



Moonlight Pirate

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Dedication

To my parents;

For giving me a love of stories, encouraging my boundless imagination, and the many trips to Walt Disney World.

To my husband;

Who has the patience and tolerance of a saint when it comes to my pirate obsession and time spent in front of my computer in my own little world, and who doesn't mind fixing his own supper.

Chapter One

The chase was over.

Captain Asia Donovan stood on the *Aurora's* foredeck. A light wind blew across the bow. Finally, her fellow pirate's game of seek and hide ended tonight.

"The Sereno has heaved to." Wilder Rotham addressed the man beside her.

She didn't take offense. The men were accustomed to Fox commanding their two ship fleet after sunset.

"The lady gives the orders tonight, Mr. Rotham," her brother ground out.

Moonlight sparkled on the black waters of the Caribbean like an endless band of diamonds. All day the pressure in the humid air had been building along with the heaviness in her stomach. For the first time in seven years she'd be face to face with Captain Rainer.

Far more than her promise to retrieve her brother's stolen snuffbox hung in the balance of tonight's meeting. The fate of all the Spanish Main rested in her hands.

Her heart beat with the fury of a thousand birds desperate to escape from her ribcage. Somehow she had to convince the vampire to join forces. "Bring 'er alongside," she shouted to the men on the main deck.

The crew jumped into action handsomely trimming the sails.

Wilder frowned and wiped the sweat from his brow with a bare forearm.

"Are you deaf, Quartermaster?" Asia glared at her shirtless second-in-command.

"No, ma'am, only dead," Wilder said flashing a fanged smile before smartly heading toward the buzz of activity.

Fox stepped closer and lowered his voice. "I don't like this. We have lost valuable time. Blasted *Tres Chupadiablos los Muerte*. The *Luna* is careened and we don't know where those three ships of blood sucking devils have made berth."

As always her brother's black entire from his open neck shirt to his knee-high boots fit his tall form perfectly, while she needed a belt to hold her trousers up. A wide leather strap hung over a single broad shoulder before cutting across his strong chest diagonally and held a sheathed cutlass near identical length of his long legs. He carried twin pistols tucked into the black silk sash tied around his narrow waist.

Half his size, standing beside Fox always reminded her how out of place she must appear. She adjusted the angle of her scabbard preventing the sword from hitting against her calf. Belonging had never been her lot her life.

She shoved her shirtsleeves out of the way along with the storm of old doubts. Going on the account had been her choice. Blonde hair and blue eyes might not make her the fiercest looking pirate, but she had defeated every scurvy dog that had underestimated her. She had

earned the loyalty and respect of her crew. What more could she ask for?

"Fox," she said joining him at the rail and meeting his black gaze, "you're over reacting. The *Luna* has sustained far worse battering. "

"Damn near losing two masts is like saying her belonging to Davy Jones is a minor inconvenience." Both his hands curled into fists at his sides.

She winced. A hair's breathe difference on any one incoming round and they'd have lost the *Luna*. At least they saved the merchant vessel and her passengers.

"Hawk will have her in fighting form by the time we're back to Noir Cove." She touched Fox's shoulder and gave him a small squeeze. More than a third captain, Hawk had taken them in, becoming the teacher and eldest brother she'd never had. The vampire would work non-stop until he replaced every one of the *Luna's* damaged boards and caulked each of her seams. "Don't forget it was my plan that took out one of their ships?"

The corners of Fox's mouth lifted as he turned and leaned against the rail. "Aye, the *Siempre Reino* will be careened for weeks. A brilliant strategy, second only to my seamanship."

"Closer to a hell-bent charge into the fray," she snorted and sucked in a lung full of sea spray. "We'll reward the men with extra liberty when we pick up supplies in Port James."

"Tortuga." He glared shifting back towards the bow as he ran his hand along the smooth railing.

"Still avoiding Dreselle, and temptation?"

"And you run straight for it." Fox's eyes narrowed. "I don't trust Rainer."

"Oh, that's rum," she shot back and snapped around to face her overly suspicious brother. He bloody well knew Rainer fought the same battle they did.

"For three years Rainer has escaped you. Why the sudden invitation?"

She froze. The exact question had crossed her mind. Ever since she'd taken the *Aurora* as her own and began pursuing the former privateer, she'd never have guessed he'd surrender.

"You're certain he isn't with *Tres Chupadiablos*?"

Pointing a finger at his chest, she advanced. "You were there when he saved us."

Fox stiffened. "He wants you."

She shook her head wishing her brother were right. Rainer's gifts aside. The pirate had three years worth of opportunities, and had squandered every one of them. "He might want my body, not me," she said quietly.

A lump rose in her throat. Every man in her life, with exception of her brother and Hawk, wanted her to be something else. Her thieving father wanted a boy, her savvy Port Royal merchant a housekeeping wife to produce a brood of children, and her short-lived distinguished naval officer a demure docile bride to advance his career. What role did Rainer expect her to play?

The evening breeze struggled to move in the humid air. Perspiration slipped between her breasts. She hadn't felt such anticipation since the night she'd first seen Rainer.

Asia stared out the constant moving water as the memories flowed into here thoughts. She, Fox, her father, and older brother Giffon had been a day away from arriving in Port James. After everyone had fallen asleep she'd snuck out of their shipboard cabin. For almost a month she'd spent every waking hour locked in the tiny room. Like tonight, the stars had shone brighter than the enormous stern lanterns she'd crawled beneath. One moment she had been sitting on the hard wooden planks, the next they were under attack. What the crew had thought were pirates turned out to be much worse.

Soulless vampires.

The *Tres Chupadiablos* struck in a vicious attack from the aft. The fierce quake of a ship beneath her boots and the roar of cannons as they fired no longer bothered her. But as a girl thrown to the deck by the force, she'd been terrified the whole world shook to pieces. The paralyzing helplessness she'd felt as the monsters had boarded still hit her each time she saw their ships.

Now she fought when they appeared. But back then she'd hidden beneath the rear deck stairs and prayed Fox would find her. He did. But then, the bloodthirsty creatures found him. If Rainer and his men hadn't appeared everyone onboard the vessel would be dead.

No image had been more joyous than the vampire pirate stepping out of a bank of choking smoke. Tall, muscled, and dressed in solid black, till her last breath she'd remember the power of his onyx eyes blazing with injustice. A field of determination resonated from him as he staked the demon about to devour her soul.

After the battle, she'd been overjoyed until Rainer demanded she and the other passengers surrender their valuables as payment. Damn him. The fight she'd put up had done nothing but postpone the inevitable and she'd still been forced to hand over her brother's snuffbox. Had the pirate captain guessed beneath the shorn hair and boy's clothing stood a thirteen-year-old girl? Recalling the irritation furrowing his perfectly sculpted face, she doubted he saw anything except her insolence.

"Let the blasted tin go." Fox's voice cut through her thoughts quicker than the blade of his cutlass.

Impossible.

They sailed toward the *Sereno*. "I handed over grandfather's snuff box to the bastard and I promised to get it back."

"Forget it."

"I know how much the heirloom means to you." She watched his reaction out of the corner of her eye. The loss of the silver case had hurt him more than his becoming a vampire or being homeless.

"*Meant*. It's in the past." He pulled off his black tricorn hat and smoothed his damp blonde hair back into the tight queue.

"For a pirate, you're a bloody awful liar." Confessing she'd lost his tin had been tougher than negotiations with the most brutal buccaneer and more painful than a battle with a ruthless vampire.

The *Aurora's* prow tilled a path through the field of waves. She welcomed the soothing rhythm of the deck rocking beneath her boots.

"This isn't about a childhood promise. It's about him." Fox jabbed a finger toward the approaching *Sereno*.

"It's both." She spun to port side and released a pent up breath. She hated arguing with Fox. All her life her brother had sacrificed to protect her without ever asking anything in return. The single time he needed her help protecting their Grandfather's snuffbox she'd let him down. Seven years she'd lived with the dishonor of her failure.

Rainer may not have changed since their first meeting, but she had. Older and wiser, with each battle she honed her skills. And this time, she wouldn't lose.

Golden lights flickered on the *Sereno*. Their mesmerizing glow reminded her of a siren drawing their prey closer with their deadly beckoning. She scanned the silhouettes for the privateer. Even without the taunts as he eluded her pursuit, she'd recognize him by his height alone. No other pirate towered a full head above his crew or stood with the confident steadfast resolve of a mast in the midst of the worst gale. Her heart raced beneath her breast.

His quips from the deck and habit of waiting until he was in view of her spyglass to flash her a wicked smile moments before he evaded her stoked her fascination. A tingle flowed over skin at the thought of his hungry mouth and eyes black with pure desire. For the past three years she'd upped her pursuit of him in between fighting the *Tres Chupadiablos los Muerte*. She glanced toward her quarters at the stern of the frigate. Behind a thick green door she had a sea chest filled to brim with the erotic silks, oils, and jewelry Rainer had sent her after each escape.

"What do you expect to get out of this?" Fox prowled the planking behind her. The fall of his heavy footsteps broke the lull of the water.

Needy quivers wobbled her knees. She didn't dare turn from the East Indiaman until the burning in her cheeks cooled. Blatant sexual lust wouldn't help sway her brother's support for her plan. Hawk had already agreed. Maybe they had been wrong not to tell Fox? She fingered the hammer of the pistol tucked into the jade sash at her waist. The hull of the *Sereno* loomed larger. It was too late to alter course.

"Rainer offers more than regaining our family heirloom."

Fox jerked to a halt.

Asia turned her back to the sea to face her brother.

"I know what goes on between a man and a woman." A small grin pushed up the corners of his mouth. "I don't need an explanation."

"The powerful vampire is afraid?" She smirked.

"Any man fears listening to his baby sister's tale of wanting bedroom booty." He shuddered.

"This isn't about sex." She crossed her arms over her chest.

Fox's eyebrows rose.

"Not that I wouldn't seize the opportunity if it arose."

"You're killing me," he said with groan.

She grabbed her brother's arm. "Impossible. You're already dead."

"Bloody punishment for allowing you to grow up on a ship full of vamps and pirates." He muttered as he allowed her to drag him to furthest point on the bow.

She swept her gaze over the deck and up through the sails and rigging. Confident the crew couldn't overhear, she took a deep breath. "I'm going to ask Rainer to form an alliance."

Fox gripped one of the golden carved beams of the *Aurora's* sun figurehead so hard the wood cracked.

"Belay that!" She swatted at his hand.

A low growl ripped from his throat.

"We don't need a second vessel damaged." Asia stood toe-to-toe with her vampiric sibling. Enough soulless devils had met their end at the point of her sword she refused to let anyone intimidate or bully her. The breeze pushed her escaped curls into her eyes and ruffled the black feather in Fox's hat.

"We don't need Rainer's help either." He released his hold.

"We've searched from one end of the Spanish Main to other and haven't found the monster's anchorage. The *Tres Chupadiablos* are getting stronger." She kept her voice low. "When we first went after them they rarely attacked a major trading vessel. Now, we come across one or more a week."

He rubbed his furrowed brow.

"Their crews are increasing until they can man every gun on all three galleons." She swallowed and glanced down at the parting waves. "You know armed to the teeth we can't match their firepower. If they we don't stop them before they reach full strength they'll rule these waters."

The dark possibility sent her stomach into a violent roll. The entire Caribbean would fall in a matter of time, and after they had killed and tortured thousands of innocent people they would head someplace new. Europe? The Americas? She hugged her middle before she retched over the side.

"I don't like this." His left hand clenched around the hilt of his sheathed cutlass. "

"Hawk is in agreement." Asia held her breath. With their fellow captain's vote agreed, she had what she needed to proceed with the alliance. All the accords in the world with Rainer meant nothing if Fox refused to work with their fellow vampire pirate. Don't be foolish she prayed.

"He follows our code." He snarled and raised his black gaze to the dark sky.

"Yes!" She whooped and clapped her hands together!

"Are you certain you can convince him?" A softness absent earlier entered his voice.

"I've fought and bargained with men who'd make the devil turn tail and run. Savvy?" she thrust back with more bravado than she felt.

"Rainer is different."

"Not so different from you," she said softly as she moved closer to him.

Fox slammed his fist on the railing so hard the wooden beam vibrated. "Don't be foolish, Asia."

Deep brow ridges rose on his forehead hooding his hollow cheeks.

His jaw shifted. The bones' prominent lines stretched his facial skin. Any other time she appreciated the frightening beauty of his transformation from man to predator. His beast hovered below the surface, but she wouldn't back down. "Why are you so against this?"

"Because," the intense fire in his black eyes quelled, "I-I can't protect you." The words slipped between his clenched fangs.

She sank back against the rail. Not even when he'd been turned had Fox ever shown weakness. He still thought of her as his frightened baby sister he must guard from all harm. A lump formed in her throat. Fox had been the only one who loved her, besides her mother, growing up. Never had she meant for him to carry the burden of her safety for so long.

Light from the *Sereno's* lanterns shown on her ship. Another minute and they'd overhaul the powerful east Indiaman. "I'm not a little girl anymore. You and Hawk trained me to protect myself and I've had lots of practice." She winked.

"I know. Your better than three quarters of the crew with a blade." He jerked his head toward the busy maindeck.

"So stop worrying. Rainer's not going to devour me," she said even as the thrill of being devoured by the pirate shot from the soles of her boots to her brain.

Her brother grabbed her by the shoulders and hauled her before him. "Letting him feed is nothing compared with the favors you've done me."

She remained still. Had any other swab attempted a similar move, she'd have broken both limbs and tossed the scurvy swine overboard. "Fox." She gentled her voice.

"I'm..." Her brother's chin fell against his chest as he released his hold.

"It's okay." She gave him quick hug. "I know." She wove a path through the maze of rigging and men to the main deck.

Across the water the crew of the *Sereno* and several women crowded the main deck.

Fox joined her. "Maybe I don't have to worry about you being the main course."

Asia ignored his sarcasm.

"I can see why you think Rainer would make a great ally," he murmured.

"Forget about the floating pleasure palace." The loose ship image didn't fit Rainer. A lazy sailor with sloppy crew couldn't have pulled off the master strategist maneuvers he'd used in their cat and mouse pursuit. The few times she'd gotten close enough to view him without the aid of a spyglass his ship ran as smooth as the silk his messenger bird delivered within an hour of his escape.

She glanced at the dockside doxies in their bright, half-fastened dresses, and then down at her white, oversized sleeves slipping past her wrists. All her battle won confidence disappeared. Her insides cringed into a tight ball dreading a glare or comment like those from her father and the well-bred ladies on the merchant vessels she saved from death. Part of her wanted to run and hide as she'd done as a little girl before anyone had the chance to send her away.

Damnit. Her father was dead. Her merchant lover and navel captain too were nothing more than a long memory. She shoved her sleeves around her elbows. Who cared what anyone else thought. She straightened her spine. Never again would she allow someone to force her to be someone else.

Fox leaned closer. "Tell Rainer if he hurts you I'll blow his ship out of the water, and if even thinks of turning you, I'll kill him."

"There she be, Captain," Ollie Smith, the *Sereno's* first mate, said.

The clank of the *Aurora's* chain echoed as her anchor sped towards the Caribbean's sandy floor.

"Fine, long lines she has. A right beauty."

"Yes, she is." Rainer ignored the sleek vessel in favor of the slender woman firing off orders with more fervor than a row of six pounders. Preternatural sight gave him a view better than the finest spyglass. Blonde ringlets poked out from beneath her brown hat and curled around her heart shaped face. The innocent curls contrasted with the snap of passion in her blue eyes and sway of her hips. His fangs lengthened.

Tonight he would repay her for the hours of sleepless frustration she'd given him. His cock jerked in anticipation of finally sinking between her silky thighs and into her warm center. A welcome if only temporary release.

"We're losing time." Dayne Leeword joined them and pulled out a gold pocket watch.

"Quartermaster's right, Sir. If'n, that is, you're still plannin' to go to Port James and get your information." Ollie's watery gaze bounced between the two vampires.

"It'll cost less time than rescuing them if they follow us." A heavy gamble, but one he'd no choice but to take. Rainer glanced skyward.

A blue and gold macaw swooped down from the yardarm and landed on the rail beside him. He stroked the creature's smooth feathers.

"Send Errol. Send Errol," the bird chanted bobbing its head.

Dayne grimaced as he held out a stiff arm towards parrot.

Errol stepped onto the offered dark blue brocade perch.

His aristocratic nose turned up. "The bloody thing bites."

"So do you, Mr. Leeword." Rainer laughed. "And sending word by his wings is more secure than paper or people." The bird had proven to be the most valuable of the booty from the Spanish treasure he plundered. Errol learned messages in one repetition and somehow found the recipient.

"Word of advice, Sir," Ollie called toward the swish of Quartermaster's coattails, "keep him above your belt."

Dayne's straight spine went rigid and held the bird further away from his body.

Their new vampire had a lot to learn. Rainer smiled.

"Ahoy."

He turned toward the shouting woman on his starboard side. "Captain Asia, I'm told I have something you want."

The crew roared with laughter. "I'll give ya something, lassie," shouted a drunken sailor.

Rainer glared at the man silencing him. No one would give anything to Asia Donavon except him.

Cool as the north wind, she waited for the bawdy comments to die down. "Aye, are you man enough to stop running and stand and deliver."

He chuckled. "I give as good as I get, Love."

"Considering you haven't given me anything that shouldn't be too hard."

"On the contrary, it's very hard." He flashed her a wicked, fanged smile.

A volley of jeers and cheers shot between the two ships.

A tide of crimson washed over her face.

Would her breasts flush the same shade when he kneaded the small mounds? What about her cherry nipples as he suckled them between his sharp teeth? His cock filled. He had one night to learn the answers.

Damn. He wished like hell he had more time with her. Their game had been the happiest moments in immortality. He hated ending the competition, but soon he'd learn the *Tres Chupadiablos los Muerte's* hideout. He couldn't risk Asia following him into their lair in her pursuit of him. When the final battle happened he didn't want her anywhere near the

uncontrollable monsters. Especially the one inside himself.

"Is this where we blast each other into oblivion?" Asia called.

"I'd hate to destroy such a beautiful ship."

"No more than I'd regret scuttling your vessel."

"Sink me!" Ollie's eyes widened. "Either she's got no fear, or she's thick as molasses."

A small mouse poked out from the wiry hairs of the first mate's bushy, gray beard. "Even Henry can't make sense of her." He stroked the rodent's tiny head.

"Nor I," Rainer said. Leaning down towards his first mate's ear. The woman had almost captured him with her relentless pursuit and cunning maneuvers more times than he cared to admit.

"Should I break out your dueling pistol, Captain?" Ollie wiped his hands on the short legs of his tar coated pants

"No, Mr. Smith, marring such a beautiful body is a worse crime than piracy." Few ladies had her shrewdness and even less her love of the chase. This gave him an idea. "Lady Captain, I have a proposition, a battle of wits and save our ships," he shouted over the slap of the waves against the two hulls.

"What a lovely rhyme. Are you a pirate or a poet?" She gifted him with a radiant smile. "I hope you're as gracious a loser."

"You'll have to join me to find out."

She scraped her teeth across her full lower lip.

Rainer tied down the growl poised to pounce from his chest. The struggle reminded him his primal instincts ruled his waning humanity. Decades of fighting monsters had turned him into one of the uncontrollable creatures he hunted.

"Agreed, a game of strategy." Her stubborn chin jutted out.

How far would she go? He scratched his stubbled chin. "You win, and I give you your choice of any piece of my treasure. Lose, and the *Aurora* is mine. Savvy?"

She gasped.

He cursed himself for giving her a loophole. Any captain worth their salt would sail straight away.

"Agreed."

Rainer released an unneeded breath. Even after a hundred years, some mortal habits outlived his humanity.

Grappling hooks clanked as they hit the *Sereno's* deck and dug into the rails. The faces of the men of the *Aurora's* crew strained as they lashed the vessels' hulls close together.

"Did you think you could scare me off?" Asia took a rope from a tall, black crewman. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I haven't mastered retreats."

The lady's crew followed her progress as she swung across the water and her boots

touched down on *Sereno's* smooth deck with the silent grace of a gull.

"Drop in anytime," he purred.

The rapid pounding of her pulse filled his head. To her credit, she hid her fear well.

"Does this vessel have any code?" She glared at a sailor with a half clad tart draped over his lap.

Good. If she bought the disreputable impression so would anyone watching. Until he discovered who had sent him the tip on the *Tres Chupadiablos'* anchorage and their intention he'd maintain the freewheeling, incompetent façade. "We like to keep things easy." He shrugged.

Her fine eyebrows rose. "The only thing looser than this ship is a whore in Port James."

Rainer let out a bark of laughter. Women who spoke their mind were too rare. "Ladies first." He gestured toward the stern.

Her pretty pink lips fell open. "This is the first time I've ever been included in that category."

"Dressed in those clothes, Love, I can see why," he said, even as he admired how the pants outlined her small waist and long legs.

Asia stumbled and whirled.

Her blue eyes blazed hotter than the point of a flame. The searing undercurrent of pain held him motionless. Who had dared hurt her? An unfamiliar protective side of his internal beast snarled. He stretched his hand towards her, but let his arm fall before he reached her. What did he know about comfort?

"Gangway ya scurvy swabs," Ollie shouted. His stout body cleared a channel through the men.

Taking up the tail, Rainer followed in the saucy wake of Asia's ass. He noted she held her fingers inches away from her cutlass and pistol. Smart woman. The night air carried her musky arousal mixed with hibiscus. Her masculine attire made the contrast of her soft feminine scent stronger. His balls tightened.

She grabbed the heavy handle to his cabin and hesitated.

"It's not too late to quit." He leaned down and whispered in her ear. Fine, blonde tendrils tickled his nose.

"Never." She yanked the door the open and froze.

A naked, dark-haired wench lay across his carved bed. Blast. Molly must have snuck in his cabin when he'd come on deck. A lusty lass, he'd enjoyed her company once in the past, but he had no intention of a repeat. Especially not tonight. He crossed the room in three long strides.

"Up with you." Rainer grasped her arms and hauled her off the black silk sheets.

The girl swayed on her feet drunk from blood loss and sex. She clutched her red gown

to her naked breasts.

Before she could wrap her arms around him, he pointed her wobbly form towards the hatch. "Off with ye." He gave her generous backside a swat. "Dayne, see to her," he shouted.

As soon as she crossed the threshold, he locked the door.

"Don't think I'm taking her place." Asia trailed a casual finger over the intricate carvings of the black lacquered footboard. Her left hand rested on the hilt of her sword.

Beneath her offended tone, he detected a quiver of excitement. "Jealous?" he goaded.

"She doesn't have anything I want."

"But I do," he whispered as he passed behind her.

The tip of her tongue flicked across her lower lip. "And later I have a proposition for you."

"You're propositioning me?" He glanced up from storage compartment under the cabin's rear padded bench.

"Not yet."

All sass and fire, he smiled to himself. "I'll look forward to it. After, I've won our chess match."

"Chess." She whirled sending more of her golden curls tumbling from beneath her brown hat.

He wanted the rest of the silky treasure freed so he could bury his fingers in the softness. Not anywhere in all of the Spanish Main had he seen brighter or more tempting gold. But first, "You have heard of the game?"

"Aye," she snapped. "Is that really all you want?"

Her nose scrunched reminding him of a curious rabbit.

"It's a start." In truth the contest, didn't scratch the surface. He longed for her in his bed every night, her golden curls spread over his pillow, and her warm welcoming flesh pressed against his cool body. A deep, ache spread through his chest. At the same time his primal instincts pressed to slake his desire. He gritted his teeth as his mind warred with his animal inclination.

Every subsequent battle became harder while each victory cost him a little more of his humanity. One day he would lose. He well remembered the grim carnage his beast created. When the moment he could no longer contain it arrived, he wanted didn't anyone around. For now, he still had time.

"Here." He tossed her an armful of turquoise silk along with the complete trappings of a lady at Asia. "You can't play the game of kings in the rags of a peasant."

A cloud of indigo dulled her bright, blue eyes. Her gaze flipped from the gown to the chessboard on the small table beside him. She held the garment at arms length as if the fabric were diseased.

"It's a dress."

"Aye, I've received them before."

By the brittle tone of her voice she'd been none too pleased with his gifts. "Yet, you're not wearing one."

"It's impractical." She dropped her arms and the airy layers of materials floated to the cabin floor. "Have you ever tried fighting a soulless vampire wearing more layers than a cake?"

"No," he smiled, "but you're inside now with no monsters to battle." At least, so long as he maintained control of himself.

"Justify it anyway you like. I'm not wearing it." She wadded up the garment.

"Dress or the door, Love," he said before she could launch it at him.

Pink lips compressed and quivered as she swallowed.

He faulted the pleasure she'd brought him over their three year chase for wanting their one night together to be different. Had he not the promise of the location of the *Tres Chupadiablos*, he'd – still keep her at a distance. He dropped the bench cover with a thunk. His tenuous hold over the animal part of himself couldn't be trusted.

Shadows partnered with the sadness danced around her kissable mouth.

"Fine. I'll put the bloody thing on," she ground out. "How does a scallywag get a ball gown?"

"I re-appropriated the fetching fashion from its less than rightful owners." The quip earned him a small grin. He pulled a bottle of red wine from the rack behind the hatch. "You'll appreciate the extra clothing later."

With a glare sharp enough to cut him to ribbons, she clomped past him and ducked behind the tri-fold rice paper screen beside the bed. "You're no different than anyone else. You want me only if I change."

Venom coiled around her words. "Just the frock, Love. I prefer the rest of you the way you are."

"Liar," she snorted.

"Normally, but in this case I'm as honest as a priest, Love." He smiled and waited for her quick parry.

"I'd trust the devil first," she muttered and hung her head.

Rainer frowned at the silhouette's slump in her shoulders. A vague memory of the despair noble women displayed over their clothing returned. Asia was far from the shallow palace females. The need to wrap his arms around her and absorb her hurt surged inside him. He fought the desire. Protective emotions outside the general safety of innocent ship passengers under siege didn't occur. Any hint of pain and weakness always incited his beast.

Her boots thumped as they hit the floor.

A single long stride and a sheet of paper stood between him from her exposed flesh. His cock strained against his trousers. For three years he'd imagined her warm, living body pinned beneath his, spreading thighs, and milking her pussy as he drank from her neck. He took a step forward and stopped.

Too close.

Knots tightened in his stomach. He hadn't even noticed his animal instincts had taken over until he'd moved to act of them. He ran a hand through his hair. Never had his need for vigilance been more important. Tonight, the man in him must remain in control.

He turned toward the small, silver box beside his chart table. Candlelight bounced off the trinket's shiny surface. The rules of human decency hit him along with the shame of falling short. Sweat dripped from his temple. Wiping the rare moisture away, he feared he'd need a lot of reminders before dawn.

"What are the rules of *your* game?" Asia called over the slap of her trousers landing on the top of the screen.

Rainer turned his attention to the lady pirate. "For every piece you capture, your opponent must surrender an article of clothing of your choosing. The first one naked loses."

"As in completely?" she squeaked.

"Bare as the day you were born." He grinned.

She poked her head around the corner. "I hope you don't have any inhibitions."

"None whatsoever." Hunger tugged at his cock and lengthened his fangs.

Her eyes widened a second before she pulled back out of sight. "Uh, w-what are all the strange black symbols on the panels?"

"The characters are Chinese writing." He pulled the cork from the bottle of wine.

"What does it say?"

"Treat death as life." He set the bottle beside the chessboard. The soft amber glow from the bedside lantern illuminated her silhouette. His throat went dry. The outline of her tiny waist and ample breasts tempted his resolve. He fought the urge to breakdown the thin barrier and plunder every treasured inch of her.

"Is Marco Polo right about a giant wall surrounding the country?" She slid a delicate silk stocking over her long leg.

A groan prowled the back of his throat. Soon he'd have them locked around his thighs.

Asia grabbed the dress next. She shimmied her hips in her fight with the skirts. "Blast." She fumbled with the row of tiny buttons.

"Let me." Before he stopped himself, he rounded the screen.

Supple blue silk hugged her body from her breasts to her waist then fell away like waves of water. Curls hid her face as she tucked her chin to her chest.

His cock jerked at the close proximity of relief. Three years he'd waited to take her.

Another hour or even a thousand wouldn't kill him. He limited his touch to the tip of his finger running the pad along the soft skin of her collarbone and down the sensitive valley between her breasts.

Asia leaned forward into his touch.

Warmth from her skin seeped into his body the same way sunshine had as a mortal. Her pulse thumped against his nerve endings. The steady beat spread through him. Lulled by a calm peace he had never known, his eyes drifted closed. Nothing else existed.

The unmistakable thick fragrance of desire flowed between her thighs. He inhaled the heady musk. The slightest touch and her body responded. Behind the veils of her skirt, he pictured the folds of her sex plump with blood and awash with in her sweet cream. Ambrosia waiting to be licked away from her outer lips by his tongue.

"Take her," his beast commanded from deep inside. Blood rushed in his veins. Muscles filled with liquid strength. His intensified senses overtook his thoughts. Asia's pulse filled his head. He stared at the vein in her neck and lowered his mouth.

"Rainer?" Wide blue eyes glanced up at him.

Reason pounded him. The creamy skin beneath his lips came into focus followed by comprehension. Another second and he'd have plunged his teeth through her skin. He backed away immediately.

"What's wrong?"

Had he deluded himself believing he could maintain control? Ice colder than the shock of the first winter frost crept through his body. If he were wrong, Asia would die.

He glanced toward the silver box.

"Laugh and I have your guts for garters." Asia scowled.

Rainer swung his gaze to Asia. His worries along with his ability to speak vanished. She looked...gorgeous. After almost a hundred years he never dreamed he'd again see the colors of the waves fluctuate under the sun. Her eyes held the wonder of the blue-green Caribbean he loved and more.

The absence of the shadow from her hat revealed high cheekbones kissed with roses. Gold curls cascaded in spirals over her shoulders and down her back. He imagined the silky strands as they whispered across his bare chest. His balls hardened to iron.

"Devil take ye and your dress." She spat and marched to red velvet bench opposite the chessboard.

A sliver of hurt jutted out of her anger. Captain Asia plied the trade of a pirate, but behind the garb, she was still a woman. Damn. His unconscious adherence to reassuring compliments and the strict code of the royal court's comportment had long past.

Rainer handed her a glass of wine. *"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."*

"Now." Tightness gripped her smile as she fumbled with the tangle of skirts.

"Tomorrow, when I'm back in britches and boots you'll change your mind."

Did she really believe him so capricious? Her low opinion of him pricked the little honor he held. He took the chair opposite her. "You're wrong. My feelings won't change the day after, or a hundred years beyond."

Her forehead wrinkled and a small dimple formed between her brows.

"The proper response is thank you."

"What does a pirate know of manners?" Her gaze softened above the rim of the gold goblet perched at her lips.

"It's remarkable the tricks one can glean at royal court."

"I didn't know they allowed scallywags in?"

He propped his left foot on the edge of the bench and tipped his chair back. "If they kicked out all the scoundrels, Love, the palace would be empty."

"True enough," she said with a tiny smile. "No doubt you were submerged in the wanton, wicked lifestyle there."

"All the way up to my black heart."

"A seducer of ladies I can believe, but not heartless." She set a flickering tray of candles on the polished wooden portion of the bench beside her.

Pain cut through his chest. His boot slipped and the chair's two front legs crashed to floor. The human organ had died the same moment as his body. Until Asia, he'd discarded his old desires for a woman's love and marriage. Fool, he cursed clenching his fist. He could want until the end of the world and still have the heart of a beast.

He buried the ache. Right now, this moment, away from the *Tres chupadiablos* and the blood rage of battle was all that mattered. "Hungry?" Rainer snagged a piece of mango from a silver platter. The tang of ripe fruit wet his thirst to taste Asia's sweet juices. He scraped his tongue against the sharp edges of his fangs.

Asia bit into a slice. Liquid dribbled down her chin and over her throat.

Rainer groaned transfixed by the rivulet's path. The trail slowed as it passed over her neck. The rhythm of her quick pulse filled his head. A soft *whoosh* of blood vibrated through her soft flesh. Moisture filled his mouth. Rich and red, her blood held the strength and spice of the finest wine. His beast demanded a sample. He swallowed and gripped the carved arms of his chair.

As the drop reached her collarbone, he noticed two round, white scars above he'd missed. There was no mistaking the familiar marks. "You've been bitten," he growled.

She jumped in her seat. The wine sloshed over the rim of her glass and onto the table. "My brother, after he'd been first—turned."

"You're lucky you aren't dead." The tide of memories of the constant hunger of his first feeding hit. Air flew from lungs. He focused on the snuffbox as he rode out the storm. Pain

beyond the *Tres Chupadiablos*' weeks of starvation and torture racked his body his first days as a vampire. Muscles cramped until movement became an act of sheer will. He clenched his jaw. The agony of tendons and bones ripped and transformed around the animal inside stayed with him. Food. The single need overtook his thoughts.

His transition had succeeded where the soulless vampires had failed. He begged for death.

When his sanity returned, he wished he'd had the strength to kill himself. His stomach rolled. Torn and shredded flesh from iron bits in a sangrenel shot on an open deck paled. He rubbed his eyes in hopes the picture of his vicious attacked disappeared.

"A bite is nothing," Asia said.

His lids snapped open. The naïve tone of nonchalance spurred a burn of anger through his limbs. Did she know the price her ignorance could have cost her? "Sharing your blood is more than providing a meal. It's surrendering your body, will, and your soul."

"Are you exaggerating to distract or impress me?" Asia licked her lower lip.

The sight of her pink tongue inflicted more pain than a lash from the cat o' nine tails. But he'd endure this brand of torture anytime. "It's not the words that count, Love. It's the deed."

She sucked in a sharp breath and leaned over the chessboard. "And did yours include plundering Spanish galleons?"

"I prefer the term reallocation of assets." He chuckled lightly.

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I knew it. The *Tres Chupadiablos* turned you."

"Aye." He nodded unsure of what to say. Concern by anyone outside his crew was as rare to him as sunlight.

"I'm sorry. I—I needed to be sure." She reached across the table and placed her hand on his.

"Why?" He stared at her long, slender fingers laid over his. A simple act of kindness. When had anyone ever done something for him free from reciprocation?

"I'll explain later." She shook her head.

Warmth soaking into his skin where their flesh connected. The agitated beast quelled. He fought unsuccessfully for years for the calm her touch achieved in seconds. He closed his eyes savoring the moment.

The world needed her goodness and generosity. Now, more than ever, he realized the necessity to sever all his ties to Asia. He couldn't allow her to follow him to the *Tres Chupadiablos*. The heat he'd absorbed from her turned cold lost in endless emptiness. He ground his fangs. All his prior self-denial had been practice. He'd endure any pain so long as Asia remained safe.

"How did — what happened when you were turned?" Asia asked.

Her concern rather than curiosity coaxed the truth from his tongue before he realized the words had tumbled free. "They captured my ship and scuttled her. After, I watched my men murdered one by one." He rubbed his wrist where ropes had lashed him to the ship's wheel. Whenever he looked away, he'd been beaten. If he passed out, they'd wait until he regained consciousness before they killed the next man. Helpless anger shook him as he recalled each face of his crew as they were drained of their blood and soul.

"I didn't think I could hate those vicious bastards anymore." She slammed her palm against the table. The ivory and onyx pieces on the chessboard jumped. "I was wrong."

"The *Tres Chupadiablo* create an infinite capacity to hate." He gave a grim smile.

Asia didn't need to know about the weeks of torture afterward. The whips stripped away his flesh layer by layer, his back spasmed with the memory. He reached for his left cheek and stopped. The transformation had healed the gash.

"Your crew died, yet you were turned and didn't lose your soul." She sat back the gleam of pride in her blue eyes.

"Too stubborn." He shrugged and reached for his wine. He didn't mention the sole reason devils had turned him had been so they could inflict more punishment.

"You didn't come here for conversation." He raked his gaze from her head to her the swell of her breasts.

"No, I didn't." She met his blatant stare with one of her own. The promise of passion overflowed from her eyes.

"Ladies first." He indicated toward the chessboard.

"I hope you're prepared to lose?" She pushed an ivory pawn forward two squares.

"I'm prepared for everything." *Except you.* And the flashes of past tenderness and want she brought out. The snuffbox's haunting reminders of his old life didn't generate a fraction of the intensity as a single smile from Asia. He selected black knight. The points of horse's carved mane dug into the pad of his thumb. A few hours of human emotions didn't make him one.

He had her until dawn. For the first time since he became a vampire time had meaning. He wouldn't squander a second longing for a life that could never be.

Three turns later, he captured her pawn. "Shoe." He rose and knelt in front of her. Grasping her foot, he trailed his knuckles along her arch as he slid off the cream-colored slipper.

Asia gripped the red velvet cushion and gave a tiny moan.

"Your move." He willed himself to return to his seat and build her anticipation.

"Knight takes bishop." Silk rustled as she rose. She scowled at the skirt caught in the claw of the brass dragon trinket on the smooth portion of the bench on her left.

He smiled as she muttered through two unsuccessful attempts to free the material from

the mythical lizard's grasp. Stubborn and tenacious. Had the third not worked he'd bet she'd pick up the statue and carry the metal sculpture with her.

Minus a shoe, she held the edge of the table and hobbled towards him.

The need to haul her onto his lap and ravage her sassy mouth with his tongue beckoned. Anticipation hung in the cabin's warm air. How would the daring lady pirate try and best him?

"Belt," she croaked. Reaching down, her trembling fingers undid his buckle.

Boldness mixed with fear fired his lust. His stomach quivered where her flesh met his. A few centimeters lower and her digits could be wrapped around his thick cock and stroking him. Wildness drummed in his blood.

The back of her hand grazed his swollen head beneath the fabric.

His hips jerked towards her. The friction from his trousers became heaven compared with the torturous mental visions of Asia's lush lips sucking him into her warm mouth. The flick of her tongue against his hardness. He clenched his muscles and willed himself to remain still.

On the heels of a shaky breath, she backed away with the leather strap and sat. "You aren't the only one who can play dirty."

"Wicked little wench," he ground out.

It took him several moves to regain a small portion of self-control along with her rook. Stocking." Again, he knelt before her.

Inches separated his face from her core. The scent of her liquid arousal flowed deep within her channel toward her outer lips. He drew the pungent musk into his stiff lungs. Air hit the back of his tongue and hinted at her taste. The sweetness of sugarcane blended with the heat of curry. His mouth watered. His instinctive hunger awoke and demanded her copper blood. He immediately drained his mind of the thought.

Asia raised her layered skirts.

He held her ankle. As his fingers met, he stopped. God she had tiny bones. For a moment he marveled at the strength of such slenderness. His primal force could snap the joint without any effort. The realization only reinforced his determination to protect her.

Rainer caressed the back of her knee before charting his course to her smooth inner thigh. He kept the pressure light. He didn't want to hurt her with his rough hands or his strength. Simple exploration of her flesh surpassed the most glorious paradise. A groan rumbled in his chest. The last time he'd taken a woman as anything more than sustenance he'd been a mortal.

Using short strokes, he gathered a few inches of silk and lowered the material one section at a time. Choppy breaths fanned his face. "Is the game too much for your fragile feminine disposition?" He grinned.

She squirmed. “Lusty devil.” She swiped a pawn as he’d pulled the last of the fabric over her toes. “Your shirt, Captain, now.”

Chapter Two

Asia bit her lip. Why had she allowed Rainer to goad her? She could have picked his boots. Instead, she'd demanded his shirt.

"Anxious, Love?" Amusement sparkled in the vampire pirate's black eyes as he stood.

"Only for *my* reward." And for you. She still couldn't believe her grandfather's snuffbox sat untarnished on Rainer's chart table. Why had he kept what couldn't amount to more than a trinket? Any one of the silver chargers, exotic golden idols, or detailed charts displayed about the cabin had a value ten times the heirloom.

Her curiosity about the origins of his motivations faded as the black curtain of fabric rose over Rainer's body. Each inch revealed taunt male perfection from the jut of his narrow hips to his flat nipples. Heat spread through her body faster than a kick of rum.

His muscles stretched with languid grace as he threw the shirt on the bed. Broad shoulders connected to ropes of muscle covering his biceps. Tendons braided with flesh flexed with supple strength.

The ache in her belly sank lower. She rose and caressed his undulating forearms. His coarse dark hairs prickled the pads of her fingers. The rough texture made a delicious contrast to the cool skin beneath. Moisture slipped between her thighs.

Rainer's nostrils flared.

No question the pirate wanted her physically.

She swept her gaze over the rugged terrain of Rainer's chest. Blue, red, and green flame like marks wrapped around the sides of his torso and rode the waves of his abdomen. Several tips of the designs disappeared below the waist of his very tented trousers. She sucked in a sharp breath at the length outlined by the material. "Good God! What do you have in there, a long nine?"

"It's not a cannon, but it does fire," he chuckled.

She shook her head and laughed even as the empty space inside her longed for Rainer to fill her to the brim. Quivers hummed along her inner thighs. Asia clamped her legs together. Still, the ache remained. "Turn around."

He hesitated a second before obliged.

A colorful red and orange bird rising from of a sea of flames filled his entire back.

She gasped. Many sailors had tattoos, but none she'd seen had the high level of intricate detail as Rainer's. The picture almost appeared alive. Any second she expected the creature to flap its outstretched wings and soar into the air. "What is it?"

"A phoenix."

"It's beautiful." Each feather held a unique blend of color. The design must have taken

dozens of hours to transfer. All of which Rainer would have spent in pain. She winced.

"The Chinese believe it's immortal."

"Like you." A flicker of shadows as she walked past a tray full of candles made the inked fire appear alive.

"No." The word came out harder than a tack biscuit. "The Phoenix ate only air and never harmed another living creature."

A chaos of guilt churned in his plainspoken statement. She recognized the agony as similar words from the *Aurora's* crew. Without her permission, her heart went out to him. "You risk yourself to protect strangers."

He shot her a glare over his right shoulder. "It's not the same—"

"Yes, it is," she snapped. "You're a good man, Rainer."

"I'm not a man." His voice barely rose above a whisper.

The absence of hope echoed off the polished cabin walls and black drapery covered windows. On the night she and Fox came to live with Hawk he warned her a vampire without the strength of will and faith couldn't hold his soul. A chill went down her spine. She recalled the blackness and slow destruction of a young man soon after until Hawk and her brother had no choice but to stake him. "If you aren't a man, then why do you torture yourself like one?"

Silence.

Someone dead didn't show passion, concern, and especially not remorse. Rainer had saved her life. She owed him. "I've seen *monsters* all my life. The worst ones never drank blood," she said quietly.

Her father and oldest brother Griffon came to mind. She dug her nails deep into her palm. Unlike them, Rainer wasn't hateful. She could never imagine him hitting a child, locking one in a cupboard, or a hundred other cruelties. She drowned the painful thoughts with the sight of the pirate's glorious body.

"Let me see the rest of your tattoo." She brushed his long, black hair over his shoulder. The regal crown of a phoenix crested the back of his neck. She leaned closer. Smoke and sweat teased her nose. Patches of rough, uneven skin surrounded the bird's face and continued down his back. *Dear Lord*. The ink concealed abused flesh. The marks resembled those of her navigator who'd been whipped as a boy.

Bile burned the back of her throat. She ran her fingers down the length of his spine.

Rainer stiffened.

Somewhere an inch of flesh surly escaped unscathed. She fanned out her fruitless search. "Someone whipped you."

"A gift from the *Tres Chupadiablos* before they turned me," he spat.

"Good God." Vampires possessed extraordinary healing powers. The damage had to have been unimaginable for the scars to remain. Rage numbed her mind until her vision

blurred. How could anyone do this? She clenched her fists knowing the answer. The *Tres Chupadiablos* entrapped the worst of all human and animal traits. She inhaled a deep breath. The hoard of soulless scourges had to be stopped.

"Since I'm spared from looking, I won't force you." Rainer reached for his shirt.

"Don't." More than vengeance, the pirate needed comfort. She ran the tips of her fingers from the bird's beak to its claws caressing the rough skin. Sinew rippled in response.

Pulling herself up on her tiptoes, she pressed her mouth to the phoenix's wing and placed a light kiss. Salty sweat tingled her lips. She licked them coating her tongue in the powerful flavor that could only belong to Rainer. A shudder shook her bones.

"I asked for your shirt. Put it on and you forfeit." She stepped away while she could still take her heart with her.

The pirate didn't move.

She returned to the game table listening to the tranquil loll of waves against the *Sereno's* hull.

Taking his place opposite her, Rainer toyed with a bishop. "Thank you." His voice thickened.

Her gaze jerked up from the game board. She doubted the vampire said those words often. The fortress around her emotions crumbled. How had she fallen for him so fast?

He reached across the table and cupped her cheek in his hand.

Asia leaned into his cool palm. Rough calluses born of the strength of hard work brushed her skin.

His fingers lingered as he stroked her jaw.

The gentleness in his touch sang of more than deep sexual longing. A reverence permeated his caress as though she, *Asia*, not someone else's idea of who she should be was the focus of his adoration. No man had ever made her feel so accepted. Her throat clogged with emotion. She wished the moment would last forever.

The constant guard over his feelings lifted from his black eyes. Gratitude shined through the darkness brighter than the northern star.

She pressed her lips tight together and swallowed. Vampires were the most private of men especially with their emotions. She treasured his small confidence more than gold.

Did he really feel something more for her than lust? Or was she fooling herself with forlorn hopes?

"I've never met anyone like you." He slipped a single finger beneath her chin. "Savvy?"

A small pang pricked her dream showing the back of her eyes with tears. He didn't remember her. She bit her lip and gathered her strength. What had she expected, she didn't look anything like scrawny *boy* the pirate had rescued then robbed.

Romance wasn't her reason she'd boarded the *Sereno*. She couldn't lose sight of Fox's box or the crucial alliance that had compelled to agree to his game. Come dawn, more important she gained Rainer's help than his heart.

She held back any mention of their prior acquaintance. "Perhaps the reason we've never met is you're always running from me, in concert with the company you've been keeping?"

"Are you referring to the *Sereno's* female guests?" He chuckled.

"Aye, she said and while she slid her sweat-slicked fingers into the cool folds of her skirts beneath the table. He'd given her an opening to lay the groundwork for her proposition. "You aren't the only who fights the *Tres Chupadiablos*."

A frown tugged at the corners of his sexy mouth.

"Or with a reason to want them stopped." The idea of partnership required a careful approach. No one surrendered longtime independence overnight. And, the vampire had privy to extensive duration of autonomy. She couldn't risk rushing and losing his support, or him.

"Right now, it's not the soulless devils I'm interested in." He flashed a wicked smile.

Distracted she moved the wrong pawn.

"Other shoe." He claimed the piece, but made no move towards her.

Cursing her stupidity, she kicked off the slipper. Feelings or not, she planned to win their chess match.

"Dangerous game you play, Love."

"My battles with the *Tres Chupadiablos* have been far from genial amusement. Everyday their strength grows." She rubbed the head of a captured onyx pawn with her fingers. "No person or ship can defeat them."

"I meant coming here." He frowned and stared off into the shadow filled corner. "But you're right."

"You aren't a danger."

Rainer bolt upright. The force sent his chair crashing to the floor.

Asia jumped at the crack as wood collided.

The vampire leaned across the table. His broad chest loomed over the checkered board. Lines from the push of his inner beast cut into his forehead. "What do you call someone who wants to rip the dress off your body and take you right here on the cabin floor?"

She didn't shrink back. The intensity in his coiled muscles should frighten her. Instead, his passion excited her. Juices flooded her pussy with enough moisture to sink the entire ship. "Would that really be so awful?"

"Don't tempt me," he snarled. Amber sparks flashed in his eyes. "I don't want to hurt you."

The single sentence threw her back into childhood. Over and over her father had spoken the same phrase before he acted in anger. "Irony the difference between our words and our actions."

Yet, her past experience didn't prevent her heart from believing the pirate captain meant what he said. She captured another of his game pieces. "Boots."

He growled at the knight in her hand and stood. A quick yank and he tossed the high, black leather casings aside. "Just watching you, the sight of your taunt nipple ready for my lips, the smell of the sea and sun on your skin, and the knowledge beneath your skirts your wet and dripping for me pushes my self control to edge." He finished with a ragged breath.

She whimpered as lightning shot to her toes. She wanted everything he suggested and more. The friction of her dress against her breasts bordered on the verge of madness. Silk and cotton couldn't compare to thoughts of the scrape from his teeth.

"What is it you doubt," his gaze locked with hers as he righted the fallen chair, "the fact I want you so bad I'm hard as steel, or that I would walk into the sun before I'd harm you."

"I've no misgivings." She forced a smile. A part of her feared Rainer would change his mind if he learned of her family's feelings towards her.

"You make others brave their ugly secrets, but won't admit yours." One eyebrow arched as he once again took his seat opposite her. "Never took you for a coward, Love."

"I'm not—" She turned toward eclectic collection of treasures beside her. He was right. Neither she nor her brother spoke of the years they'd spent under their father's brutality. "Why ruin the game?" She swallowed.

"I'd wager you couldn't ruin anything." Softness crept into his tone.

Her heart flip-flopped of its own accord. "A pity my father didn't share your sentiment." She stared at the upright jewel encrusted cross and pinched her lips.

"Why is that?"

"He, uh..." How did she say the truth? Her chest constricted. "He didn't care for girls." She held her breath. Please let the simple explanation suffice.

"How?"

Damn her luck. She tucked her knees up beneath her chin and hugged her legs tight against her body. She wanted the harsh words her father and Griffon had used to disappear, not remember the contempt. "He just didn't have use for them."

A bitter laugh rang in her mind. Her answer painted the situation lightly. After her mother's death, the *good Reverend Donovan*, had attempted to dump so many times she'd lost track. If Fox hadn't protected her, God knew where she'd have ended up.

"Looks as though I'm not only skilled in evasion."

She raised her gaze to Rainer's unsure of what she'd find. Nerves fluttered in her stomach. She stared into concerned blackness devoid of mockery. Another check confirmed

she'd hadn't been mistaken. Who'd ever have guessed she'd find much needed kindness in a pirate?

The pirate propped his feet on the bench so they rested against the side of her calf.

His touch eased the pain of the old hurts. "My father was a thief." She rocked back and forth as much as the narrow space allowed. "In each new town he'd claim he was a traveling protestant missionary who'd been robbed and needed money. Having a girl caused too many questions."

"Is that how you came to the Caribbean?"

"My father and brother Griffin told everyone they were collecting money for a mission they wanted to build." She snorted. "Their only mission was their own comfort. They visited a wealthy merchant, saying they had enough money, but still needed passage."

"Let me guess," Rainer grinned, "the man gave them exactly what they asked for."

She nodded. "They either boarded the ship or face arrest and a prison sentence." She hugged her legs tighter. They'd have left her had Fox not concocted a story about the sudden addition of an orphan boy.

"Still doesn't explain how you ended up a pirate?" He frowned as he filled her wine glass.

"Another tale for another time." She unfurled her limbs. At the moment she didn't trust she wouldn't slip and reveal they'd already met.

Beads of summer sweat flowed down Rainer's hard chest. Asia tried her damndest not to look, but she couldn't resist the pull of the liquid jewels' path. The slick expanse shined in the candle's warm glow. No matter how badly she wanted a drink of salty liquid she didn't dare. As with sea water, one taste would leave her wanting more.

Moisture dripped between her tightly cinched breasts. She fanned herself with her hand. A few wrong moves on the board and she'd rid her herself of the oppressive garments.

"Hot?" Rainer leaned closer.

"Positively an inferno," she whispered.

His nostrils flared. "It's a good thing I'm here to provide relief."

"Aye." The plea came from her brain as much as her body.

"But first," he shot her the wickedest grin, "I'll need this." In one smooth movement he swiped her last bishop.

"Bloody pirate," she snapped. He'd turned the tables on her.

"Up." Rainer ordered standing over her.

She craned her neck. Plenty of men she'd faced outdid her in height and weight, but none had made her feel tiny. A shiver of excitement slid down her spine.

Rainer swept her to her feet.

"Oh!" She reached for his chest to steady her balance.

Two strong hands gripped the delicate neckline of her dress.

Before she could protest, he ripped the garment from her body. She yelped as the blue silk puddled around her bare feet. All she had left was her thin cotton shift.

His dark, hooded gaze devoured her.

She twisted before he saw the damp material between her thighs.

A ragged groan tore from Rainer's throat. He turned her so her back faced towards him. He trailed the back of his hand from her breasts to the damp fabric covering her mons.

The contact provided the exact attention she wanted, but fell woefully short in quantity. Her knees wobbled more than a sprog on his first day at sea.

He raised his fingers to his nose and inhaled her scent as if he'd captured the perfume of a rare flower. Thick lashes swept over his eyes. "Not yet, Love."

Her pussy wept. She turned to the chessboard and slid her queen to the opposite side of the board.

Rainer reached down and moved his queen. "Check."

Forcing herself to focus, she countered and placed his king in peril.

He sacrificed his last pawn to block the threat.

Gotcha! She stood toe-to-toe with the pirate. "I believe you owe me something."

One dark eyebrow rose.

All he had left was his trousers. Anticipation burdened the already heavy air.

"If you want it, you'll have to ask for it." A cocky smile hovered on his lips.

Did he think she wouldn't? She spied his discarded cutlass at the base of twin sea chests and scooped up the weapon. The man didn't even flinch as she pulled the blade free of the scabbard.

"I'm a pirate," she walked back towards him, "I take what I want."

With two quick slashes she sliced his britches from his body.

Asia stared at Rainer's glorious naked form.

His thick, engorged cock sprang free.

Hard and long, and for the moment all hers. She licked her lower lip and stepped towards him. "Hope you didn't mind losing your pants?"

"Not half as much as I'd mind the loss of what's in them." A slow grin revealed his sharp fangs.

"Aye, that would be a terrible tragedy." Her heart beat against her ribs. "Perhaps, I should check everything is still there."

"After, you put down the blade."

She followed his gaze to the cutlass still clutched in her left hand. "Do I scare you?"

"All men fear sharp objects directed below the belt, Love."

Hunger lit his black eyes. Yet, he didn't make a move toward her. She smiled. A beast

lived in Rainer, but the man controlled him. She whipped the chessboard with the back of the blade. The last few game pieces in play rattled across the floorboards. "Game's over."

"But the night isn't, and it's my move."

Chapter Three

Rainer pulled Asia into his arms. The heat from her sun-caressed flesh radiated through her thin shift and warmed him. She felt so damn good. Better than the fantasies his sleepless imagination conjured.

Small breasts molded to his chest. Soft and supple, he savored the simple trust she bestowed in allowing him to hold her. Primal blood surged through his veins. Muscle fibers burned as they stretched with liquid energy.

Take her. The voice inside ordered.

He glanced toward the silver box. No. Not without total control. He wouldn't risk her safety. Another urge assailed him. He ground his teeth.

Her arms wrapped around his torso and she pressed closer.

Tight nipples thrust against him and demanded his attention. He groaned. The stiff points had past the need for encouragement from his fingers. They were ripe and ready for his lips to suckle. His fangs lengthen at the thought of his mouth latched onto the pretty cherry bead while she writhed from his teasing tongue.

"Rainer."

She spoke his name with a desire and tenderness he'd never experienced. He wanted more than the usual sex for sustenance business transaction he had with other women. He wanted to make love to Asia. Bringing her pleasure went well beyond an agreed arrangement. The desire dictated every caress of his fingers and lick of his tongue.

The lady pirate rolled her head to the side exposing her delicate neck.

The long line pulsed with blood. Nothing stood in his way of biting her. He scraped the tip of his fangs over the delicate flesh. His taste buds tingled with salt of the sea and sweat.

"Is it me you want, Captain, or a meal?"

He gripped her shoulders and pushed himself back. The question swirled in his mind.

Uncertainty danced with candlelight in her indigo eyes.

Hunger moistened his mouth. Yet, the idea of drinking from her body left him still wanting more. He stroked his thumb down her soft cheek to her jaw. She'd shown him more tenderness and caring in a few hours than he'd experienced in his life as a vampire. He inhaled an unnatural breath and steadied himself. "I want you."

Tension drained from limbs.

"Asia?" He cradled her small, unsteady body close brushing his nose over the top of her head. Silky curls stuck to his stubbled chin. For all eternity the scent of hibiscus would remind him of the lady pirate.

"Say that again."

"What's that, Love?"

"You want me," she whispered.

He frowned. "Still doubting me?" He pressed his cock against her stomach.

"Forget I asked." She pulled back and shook her head.

She was afraid, but not of him. He held onto her warm body. What could a woman who fought vampires, and chased him across the Caribbean fear?

Asia twisted in his arms.

The answer could wait. He cupped her chin, "Look at me."

Twin azure jewels fanned by pale lashes rose to meet his gaze.

Hope flashed like the fleeting back of a dolphin. Not since a scrawny boy had cut him down to size over the snuffbox had he felt so human. He might not merit her trust, but he damn sure wouldn't break it. "I want you, Asia," he said with slow precision.

"Thank you." She pressed a kiss over his silent heart.

A jolt went through him and he swore the still organ beat for the first time in years.

The rigid locks of her spine released. She slid her hands up his chest.

Her fingers scorched ten tiny paths over his cool body. Each pad pulsed with the cadence of her rapid heartbeat. His cock hardened. "I'm not done with you, Love."

"I certainly hope not." She grinned. "I'd hate to be forced to sack and plunder you."

He smiled at the confident woman who'd boarded a vampire's vessel alone. "I'd hardly call being ravaged by a beautiful woman punishment."

"The possibility of my despoiling your virtue doesn't concern you?" She winked.

"No, only how to get your naked body under me."

"I have the feeling you'll manage." She rubbed her cotton-covered breasts against him.

He grunted. The pale swells rose as she lifted herself to her tiptoes. Dark cravings of plunging his teeth into the tender flesh sailed through his mind. But he let them go. "I want to bury my cock deep inside your pussy."

She bit her lower lip.

"I want to watch you come for me as I stroke you from the inside out. Feel your juices coating me." He dragged his hand over the damp fabric between her thighs. Blood filled his already swollen cock. He rubbed the silky dew between his fingers. "I want to feel every muscle, each fiber tighten as I touch you until all you can do is let go for me."

"Yes," she whimpered. Need darkened her eyes to lapis.

He captured her mouth with his. Not the most perfect day at sea could rival the smoothness of her lush lips. For once he appreciated his heightened primal senses. Life energy radiated from her. Thoughts, hopes, and fears flowed in an unstoppable stream. He drank them in, savoring the feelings. He ground her hips against his.

She dragged him closer. "You taste like steel cut through fruit. Strong and sweet."

"And what will I find in you, Love?" He scraped his teeth along her lower lip.

"You'll have to explore and discover the answer for yourself."

Warm breath caressed his mouth. "Uncharted territory?"

"No, but neither has anyone made a lasting impression." Her fine brows arched.

"Ah." He sucked her upper lip between his and nibbled. "I'll be sure and leave my mark." That she belonged to him.

Moaning, she opened for his tongue.

He plunged into her hot moisture. Heat poured down his throat and spread through his limbs. For months he'd wondered about her taste. The shadow of wine clung to the slick walls. Beneath the spiced ripe berries lay pure Asia. Sharp sass and wit tempered by a generous heart.

Asia met each lunge of his tongue. Even in sex she refused to be bested. She teased in the same style she fought quick, unexpected movements designed to surprise her opponent and throw him off balance. Blunt teeth scraped his taste buds. The roughness appealed to his wild nature. When she traced his fangs with the tip of her tongue he thought he'd lose his mind.

He dove deeper into her mouth. His beast railed for the sharp copper of her pleasure in her blood. His gaze strayed to her neck. One bite. One second of pain, and then—

"Rainer." Asia swept her hands down the sides of his torso to his hips.

Chills rose despite the humidity. He couldn't give her up anymore than he could separate himself from his baser instincts. With one last nip, he pulled back. "You aren't the only one who knows how to take what you want."

A thick fan of lashes covered her eyes as she pulled a slow breath into her teetering chest. "Is there anything else you want of me?"

To stay here forever.

Rainer stopped midway through unfastening the satin tie of her chemise. Never had he thought beyond the immediate moment with a woman. The past few hours with Asia had been the best time he'd spent with anyone.

Even if she would agree to remain, he couldn't let her. Not when she'd be in danger from the *Tres Chupadiablos*. And, he still wasn't certain she was entirely safe from him.

Cupping her ass in his hands, he pulled her up and into his arms.

Asia gasped, and wrapped her legs around him.

The transparent, wet cloth barely shielding her pussy moistened his stomach. Rich and potent, her perfumed musk covered her. He kneaded her firm ass as he walked to the bed. "It's time you got carried away, Love."

She threw her head back and laughed. The movement arched her spine pushing her

breasts towards his mouth.

The smooth, creamy roundness reminded him of a lush coconut and he couldn't resist a taste. He lowered his head and traced his tongue over the milky mounds.

Moaning, she reclined further.

He tightened his grip on her ass and squeezed. Bloody undergarments. Naked, he could have speared her with his cock guiding her along the length of his shaft as he held her.

A growl vibrated along his ribs. He deposited her on the bed while he anchored his beast by sheer will.

Asia scrambled to her knees.

One yank and the thin chemise would rip as easy as paper. No, the impatient action belonged to his primal side. He forced himself to finish unlacing the delicate ribbon.

Warmth wrapped around his cock. He sucked in a sharp breath as his gaze shot downward. Asia's small hand curled around his shaft. The muscles in his thighs pulled tighter than rigging.

"After the close proximity with the cutlass, I thought a damage inspection was required." She licked her lower lip. She stroked him from base to tip.

He clenched his teeth and groaned. Talented fingers cupped his balls.

She fondled him and rolled the hard stone inside the sac. Scooting closer, she positioned herself so the length of his cock rubbed against her breasts.

"Wench," he rasped.

"Payback for torturing me."

"You'll get yours."

"I'm counting on it." A naughty grin curved the corners of her mouth.

He gathered her breasts in his palms. Small and heavy, he squeezed them around his hard cock. As he thrust into the sweat-slicked tunnel of his making, he tweaked her pale pink nipples. The friction and sight of her on her knees would make a lesser man come.

Asia circled his crown with the pad of her thumb. A pearl drop of precum beaded at the tip. Her gaze locked with his. Slowly, the tip of her tongue swept out from her kiss-swollen lips and caught the moisture the same as a raindrop.

Breath hissed from between his teeth. The sun could rise right then and he wouldn't move. Ages had passed since a woman had licked him. He closed his eyes and surrendered to the gentle suction of her mouth.

"You're killing me, Love."

She responded by drawing him deeper.

Careful not to hurt her, he flexed his hips thrust into her willing mouth. Small, blunt teeth scraped him as he slowly moved in and out. His thighs stung as they tightened.

Her tongue traced the underside of his cock.

He gripped her shoulders and held himself motionless as her satin torment advanced to the side followed by the smooth top of his cock. His balls hardened as they filled. The plates in his face shifted. With a growl, he rolled onto the bed swinging her on top of him.

"Wait, I—" She moaned.

He latched on to a swollen nipple. As he tugged, her thighs widened and her wet slit bathed his throbbing cock in her juices.

Asia slid herself from his crown to hilt coating him with her scent. Her movements were as smooth as the Sereno's sails. A sheen of sweat sparkled on her skin lit by the candles' topaz flames.

She embodied passion. She touched as though she needed the feel of him to survive. Giving pleasure came as naturally to her as receiving. Through every action she shared her emotions. Time had meaning and she didn't waste any second. In his arms, he held life.

He rolled and pinned her body beneath his.

"No fair!" She ran the arch of her foot along the back of his calf.

"I'm a pirate, Love. There's no rules but the code." He grinned.

"Rainer, bite me, please." She pleaded and rolled her head to the side.

Hunger and primal lust heeded her summons. "No," he growled as his transformation into his vampire form completed. Bones shifted. Strength and power flowed in his veins. Sights became sharper. Sounds clearer. And, instinct ordered him to fulfill her request.

"Yes."

"Don't tempt danger." He tried to push away, but her legs locked around his waist. Every fiber screamed at him to sink his teeth into her neck. *No*. He closed his eyes to the hypnotic thrum of her blood pulsing in her neck. Dear God, if one existed, he prayed the deity wouldn't let him rip her throat out. "I don't want to hurt you."

"If you were going to hurt me you would have already." Conviction rang in her words.

"Don't be so—"

"I tracked and chased you." She wriggled a hand free and caressed his hollowed cheek.

The gentle contact momentarily halted the war inside him. Never had he allowed a woman to see his predator face let alone touch.

"How many times could you have blasted me out of the water and didn't?"

His eyes snapped open. In battle his survival instincts surfaced, but with her he'd maintained his ability to think. He'd approached each pursuit as a game. "I could rip your throat out." He swallowed.

"So could half my crew." She combed her fingers through his hair. "But you haven't."

"Do you know how many times I've come to almost biting you tonight?" Shame filled him. He hated his weakness, but Asia needed to know the truth.

"Drinking my blood isn't the same as ripping my throat out."

"I've done it before," he said quietly.

Asia stiffened beneath him.

This was it, the point where she couldn't justify his actions. She risked her life to protect innocent women like the one he'd killed.

"What happened?" she asked.

Her voice held only concern. How could she not hold judgment or anger against him? But in his arms wasn't an ordinary mortal woman. He held Asia, lady pirate and captain of a vampire crew. He kissed her forehead. He didn't deserve her.

"Tell me."

Screams echoed in the back of his mind. Specters of blood and pain slipped through a fog of memories. "My first feeding," he swallowed, "I lost control and killed a woman."

She placed a gentle kiss on his lips and wrapped her arms around his torso.

He must be dreaming. He shifted his weight, but kept the majority balanced on his elbows.

"When you did – this. Were you injured?"

"It still doesn't excuse taking a life, but aye. The *Tres Chupadiablos* went ashore to pillage Santa Bella, and I escaped." His body had died, but the guilt and regret of his actions lived inside him.

"You're right it's not an excuse," she let out a breath, "but it does explain how you could do such a thing. Has it ever happened again?"

"No," he growled. Blast. He didn't hunt down victim and torment them. "Never again –"

"I thought not." She smiled. "I'm more afraid of the *Tres Chupadiablos* than a man with a soul."

The tender words tore through his dead heart. She saw him for his soul, not his appearance or past mistakes. He held her close never wanting to let her go.

The long fight had hardened him, not his beast. More than ever he needed her. Whatever else happened he would keep control. He would love her, and then let her go.

Kissing her tender palm, he lowered himself on top of her. For the first time he would try and conceal his primal face. *He* controlled his animal.

He claimed her mouth. Sweet, moist heat rivaling the hottest tropical night welcomed him. With a moan, he deepened his oral caress. He nipped at her lower lip, hard enough to excite her, but without breaking her skin.

"I can't wait," she cried jerking her pussy against him.

"Easy, Love. Almost there." Too long he had dreamed of exploring her pussy before he took her. He slid his hand down her flat belly. Muscles quivered beneath his fingers. Her trembles hid his unsteady hand. He smiled. Their joining had her equally off balance.

A thin, white scar ran from the bottom of her ribcage to the top of her hip. Inner calm exploded into battle rage. She could have died from the injury. The beast inside howled for the blood of whoever dared harm her.

He tapered down the need and rubbed his thumb along the pale line. "Where did this come from?" He kept careful control of his voice.

"Knife."

The wound couldn't compare to damage the *Tres Chupadiablos* would inflict if they captured her. Icy numbness overtook him. Her safety outweighed his selfish desire to have her near.

"Enough stories for now." She guided his head towards hers and kissed him.

The warm dance of her tongue melted his fears. It didn't matter, for a pirate she had few injuries. Any wound to someone who made him feel human was too much.

His hand skirted over her hip.

She bucked against him.

"That's right, Love." He shifted his body along side hers. The dwindling candle beams of topaz wrapped her skin in a golden glow. Her pale thighs parted for him. Drawn by the current of moisture flowing from her pussy, he moved toward the dark blonde triangle.

Fingers tangled in his hair. As he kissed her, he parted her delicate wet pink, folds. "You are ready," he shuddered.

"Yes." She gripped his shoulders.

He stroked her tender nether lips before inserting one finger all the way inside her.

Her back arched drawing him deeper.

"Is this what you want?" He slipped a second and then third finger in. Her pussy tightened around his digits.

"Yes. No," she panted.

"Which is it, Love?" He gave her a few shallow thrusts and at the same time rubbed his thumb over her dark pink, clit.

"No."

He froze.

Deep blue, caring eyes stared up at him. "I want your cock inside me when I come."

Thank God. Relief melted to need. He closed his eyes. "Spread your legs for me."

Asia complied.

The smell of ready cream drew him. He scooted lower on the mattress and traced her opening with his tongue as she quivered.

"Ahhhhhhh." Her hands fisted in his hair.

He caught her flowing liquid on the tip of his tongue and drank. Her flavor was more potent than the strongest rum and more mind addling. "God, you taste good." He licked his

lips loving how her flavor clung to them.

His cock clenched tight. Even vampiric stamina and resolve had its limits, and soon he'd reach both. He nudged her entrance. The head of his cock pulsed as he eased into her welcoming body.

Heat raced down the length of his shaft as he slid deeper. The urge to slam forward and explode in release howled inside him. He gritted his teeth. He had to move slow and allow her body time to adjust to his vampiric size or he'd tear her sensitive tissue. He'd wait, no matter how great the agony.

"Too slow." She grabbed his ass and pulled him inside.

An instant vice of velvet surrounded him. He held himself completely still as the sudden swell of wet heat threatened to overwhelm his cool body. "You're tight, Love," he grunted.

Bit by bit her grip relaxed.

"Can't wait." He growled.

"Don't." She nipped at his ear lobe.

The soft tug of her teeth went all the way to his toes. He covered her mouth and thrust his tongue between her lips in time with the rhythm of his cock. Her walls caressed him as he stroked deeper.

He nuzzled her neck. Her breath gusted in his ear with every plunge. Blood beat a frenzied dance against her throat. The animal inside cried for a drink. He refused. If the beast wanted food, it would submit to his control.

Sweat dripped from his torso and onto her easing the friction of his chest sliding against her breasts.

"Rainer." Rising up, Asia met his every thrust.

Her tight sheath grabbed and held him, then released, only to repeat the sequence. He could feel her release building. The same way fire consumed the final inches of a fuse, she'd explode for him.

"Harder, please, h-harder," she cried.

Now.

All his senses focused on the woman beneath him. Her scent and heart rate peaked.

"Bite me!" She yanked his mouth against her throat.

His fangs sank into her neck. Copper life flowed into him. Her essence filled his mouth. Through her blood he shared her emotions. He drank deeper drawing her soul towards his. The beast wanted more, but he refused. More than nourishment, he needed the life she freely brought in her passion and caring. When his soul touched hers he felt—Human.

At the moment they connected, Asia screamed as her pussy convulsed.

The buzz from the tip of his cock to his toes grew stronger. His ass tightened. He

slammed into her womb spurred on by her cries. Tension built in his balls and exploded. A wild storm of release rocked his body. He sank on top of her.

Finally, calm returned. He rolled over pulling Asia with him so she laid on top his chest.

He lay resting in peace for the first time since his *death*. He had maintained control and more important kept her safe. Holding her tight, he didn't want to ever let her go. He loved her.

The realization blew through him harder than a gust of north wind. Joy swelled and he smiled a moment before a crash of reality wiped it all away. No amount of human emotions or self-mastery could protect Asia from the *Tres Chupadiablos*.

Cold emptiness settled into his bones. He held her tight against him memorizing the texture of her skin and the way her curves fit against him. Somehow he would find away to—

Those were the selfish beast's thoughts. He would not jeopardize her safety or her life so he felt human. He loved her enough to her send her away.

Chapter Four

When the last of the tremors faded, Asia didn't move. Rainer had withdrawn his fangs, but she was reluctant to separate their bodies. Nothing compared to the feel of his cock filling her. All he'd said about a vampire's bite had been true and more. For a moment, as she'd came, she'd felt like part of him.

Even now, the gentle way he held her said what they'd shared had been more than a meal. Just how much more she couldn't be certain. She traced the pattern of flames along the side of his belly.

"You're amazing," Rainer rasped. He captured her hand and brushed a kiss over her knuckles.

A slow shiver lolled down her spine. Already she wanted him again. "I don't think they have words to describe you."

A chuckle rumbled through him. He stroked a large hand up and down her arm. "You never answered my question."

"Hmmmmmm?"

"Why did you become a pirate?"

The tranquil current she'd been floating along turned choppy. She propped her head against her forearm. Already she'd gotten closer to the pirate than was wise. Her efforts should be on persuading him to join forces, not spilling her guts. She could take a refusal of her cause better than she his rejecting her.

She cleared her throat. "Is this what they mean by *on a dead man's chest*?"

"No, Love." He laughed. "It's stalling."

She scowled and drew imaginary patterns on his bare skin. How did she answer?

Rainer brushed her hair back from her face.

The tender gesture splintered her last barrier. No one but her brother and Hawk knew how they'd ended up on the account and vampire hunters.

The candle stubs beside the bed sputtered a second before their light vanished. The dark room reminded her how fast situations and people changed.

She drew a deep breath. "My father threw Fox and I out into the street." Muscles stiffened beneath her. "My brother had met Hawk on the docks at Port James. He persuaded the pirate to let him join his crew."

Asia didn't mention all the convincing Fox had to do for the pirate to allow her to come along. She'd wager neither man realized she'd overheard their argument. Since that day, Hawk had a second older brother.

"How old were you?" Rainer wrapped his arms around her naked body.

"Thirteen." Before she could stop herself, she sighed and melted into his supportive

strength. Just once she wanted someone to lean on. As captain she shouldered the responsibility of her ship and the lives of her men, weakness was an indulgence ill afforded. Her brother had cared for her as a result of a deathbed promise. Rainer had no such oath to bind him. He gave his comfort freely. Did his mean he felt something more towards her?

"You were a child."

"Not really." She shrugged. By then she'd experienced her father at his worst, the violent drunken rages including the one that had killed her mother. She hallowed and pushed the painful memories away. She didn't want sadness ruining her time with Rainer. "Fox was bitten the night before we arrived in Port James. When we docked, he pretended to be sick. The charade worked for about two weeks until my father caught him feeding from me."

She couldn't stop a shudder from creeping down her spine. Only the *Tres Chupadiablos* rivaled the hatred and viciousness she'd witnessed in her father that night. "He accused me of being a witch. He blamed me for turning his son into a monster and came at both of us with a knife."

Rainer snarled a curse.

The long scar where he'd caught her with one of his slashes stung. She studied Rainer's jaw uncertain of what she would find in his eyes if she dared look. "From there we went to the docks and to Hawk."

"What kind of man throws his daughter out?"

She bit her lip and decided to take a chance. "Even before my mother died, I dressed as a boy. I hoped if I looked and acted like one he might love me." She drew a deep breath and steeled herself to say the truth out loud for the first time in all of her twenty years. "He didn't want me. Ever," she forced the last word over the lump in her throat.

"The man should be run through and gutted." The ridges on his brow deepened.

His anger for her went a long way to easing her hurt. She snuggled into his strong shoulder. "Sorry, you're seven years too late."

"What?" Rainer rolled on his side, but kept her tucked against the length of his body. "Did you —"

"No." She stared at the smooth timber beams overhead. "The same week he threw Fox and I out, he double-crossed the wrong man in Stuart Bay. That man killed him and our older brother." She should feel sorrow or at the least remorse at the death of man who sired her. Instead, she felt nothing. The story might as well be the tragic incident of a stranger.

"The man's lucky." Rainer's black eyes hardened and gleamed in the darkness.

"No, Fox and I are," she said slowly. "If we'd been there, we'd be dead as well."

"I hate to tell you, Love, but your brother's already dead."

Asia laughed. Only a vampire would state the obvious and lighten her mood when she needed it most. "Not the kind of background to attract a respectable merchant looking for a

wife to tend his home and chase after a parcel of children."

"Did you want that life?"

Sky peaked through a narrow slit in the thick black, velvet drapes. An azure band rose from the horizon line diluting the endless ink above.

"We still have a minute," Rainer said.

She nodded. A volatile sea of questions churned in her mind. "Honestly, I couldn't sit in some cottage with the knowledge those monsters were out there, and I could help stop them. Most men can't understand that."

"Most don't have your bravery, Love."

His praise warmed her. She couldn't wait any longer. "I fight the *Tres Chupadiablos*, and I won't ever quit."

"Almost dawn." Reluctance stuck in his voice the same way his skin did to hers.

The dismissal bled through his tone. Her heart sank as she pulled out of his arms. How could she have become so accustomed to his presence? A marooned man couldn't have been more alone than she did in that moment. She wrapped a black silk sheet around her naked body.

The pirate also rose. "You won our game. Name your reward. Gold? Emeralds? Pearls?"

Asia approached the dim corner where his chart table sat. She turned. The sight of his sculpted behind and stark muscled thighs made her ache for more of him. She swore his phoenix had its eyes on her. "I choose this." She lifted the snuffbox from the shelf with both hands. The cool silver gleamed without a trace of tarnish marring the intricate scroll pattern.

"No," Rainer barked and plucked the heirloom from her hold.

"We had an accord." She crossed her arms over her chest securing the sheet. "It can't mean anything to you."

"You're wrong." The pirate glared. He stared at the box.

An undercurrent of sadness bobbed beneath his anger.

"I rescued a passenger ship from the *Tres Chupadiablos* several years ago." His voice softened. "The Captain threatened to have me and my men hanged as pirates for our trouble." An ironic smile curved half of his mouth. "I hate to disappoint a man almost as much as I do making liars of them, so I took half their cargo and a few trinkets from the passengers."

She couldn't believe his story. The pirate remembered far more than she'd have ever guessed.

"The insolent lad I took it from gave me a tongue lashing about honor and decency. He held me to human standards." He pushed a hand through his black hair. "Until you, it'd been a reminder of the humanity I thought I'd lost."

A tidal wave of emotions washed over her. Rainer remembered the night they met.

More important, he remembered her. Her head spun. She mattered to him. Joy burst inside her she could hardly contain the rush. "You deserved every insult that day. That box is a family heirloom."

He spun around his jaw hung open.

"You are human, and honorable." She stepped closer and reached up to rest her hands on his shoulders. "Why do you think I was so angry?"

His jaw dropped. "That was you?"

She nodded. "The snuffbox belonged to my brother and one of the reasons I tracked you."

"And the other?"

"You and to get your help against *Tres Chupadiablos*. They're getting too strong."

Silence.

Her chest squeezed until her heart broke. She hadn't expected declarations of love. Whether he wanted her personally, or not, they needed his help. She had to find a way to convince him. "Forget about—this." She swallowed hard and pointed towards the bed. "We stand a better chance with our forces combined."

"Can you?" His eyes blazed.

"No." *Not ever*. She let out a breath. Could he make this any harder on her?

Narrow fingers of light crept into the room.

Grateful for the excuse to turn away, she adjusted the curtains. She shoved down the broken pieces of her heart. "Defeating those soulless monsters is more important than whether you want me *or not*." Using all her strength, she kept her voice steady.

"What I want is you far away from them and safe," he growled.

The winds of hope filled her sails. "You're dreaming if you believe they'd let me walk away, even if I wanted to quit."

He stepped closer.

Energy zinged through her nerve endings. "I've cost them too much for them to ever leave me in peace. And I've vowed to stop them."

Fine lines deepened around his mouth. "You'll go after them regardless, won't you?"

She nodded. The question she needed to ask was as foolish as sailing toward a powder ship. Both actions stood a good chance the last of her heart would be blown to bits. "Why does it matter to you?"

"Because I love you," he snapped.

"You what?" she swallowed certain she'd misheard.

"I love you." He gripped her shoulders.

"And, this time I want more than a trinket."

Her pulse pounded in her chest.

"I want you safe along with your heart, your soul, and your love." Rainer held her in his black gaze. "I want you."

"You already have them." She melted into his arms. Strength and love surrounded her. She'd waited years to hear those words. "I love you, Rainer. I think I've loved you since the day you saved my life and robbed me."

He laughed.

Safe? He wanted her safe. What did he mean? She loosened her hold on his torso. Did he expect her to give up her quest in exchange for dresses and land? Surly not, but...She stepped free of his embrace. Of all the pain in life the conditional love hurt worst of all.

"What, Love?" He reached for her.

She took another step back. "Is it me you love, or the girl in the gown who stays below deck and out of the fight?" She dreaded the answer, but she had to know the truth.

"I love the one in the dress."

Numbness spread through every part of her except her heart.

"Along with the lady pirate in pants, and especially the woman who's naked in my bed." He came forward and stroked his hands down her ribcage to her hips and held her.

Asia shivered despite not quite understanding the direction of his thoughts.

"It's not the clothes I want. It's the brave woman who's as quick with her wit as her sword. The one who would risk herself to protect others. That's who I want."

"You won't keep me below deck and out of the action?" She held her breath hoping the pirate meant what he said.

"I can't promise you I won't try." He grinned. "But since I'd stand a better chance convincing the sun not to rise than you to give up your quest, I'll have to keep you close so I can watch your back."

"I thought my front interested you?" She winked.

"It's all of you." He backed her across the smooth floor towards the rumpled bed.

His hard thighs brushed against hers. The feel almost exceeded his cock stiffening against her. Moisture pooled in her core. "How long do you expect this need of yours to last?"

"I've got time ahead of me." He flashed the wicked smile that made her knees slacken.

She bit her lower lip to keep from grinning back. "Are you requesting a rematch?" She glanced over at the chessboard.

"Best out of a thousand?"

Asia laughed. "What's the prize?"

"You with me for eternity." He lowered his head to hers for a long, slow kiss.

The silk sheet slipped between her fingers and fell to the floor. His cock slid between her already moist thighs. Shivering, she gave herself over to the hardness teasing her pussy.

"I might require some assistance to ensure that," she murmured.

"I know just the *man* for the job, Love." He grasped her hips and lifted her into his arms.

"So do I." Her legs wrapped around his waist, she slid onto his cock joining their bodies and souls.