, where his scalp was shaved, the small disk in his ear. "What has happened to you?"

"Too many things to be telling right now." Braced back on his elbows, legs stretched out before him, Curran did not shrink from my touch. One hand came forth to pluck a lacy branch of fern from my hair. Twirling it between his fingers, he sighed. "Enough of them, though, that I've had time to think about you," another, deeper sigh, "and decide some things."

Hope lived and died in a thousand angels' heartbeats. I could barely bring voice to my question. "And you've decided?" Breathless, I waited.

Black eyes rolled to heaven and then came back to meet my gaze. "I love yer miserable self." Almost as overcome as I, Curran could hardly find the words he needed. "I could hardly stand the missing of yer. Ah, Jules, this world is not a fit place to be if yer not in it with me."

I took his face in my hands. The warmth of his skin under my touch, those beautiful, midnight eyes, *Mon Dieu*, how I loved him. "*Mon amour*, don't ever leave me again."

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He snorted. "Not unless yer cheese me off." We'd played this conversation before.

"That would be," I found myself laughing as well, "tomorrow then."

One strong hand slid under my hair the other along my hip as he pulled me to him. "The 'morrow," his words trembled across my lips, "for sure."

## About the Author

James Buchanan is a multi-published author of homoerotic romance. James grew up in a small Southwestern town, hours away from any other small Southwestern towns. A stint at the State University, where he ostensibly majored in English, garnered him a degree useful for being someone's secretary. The absolute lack of employment opportunities led James to Southern California. After a stint in County Mental Health (administration, not client) he ran screaming into the field of Law. James has been practicing for nine years and someday he might even get it right.

Visit James at <http://www.james-buchanan.com> for more information on his books.

James Buchanan

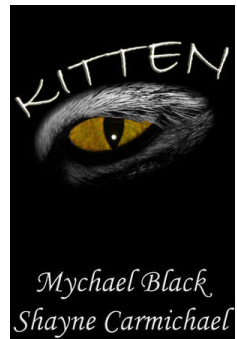
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