



Cullen's Captive

Danielle Devon

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Chapter One

There was nothing she despised more than watching her sister and her new husband fuss all over each other. Adianna might thrive on her husband's attentiveness and live for his affections but Isadel had no room in her life for love or the obligations of a wife. Isadel had had enough of duties and crowns. All she desired was freedom. The sweetness of escape ... to no longer live in the shadow of her perfect sister and her role as second daughter to the throne of Anista.

Across the great spans of the Savin Sea, she knew she could lose herself. The country of Malagon claimed most of the northeastern tip of Triel, and it was there that she could escape the influence of her family in Anista and Easton. To be free of their rule, their obligations, and live the life of her own choosing.

A soft knock at her chamber door disturbed her thoughts. More than a little annoyed at the interruption, Isadel bellowed out a gruff, "Come in."

The door creaked open and her sister entered her room. Her silk gown trailed along behind her, quietly shushing with the rhythm of her stride. Despite the chill in the air from the approaching winter, Adianna had twisted her heavy golden hair into a pile of delicate curls upon her head, leaving her neck bare and free.

Isadel turned back toward the mirror at her dressing table, picked up the silver comb and ran it through her heavy dark locks. As if being born an afterthought was not enough she'd been born with dark hair, dark eyes and a darker complexion than her sister. In Anista, a land home to fair-skinned, golden beauties, her darkness was truly a flaw and a curse. She dropped the comb on the table, disgusted with her own reflection. "What is it, Adianna?"

"We requested you join the family for supper ages ago."

Isadel looked from her own reflection in the mirror to that of her golden sister. Beneath her gown, her belly was swollen with child. An heir to the Easton crown. Could her sister's life have been any more of a fairy tale? Isadel looked away. "I've no appetite."

Adianna stepped forward and placed her hand on her sister's shoulder. "You cannot keep shut away in this room, Isadel. There is a whole world beyond this castle and family who loves you beyond this room."

Isadel slid out from under her sister's grasp. How could Adianna even begin to understand how she felt? Her sister had always been content to call Anista and now Easton home. She may have spoken of other lands but she had no desire to see them. She had no desire to venture beyond their borders to explore the world at hand. No, her sister could never understand. She had never felt the way Isadel did ... like she was suffocating. Drowning in a sea of her own discontent. Isadel felt she didn't matter here any more than she'd mattered at home. Why had she let her father talk her into staying behind with her sister? She was never more alone than when she was living beneath the shadows of her perfect sister. "I said I've no appetite, now please leave."

Adianna let out a deep breath as that familiar flush of disappointment seeped into her sapphire eyes. Isadel felt a quick jab of regret, but it was fleeting. She started to speak though she had no idea what to say. Her sister spoke before she had the chance. "I shall

have Shala bring you a plate should you change your mind.”

Isadel said nothing as she watched her sister slip beyond the door and close it quietly behind her. Isadel stared at the wooden door, her gaze lingering over the iron hinges to the latch. She thought of going after her, perhaps saying something more, but she didn’t move. She trusted that her sister knew she loved her and would carry that thought with her... even when she was gone.

* * * *

Isadel bid no goodbyes but left a letter of intention. She only hoped that when her sister found it, she would understand why she had to leave to find a life of her own. Under the faint light of the twin moons, Isadel mounted her massive black stallion. With nothing more than a few belongings tucked away in her leather satchel, she kicked the horse into motion and thundered away from the towering castle of Easton.

She rode ’til early morning, stopping only long enough to give the stallion a brief rest, some water and a few blades of dew-covered grass. By the time the first rays of sunlight began to slip over the land she had reached the wayward town of Holly Bluff, a place not near as warming as its name. She trotted Majesty into the sleepy town, reined him to a halt outside the Fox Den Tavern and dismounted. She quickly wrapped the reins about the hitching post, tossed her satchel over her shoulder and pushed past the tavern doors.

Inside, the narrow room housed a few sparse tables, a battered old bar and a rickety staircase that led to the rooms above. It was dimly lit by candle sconces that hung from wooden walls. The few patrons of the tavern turned to gaze upon her as she entered and headed toward the bar. She cast a cagey glance at two scruffy old men who looked as if they hadn’t bathed in months. Their ravenous gazes poured over every inch of her body, settling on the lush mound of breast beneath the linen shirt she’d taken from Rydon. No doubt she was a ludicrous sight in her man’s attire, but she had no intentions of riding all night in a gown of silk and lace.

The boy’s leather boots she’d bought from the clothier thudded against the wooden plank floor with every step she took. They were much heavier than her satin slippers and she walked awkwardly within them. The sound of her footfall echoed through the silent room, drawing even more attention to her presence.

She reached the bar and met the gaze of the burly barkeep. He tossed his rag over his shoulder and leaned forward, his thick hairy forearms resting on the counter. Isadel cast a gaze from him to the bar wench cuddled up in the corner on the lap of some scoundrel. She shot an ice-edged glare at Isadel then went back to biting the man’s earlobe.

For one brief, heart-pounding moment, Isadel thought that perhaps she’d made a mistake. But all she had to do was envision the life she sought and every grain of doubt was washed away like the sands at high tide. She straightened, lifting her chin proudly as she greeted the grubby barkeep. “I shall need a room for myself and stable for my horse.”

A gritty, crooked smile rose on the barkeep’s lips. “You’ve money?”

Isadel unlatched the small leather purse she’d secured about her waist. She retrieved two gold coins and dropped them onto the bar. They clattered against the wood then lay silent and still, glinting under the pale light of the lantern. The barkeep let them lie, his gaze never faltering from Isadel as he called out the bar wench. “Fetch a lamp for our guest, Bibby.”

The redheaded woman shot another loathing glance at Isadel then rose to do his bidding. She swept past Isadel, grabbed an oil lamp from behind the bar and lit it. "This way," she said as she headed for the stairs.

Isadel followed, making her way up the narrow staircase. There were but four doors at the top of the stairs. All were open save one. Bibby led her to the closest open door. They stepped inside an alcove of a room. It had nothing more than a rickety bed and a side table. Bibby all but dropped the lamp on the table, and then turned to leave.

"What of my horse?"

Bibby propped her hands upon her shapely hips. Her breasts, exposed near to the nipple, heaved under her laced corset. "Abas tends to the animals."

"He will have hay and fresh water?"

She gave a goaded snort. "No, we shall feed him fresh pork and a stein of our finest ale." With that, Bibby turned and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

Isadel yanked the heavy drape over the small cutout that was meant to serve as a window. The sun was beginning to warm the day and chase away the last shadows of night.

She set her satchel down beside the bed and yanked off her boots. Though she'd not walked much during her journey, her feet ached from the stiff leathers she was unaccustomed to. She slipped under the coarse blanket and rested her head on the lumpy down-filled pillow. It was a far cry from the luxurious mounds of satin and silks of the palace beds, but it was a bed nonetheless. And as her eyes fell closed she had one last lingering thought before her dreams took her away ... she was finally free.

Chapter Two

The door flew back, slamming against its hinges as Cullen stumbled into the tavern. He fell against the door, took a moment to regain his balance then staggered towards the bar. The room was spinning and a fire was burning deep in the pit of his belly, though it dulled in comparison to the ache that throbbed in his breeches. "Where's my Bibby?" he called out to Abas through a slur of words.

"Imagine she's sleeping. You going to disturb my best wench, you old dog?" Abas joked through a wide, toothy grin.

"I plan on doing more than that," he shot back as he turned and headed for the stairs.

"Cullen," the barkeep called out.

Cullen whirled about, would have toppled over if he hadn't caught himself on the chair. "Yes'ir."

"Coins," Abas reminded him.

Cullen dug two gold coins from his pocket and flicked them across the room. One landed on the bar, the other clattered to the floor and rolled away. Abas merely shook his head and bent down to retrieve the coin as Cullen stumbled up the stairs.

Cullen ran into the wall, then leaned up against the door and drew in a deep breath. He cursed himself silently, wishing he hadn't drunk that last pint of ale at the card game, as it might inhibit his visit with Bibby. But he'd cleaned up, held a pocket full of coin and a pant-full of manhood so he wasn't about to complain. He blinked his eyes against the dizziness in his head and took a moment to right himself. With as much composure as he could muster, he opened the door and slipped inside the dimly lit room.

She was sleeping soundly. He could see nothing more than the soft rise and fall of the blanket. He crossed the narrow room, kicked off of his boots and quietly slipped into bed beside her. He nuzzled up against her, draping his arm about her and pulling her close so that he could breathe in the fragrance of her hair. He inhaled deeply. Perhaps it was because he was drunk or because it had been so long since he'd shared her bed but he never remembered her smelling quite so good.

He pressed this throbbing member against her, nudging it in a soft demand against her backside. She gave a light, breathless moan that had the butterflies fluttering to life within his stomach and the ache burning deeper in his groin. He pushed back the soft tendrils of hair and softly traced a line of kisses along the slope of her neck.

Again she moaned, stirring slightly in her sleep. She was still clothed, in odd attire no less, but his hand found the soft swell of her breast. He fumbled with the buttons, and then managed to slip his fingers beneath the soft linen. She exhaled a deep breath as his forefinger traced over her nipple. He gave it a little squeeze, rolling it between his finger and thumb. He whispered softly into her ear, "Miss me?"

She shot straight up in bed, nearly ripping his hand off as it caught in her shirt. A gut-wrenching screech rang from her throat, echoing throughout the dim room. It was at that point he laid eyes on the most breathtaking raven-haired beauty he'd ever seen. Before he could utter a word, she shoved him out of the bed and he fell with a hard thud to the floor. She yanked a dagger from beneath her pillow, pointed it at him so that the razor edge of the steel blade was just inches from his face.

“Get out! Get out!” she screamed repeatedly. She scrambled out of the bed, the dagger still jutting dangerously into the air. Realizing that her shirt lay half open and one mound of soft silky breast was exposed, she jerked the blanket from the bed and dragged it over her body. “I shall have you arrested for this!”

Cullen scrambled up from the floor, stunned just as much by her beauty as her outburst. He yanked down the hem of his shirt, trying to cover the bulge in his breeches that refused to yield. “Forgive me, my lady, I thought you were someone else.”

“I’ll bet,” she retorted with a sneer. “Do I look like a common whore to you?”

Despite the raging fire in her emerald eyes, he couldn’t help but take a moment to drink in the waters of her beauty. Her long dark hair cascaded down to her waist in a series of long, soft waves. He could think of nothing more than burying his fingers in those silky tresses. The smell, that fragrant, floral scent was burned into his senses.

She wore a man’s linen shirt, which was now partially unbuttoned and sliding down her arm, revealing a smooth slope of shoulder. The rest of her was hidden behind the blanket she clutched. But he could very clearly imagine what lay behind that cloth buffer. She had backed away from him; put purposeful distance between herself and the cad who had violated her in her sleep. It was then that a wave of shame washed over him. “My apologies, my lady, I was mistaken.”

There came a knock at the door, drawing their attention. When neither gave a response, the door creaked open. Abas poked his head in through the door then gave a disheartened sigh. “Cullen, you drunk dog, you’ve the wrong room.”

Cullen couldn’t take his eyes off the beauty before him, but he cocked his head and mumbled in agreement, “I am well aware of that.”

Her blazing gaze remained steady and stern. “I believe you want the next door down.”

He could do no more than nod. Her voice was soft and sultry, like the whisper of winds through the trees. The sound of it sent chills dancing over his skin as a strange wrenching plagued his gut. His response to her was strong and sudden, completely consuming. He’d never before had such a powerful and undeniable response to any woman.

Abas pushed past the door and slung his arm over Cullen’s shoulders. “Come along, old friend.” He gave her a nod. “Apologies, my lady, won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t,” she shot back as Abas nudged Cullen out the door.

Abas nodded towards the latch on the door. “You might use this next time.” Abas shut the door behind them, leaving the dark beauty alone to brood in her room. He led Cullen across the narrow hall and plopped him down on the bed in the empty room.

Cullen looked up at his old friend. “Who is she?”

Abas nudged Cullen so that he fell back upon the bed. He pulled the blanket up over his friend. “Just a passerby.”

“I must know her name.”

Abas shook his head. “Get some rest.”

Cullen glanced out the window as the last bit of energy slipped from his body. The sun had risen now and seemed impossibly bright. He closed his eyes against it and let his head sink fully into the pillow.

* * * *

She should have felt utterly violated. She should have been furious. She should have shoved her dagger into the soft flesh of his thigh. All the things she should have done and should have felt were pointless, as she didn't feel any of those things. Instead, Isadel felt a soft, subtle throb between her legs. She was no stranger to the feeling, was well aware of how a simple touch in the just the right spot could send shivers running rampant throughout her body. Just because she was not wed did not mean that her body didn't ache. That she didn't have needs or desires. Though she'd never speak of it, she'd often pleased herself in the solace of her bath or sought out the attentions of a handsome young stableman. Unlike her innocent sister, Isadel had experienced lovemaking with a handful of carefully chosen, willing young men.

But it had always been her to initiate the encounters. She who sought out the affections of suitable young men she could trust to keep their meetings secret. Never before had she been the prey of some randy, handsome stranger. She was half excited, half repulsed by his behavior. Of course, she couldn't be sure that the repulsed part didn't have something to do with the fact that it had been Bibby he'd been after.

Isadel slipped back into bed, though she couldn't fall asleep. He was handsome indeed. Dark and rugged, far more attractive than any man she'd bedded. She could clearly trace the hard, angled lines of his face within her mind's eye. Those dark hungry eyes that burned with a desire she'd never before seen. That yearning bulge of manhood he'd so demandingly pressed against her. The long, lean lines of his body. Even now she felt her body tighten in response.

And how was she to sleep now, with her body tied in knots from that sharp, intense desire? She'd heard the door open and close across the hall. She assumed the barkeep had put him to bed. She gave a fleeting thought to going to him, finishing what he had started. A sly little smile slipped over her lips. What thoughts these were for a princess. For if her father or sister knew the thoughts she entertained she'd have surely found herself in a chastity belt.

But she was no longer under the ever watchful eye of her family. She was free. Free to do as she pleased. And maybe this was just the thing she needed to begin her new life. One wild, mindless moment in the arms of a man she'd never met.

Chapter Three

Cullen was roused from a deep, dreamless slumber by a soft hand upon his arm. There was a pounding in his head and a blur in his eye so that he could neither think nor focus. And for a moment he thought he was dreaming. But he wasn't and she was there. She was nude, except for the man's shirt that slipped off her shoulder and fell alarmingly short at her thigh, giving him a hint of delicious, dangerous flesh.

He could clearly trace the gentle curves of her body under the morning's light. She was breathtakingly beautiful as she stood staring down at him with a yearning burning bright in those mesmerizing eyes. She took a step forward and then parted her lips so that he caught the flash of moist pink tongue. "A real man should finish what he starts."

Her breath was heavy and her words came out with a slow, sensual rhythm that crawled beneath his skin and sent his heart pounding. He said nothing, as he feared he had neither the words nor the voice to speak. Instead, he pulled back the blanket, an unspoken invitation that she silently accepted.

She slipped into bed beside him, pressed her taut body against his. He could feel every muscle in his body scream to life as the blood rushed fast and furious through his veins. Her soft floral scent filled the air between them, affecting his senses so that he could barely breathe. She lay on her side, her face just inches from his as she stared into his eyes. She said nothing, but inched forward, softly brushing her lips across his.

It was maddening. A slow, sexy movement, so light that it was barely a kiss at all. His body tensed fiercely, his nerves alive at every ending. He reached out, buried his fingers in her thick, silky mane and dragged her lips to his. Her lips parted, eagerly offering as her tongue darted inside his mouth. She tasted as good as she smelled and he lost himself within her. In a maddening whirl of raw-edged desire, they grabbed at each other, taking and biting so that both cried out with desperate need.

He slipped his hand between her thighs, touched the bush of curls and then slipped a finger inside her. She was warm and wet, a luscious mixture that delighted his senses. She arched in response, nipped at his ear then breathlessly whispered, "Take me now."

She slid her hand down between them, trailing it slowly over his chest, down his stomach to settle softly on the tuft of hair between his legs. And just as she wrapped one slender finger after another about his manhood, he jerked away. He tumbled from the bed and landed in a heavy thud on the floor. In the half light of morning, he was sure his shame was visible to her, both on his face and on his limp member.

Her gaze swept over his face then rested on the hand that fell protectively between his thighs. A small, almost playful smile curved on her lush lips. She shrugged, gave a heavy sigh and rose from the bed. "'Tis late, or rather early and I should be getting along."

He said nothing as he watched her walk toward the door. A thousand responses raced through his head, but he could utter none. The ale still rushed vigorously though his body and he was powerless to stop the swimming in his head or the sickness in his stomach. Why, in the name of all that was sacred had he drunk so much?

Her hand rose to the door handle, and as she slipped those curious fingers around the cold metal she tossed a quick glance back over her shoulder. He was sure it was a smirk

and not a smile that rose on her lips. "Good day, sir."

As she closed the door behind her and left him alone with his shame, he bowed his head into his knees. He'd do nothing before finding her and whipping that smirk off her face... this he vowed to them both. But first, he needed a few hours sleep.

* * * *

"Pardon the intrusion last night, my lady." Abas gave her a nod as she came down the stairs later that morning. He had a set of pewter mugs lined along the bar and was carefully wiping each one down with the rag in his hand, as if they were precious heirlooms rather than steins from which thirsty travelers drank.

"All's forgiven, sir." She cast a glance about the barren tavern and decided to sit at the bar. She needed a little company this morning. After the night she'd had she needed something to take her mind off things, if even for a few moments. "May I have a mug of Genja tea, please?"

"Something to eat with that?"

Isadel nodded and he slipped a piece of bread and a steaming mug of hot Genja tea in front of her. "Thank you."

"Bibby should be back shortly with some fresh eggs."

"That would be lovely, thank you." They sat in silence for several long moments. He worked the rag over each and every mug while she tore off small bites of bread, sipped tea and watched him. He worked with a confident, gentle hand ... like the hands one might use with a lover. Of course, not any lover she'd know as of late. Now, why did she have to go and think about that? She was trying to get the memory and the image of her brief but disappointing encounter out her mind.

She was thankful when Abas broke the silence between them. "Where is a nice young lady like yourself headed off to, and without an escort I might add?"

Isadel gave a faint little smile. That was so like a man, to think that she should not venture beyond the threshold of her home without a proper escort to accompany her. That was one of the many things she was eager to leave behind. After all, why shouldn't a women be allowed go where she pleased, whenever she pleased without being hunted like a fox? "I'm headed to Willow's Cove to charter a boat."

He cocked an eyebrow at her answer and for a brief moment she wondered if she'd said too much. What if her father or her sister came looking for her? What if Rydon sent the guard out to bring her home? Surely they would have noticed by now that she had gone. Why, the guards could be on their way that very moment. She supposed it made no difference. For soon she'd be on a boat to Triel and to the new life that awaited her.

"And where, may I ask, is this boat to take you?"

She gave him a wide, flirty grin. "Away."

A slow, knowing smile rose on his thin lips. He slipped her another small loaf of bread. "For your journey."

"Thank you, sir. Please ready my horse, I wish to leave immediately."

"What of your eggs?"

"I shall pass this morning." The thought of the guards that could very well be on her heels set her heart to pounding and she was eager to be on her way. She would feel much safer once she'd set sail. Isadel retrieved a single gold coin from her purse and set it on the counter before him. "Thank you, sir."

He took the gold piece, slipped it into his pocket and tossed his rag on the counter.
“I’ll meet you out front with your steed in a moment.”

Chapter Four

A cursed clatter of dishware and Abas' hollering woke him much too early that morning. Cullen slowly opened his eyes, barely able to think beyond the pounding in his head. The sun streaked into the room, so bright that he felt as if he was going blind. He buried his head under the pillow and wished for sleep to take him away.

Another crash echoed out through the tiny tavern, followed by a gruff bellow and a curse. Cullen shot up in bed and chucked the pillow at the door with all of his might. He immediately wished he hadn't, for the pounding in his head grew fiercely painful. He flopped back into the bed and yanked the blanket up over his head. It was then he smelled her, that soft hint of flowers and that faint, but distinct mix of her arousal. It hit him then and he remembered everything with a crystal clarity that made his mind ache.

Damn, he wished it had been a dream. A bad dream, but a dream nonetheless. But it had been real, she'd been real. There was no denying the scent of her on his skin, the lingering taste of her on his lips. Even he did not dream in such vivid detail. He let out a loud groan and threw the blanket off his body. He had to find her. He wasn't sure what he going to do when he found her... short of making her toes curl and her breath labor.

He rose from the bed, taking a moment to right himself and gain his balance before dragging on his breeches. Though his wardrobe was in disarray, he stumbled down the stairs and flopped onto a barstool.

Abas was coming in through the front door as Cullen dropped his head onto the counter. He gave a small groan that was nearly a whimper. What had he done? He knew exactly what he'd done. He'd drunk himself stupid, tried to mount the wrong woman, then gone limp in the hands of the most beautiful creature he'd ever laid eyes on. He was a dog. Nothing but a ragged old dog.

Abas slid a mug in front of him. Cullen lifted his head slightly and sniffed at the mug. He wrinkled his nose and turned away in disgust. "Are you trying to poison me?"

"Cures what ails you. Drink up."

"I'd rather suffer."

"Suit yourself. But you can't very well go chasing that dark haired beauty with your head a-pounding."

Cullen glanced up at his old friend and wrinkled his forehead in a frown. "What are you talking about?"

Abas leaned in, rested his forearms on the counter and whispered though there was no one around to hear him. "It's a small tavern, Cullen, an even smaller inn. Nothing here goes unheard or unseen."

Cullen dropped his head back on to the counter. Wonderful, just what he needed. An entire town knowing about his performance, or rather lack thereof. And yes, the entire town would know, because if Abas knew, then Bibby would know and if Bibby knew, everyone within twenty lengths of town knew. That's just the way it went. Abas could keep a secret from everyone but Bibby. Bibby couldn't keep a secret from anyone.

"You could have me hung."

"I could, but I won't."

Cullen looked back up into the gray-blue eyes of his friend. He thought back,

considered a moment. "What makes you think I'll go after her?"

Abas straightened, picked up his rag and a mug and began polishing, just as he did each day. "I've never known you to leave anything undone."

"Undone? Who's to say it's undone?" When Abas cocked an eyebrow and gave a little smile, Cullen nodded. "I know, I know, everyone. Just drank too much is all."

"She left only a little bit ago."

"Those were her hooves I heard thundering out of town?"

Abas nodded then pushed the mug closer to Cullen. "Might still catch her."

There was a part of him that hated that Abas, or anyone for that matter, could know him so well. He was a lone soul, a thief of the night with no ties. As with ties came trouble and with trouble came the end of a rather fruitful career. But deep down he admitted that there was also a comfort to knowing that someone, if only a lonely old barman, truly knew him. Not the him that he pretended to be while picking the pocket of some young fop or the him he pretended to be while attending a ball in search of the perfect lady prize. But him, the real Cullen. The thief, the loner, the dog. But Abas was right, Cullen would go after her because he could not leave things undone. She was like a jewel that had slipped through his fingers and he could not let it go. He picked up the mug of Abas' smelly concoction and downed it in one, disgusting gulp.

He slammed the mug back down on the counter and hoped the miracle cure worked as well as Abas claimed, for he had a raven to catch. "Where was she headed?"

"Willow's Cove, I've already saddled my horse. See that this one makes it back to me."

Cullen gave a wicked grin. He was beginning to feel better already. He didn't know if it was the drink, the thrill of the chase or the thought of the prize, but he was humming with excitement. There was but one thing left to do... mount his steed and find the woman.

* * * *

"I have coins, I can pay you your rate and then some," Isadel pleaded with the burly ship's captain. There was but one thing standing between her and her future and his name was Captain Sully.

"Smart little ladies don't go around 'nouncing they have coins. And I told you, we don't take passengers, especially not little ladies without escort."

Frustrated and tired from the long, sleepless night, Isadel wanted nothing more than to board a ship, set sail for Triel and sleep through the journey. Of course she couldn't sleep through a two week voyage but if she couldn't convince old Sully to take her, she'd never get the chance to try. She couldn't believe that this old goat was going to keep her from her freedom. "I must reach Triel, I'm desperate."

"No passengers," he repeated. He turned to leave but she caught him by the arm. The hard lines around Sully's eyes softened as he watched the tear trickle down her cheek.

"Please, Captain. I'll do anything, anything. I must get to Triel." She gave a little shudder and drew in a ragged breath as if she were holding back a flood of tears. It was a trick she'd learned early on and it worked wonders on men. Especially the big, burly, soft-hearted type like old Captain Sully.

He let out a sigh as if her tears had left him little choice. "Alright, lady. I'll take you to Triel but on one condition."

“Anything, anything,” she rejoiced.

“Find an escort. I ain’t a gonna be responsible for your virtue on a ship full of lonely old sea-dogs. And I ain’t a gonna be responsible to the guard neither for taking a lady passenger without proper escort.”

Isadel felt her hope, like the breath in her throat slip away. She wanted to kick and scream and curse about the unfairness of their world, but she knew it would do her little good. Instead she let out a heavy sigh. “Alright, Captain, we have a deal. You shall take me to Triel and I shall find an escort to accompany me.”

Captain Sully gave a nod. “We set sail at noon.”

“Aye, Captain,” she said with a slight nod of her own. Well, that was settled. Now there was just one problem remaining. Where in the world was she going to find an escort?

Chapter Five

He hadn't needed to look far to find her. She was standing at the docks beside her black stallion, lovingly stroking his neck in long, slow caresses. Her eyes were cast downward as if she was lost in poignant thought. She'd pulled her dark hair back into one long braid that swept down her back. Her cheeks were rosy from the winter's chill that nipped the air. She was clothed in a ridiculous ensemble of boyish attire, the shirt nearly two sizes too big, a long coat sloppily slung over her shoulders. Despite all that, she was indeed the most breathtaking creature he'd ever laid his gaze upon.

Now that he'd found her, he hadn't any idea what he was going to do or say to her. He knew exactly what he should like to do ... he should like to yank her about, crush his mouth upon hers and lose himself in a bath of her beauty. Even though every fiber of his being ached to do just exactly that, he knew he couldn't. Not here and certainly not now. He needed to get her away, to get her alone. Without barmen and pints of ale and a town full of busybody folks. He needed her ... just her. No distractions.

But what should he say? How was he to get her alone? He gave a moment's thought to capturing her ... sweeping her off to a lone cabin in the heart of the mountains. It was a lovely picture. Just the two of them and the solitude of the Everwinter Mountains. But he doubted very much that such an audacious lady would stand idly by while he tried to sweep her off her feet. No, not this one. She wasn't a fervent barmaid. And though he didn't know her, couldn't have even whispered her name, he knew she'd not lie down for him without it being of her own accord. With this one, his old dog tricks would not reap the prize.

He squeezed his calf against his mount, urging the chestnut gelding forward. He trotted toward her, passing so close to her stallion that had the massive beast kicked out he would have made contact with Cullen's mount. It was enough to draw her attention. The look that crossed her face told him not only that she noticed him, but that she recognized him. Just as he'd hoped she would. He did not stop, nor pay her any mind at all. Instead he trotted past her, pulled to a halt in front of the seaside market and dismounted. He tied his horse to the post and didn't bother to cast a glance back at her as he entered the shop.

It was but a few short moments before she followed behind him. He pretended to admire the spread of fresh fish for sale, though he had no appetite for fish. There was but one thing he desired and it couldn't be found on a market shelf. Cullen felt her slip up beside him; the wonderful soft scent from her hair rose up around him. He closed his eyes for a brief moment and lingered in the sweetness of it. She leaned close, her lips nearly brushing his ear. "Excuse me, sir, may I have a word?"

Cullen turned about slowly, it took a tremendous amount of control not to grab a hold of her and devour her right there on the market floor. He allowed a small smile to curve at the corner of his lips. "Just one?"

"This is a private matter," she said as she cast a glance about.

Cullen leaned in closer to her. It was dangerous, he knew, but it was a risk worth taking. Oh, how lovely she smelled. He could lose himself in that scent. "Have a word then; no one is listening."

She cast a wary glance at the shopkeeper, who was paying no mind to them or their conversation. She turned back to him, cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably as if she didn't like what she was about to utter. "I should like to ask a favor."

"A favor?" He cocked an inquisitive eyebrow.

She shook her head. "Or rather I have a proposition. You see, I must travel to Triel and there is but one ship at port and in order for me to take passage aboard I must have a proper escort."

She paused for a moment and Cullen took advantage of the opportunity. "Where is your escort? It's rather unfashionable for a young lady to parade about without a proper escort."

He watched the fires of fury rise in her eyes, but she managed to keep them at bay ... though it was an obvious struggle. "I have not been parading about nor have I a need for an escort, I can tend to myself."

"All evidence to the contrary, my lady." He flashed a wide smile as he watched those fires flicker within her emerald eyes.

"If not for that stubborn old goat of a captain, I'd have no need for an escort," she mumbled.

"And what is it you should desire from me?"

She shot a dagger-edged glance at his particular choice of words. But again, she managed to keep her temper under control. "I should like you to accompany me on the voyage in appearance as an escort."

"And what shall I get in return?"

"I shall pay you four gold coins."

He scratched his stubbled chin as he considered. "'Tis a two week voyage to Triel, my lady, surely you do not expect me to put my life on hold for an entire two weeks for a mere four coins?"

She let out a deep breath that was a mixture of frustration and defeat. "Six coins then, that is all I can offer."

"And what shall my duties be?"

"You shall have no duties. You shall accompany me for appearance's sake only. I have told you I can tend to myself."

He took a moment, as if he were considering even though he'd already made up his mind. For he could not have thought of a more perfect opportunity than to be alone with her aboard a small merchant ship for the span of two weeks. In two weeks he could do such things to her... He indulged in the fantasy for a moment.

"I shall need an answer immediately, for we sail at noon," she said, interrupting his thoughts.

"Agreed," Cullen answered. "On one condition."

"Yes?"

"Tell me your name."

Her gaze cut upward under dark, cocked brows. A smile curved at the corner of her lush lips. She parted her lips so that he could see a flash of moist tongue. "Isadel, and you are?"

"Cullen."

"Of which house?" she asked.

"None," he stated simply.

* * * *

What luck, Isadel thought as she gathered her satchel and handed Majesty's reins over to the stable boy. Not only had she found an escort, but she'd found an escort whom she'd met before. Despite his rather meager attempts at love-making, she had a feeling that she could trust him. She wasn't exactly sure what made her think such a thing, perhaps it was the boyish, playful light in his eyes or the dimple that played at the corner of his mouth when he smiled... Nevertheless she felt she had made a wise choice in her pseudo-escort.

Isadel placed a gold coin in the stable boy's hand. "Now see that this steed is returned to Princess Adianna, and remember ... you found him wandering the pastures."

The boy nodded and shoved the coin into his pocket before turning to lead Majesty away. Isadel watched her favorite horse walk away and couldn't help the fleeting regret she felt. Underneath it all, she missed her sister. They may not have always seen eye to eye, nor agreed on ... anything. But she was still family and a friend. Isadel let out a heartfelt sigh as her gaze shifted from the horse to the man crossing the beach toward her. Cullen was outfitted much as he had been but an hour before, sienna breeches, a beige linen shirt, brown leather boots that were well worn. His chocolate tinted hair rustled in the breeze and though he hadn't shaved and the shadow of a beard was beginning to form he still looked rather young ... and handsome.

Pity, she thought as he closed the distance, that he should be so terrible in bed. It would have been a pleasure to share close quarters with a handsome man who could fill those cold, sea-born nights with the heat of passion. She smiled knowingly as he stopped in front of her. "Thank you for coming," she said through a friendly, pleasant smile.

"Pleasure." He had a pack slung over his shoulder and though his tone was light, he looked anything but thrilled to be standing there with her. He nodded toward the ship. "All set?"

Isadel nodded then turned toward the ship and made her way down the dock. Cullen fell in step behind her.

Captain Sully awaited them at the plank that led up to the ship's deck. He flashed Isadel a wide toothy grin as his gaze bounced from her to Cullen. "Found yourself an escort, did ya?"

"This is Cullen; he'll be accompanying me on the voyage."

Sully gave a curt nod towards Cullen before turning his attention back to Isadel. "Deal's a deal, I suppose. Come aboard."

Chapter Six

“Is your cabin to your liking, my lady?”

Isadel glanced up from the contents of her satchel that she had dumped upon the bed. Cullen was leaning against the threshold watching her beneath brows that always seemed to be cocked in a rather arrogant yet boyish nature. “Fine, thank you.”

He pushed himself from the threshold in a rather casual manner, crossed the length of the small cabin and plopped down upon the bed. He cast a glance over her personal belongings. He picked up a small diary and began flipping through the pages. Isadel was quick to yank the book from his hand and shove it back into her satchel. “Do you mind?”

“Not in the least,” he said with a devilish grin.

“Is there something you need?”

Cullen shook his head. “No.” He went back to thumbing through her things.

“Will you please keep your hands to yourself,” she said in a huff.

His lips curved into a half smile again and he met her dark gaze in challenge. “That wasn’t what you said when you strode into my room half naked and dripping wet.”

Isadel threw her belongings into her bag then shot up as she clutched the satchel to her breast. “How dare you say such things to me! Do you even know who I am?” The words were out of her mouth before she could even think. And the minute she’d said it, she cursed herself for it.

“No, who are you?”

Isadel turned about, went to the small port window and looked out over the sea. She shook her head. “Please forget I mentioned it.”

He rose then, crossed the distance between them. He pressed his body against hers so that she could feel the hard lines nudging her in silent need. The feel of his body against hers drove ripples of desire straight down to her soul. She closed her eyes and lingered in the feel of him against her, the mix of his masculine scent with her feminine fragrance.

He spoke then. His voice was a hoarse whisper and his breath tickled her ear, sending pulses of sensation running down her spine. “Who are you?”

“No one of importance, I assure you,” she whispered, near breathless.

“I find that incredibly difficult to believe.” He was torturing her. That heavy musk of need, the urge of manhood behind her, the husky whisper of desire, it was all driving her mad so that she longed for nothing more than the feel of him inside her.

“Please,” she whispered. “See yourself out.”

He hesitated a moment as if he had no desire to leave, but he finally spoke whispered words into her ear. “As you wish, my lady.”

Isadel closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath in an effort to steady the raw-edged need that spread through her body like eager fingers. And as she heard him cross the room and the door click quietly shut, she cursed herself for sending him away.

Finally she opened her eyes, turned away from the window. She crossed the cabin, dropped her satchel at the foot of the bunk and flopped down upon the coarse wool blanket. She buried her head within the pillow and let out a long, heavy groan. With Cullen as her escort and the obvious desire that loomed between them, Isadel feared it was going to be a long, laborious two weeks aboard ship.

* * * *

Cullen took to the deck in hopes that the crisp winter air would douse the flame of desire that Isadel had lit within him. Being that close to her and having pressed against her had proven to be almost more than he could bear. But the time wasn't right, and she wasn't willing or ready. And that was exactly how he wanted her. He wanted her to come to him of her own accord. To beg him to take her and then at long last, when she was raw with her own desire, then he would show her just exactly what he could do with a wet and ready woman.

Cullen blew out a deep breath as he crossed to the rail and looked out over the Savin Sea. Curse these thoughts, the last thing he needed when trying to temper his own desire was to think of the beautiful Isadel as wet and ready. When Captain Sully came up beside him, he wasn't sure if he welcomed or loathed the distraction. "Captain," he said with curt nod as he kept his gaze out to sea.

"Pretty young lady you got there."

Cullen could merely nod, pretty was an understatement. Beautiful, alluring, sensual, heartbreaking, breath-stealing ... anything but plain pretty. Good heaven, he had to clear his mind.

"Where'd she pick you up?"

Cullen turned to the captain, cocked a brow at the question. "Excuse me?"

"Earlier she didn't have an escort, now she does. She must have picked you up somewhere."

Cullen gave a nod, and though he wasn't sure he liked the captain's tone, he struggled to keep his demeanor light. "At the Fox Den."

Sully gave a nod as he rubbed at his chin with plump, sausage-like fingers. "None of my business, I suppose, but you keep your hands to yourself, you hear?"

Cullen couldn't resist an open door, and when presented with one, damn the consequences he always ended up walking through it. "You're right, Captain, it's none of your business but just the same, as her escort I'll put my hands wherever she tells me to."

Sully turned and bore his heated amber gaze down upon Cullen. His jaw tightened and hard lines ran up the length of his face despite the mass of an extra chin. "I know who you are and rest assured, I'll be watching you. One wrong move, thief, and I'll snap your body in two and toss you overboard. You got that, sonny?"

Cullen was no stranger to confrontation, and being presented with threatening words, even by a man as big as Sully, didn't frighten him. He took a step closer, daring to close the distance between them as his eyes narrowed in heated challenge. "I take orders from no one, especially not an old sea-dog like yourself. But the lady wishes to go to Triel and yours is the only ship headed in that direction, so I'll make you a deal. I'll mind business and you mind yours for the remainder of the voyage. And neither of us will have a need to tell the lady of this unfortunate encounter."

Sully's eyes narrowed in pure loathing as he glared down at Cullen. "I should tell the lady you are nothing but a common thief, the underbelly of civilization, a mercenary with booty on your hands and stolen jewels in your pocket."

Cullen cocked a brow at that. "Why do you think she came looking for me?"

His comment left Sully near speechless, and for a moment the old captain struggled for his words. "I ... well."

"Do we understand each other, Captain?"

Sully gave a hesitant nod. "But you understand that I'll be watching you."

"I don't doubt it," Cullen said as he watched the captain sulk away. Not a day went by that someone wasn't watching him.

Chapter Seven

Wretched rocking, Isadel thought as she cursed the night sea. The winds had picked up and set the ship to violently rocking. She could hear the crash of waves, like giant angry hands pounding upon the hull of the ship. The rocking sent her stomach rolling and she feared that she shared her sister's weakness for seasickness.

When there came a knock at her cabin door, Isadel didn't bother to rise to answer it for fear that if she moved from her bunk she'd spew the contents of her stomach all over her cabin. She closed her eyes as she kept a death grip on the bunk with one hand and the blanket wadded up in the grasp of the other.

There came another knock. This time she heard Cullen's strained voice filtering in through the door. "My lady?"

Again she didn't answer, and he pounded his fist fiercely against the door. She wanted to call out to him, but she didn't want him to see her in this compromised state. "Go away!" she finally managed to shout though her voice came out sounding foreign and hoarse.

"Isadel? Open the door or I'm coming in!" he shouted in return.

She didn't dare move, and when he was met with her silence he burst into her cabin. As he stood towering in her doorway, his hair slicked back from the wild rains that plagued the night and his chest heaving with his ragged breath, Isadel regarded him with a teary gaze.

"Isadel?" he whispered then rushed to her side. He sat down beside her on the bunk, wrapped his arms about her and pulled her against his chest. "What is wrong?"

Isadel lingered in the strength of his embrace for a mere moment. And without warning a rush of tears washed over her as she thought of the family she'd left behind. With the storm raging about them and her stomach in turmoil she feared that she'd been wrong in leaving. Feared that the storm would drown the ship and her with it and she would never be able to tell her sister that she loved her, that she was sorry for running away. That she'd never meant to hurt her.

Cullen stroked her hair with a gentle hand as the ship rocked and shivered beneath the slap of the waves. "It's alright," he whispered as though she were a small child or perhaps a frightened animal. "It'll pass, it'll pass."

Isadel slowly pulled back, blinking past the tears so that she could gaze into his dark eyes. She was surprised at the general compassion she found there and though she hated to admit it, a small piece of her heart opened to him. "Thank you," she whispered.

Before he could utter another word, the ship gave a violent shudder and they were carelessly tossed about the cabin as though they were a mere sack of potatoes. Isadel slid across the damp floor and collided with the cabin wall. Cullen tumbled down upon her, knocking into her with such force that it drove the very breath from her throat. He struggled to move off her but the ship jerked again and he was thrown down upon her once again.

The sounds of howling winds and whipping waves grew to a deafening crescendo and the ship gave one long, low, aching groan. Then they heard a sickening snap, like a wet tree branch that had been snapped in half. "What was that?" Isadel whispered, near

breathless.

Cullen's eyes grew wide as he met her terrified gaze. "Hell," he whispered beneath his breath. He jumped up, grabbed Isadel by the hand and yanked her up from the floor. As he dragged her across the cabin and threw open the door, Isadel's ankle screamed out in protest and she dropped to the floor and cried out in pain.

Without thought, Cullen scooped her into his arms and burst out onto the deck and into the night storm. The crew scurried about in a frenzy as the waves beat upon the ship, washing over the deck and drawing members back out into the sea. Their screams were drowned by the roaring winds as the sea devoured them in its violent embrace.

Isadel closed her eyes, and turned her head against the madness, burying her face in Cullen's chest. He stumbled about on the slick deck, the waves nearly knocking him off his feet. They heard the ship give a loud groan followed by another crack of battered wood. One thought clung in Isadel's mind; the ship was coming apart around them and she was going to die.

Cullen's step faltered on the slick deck and a wave rushed the side of the ship, crashing down upon them and causing Isadel to tumble from his grip. She felt herself being swept away by the retreating wave and she blindly grabbed out, her hand catching hold of the rail as the wave tried to yank her back into the dark depths of the sea.

She caught sight of Cullen ahead of her; he too was being carried away by the wave. His head lolled to the side as if he was lost in an unconscious slumber. Isadel reached out and grabbed his wrist. His arm cracked sickeningly as she took hold of him. The muscles in her arm flared in agony as she struggled to hold the railing despite the constant crash of the waves upon them.

The ship cracked and groaned beneath her and she felt it shift as a wave overtook the bow, dragging it beneath the water. There was nothing more she could do. She kept her grip on Cullen as she let go of the ship and was quickly sucked beneath the water's surface.

* * * *

Cullen woke with a start from the momentary darkness and found his lungs filling with salt water. Panicked, he struggled to swim for the surface, dragging Isadel along as she kept a death grip upon his wrist. When he broke the barrier between water and air, he coughed out a mouthful of seawater and gasped for air.

The waves rocked and pummeled him, but he managed to drag Isadel to the surface with him and he held her, barely treading water against the wild waves as she filled her lungs with air. She coughed and spit and went limp against him and it was then, when Cullen tried to bring his arm up about her that the pain shot through him in violent waves. He could no longer feel his arm or the fingers upon his hand. He tried desperately to move his limb and it remained limp and helpless at his side.

Isadel managed to grab hold of piece of the ship's plank that had been ripped free from the hull. She scrambled up onto the wood, pulling Cullen up with her. They collapsed upon their only hope for survival. Together they bobbed upon the restless sea while the rains beat down upon them and watched the ship slip beneath the thunderous waves.

Chapter Eight

The rays of sunlight slipped over the horizon to kiss Isadel's face. She woke from a dark slumber and for a moment she thought she'd just woken from a terrible dream. But as the clear steel-gray sky came into focus above her and the faint slivers of sunlight peeked through the threatening clouds that had drifted off into the distance, she knew that it had all been very real.

She managed to sit despite the pounding in her head and the throb in her ankle. She glanced down her leg to the source of her pain and found that her once silky, slender ankle was now an ugly, puffy mass of purple-black flesh. She reached out to touch it gingerly, but even the softness of her own fingers made a raw ache shoot straight up through her leg.

Isadel turned to Cullen who was still sleeping soundlessly beside her. She traced the contours of his face, reached out to softly brush aside the strands of his hair that had fallen over his eyes. A huge bruise revealed itself beneath her touch, a swollen mound of flesh that matched her ankle in hue.

With all the energy drained completely from her body and her temples and ankle throbbing mercilessly, Isadel laid her head down upon his chest and closed her eyes. She listened to the draw of his breath, the steady lullaby of the beat of his heart. And even as she lay, helpless and hopeless, adrift upon a vast sea, Isadel had never felt more relieved. They were alive. They were both alive. She thanked the stars in the heavens for the miracle.

She felt him stir beneath her and she rose up to gaze down into his eyes. He squinted against the sunlight, the flash of pain flooding his face as the water had flooded their vessel. "Can you move?"

Cullen gave a low grunt and wheezed out a breath as he struggled to sit. But he managed to sit up, rolling his head from side to side to stretch the muscles in his neck. He cast a glance about, though there was nothing but endless ocean surrounding them. Finally he turned to meet Isadel's gaze and he managed a half smile. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to charge you more than six pieces, my lady."

Isadel let out a hearty laugh and as she shook her head in amusement, she felt her heart open to him just a little more. "I think we can negotiate," she said. "If we ever reach land, that is."

Cullen gave a nod and made a fruitless attempt to move his arm. "I think it's broken."

Isadel touched a hand softly to his shoulder. Sure enough she could feel the bone that had slipped out of place. She quickly tore the hem of her oversized, tattered shirt and fashioned it into a sling. Cullen held out his good hand in protest as she moved to place the sling over his shoulder. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"You have to pop it back into place first."

Isadel could feel her gaze grow wide and her jaw drop of its own accord as he nodded to his useless arm. She shook her head as she caught the plea in his eyes. "No, you cannot mean... I mustn't."

"You must, quick and sharp."

Isadel shook her head. The idea of shoving anyone's arm back in place sent shivers running down the length of her spine.

"Isadel, you have to. I might lose the use of my arm all together if you don't."

Isadel drew in a deep breath as she considered. But of course, there was only one thing she could do. "Alright," she whispered. "Tell me what to do."

She followed Cullen's instructions. She situated his shoulder and drew in one long breath before giving a mighty shove. She heard the bone crack beneath the force and Cullen cried out in a sharp, pain-wrought groan. "I'm sorry," she cried out. "I'm sorry."

Cullen gritted his teeth and despite the pain that was obviously ravaging his body he managed a weak smile. "Now you may wrap it."

Isadel tenderly wrapped the bandage about his shoulder, securing his arm the best she could so that it was drawn up against his body.

"Thank you," he said softly as he cast a glance down the length of her body. "Better tend to that ankle," he said as he reached out for her with his good arm. She jerked away when his fingers wrapped about her, and though his touch was gentle it sent bolts of pain driving through her body. "Good, it's not broken," he said.

"I'll live," Isadel whispered. How could she even complain when he'd barely uttered a curse at having his shoulder shoved back into place?

"Wrap it up; it'll help with the swelling."

As Isadel went to work wrapping her ankle, Cullen looked out to the now sedate sea. Isadel's gaze wandered up from her ankle to search his face. "We're as good as dead," she muttered.

Cullen shook his head as he continued to scan the horizon as though he were searching for something. He pointed toward the sky with his free hand. "There," he said. "We follow the birds. They'll lead us to land."

Isadel cast her gaze upward, resting upon the flock of white seabirds that were headed in the opposite direction. But too soon they disappeared beyond the horizon, seemingly slipping off the face of their world.

* * * *

They took turns paddling, Cullen with his one good arm, Isadel when he tired. They paddled for the majority of the day, hunger already beginning to spread like aching fingers through their stomachs. Cullen sat cross-legged on their makeshift raft as Isadel used the force of her stroke to inch them forward. They made less time with her providing the power, but she'd insisted on sharing the duty, something Cullen found both infuriating and heartwarming at the same time.

It shamed him to admit that he had to depend on her to provide for them in any sense. He was the man after all and it should have been his duty alone to save them. But with only one arm to service him, he supposed he wasn't in a position to protest. He doubted that it would have mattered much anyway, for Isadel seemed to be a woman who did things of her own accord.

As he studied her from across the vessel, watched the way her dark locks stirred about her face in the subtle winter winds, he knew he'd never met a woman quite like Isadel. She was beautiful, of that there was no doubt. And even in her obvious state of disarray, she was still a breathtaking sight. The chill in the air brought a flush her cheeks, tingeing them a becoming pink. Her lips, though dry with thirst, were plump as though

begging for a kiss. Despite her beauty, it was her character that offered the true attraction.

Never before had a woman come to him in the midst of the night. Never before had a woman been so brazen in her desire for him. Never before had a fiery female temper and quick tongue been a catalyst for unending desire. And just as sure as he was that he would live and die, Cullen knew that he'd never again meet her match.

"You should rest when you tire," he stated as he noticed the beads of sweat circling her brow. He cast a glance to the horizon, to the sun that was quickly vanishing upon them. "The Ladies will be out soon."

Isadel followed his gaze skyward as though she were searching for sign of the twin moons. She let out a heavy sigh then yanked her hand from the water and flopped down upon her back, resting upon the damp wood. "I fear we're not getting anywhere."

"We are," Cullen assured her, though he wasn't positive himself. They'd paddled all day, and still there was no sign of land. There were a handful of small islands between Anista and Triel but he feared their chance of floating up upon one was slim. He hadn't mentioned his own doubts, for what good would it have done? They would either find land soon or die silently upon the waters. Either way, speaking his doubts would make little difference now.

"I wish I had your conviction," she said as she closed her eyes and drew in slow, steady breaths. Her hand slipped downward, settling upon the flat of her stomach. "My stomach aches."

"Mine as well," Cullen muttered. Though it was not the hunger that worried him, it was the thirst. A man could go for weeks without food ... but could only hope to live a few days without water. Better not to think of it, for again there was nothing he could do. He cast his gaze over her and as he let his gaze slip over the soft curves of her body, he noticed the slight tremble in her hands, the shiver rippling through her body. "You're cold."

"I'm fine," she protested.

"Winter is nearly upon us, the chill will only worsen with nightfall." He managed to scoot closer to her.

She lifted her head and shot him a cagey glance. "What are you doing?"

He lay down beside her, turned her so that her back was flush against his front. He hugged her close to him, already beginning to feel the warmth from her body slip over him. "We must use our body heat to keep us warm through the night."

Isadel settled comfortably in his arms, her shivers lessening with each passing moment. "If we weren't at death's door, I'd say you were making a pass at me."

Cullen couldn't help but smile at the playful melody of her voice. "If I were making a pass at you, you would know it, my lady."

"Isadel," she said. "Please call me Isadel."

"Alright, Isadel," he whispered softly. The sound of her name rolling off his tongue was all too sweet and it made him ache for her, down to his very core.

"Cullen," she said sleepily.

"Humm?"

"Do you honestly think we'll make it to land?"

"I do, the Ladies will watch over us."

She drew in a deep breath and let it escape her lips through a heavy sigh. "Do you have any regrets?"

“Regrets? Of what sort?”

“Well, if we are meant to die here, will you have any regrets when you enter the afterlife?”

Regrets. He’d never really pondered that question before. Did he regret any of the things that he had done? Or perhaps the life he’d lived? He thought on it for a moment, the stolen coin in his pockets, the blood upon his hands... Were those deeds that would haunt him in the life beyond this one? He honestly couldn’t say. He supposed there had been at the very least a handful of things he’d done in this life that he was not so proud of, but he couldn’t say for sure that he regretted doing them. There was but one answer he could settle on that would neither be a complete lie nor the full truth. “Perhaps. You?”

Isadel drew in a shaky breath as though the subject brought her much pain. Cullen tightened his grip on her in response, pulling her closer to him. “One,” she said softly. “My sister.”

“What of your sister?”

“I will regret that I will have died without ever having the chance to say goodbye. To tell her that I did love her, that I will always cherish her.”

“Perhaps she already knows.”

“Perhaps,” she whispered as though she didn’t quite believe it.

“No more talk of death and regret. We should get some rest, for I’m afraid we have another long day of paddling awaiting us.”

“You are right of course. Good night, Cullen.”

As she lay with her body tucked so comfortably against his, one thought alone occurred to him. The only thing he would die regretting was not being able to make love to her. “Goodnight, Isadel.”

Chapter Nine

Once again the sun's rays woke Isadel the next morning. She found that during the course of the night she had turned so that she was face-to-face with Cullen. He still held her close, even in sleep and as she tilted her chin upward to look upon his face, she found his lips were just a breath away.

The instant pull of desire rippled over her and despite the ache that plagued her body, the harsh dryness of her throat and the wretched churning in her empty stomach, Isadel did the most unthinkable thing. She kissed him. A soft, flutter of a kiss that was so light it was barely a kiss at all. It was enough to stir him, and for a moment she found herself lost in his dark eyes.

But she broke the connection and rose, putting space between them as she stretched out her limbs and pretended to be occupied with the day stretching before them. She had no idea if he knew that she had kissed him; if he did, he hadn't uttered a word. "Good morn," she said quickly to break the unspoken tension that was rising between them.

"Good morn," he said as he awkwardly rose, shifting his useless arm so he could leverage himself with his good one. He gave a slight breathless wince that drew Isadel's attention.

"Your arm, it's bothering you tremendously. There must be something we can do."

"It won't be the arm to kill me," he said lightly.

As she turned to meet his gaze, she saw the most heavenly sight in the entire world. "Land!" she shouted as she whipped about to point in the direction of the island before them.

A wide smile lit Cullen's face, hope flaming to life in his eyes. "The sea must have carried us to her through the night."

"Oh, thank the Ladies! We're saved!" Near delirious with her own excitement and the realization that she wasn't going to die out in the middle of the sea, Isadel leaned off the side of their vessel and began furiously paddling. "Quick, hurry! We're almost there!"

With his good arm, Cullen helped her paddle them toward the shoreline. Before their raft even reached the sands, Isadel flopped into the water and swam ashore. She all but crawled upon the beach and fell face first into the sand. She rolled onto her back and held her hands up in the air. "We're saved!"

Cullen made his way up the shore and collapsed beside her. He lay back, rested his head in the sand and closed his eyes as he drew in the sea air. Isadel rolled onto her side and watched as the rays of sunlight kissed his weathered face. She brushed the long strands of his hair back from his face, drawing his gaze to her. She kissed him softly on the lips, a long, lingering kiss ... one that said she didn't care if he or anyone else thought it uncouth of her.

His gaze sparkled like muddy waters as he stared up at her. "What was that for?"

"For saving my life."

"You saved mine as well."

"Then I should say we are even," she said as a smile bloomed full on her lips.

She rose then, still struggling with the ankle that plagued her. "We must set up a camp. Build a fire, find some food and water for the day. We'll rest, regain our strength,

then tomorrow search the island for inhabitants.”

Cullen sat up, his body lumbering from weakness and injury. “Are you sure you’re a lady?”

Isadel cocked a brow as she stared down upon him. “What kind of a question is that?”

“Forgive me, I’ve just never met a lady with your ... shall we say ... zest.”

Isadel wasn’t sure quite how to take his comment, for most people usually found her abrasive and spoiled. ‘Zest’ had certainly never been used in describing her. But she found she liked the way it sounded when Cullen said it. She flashed a shy, half smile. “You’ve never met a daughter of Anista before.”

* * * *

Cullen had never been one to attend to the formalities often required in the presence of royalty. In fact, most often when he was in the presence of royalty it was usually because he was robbing them blind. But the words that rolled off her tongue suddenly made him feel extremely uneasy ... like an old, worthless dog that’d bitten the heel of his master. Oh dear Ladies of the Night, she was a princess!

For some unexplained reason he felt the need to struggle to his feet and attempt a low if wobbly bow. “Your Highness, forgive me for I had no idea.”

Isadel shook her head and crossed the distance to him. She helped him to his feet, keeping her soft fingers wrapped about his arms. “I’ll have none of that.”

“But, Your Highness,” he protested.

“None of that,” she repeated. “My name is Isadel.”

The night at the tavern flashed in his mind once again, and he felt a flush of unexpected embarrassment wash over him. She was a princess, a Daughter of Anista, and he had tried to mount her. He had come with her on this voyage for the sole purpose of trying to mount her again. “Forgive me, Your... Isadel.”

Her gaze narrowed upon him, heat flashing in her brilliant emerald eyes. “I mean it, Cullen. No more. I’m tired of being treated as servant to my title. We are not in Anista anymore and I’m not a princess here. I’m just Isadel, nothing more.”

“As you wish,” he said as he watched her attempt to storm away even with a twisted ankle. He shook his head in a silent curse to himself. Why did this have to change things for him? Why should it matter who she was? After all, he was nothing but a thief, the underbelly of civilization, as Captain Sully had called him. In fact, he should have been overjoyed to find himself sharing his survival with a princess... Why the reward alone at her safe return would surely be worth more to him than a year’s worth of stolen jewels.

But he just couldn’t bring himself to think that way about her. She’d done something to him... bewitched him so that, for maybe the first time in Cullen’s life, he was ashamed of his caddish ways. He watched as she went to work collecting discarded tree branches for their fire. She certainly didn’t act like a princess. He was sure that no princess would be caught dead collecting her own kindling. But then Isadel didn’t act at all like any other woman, much less a lady.

He crossed the distance between them, joined her where she’d set down the branches. Wordlessly he began arranging them into a purposeful pile so they could easily light a fire come nightfall. Isadel crossed to a trio of palm trees just behind them, and before Cullen could utter a word in protest, she climbed up the tree and knocked five

coconuts out of the tree.

She slid down, landing with a light thud as though she was quite accustomed to tree climbing. She said nothing as she plopped down beside him and crossed her legs underneath her in a boyish fashion. She picked up a rock lying near her side and cracked open a coconut, then handed him half. They drank the sweet milk in silence, lingering in the feel of the cool liquid as it served to quench their dying thirst.

Isadel set the coconut aside then took off the glinting jeweled necklace that was buried beneath her man's shirt. Then she retrieved one of the branches, broke the chain of her necklace and began fashioning a spear from one of the sharp, dripping jewels. When he cast a questioning glance up at her she smiled sheepishly. "I'm hungry."

"Just what do you intend to do with that thing?"

"Catch a fish of course." She rose, her fashioned spear in her hand. She waded out into the sea until the water lapped at her knees.

Cullen shook his head for he could hardly believe this woman. "You'll never be able to catch anything with that."

Isadel said nothing as she kept her gaze locked on the waters below her. She moved, slow and deliberate. Silently slipping along the shore. Then suddenly she thrust the spear into the water and when she yanked it back upward, a small fish flopped helplessly on the end. She turned to flash him a warm smile that held an unmistakable hint of arrogance.

"And you said I would never catch anything."

"Apparently, I was wrong." It seemed being wrong about fishing was just the beginning of things Cullen clearly misunderstood.

Chapter Ten

Later that night with their bellies full of fish and coconut milk, Isadel and Cullen lounged under a starlit sky by the warmth of the fire. As winter set in, the days became increasingly shorter, the nights impossibly long. Isadel welcomed the change of season, and she enjoyed the darkness that settled over the land at an early hour. She had always liked the dark. You could disappear in the dark ... a fact she'd made painfully clear throughout her childhood. Her poor older sister had spent countless hours searching for the runaway princess. In the end, she always found her and brought her home ... but not before Isadel had enjoyed a few hours of peace and quiet alone.

She usually lingered in her private time alone, for back home it seemed as if it was never long enough. But now, as she lay upon the sand that still held the warmth from the vanished sun, she enjoyed having company. For once, she was glad she wasn't alone.

She wasn't sure what it was about Cullen that drew her. There was raw sexual attraction, there was no denying that. But there was something more, something beyond sex, something deeper, more intimate. And it both warmed and concerned her how comfortable she'd become in his presence.

Of course, she'd cursed herself endlessly when she'd blurted out that she was a Daughter of Anista. For it seemed as if Cullen's attitude toward her had changed, stiffened. But now that day had given way to night, she felt his resolve lessen and he slipped back into his comfortable, easy and somewhat boorish nature. She quite preferred that to the babbling idiots she was usually surrounded by, those who bowed whenever she moved and never addressed her by her given name. Being treated as an object of the country had soured Isadel's taste for royalty. All she desired these days was to simply be a woman. A woman who had the freedom to make choices for herself. One who was not concerned with the desires and expectations of an entire country.

"What awaits you at the end of your voyage?"

Cullen's voice broke into her thoughts, pulling her from the bout of pity she'd quickly slipped into. She needed no time to consider his question, for she knew exactly what waited at the end. "Freedom."

"Freedom? From what?"

Isadel let out a heavy sigh. She never told anyone how she felt, never, not even her sister. Yet somehow she did not hesitate to tell this man who for all intents and purposes was a complete stranger. "Freedom from my family, from my crown."

"You're leaving home."

Isadel rolled onto her side; she watched the play of shadow and light from the flicker of the fire as it danced across his face. "I prefer to think of it as moving on."

"What does your family have to say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Can a princess just walk away from her castle?"

Isadel let out a slightly amused huff. "She can if she does it under the cloak of darkness."

"I see," he said as he turned his head to meet her gaze. "You're not so much leaving home as running away."

“Let’s just say that I have no desire to be a princess.”

Cullen lowered his brow in a scowl, as though her comment had displeased him. “Think of the riches you’ll be leaving behind, the power you’ll be giving up.”

“What good is money and power if you do not belong to yourself? If everything you are, everything you must be, is centered on pleasing a country.” Isadel let out a heavy sigh as she thought of the life she’d been forced to live. “You cannot possibly understand, Cullen. You are free to make your own choices, go where you wish, with whomever you wish. You can live the life of your choosing. You’ve not been a prisoner in your own body.”

The sorrow in her voice filtered up between them and it seemed to stir something inside him. “You make it sound as though being royalty is a dismal existence.”

“It’s no existence at all,” she corrected.

* * * *

He wasn’t sure what had touched him about the way she spoke. Maybe it was the strain of her voice or the sadness of her words, but she had moved him. He felt pity for her, something he never could have imagined he’d feel for someone of royal blood. But there was something else, something more ... something, perhaps like ... love. Blast! He cursed himself for even letting the thought filter into his head. If there was one thing Cullen didn’t do, it was love. He had no room in his life for love or relationships. He was hardly ever in the same place twice. The only place he called home was his standing room at the Fox Den Tavern, and he was only there but a few times a month.

Cullen was like a lone wolf, prowling the lands on his own, taking what pleased him and answering to no pack. He was dependent upon no one and no one was dependent upon him. That was just the way he preferred it. Hell, in his line of work that was the way it simply had to be. To tie himself down to any one person, any one place would be career suicide. A man with ties was bound and a bound man couldn’t flee when needed. No, he couldn’t have felt anything close to love.

Still, he thought as he listened to her talk of duty and ties, there was something about her that stirred him. Something that had butterflies dancing in his belly and heat pulling at his groin. It was as though he’d found a kindred spirit, for she, like him, sought freedom. She had fled to break the ties that bound her. To answer to no one, to be dependent upon no one and to have no one dependent upon her. And the fact that she’d given up crowns and wealth, prestige and power to obtain it spoke volumes to him. He supposed that in her position he’d have done just the same. That thought alone was enough to warm his calloused heart.

“Why Triel?”

Isadel cocked a brow in question. “What do you mean?”

Cullen shrugged his good shoulder. “Why Triel? Why not some other place?”

“Triel was the farthest place on the map that extended beyond my family’s diplomatic duties.”

“I see,” he said.

“I suppose it doesn’t really matter where I go, just as long as my family can’t reach me,” she said with a slight grin as though she’d stumbled upon some wicked secret. “So,” she said blowing out a breath as though she had tired of that subject. “What do you do?”

The question caught him off guard. It shouldn’t have, for he knew that at some point

he would be confronted with this question. The trouble was he still hadn't formulated an answer. Should he be truthful and tell her that he was a thief? Or should he lie and claim some noble occupation? The question, he supposed, was really whether or not he wanted to begin this relationship with a lie.

Relationship? That thought caught him off guard. This was not a relationship! Why ever had he thought that? She was not his mate, his wife, even his lover. They were simply traveling together ... stranded together, and there was nothing about this situation that implied relationship. The thought took him back and he'd forgotten that she'd even spoken.

"Cullen?" Her soft words broke into his thoughts, causing a wave of some emotion he couldn't quite pinpoint to rush over him.

"Hum?"

"I asked of your occupation."

He couldn't stand it. The guilt was bothering him more than he cared to admit. Just tell her, said the little voice of conscience in his head. Tell her you're a lowly thief. Tell her. Oh, why did it bother him so? He'd never before been ashamed of what he did, of who he was. So why couldn't he bring himself to tell her? Damn it all to hell, he cursed silently. He rose, struggling to get to his feet despite his injured arm. "I'm a thief," he said softly then turned away from her.

He crossed the beach, stepping beyond the reach of the fire light so that only the twin moons served to light the way. He mounted a jutting rock that overhung the shoreline. Below, the low tide rushed and retreated against the rock's base under the light of the pale moons. He heard her come up behind him, the soft thud of her footfall echoing out against an otherwise quiet night.

She slipped a hand over his shoulder, her touch warm and soft against his skin. He couldn't bring himself to turn toward her, but from the corner of his eye he could see that her gaze was fixed on the sea beyond. "A runaway princess and a wayward thief, we make an unlikely pair, wouldn't you say?"

Cullen let out huff of laughter and shook his head. A pair. Yes, indeed they made an unlikely pair. A pair of stranded strangers that had more in common than any one could have ever guessed. He turned toward her. The light from the moons played against her dark hair, illuminating the raven tendrils so that they glowed in the faint light. It played against her face, that dance of light and shadow, making her look painfully pale and breathtakingly beautiful. She was soft and feminine, both qualities he found undeniably desirable. But her thoughts, her dreams, her desires ... they stirred more to life inside him than the perfect presence of her body.

What was happening to him? Was it possible that his brush with death had altered him? Just a few days before he could think of nothing but wealth and a warm body beside him. Now, all he cared for was the sorrow in her voice when she spoke of home and the way the moonlight played in her hair. Was he going mad? Or had this beauty cast some sort of the spell on him? Perhaps she was a witch rather than a princess.

He reached out to touch her, letting his palm graze her cheek. She closed her eyes for a brief moment as though lingering in his touch. That simple gesture warmed his body and made his heart ache for her. "What is it you do to me?"

She brought her gaze up to meet his, those emerald irises swimming in a sea of ghost white. "What do you mean?"

“I feel as though you have cast a spell upon me. Everything I once thought I needed, once thought I desired, means nothing when I look upon you. I’ve become a changed man in the course of one night and it’s all because of you.”

She cast her glance downward to the rock beneath their feet. “You say it as though it were a bad thing.”

He slipped a finger under her chin, lifting her head until he could once again gaze into those emerald pools. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“What do you desire now?”

“Only you,” he said softly.

She cocked an eyebrow and let a devilish grin slip over her lips as though she were the keeper of some amusing secret. “And here I thought it was only the bar wench you desired.”

Cullen wrapped his good arm about her, yanking her possessively to him so that their bodies were pressed eagerly against each other. He could feel her soft feminine curves hug his hard masculine angles and the sensation sent flames of raw need licking through his body. He gazed down into her eyes; the flash of hunger within them matched the heat rising in his groin. “Finding you in that bed was sweetest surprise I’ve ever stumbled upon.”

“It was the wrong room,” she reminded him.

“Thank the Ladies of the Night for that.”

She licked her lips eagerly as though she was every bit as hungry for a taste of him as he was for her. “And I thank the Ladies that there is no ale upon this island.”

Cullen flashed an amused if somewhat disgraced smile even as he pulled her closer, pressing his shaft demandingly against her. “I assure you, my lady, that has never happened before.”

“Let us do hope it never happens again.” Isadel wrapped her hands about the back of his neck, drawing his lips to hers. Her moist lips pressed against his, and he eagerly opened them, allowing her tongue to dart within his mouth and dance wildly with his.

Cullen nearly lost himself in the ardent sweetness of her kiss. He reveled in the ease with which she could cast aside the years of proper chastity and act with the desire of a purposeful barmaid. There was something strangely erotic about the contradictions of the woman in his arms and he knew that he’d never before desired anyone so completely.

He deepened the kiss, letting his free hand roam the length of her back even as he cursed his limp shoulder and bound hand. It was pure torture not to be able to explore her body with both hands, not to let all ten fingers dance up her spine. The Ladies must be mocking him!

He managed to slip her shoulder free of the ragged man’s shirt that still clung to her breast. As he peeled it back, he watched the soft skin appear under the glow of the twin moons, inch by maddening inch. Finally the soft mound of her breast was exposed to him, the pink nub of her nipple hard and ready for his touch. He let his hand skim the side of her breast and as his palm closed over her, he heard her suck in a deep breath as her body gave a slight shiver at his touch.

He could no longer contain the mad desire that raged like a winter’s storm through his raw body. He took her by the hand, nearly dragging her back to the warmth of the fire. He collapsed onto the sand, bringing her with him so that she fell upon him. The warmth of her breast burned him; the heat of her breath scorched him. He needed to fill

her, to bury himself within her. He wrapped his hand about her neck and dragged her lips to his.

She opened to him eagerly, her kiss as deep and urgent as his. She let her hands roam the length of his body, slipping down to the bulge of manhood that threatened to rip through his breeches. Under the pale flicker of firelight he saw a wide smile bloom full on her lips. "Now that," she said breathlessly, "is exactly what I've been longing for."

He smiled up at her and wondered at the obvious dumb luck that had found a lowly dog of a man like him caught in the grasp of a vivacious, desirable woman such as her. As her hand slipped beneath his breeches to take full hold of him, Cullen felt every muscle in his body tighten in rigid response. Raw need pulsed through his body in violent waves and he'd never before been so full of his own seed. He needed her, needed the release only she could bring him ... but they had only just begun. And Cullen intended to explore every delicious curve of her body till morning's light.

Slowly she inched down his body, pulling his breeches with her till his bare ass settled into the cool sand. She gazed up at him devilishly from beneath raised brows. And as she made her way back up his body, she trailed kisses in her wake. Reaching his thighs, she paused, her hand slipping up to wrap around his cock, one sinful finger at a time. Her touch, so warm it nearly burned, sent bolts of desire slashing through his body. As she lowered her head, bringing her mouth so close to his rigid manhood that he could feel her hot breath flowing over his skin, he prayed for strength. Her mouth opened, a hint of tongue taunting him before she slipped his cock between her lips. She stroked him slowly, letting her lips slip along his shaft while her tongue danced wildly over the head. Cullen let his head fall back into the sand as he turned his gaze star ward. He had the urge to thank every star in the heavens for bringing him this beauty. Her rhythm turned feverish, and the blood within his veins boiled. When he feared he could take no more lest he spread his seed, he took hold of her, urging her up the length of his body.

Her eyes ablaze with desire, she gazed down upon him, licking her lips in the most delicious fashion. Her hair fell down to frame her face, which glowed with an erotic sheen by the light of the fire. She was more beautiful to him than all the stars in the heaven above. He lifted a hand, wrapped it around the back of her neck and pulled her to him. He kissed her deeply, not minding the taste of himself upon her lips.

Too soon, she pulled away to stare down at him with that wicked little grin. Wordlessly she slipped from her shirt, her small, round breasts falling free for him to devour. Her nipples had hardened to rosy pebbles, most likely due as much to the cool night air as the desire that spread within her. Unable to resist, Cullen reached up to take one rosy nipple between his fingers. He rolled it lovingly between his forefinger and thumb, delighting in the soft groan that slipped from her throat.

She slipped from her bottoms and pressed her naked flesh against his. She straddled him, slowly sliding herself down the shaft of his rigid cock. Isadel's warmth and wetness consumed him, drowning every thought until he could think of nothing but her. She leaned down, pressing her lips to his as she rocked upon him in a lovely slow rhythm. His hand roamed her smooth back, while his tongue ravaged her mouth and she drew him to maddening heights.

He luxuriated in the feel of her body atop his. He swept her hair away from her face so that he could watch the play of passion in her expression with each release. He lingered in the rise and fall of desire that rushed through them like the tides upon the

beach. She rose, riding him wildly so that he could see the full splendor of her form straddled over him. Overflowing with seed and the need to fill her, Cullen let a deep throaty moan escape his lips as he emptied himself inside her. Joining him in release, she collapsed upon him breathlessly.

Exhausted and filled with a peace he'd never known before, Cullen swept her hair back and softly kissed her brow. She snuggled against him and he wrapped his arm about her as he listened to the draw of each breath she took. This, he admitted to himself, was what they called making love.

Chapter Eleven

Isadel stared up into the orange hues of sunrise and wondered at the fates that had brought her here. Though she had bedded many a man, she knew beyond a shadow of any doubt that this was the first man she'd ever made love to. She rather liked the idea of basking in the morning's light in the arms of her lover. Lover. That word had a strange ring to it now, a different feel as it rippled through her mind down through her bones to infect her heart. It was a feeling she rather enjoyed and one that was a welcome change from the usual regrets she normally stomached after bedding a man she hoped she'd never have to face again.

She turned to gaze upward into Cullen's handsome face. His eyes were heavy and threatened to fall closed with every breath he took. Isadel reached up, letting her fingers dance softly over the planes of his chest while she delighted in the feel of his taut, slick skin beneath her touch. "You are falling asleep on me," she whispered, despite the fact that there was no one around to hear them.

"Never," he said even though his eyes fell closed.

"Sleep, darling," she said as she rose and kissed him softly on the cheek. "I shall find us a bite to eat."

Cullen merely murmured as she rose and before she was able to make it to her feet, he had drifted off into a sound sleep. Isadel watched the soft rise and fall of his chest and found herself thanking the Ladies of the Night that he had stumbled into her bed ... and into her life.

She dragged on the tattered shirt and breeches that she'd worn now for too many nights. For a moment she felt herself wishing she had a soft, silky gown to slip into ... satin slippers to caress her feet. Oh...and a bath. A warm bath in steamed goat's milk ... umm ... how her skin craved such attentions. She shook her head and willed the thoughts away. The time for gowns of velvet and skin softening baths was behind her now and dreaming of things she could no longer have would do no one any good.

With her feet still bare, Isadel crept beyond the sands to the tree line that etched the shore. She stepped from the sandy beach to the cushion of dew covered grasses. As she wove her way about the towering trees, her eyes ever watchful for something more substantial than a scrawny fish, she caught sight of the most beautiful thing she'd laid eyes on in days. A fat, fresh rabbit nibbled at the long grasses just ahead of her.

Her mouth watered at the sight of the succulent young rabbit. She crept forward, stepping as lightly as possible as she inched toward the unsuspecting creature. She had no idea how she would go about catching it, but she couldn't bear the thought of letting it get away. Her stomach protested the thought with a low growl.

The rabbit hopped forward then stopped to sniff at the air as though perhaps it sensed her. Isadel remained perfectly still. The only movement was that of the rise and fall of her chest with each shallow breath. They paused, rabbit and woman, both waiting for the other to make a move. Then suddenly the rabbit turned and fled into the trees. Isadel rushed forward, tracking the scurrying creature through the tall grasses.

She nearly giggled in delight as she gained distance on the rabbit. Her heart was thumping an erratic beat beneath her chest as the thrill of the chase rushed through her

veins. But moments later her meal disappeared beneath a pile of brush and Isadel was left to stand panting in the midst of the trees. She turned to look about, but couldn't tell which path she'd used to get there. Suddenly the thrill was replaced with the quick flutter of fear.

She turned about, looking for any clues to point her in the direction of the beach, but with each swirl about on her heel she became more and more disoriented. There was a rustling in the bushes behind her and before she could turn about, a hand clasped her shoulder. Isadel let out an ear-piercing scream that echoed through the trees, startling the birds above her into flight.

"Blast, almighty!" Cullen cried out as he clasped his good hand to his ear. "You could wake the dead with that screech."

Isadel turned on her heels and instinctively lashed out, smacking him square on his injured shoulder. "Heaven's sake, Cullen, you scared me to death!"

Cullen let out a grunt and clutched his injured arm. "Damn it all to hell, woman, have you gone mad?"

Isadel blinked back the confusion and let her gaze wander from Cullen's somber face to his bandaged arm. "Oh, Cullen, I'm sorry. Does it hurt?"

"I'll live," he assured her.

"What in the world are you doing sneaking up on me like that anyway?" Her emerald gaze bore down on him in question.

"When I woke up you weren't there. I was worried."

His concern for her touched her. She couldn't remember anyone ever being genuinely concerned for her before. Afraid that the Daughter of Anista might find herself in some trouble, perhaps, but no one had ever worried about Isadel's well being. His kindness pulled at her heart, making it ache for him. "I told you I was going to find some food."

"I did not hear you."

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she leaned forward to kiss him. As her lips swept across his she caught the rustling of leaves just beyond. As she pulled away from his kiss, she let a small smile warm her lips. Perhaps her rabbit was ready for another round of chase, she thought. But as four bronzed, muscled men stepped from the foliage, her amusement, like her rabbit, was gone.

* * * *

"Well, well. What have we here?"

Cullen's eyes narrowed to dark slits of challenge as the towering men stepped forward. They wore thick leather bands at each wrist and breeches that were worn well beyond their day. They could have been mistaken for pirates if not for the drawings in hues of midnight blue that were inscribed upon their chests and arms. That could only mean one thing. Banters. Rogue men who abided by no law but their own. Worse men than pirates could ever dream to become. And stumbling upon Banters could only mean one thing—they'd shipwrecked on Banters Isle—the worst place in the world that they could have landed.

Cullen stepped forward, putting himself between the men and Isadel. Their hungry gazes were already dripping over every inch of her flesh, making him bubble with fury. He knew the Banters' reputation only too well, and he knew just what these men would

like to do with his raven-haired beauty. And he'd be damned if he was going to let them. "Just passing through," he said with as much calloused strength added to his voice as he could muster. Truth was with his arm in a sling, he was a bit worried about defending Isadel and himself against an unruly bunch of Banterers.

"Passing through?" mocked the brute beyond him. His stance and position in relation to the others told Cullen that this man was the leader, at least in this pack.

"Stranded," Isadel murmured. "Would be more accurate."

Cullen nudged himself back against her. A silent request for her to keep quiet. The last thing she needed to do was draw any more attention to herself. He only hoped she got the message. "Just moving through," Cullen reassured them.

The head brute folded his arms across his massive chest. Even on his best day, he still made nearly two of Cullen. He took a step forward, closing the distance between them. "No one just moves through the Isle."

"We have no intention of staying," Cullen said. It wasn't like they had any real way off this island, but frankly the idea of piecing together a ship and braving the open sea was much more appealing than spending another night on Banterers Isle.

"And what arrangements shall be made for the toll?"

"Toll?"

The men all laughed heartily as though they were all in on some private joke. "No one leaves Banterers Isle without paying the toll."

"Our ship is resting on the bottom of the sea and we only managed to make it ashore on a scrap of hull. We have nothing more than the clothes on our backs." He only hoped that he could convince these men that they had nothing much to offer and perhaps the brutes would move on.

The leader seemed to consider his proposition as though it were up for some discussion. He nodded to Isadel who thankfully had remained silent. "What of the woman?"

Cullen lowered his brow in a scowl. "What of her?"

"Seems to me you've got more than the shirt on your back."

Cullen shook his head and managed to force a laugh. "My shirt is worth more than this wench. Worn as old dish rag this one is, and got a stench to boot."

Isadel shoved at his back, sending him stumbling forward. "Why you filthy, wretched dog you! How dare you speak of me in such a manner!"

Cullen turned back, his eyes wide with horror as he caught her gaze. Silently he pleaded with her to stop, shaking his head and holding up his hand in protest, but she came at him anyway. The laughter of the men echoed through the treetops as Isadel swung out. Her fist collided with his chin and his head snapped back. The force of her swing had him reeling backward and his head swam as though he'd plunged into a sea of stars.

She stood towering above him, her hands propped defiantly on her hips as her heated gaze bore down upon him. "And to think I nearly fell for your romantic notions and roguish charms! I'm glad to know what you really think of me!"

For added humiliation she kicked dirt into his face. The roar of the Banterers' laughter echoed out to surround him as a pounding throb pulsed through his head. "Aye, me! She's a fiery little twit! Boys, I think we've found tonight's entertainment."

Much to his horror, before Cullen could even manage to move the lead brute

snatched up Isadel. Despite her efforts to bite and kick at him, he swung her easily over his shoulder. “Bring him,” he said to the other men as they moved in and took hold of Cullen with vise-like grips.

Chapter Twelve

“Well, you’ve really done it this time, Princess,” Cullen said through clenched teeth as he struggled against the ties that bound him.

The brutes had bound Isadel beside him. Her arms were stretched up over her shoulders and she was tied to a hook protruding from the tree above her. Her ragged boyish attire still clung to her and her hair was in complete disarray, her cheeks flushed with the heat that he had lit inside her. “Me? What ever did I do?”

“You mean besides wandering off, leading us straight to the hands of Banters and convincing them that you were a prize worth having?” He cocked a brow at her and as that fiery gaze flickered over him, Cullen had to remind himself to breathe. He shook his head. Now was not the time to be entertaining thoughts of beautiful bound women. He had to figure a way out of this, and fast. He had no idea what entertainment the Banters spoke of, but knowing their reputation, it couldn’t be good.

“Well, it’s not like you did anything to stop them.” She turned her chin up regally, snubbing him. Why did he find that so intoxicating?

“What would you have me do, Your Highness? Take on the lot of them, busted arm and all?”

“No,” she huffed out, “of course not.” Her gaze drifted downward as though it had just dawned on her that she was being completely ridiculous. “What are we to do now?”

“I’m thinking on that,” he said as he shot a glance toward the crowd of Banters who’d gathered about the fire. The sun was beginning to set and thankfully the Banters were too busy bickering over slabs of meat and pints of ale to take much notice of their prisoners. Much to his luck, they’d left his broken arm free. Though caught in a sling he wasn’t sure that it was going to do him much good. He twisted his good arm against his bond, hoping he could manage to wiggle free, but it was hopeless. The ropes were much too tight.

“No bright ideas?”

“Nothing yet,” he said letting out an irritated breath.

Isadel cocked her head, her mischievous gaze cutting up at him from beneath raised brows. “I have one.”

“I’m listening.”

“Live bait.”

Cullen shook his head and though he managed to keep his jaw from dropping, the horror of her suggestion plunged into his stomach making it churn. “Absolutely not. These aren’t like your prim and proper society boys, Isadel; these are dangerous men. You cannot toy with them.”

Isadel shifted beneath her bonds, a sly little smile curling on her plump lips. “They are still men.”

“They look as men, but they are monsters, Isadel. Men who’d just as soon cut your throat as look at you.”

“Well, then let’s hope that tonight they prefer looking to cutting.”

“Isadel, no.” Cullen’s protests were ignored and before he could utter another word, Isadel was calling out to the Banters.

“Oh, boys!”

* * * *

So she wasn't entirely sure what she was doing and as a handful of Banterers approached a quick stab of regret plunged into her stomach. Despite the reservations she was quickly building, she fixed a soft sexy smile on her mouth.

The same brute she'd first stumbled upon during her rabbit hunt stepped forward. “What'd ya want?”

Isadel let out a soft little sigh and let her gaze trail slowly down him. Though he looked as though he hadn't bathed in a few days' time, he wasn't at all hard on the eyes. He was tall with wide shoulders and arms that rippled with muscles. His face was dark and attractive despite the flicker of menace in his eyes. Still, she thought to herself, he had nothing on Cullen. She shot a glance at Cullen, sent him a quick wink and hoped he caught on and would play along. “I'm awfully tired of just hanging around. Perhaps you might have an idea of where a girl might be able to find a little fun in these parts?”

The brute stepped forward, his brows lowering in question as he drank in the features of her face. “What sort of fun?”

Isadel cocked her head to the side, letting her shirt slip over her shoulder to expose the naked skin beneath. “The sort that proper little ladies aren't supposed to enjoy.”

Her comment earned a round of hoots, hollers and whistles from the group of Banterers. The lead man turned about and with a wave of his hand, shushed them all. “Enough! Move along now.”

With murmurs of discontent and shakes of their heads, the other Banterers turned away to leave the brute alone with the captives. He took a step closer to Isadel, reached out and let his hand gruffly trail along her chin. She didn't jerk away; instead she held the sensual smile firmly locked in place. “It's been a long while since I had a real man,” she whispered, hoping that Cullen wouldn't hear.

“Isadel! What in the hell are you doing?” Cullen's heated gaze narrowed upon her and it pained her to see the hurt flashing in his eyes.

She gave a slight shake of her head, praying that he'd catch her signals. Thankfully the brute before her didn't seem to notice Cullen's outburst. “And just what would you do with a real man?”

Isadel let a soft, throaty laugh escape her lips. “Why don't you let me down from here and take me somewhere private and I'll show you just what I would do.”

He seemed to consider the request for a moment. All the while Isadel's stomach was winding itself into tighter knots. She sure hoped this worked, because if it didn't she knew she'd end up being the sexual play-toy of the Banter before her. There was only one man she wanted, and he needed her help. The Banter reached out, loosening the ropes that bound her. “Come with me,” he said simply.

As Isadel let him take her forcefully by the arm and drag her to one of the far off tents in camp, she shot a glance back over her shoulder to Cullen. She could see the upset as clearly as if it were painted across his face in vivid colors. He opened his mouth as if to speak and again Isadel shook her head. She mouthed the words, “Trust me,” just before she disappeared into the darkness of the waiting tent.

Chapter Thirteen

He could have only guessed that it had been hours since she'd disappeared into that tent, and Cullen was absolutely sick with worry. As he watched the last of the Banter's retire for the night, he conceived a hundred different scenarios in his head. Perhaps he'd bound and gagged her so that she couldn't utter a word or a whimper. Perhaps he'd hurt her... Perhaps she was lying there unconscious and vulnerable. Perhaps she's lying beside him in his bed, he thought, as dagger-like pain ripped through his heart.

He shook his head. Dear Ladies of the Night, he couldn't think that. She would never give herself to a strange man ... though she had tried to give herself to him before she'd even known his name. No, that wasn't possible, she may have been free and open, but she was no whore. She was a Daughter of Anista, a princess of a kingdom... It was just impossible.

Still, he wondered, worried. What could she have possibly been thinking? If she had some sort of plan, wouldn't she have done something by now? Or at least sent him a sign? His mind reverted back to his long list of maybes. Maybe she was hurt. Oh, he couldn't take the wondering. Each uncertain moment that passed was like a punch in the gut and it made him nauseous. Where the hell was she?

Then as if on some magic cue, he saw Isadel emerge from the tent. She cast a cautious glance about, but when she found the camp empty she strutted across the grounds. The moonlight caught the knife in her hand, making the blade shimmer like hope in her fingers.

As she reached him, he wanted nothing more than to draw her into his arms and kiss every inch of her face. His heart welled with happiness that she had emerged unharmed. "Isadel," he whispered.

"Shhh, we must hurry." She quickly went to work cutting the rope that bound him, then tucked the knife into her pocket and took his hand in hers. Just beyond the camp lay the shoreline of Banter's Isle. Under the glow of the moons, two small vessels came into view and her intentions became absolutely clear.

Cullen pulled up short, causing her to stop in her tracks. "You've lost your mind," he said simply.

"You've a better idea?"

"We can't steal a Banter ship."

"It's the only way off this island."

Cullen swallowed the lump in his throat. He wasn't sure if he was more nervous about stealing a barbarian's ship or braving the open waters once again. But she was right, it was their only hope. "Hurry then."

They boarded the small ship and after several long moments that seemed more like an eternity they finally set off into the darkened waters. As Cullen watched the Isle disappear into the darkness, he finally let himself breathe a sigh a relief. They had made it. Somehow, they had made it. They've survived a storm, escaped Banter's and were finally heading back in the right direction.

Cullen crossed the small deck to where Isadel was resting. Her eyes were closed and her head was leaned back against the frame. The twin moons bathed her in their pale

glow and she looked like something from a dream.

Despite the ache in his arm from wrestling with the sails, he managed to plop down beside her. He leaned up next to her and almost automatically she shifted so that her head rested comfortably against his shoulder. They sat a moment in silence, simply enjoying the feel of freedom. But Cullen had to break the silence. "Isadel?"

"Humm?" she muttered as if half asleep.

"Do I even want to ask what you did back there?"

She lifted her head and flashed a sleepy smile at him. "Probably not."

Cullen considered leaving it at that, but curiosity—and jealousy—got the best of him. "You didn't ... you know?"

"Heavens, no!"

"Then what did you do?"

Isadel snuggled back against him, resting her head on his shoulder once again. "I hit him over the head with his chamber pot."

Cullen's booming laughter echoed out into the night at the thought of it. "I hate to say it but I almost feel sorry for the man."

"Don't. He was a cad."

"Go figure," Cullen joked. But as the laughter died, one thought in particular plagued his mind. "I was afraid for you."

"I'm a big girl," Isadel whispered softly.

Cullen rose up and rested his palm upon Isadel's cheek so that she brought her gaze up to meet his. "I mean it, Isadel. I was afraid he'd hurt you, afraid I'd never see you again. It nearly broke my heart."

His words seemed to touch her because for the first time since he'd met her, he saw tears swimming in her eyes. "Cullen, I was more afraid of what they would do to you. I, at least, would have served some purpose to them, but you, they would have just killed you. I couldn't stand the thought of that, I had to do something."

"It was supposed to me to save you, not the other way around."

Isadel pulled back slightly and cocked her head as she considered his statement.

"Why? Because I'm a woman?"

"Exactly."

"Ha! You think that just because I'm smaller than you that I'm fragile and weak. We'll I've got news for you..."

Cullen pressed his lips softly against hers, capturing the remainder of her protest in her throat. He lingered in the taste of her sweet lips and her velvety tongue as she opened her mouth to taste him. She was pure heaven and in that moment there was nowhere else he'd rather be. He knew that despite her grand notions and even grander dreams, he had lost his heart to a Daughter of Anista.

She pulled away, near breathless from his kiss. "I hope you don't think that changes anything."

"No," he said as he casually leaned back and let his gaze drift upward to the night sky. "I was just shutting you up."

"Oh! You are so infuriating!"

Cullen reached out and softly trailed his finger over her moist lips.

"Stop that! I'm not some bar maiden to quiet with a kiss or a horse to be gentled with a touch."

“I rarely gentle my horses. I like them wild and spirited. Just like my women.”

“I am not your woman,” she protested.

“Well that does prove a bit of a challenge since I had full intentions of being your man.”

Isadel smiled as she caught the play of amusement in his eyes. She leaned forward, resting her palm against his chest, her lips just inches from his. “And if I refuse?”

He pressed his lips to hers. “I’m a thief, remember? I’ll simply sweep you off to Triel and hold you captive.”

The End

About the Author:

A native Californian who now calls the lush, mountainous landscapes of Washington State her home, Danielle Devon is living a life long dream of being a writer. This multi-published author has settled comfortably into her realm of romance. She looks to each new title as a chance to explore her own creativity and enchant readers with her fanciful stories.

A voracious reader herself, Danielle can most always be found with a stack of books in her to-be-read pile in addition to a stack of her current works-in-progress. When not toiling away behind a computer screen or reading a good book, Danielle enjoys watching romantic movies, playing with her children and going dancing with friends.

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