



One man claims her by day, another by night. Together they lay claim to her heart.

Annabelle Whittington sails toward Jamaica, and marriage to a wealthy plantation owner, on winds of hope. Hope that she hasn't saved her virginity only to be doomed to proper English wifehood, never to fully satisfy her sexual curiosity. Then the sails of the pirate ship *Howling Hades* appear on the horizon.

Captain Galerius's demands are simple: in exchange for her blood to slake his eternal thirst, and her body to quell his voracious lust, he will guarantee safe passage. Except his motives are less than pure. In his hold is another prisoner, Ian Drummond, who must soon be replaced...with Annabelle.

But Ian has plans of his own, and they don't include giving up his lover so easily. And, once he gets a taste of Annabelle's sweet blend of innocence and boldness, he can't imagine living without either one of them.

Annabelle, sensing the tortured soul beneath the monster, refuses to let Galerius intimidate her—and finds an unexpected ally in the infuriating, maddening Ian. As danger threatens the *Hades*, she is faced with a choice. Return to her life of duty, or embrace her spirit of adventure...and sail the high seas with the men who have captured her heart.

Warning: Avast! Here be hot vampire pirate lovin' that won't be coming to a theater near you any time soon; a comely wench who be givin' "boring" the old heave-ho. Cool rum drink recommended.

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Ravenous
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Ravenous

Abigail Barnette

Dedication

Dedicated to all the fine ladies at the Grand Rapids Region Writer's Group, who inspire me to take risks and follow my heart.

Chapter One

The cloudless gray sky reflected Annabelle Whittington's mood: bleak and endless. It also uncannily mirrored the voyage she had embarked on only three days previous. Three days of rocking seas, roiling stomach and interminable waiting. She'd been prepared in advance that life onboard a ship would be boring.

Her cousin—no, her fiancé now, how could she forget—had advised her in his letters to bring all of the small amusements that would keep a lady occupied: embroidery, books of poetry, pastels for sketching. Those things did not amuse Annabelle at home, and though life at sea was dull, it was not so dull as to induce her to take up a needle. Not yet.

She leaned over the ship's rail, grimacing as her fingers encountered the sticky oiled wood, and peered into the depths of the sea, a darker gray than the abysmal sky that stretched above it. She could see nothing below the waves. It was as if the water were a liquid mass of iron, impenetrable and unwelcoming. It was difficult to tell how far they had come. She knew the voyage would take weeks, but once the land had gone from sight it seemed they stood still, the ocean moving around them. Would they ever arrive in Jamaica? While she would have gladly accepted an end to the seasickness and boredom, she could not look forward with any optimism to her arrival at the island plantation that would be her home.

Her father had made a good match through deceit. Cleverly, he had sold her for a large price to his nephew, the long exiled Earl of Harrington, who had gone off to seek his fortune in the new world. So eager was he to re-enter London society, he had not haggled over the steep price her father had set for her. Little did he know that an affiliation with the Whittington estate would not bring him the esteem he so desired. The Earl of Whittington had struggled in poverty, though he was rich in titles, and had become the laughing stock of London society. Annabelle did not dread the prospect of marriage, not after the many kind letters and the fine portrait her intended had sent, but she did not look forward to keeping up her father's charade of legitimacy. She did not know how to run a proper household, and she could not pretend the manners of a great lady when she had never ventured into society.

"Annabelle!" The sharp cry pierced her hearing. She was coming to hate the sound of her own name. Mrs. Grimble, the widow whom her father had hired to chaperone her on the sea voyage, thumped her cane against the deck. She sat on a crate, gouty leg propped on a coil of rope, a flannel blanket tucked across her lap. "Annabelle! Come away from there. You'll fall over!"

Now there was a thought. She could throw herself overboard and be done with this whole miserable voyage, and the more miserable shock she would have to deal to her cousin upon her arrival.

It was a shame, she thought, as she crossed the deck to sit beside her dowdy companion. She pulled the miniature portrait from her skirt pocket and traced the shape of her betrothed's features in the painting. He was handsome, if fair. Annabelle had never cared for the look of fair men, preferring instead dark hair and eyes, but there were worse men to be promised to, she supposed. Old, and with rheumy eyes like Mrs. Grimble.

"You mustn't be nervous, dear," Mrs. Grimble reassured her for what was likely the hundredth time since they had disembarked. "It won't be as bad as all that."

Her reassurances were not necessary. On the contrary, Annabelle was quite excited to find out what that thing, which all brides were called upon to universally fear, would be like. She'd found a book from the Orient her father had kept hidden in his library. The pictures had removed any mystery about the physical act of married love, but the revelations had only served to make her more curious. She'd spent many a night tucked safe in her bed, imagining how her husband's hands would feel on her breasts, her thighs, stroking the warm, wet place between her legs.

She pressed her knees together and clenched her fists on the portrait, knuckles going white.

"Annabelle!"

Had the old woman learned to read her thoughts as well? Annabelle looked up sharply to running feet and shouts of alarm as the crew scrambled to the rails. "Pirates!" someone shouted, and at once the deck became a terrifying flurry.

"Annabelle, help me up," Mrs. Grimble cried, one hand clutched to her bosom. "We must go to our quarters, quickly."

As if there were any place to run. Annabelle did not know much about pirates, but she did know they were unlikely to skip a search of the passenger quarters onboard. Still, she gripped Mrs. Grimble's hand and helped haul the widow's considerable girth to her feet. As they shuffled along the deck—every step forcing Annabelle to bite back a cry of frustration at her chaperone's slowness—she looked out over the waves. The sky was not cloudless anymore. A thudding boom echoed across the water and billowing white smoke followed. A cannonball struck the waves and sent them skyward, but did not reach the ship.

"Not to worry, Miss," a deckhand told her, apparently noticing her pale expression. "'Tis just a warning. They won't want to be damaging the *Helen of Troy*. She's too valuable."

It wasn't the ship Annabelle worried about. The ship that had fired on them looked like something out of a very grand nightmare. The wooden body shone deep red—*like blood*, Annabelle thought, then forced it from her mind—and the black sails snapped like serpents in the wind. A carved figural decorated the prow, a fanged woman from the Orient whose hair curled into snakes and whose body became that of a cobra.

What kind of men would live onboard that ship? None who could be trusted to be satisfied with jewels and kegs of spices.

The men who piloted that ship would not be satisfied without blood.

“Annabelle, hurry,” Mrs. Grimble cried, though she still shuffled along at a tortoise’s pace. They reached the door to their cabin, and Annabelle nearly pushed her guardian down the three short steps to get inside.

Once the door was safely closed, the insufferable woman collapsed on the bed, fanning herself with her gloves. “What shall we do? Oh, we shall be killed, for certain. What shall we do?”

“Be quiet,” Annabelle whispered fiercely. “What if they come aboard? They’ll find us if you keep shrieking like that!”

Annabelle crouched beside the steps, gripping the wood like a lifeline. Her gaze never moved from the door, though it did her little good. She lamented shutting it all the way, but could not summon up the courage to open it again. There were shouts from the deck, loud thumps that echoed through the cabin. Something bumped the ship, and the walls creaked and groaned, sending a shower of dust onto them.

“We’ll be killed, for certain!” Mrs. Grimble repeated, and Annabelle did not scold her, for she was becoming convinced of the fact herself.

After a long while, the sounds on deck grew quieter. Annabelle wished desperately to know what had happened. In the commotion, no one would think to tell them what transpired. She straightened a little and reached toward the door, though she would have to climb the steps to reach the handle.

“Annabelle, don’t go out there.” Mrs. Grimble had gone white, still clutching her gloves against her chest in her doughy hand.

“I’m only going to peek, to see what has happened.” Saying it aloud helped bolster her courage, and she sprinted up the steps. Her hand had nearly touched the door handle when it pushed open from the outside, knocking her backwards to the floor. Her vision sparked with stars, and the breath rudely fled her lungs. Mrs. Grimble shrieked, loud and repeatedly, and the last things Annabelle knew were rough hands lifting her and a scratchy burlap sack covering her face.

She woke to darkness, but she knew she was in a closed space. Had she died? She lifted her hands and knocked them painfully against something close to her face. She was dead, she realized with a panicked cry. No, not dead. Entombed alive. She screamed and clawed the wood above her.

Light flooded her prison. In a dizzying moment, someone hauled her to her feet, then let her fall to the floor. Her head ached, and she squeezed her eyes shut tight. “Where am I?” she managed, though she had to hold back the contents of her stomach to say it.

"You are a prisoner on the *Howling Hades*, my lady," a deep, strangely accented voice informed her. At once, she remembered what she had not realized she had forgotten. Screams and pain, and a ship with black sails.

"Where are you from, and where are you bound?" the voice demanded calmly.

Annabelle raised her head. The man who questioned her stood at a round table, pouring wine. Above his head, a lantern swung violently, but the pitching and tossing of the ship did not seem to trouble him. She struggled to sit up and pressed a clammy hand to her cheek. "I am Annabelle Whittington. From London. Bound for Jamaica." Something sparked within her brain, and she hastened to add, "My father is very rich. He will pay you any ransom you ask."

"He is rich, but you travel with no jewels, an arthritic old servant and threadbare gowns?" He was not mocking her, but stating it as fact. "There is no money to be had from you."

"M-my intended," she stammered. "He owns a plantation in Jamaica. Surely he could—"

"I am not going to Jamaica." He turned, and for the first time, Annabelle saw his face. The swinging lantern cast deep shadows under his brow and cheekbones, making him feral and terrifying. His hair, close cut in a style that hadn't been in fashion since Julius Caesar ruled, glinted copper in the light, and in the dark hollows of his eyes, darker black glinted there. "If your father has no money and your fiancé is across the sea, what use are you to me?"

Annabelle looked down quickly. She had never seen a man in less than his shirtsleeves. This man, whoever he was, was nearly naked. He wore a long jacket of red and gold brocade, open to reveal his bare chest, and light linen pants, rolled up to the knee. His feet were bare, and Annabelle focused on his toes. She needed time to calm herself and think. "May I have some of your wine, please?"

"No. I do not think you would like this kind of wine." Was that a note of humor in his voice? If it had been, it was dispelled by what he said next: "I suppose I could cast you overboard."

"No!" Her fingernails dug into her palms. "No, please! I can be useful."

"Can you?" One of his brows rose suggestively.

"I can...sew. And cook," she blurted, knowing she could do neither, but if it kept her from being thrown overboard, she would learn.

He shook his head, dismissing her outright. "We have a cook already. And we have no need for pretty dresses."

Her mind raced, but she could not think of a single thing to save herself except to resort to pleading. "Do not kill me, I beg you! I am to be married. I don't want to die!"

"I doubt anyone would want to die, if they were given the choice," he replied with a bitter laugh. "But perhaps you're right. You should live and be useful." His lips parted in a smile, and the tips of two sharp teeth showed. *Fangs*.

Annabelle screamed and threw herself backward, forgetting the coffin behind her. She fell across it, the wood biting into her back. All the time, the monster advanced. “Demon,” she shouted, scrambling over the coffin and crouching behind it. “You’re a demon!”

“How astute of you.” He laughed and swiped the coffin out of the way as though it were a child’s toy.

“Stay back!” Her body shook and her head ached. One of his large hands closed over her shoulder, and she slapped it away. “You said you would let me live!”

“I did.” He reached for her again and, when she resisted, he pulled her against him, crushing her arms to her sides. “You’re of little use to me dead.”

His body, hard and strong against her, was unlike anything she had ever felt. Her mind involuntarily recalled the illustrations in her father’s book, and she shuddered in spite of her fear. “What...do you want from me?”

He crushed her in the bend of one arm and used his other hand to brush aside her hair. “What do you think I want?”

Squeezing her eyes shut, Annabelle forced herself to remember that she stood in the grasp of a demon from the very depths of hell. At least, that was what she suspected. She had very little experience with demons. “What are you?”

Though she did not open her eyes, she knew he smiled from the sound of his voice as he spoke, tracing his fingers up and down the side of her neck. “Just a man.”

Hardly. “You are not. You have...” She could not say the word.

“Not just a man, then,” he whispered close to her ear. “A pirate.”

Something warm and wet grazed her neck, and her body realized before she did that it was his tongue. He had put his mouth on her. Her legs no longer supported her, and she was strangely glad for his arm around her waist. Her skin prickled with sensation under the hot, wet path his tongue left as it laved lower, toward her... Certainly he would not touch her there. She swallowed hard, her breath hitching, forcing her breasts to swell over the neckline of her gown. She moaned as his head moved lower, his mouth gliding over the tops of her breasts.

There was a loud banging, and someone called, “Captain, sunup!”

The man released her with a curse. “You are free to move about the ship,” he fairly growled. “I will decide your fate this evening.”

“My fate?” She gasped out the words, still overcome by the intimate way he’d touched her. “What do you mean, my fate?”

Unbelievably, he did not answer her, but righted the coffin and climbed inside.

“You promised you would not kill me!” she shouted as he pulled the lid up and closed himself inside. “You promised!”

But there was no answer. She was alone.

Chapter Two

Left to her own devices, Annabelle did not know what to do. There was a bed in the captain's cabin, but she could not sleep in it. Not with him there, hiding in a coffin like some ghoul from the grave. There were sailors on deck, though, and not the ones paid handsomely by her father for her safe passage. Who knew what they might do to her?

She did not know how much time passed before the prospect of staying in the cabin with whomever or whatever the ship's captain was seemed a much more unpleasant prospect than risking harassment from the crew on deck, but the sun was bright in the sky. It seemed wrong for the weather to behave so incongruously to her situation.

No one seemed to notice her, or care about her presence, as she wandered the deck. Upon inspection, she saw that the ship was very nice, despite the black sails, much nicer than the one she had been traveling on. Mrs. Grimble had thought *The Helen of Troy* the height of luxury. The sight of this one would have caused her to reach for her smelling salts.

Mrs. Grimble! The blow to her head and the disconcerting meeting with the ship's captain—the very thought of him sent shivers racing over Annabelle, swelling into an ache that made her clench her fists, so she put that thought aside—had conspired together to make her forget entirely about her chaperone.

She found a deckhand busily sealing the cracks in the planks and stamped her foot sharply beside his hands. “You there! I demand to know what has been done with my companion. You will show me to her at once!”

The pronouncement did not have the effect Annabelle had intended. The sailor—no, the pirate!—did not have the courtesy to even glance up. She had known they would be difficult to deal with, but she did not like to be ignored. She stamped her foot again, this time closer to his hand, and caught his wrist with the heel of her shoe. He yelped and gripped the offended appendage, muttering, “Damn rheumatism actin’ up again.”

“Rheumati—” Annabelle nearly choked on her outrage. “If you persist in ignoring me, I will...I will...”

Someone laughed, and she whirled to face the sound. A man—no, another filthy, stinking, horrible pirate—leaned against the rail, his broad grin showing white teeth against his sun-darkened skin. “It won’t do you any good. They’re glamoured.”

He spoke with a faint lilt. Of course, the one person on this ship who would speak to her would be an Irishman. “What do you mean, glamourous?”

“Glamourous.” He pushed away from the rail, had the audacity to walk a slow circle around her, his icy blue eyes searing her with his appraisal. “Very nice. I can see why the captain took you.”

“Abducted me, you mean.” She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling the absurd need to shield herself from his gaze, as if he could see through her clothing, right down to her naked flesh. “I...demand to know what has happened to my chaperone. If no one will tell me, I will—”

“You’ll what?” He had the nerve to laugh. “You don’t have any power here. The crew certainly doesn’t.”

A slow understanding unfurled in Annabelle’s mind, like the gently billowing black sails. “Because of the captain?”

The man shrugged. “What’s your name?”

“Annabelle.” She answered automatically, but she had not meant to tell him. She had questions. Questions she could no longer think of. Her mind was so muddled... Was it because she hit her head? Because of the panic that clawed up in her throat? Because she was truly alone, truly stranded with a crew of pirates who did not seem to know she was there? She cast her gaze frantically to the men on the rigging, waved her arms up at them. They did not appear to notice her, nor did the man who still patiently filled the gaps in the deck. She covered her face and sobbed.

“That’s the glamour.” In an instant, the obnoxious Irishman was at her side, putting an arm around her shoulder.

Annabelle shook her head, suddenly free of the cloudy feeling. “What do you mean, ‘that’s the glamour’? What did you do to me?”

“It’s a simple trick of the mind. He uses it to keep the crew from seeing us. Keeps them from bothering us when he’s not able to be here with us. And he fools them into thinking other things. It takes a bit of getting used to. But once you do, it’s freeing.” He squinted up at a sailor climbing the mast. “I had them all convinced the ship was haunted not two months ago, before Galerius asked me to stop.”

“Galerius?” Her mind raced. “Is that the captain’s name?”

The pirate nodded. “He taught me how to do a glamour. It’s old magic, but I’m getting to be very good at it. He’ll teach you, if you ask him to.”

“What is he?” She had to know, though she wasn’t certain having her curiosity satisfied would make her less afraid. “Galerius...the captain...he isn’t just a man, is he?”

“He’s a man,” the pirate told her. “I suppose. He’s very old. He can’t go out in the sunlight for long. And he...drinks blood.”

A chill crept up Annabelle’s spine. “He drinks blood? Why?”

Another shrug. "He has to. I don't understand it myself, but if he doesn't, he'll starve. That's why he's been keeping me, and why he'll keep you."

"No." She stalked away, then back, pacing angrily across the deck. Being kidnapped by pirates, being...handled by a pirate captain, those were bad enough. She wasn't going to let some demon, some monster, drink her blood. "No! I won't do it!"

"You don't really have a choice," the man said cheerfully. "Or you do. But the alternative isn't pleasant either."

She stopped. "What alternative?"

"Drowning." He smiled, looking infuriatingly pleased with himself.

She backed away. "He wouldn't."

"He might. And none of these men would ever know you'd been here." He walked away, stretching lazily. "I'm glad you're here, though. Gives me a night off."

She ran to the railing, gripped the wood so tightly she was sure she would leave marks from her fingernails. There was a monster on board the ship. A demon who would drink her blood, or throw her into the sea. A warlock who had put a spell on the entire crew and rendered her invisible. She could not give him the satisfaction. She would throw herself overboard. She took a breath, willed her foot to raise, to boost herself up against the wood and tumble over. But her body would not listen, and she slumped to the deck, legs shaking.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll just do as he asks," the man called down from the forecastle. "And be in his cabin at sundown."

Sundown. Galerius awaited it every evening with little patience. Though he had spent centuries at sea, his body would not adapt to the rhythms of the sunrise and sunset during travel. Some days were interminably long. Others so short he rose, willing yet unable to continue sleeping, exhausted. A creature such as himself was expected to stay in one place. He sneered at the thought. He would not flee from men in fear, nor hide from the world lest it condemn him as a monster.

Still, his physical nature betrayed his desire to roam, and the hours he spent in his coffin became unbearable at times. It was made worse by knowing she was there, on the ship with him, close, but out of reach. He closed his eyes and conjured a picture of her in the stifling heat and darkness around him. Her chestnut hair, shot through with strands of amber that almost made him miss sunlight. The creamy swell of flesh above the tightly cinched bodice of her gown. Her gray eyes flying open in shock, then drifting closed in undeniable pleasure as he touched her.

He inhaled deeply and closed his hand around his cock, grown hard once again at the thought of her. Letting her go at sunup had been torture of a kind he had never experienced in all of his long, intimate

acquaintance with pain. If he could have ignored the sun and its command that forced him to seek shelter, he would have had her right then. She would not have resisted him. Oh, she would have put up a fight, that was certain. But just a sniff of her skin had revealed her arousal, a peek into her mind had proved that her eagerness and curiosity would have vastly outweighed any stringent warnings she had received to guard her virtue. What he had seen in her mind was an image graphic enough to match any of his own imaginings, and his cock throbbed at the memory. She had been picturing herself kneeling on a bed, her head thrown back, hair unbound and cascading over her shoulders, a man of undistinguishable features behind her, caressing her breasts and belly, moving his undefined mouth over her neck. And as he had watched the fantasy in her mind, he'd seen himself replace the indistinct man of her imagining.

It was just as well. If the man existed, Galerius might have felt possessive, jealous even, but it was clear from the hazy way she had imagined her dream lover that she was not familiar with a man's body, or a specific face. She was pure, untouched. It should not excite him so, what with the difficult work it was to seduce a virgin, but the thought that he would be the first to possess her, the first to make her beg with desire and scream with pleasure, the first to open her tight quim, almost caused him to spill in his hand.

Galerius felt the sunset in his bones, the same as he felt the sunrise: a compulsion, a command that could not be ignored. With a growl of impatience he flung aside the lid of his coffin and rose to his feet, intent on finding the girl before any more time was wasted.

He did not have to look far. She stood, gazing out the porthole, her back rigid. He kicked the side of the coffin and she jumped, as he assumed she had when he had first risen.

"I have decided how I can be useful to you," she said, attempting stoicism but failing as her voice shook and died on a choked hiccup.

"Oh?" he asked, padding slowly toward her. He indulged in a momentary vision of how he would find her truly useful: on her knees in front of him, her pretty pink lips sliding up and down his engorged shaft. "How do you propose to be useful, then?"

She turned, but would not meet his eyes. "I know that you drink blood." The hesitation in her voice belied her fear. Smart girl.

"I see you've spoken to Drummond." Galerius wondered what else the Irishman had told her. He did not press to find out. Better to let revelations unfold so she could face them slowly.

"Yes, I've spoken to Drummond, though I did not know his name." She looked up then, anger seething behind the gray storms in her eyes. "Is Drummond the only person on board who can see me? Hear me? Speak to me? He told me that you drink blood. And that the rest of the men on the ship are under a spell, a glamour. And that your name is Galerius, though you were not polite enough to tell me yourself."

He hid his smile. "I was unaware that pirates—excuse me, 'demons'—were required to be polite. And you never told me your name."

"It's Annabelle." She looked down. "And you never asked."

"You never asked, either," Galerius replied blandly. "The spell is for your own protection. And mine. I don't need any superstitious deckhands thinking to end my life out of a misguided notion of evil." He went to the table and retrieved a bottle of wine. "Would you like a cup?"

She paled and touched a hand to her throat. She was afraid, and he knew he should not laugh at her fear, but he could not help a chuckle. "Real wine, this time."

"I would like answers," she demanded stiffly. "What are you? You called yourself a man, and Drummond did the same, but I do not know any man who must drink blood and avoid the sunlight."

He shrugged and took a cup himself. It would not nourish him, nor would it intoxicate him, but he missed the taste. He poured her a cup as well. When he stepped nearer to deliver it, she shrank back. "It will calm your nerves," he told her, and he hoped it would. He wanted her willing beneath him tonight, and he would not resort to cheap tricks of the mind to have her.

She took the cup and drank hesitantly. "Thank you."

He waved his hand. "Now, to answer your question. I do not know what I am. There are stories the world over about creatures who drink the blood of the living, who lie in graves during the day and rise at night to terrorize their loved ones. These stories have existed, in various forms, throughout history, since what you now call 'ancient times', and I know this because I was there. I was created before many of the words that are now used to describe my kind, so I will not submit to any of them."

She stared at him over the rim of her cup, her eyes wide and watery. "How long have you been alive?"

Before he had taken to the sea, he had not bothered to converse with his prey. He'd simply seduced them and, when they were quite under his power, drained every last drop of their blood. He had learned, though, that he must ration that blood at sea, lest he be caught without it, or deplete his crew. Keeping a source on hand was easier if he spoke honestly and assuaged their fear. "Many centuries. The early years of my life, after I acquired this affliction, passed by so quickly, I barely remember them."

She took a deep breath and set her cup down. "If you will promise not to kill me, and if you promise that you will hand me over to my fiancé when you find someone else...suitable for your purposes, then you can drink my blood."

He laughed at the seriousness of it, and the notion that she had any power over what would become of her now that she was on his ship. "I see two problems with our arrangement."

She swallowed audibly and stepped back as he moved toward her. "Oh? And what are they? Perhaps we can amend the agreement."

Too long she had stood in his cabin, close enough to touch, without him touching her. He pulled her into his arms and ignored her startled cry. "I have already told you I do not sail for Jamaica on this voyage."

"And the other problem?" she squeaked, standing stiff and still in his arms.

Abigail Barnette

“I don’t drink virgin blood.”

Chapter Three

Annabelle gasped as Galerius's mouth covered hers. She pressed her fists against his chest, determined to push him away, willing herself to with every second that passed, but the will of her morals lost out to the will of her body.

His lips were shockingly cold, and his tongue tasted of wine. Her hands moved from fists to claws as she gripped his shoulders. For a moment, she thought of the fiancé she had not met, the only man who had a right to do this to her, and she felt a stab of guilt. But she did not know him, and she did not know if she was safe at the hands of this pirate, and—

Yes, that was it! Surely it was not her sinful curiosity that drove her to press harder against Galerius, not the feverish fantasies she indulged in night after night. She did this to protect herself, and to save her life!

She couldn't really believe that, could she?

No.

She pushed back, caught him unawares so that he released her. "No, I'm sorry, I can't—"

"I saw into your mind, Annabelle." He stalked forward, pulling the robe from his shoulders. "I know what you dream of doing with a man."

He could not possibly... She shook her head. "I think of no such thing."

"Oh, but you do." He took her hand and lifted her wrist to his mouth, flicking his tongue over the pulse that leaped there. "And I promise you, there is so much more than what you've imagined."

When she opened her mouth to protest, all that came out was a whimper.

Galerius released her arm and stepped back, finger to his lips as though having an epiphany. "Perhaps I am driving too hard a bargain. How about this, then? The next time we are to sail across the sea, I will make it my personal mission to find your betrothed and deliver you safely to him. Do you find that fair?"

It was too easy, and very suspicious. "Do you often travel across the sea?"

"Of course. We are pirates, after all."

"Fine, then." Her answer was too easy, and very suspicious as well, but she refused to dwell on it. Still, he had not made a move toward her. "I agree. Proceed."

He chuckled, and a hot blush crept up her face. "It would be easier if you took off your gown."

"Oh." She felt foolish and suddenly not as eager to continue with what they had begun. She had supposed she would be naked, but she had imagined it would happen in the heat of passion, as if by magic,

so she would not have time to think about it. To remove her clothing now, while he watched her, would be embarrassing and...

Impossible, she realized. On the boat, Mrs. Grimble had helped her with her stays when she dressed and undressed, and the woman tied such ridiculous little knots. "I can't," she said quietly, relief and disappointment mixing in her voice. "I suppose that's—"

Before she could finish, he dropped to his knees in front of her and pulled her gown open, flinging pins across the room and ripping her stomacher. Annabelle gasped. She would not deny she had imagined having her clothes torn off in a moment of passion, but in practice it was a bit unnerving. More so when he reached for a knife on the table and pointed it to her midsection. She yelped and jumped back, and he growled, "Be quiet, I won't hurt you." A horrible tearing sound alerted her to the demise of the ribbons cinching her corset, and at once she stood in the short shift and drawers beneath. The gasp she uttered then was one of relief, not anticipation.

A smile curved his mouth, and he tossed the blade aside. "In my day, women did not wear such ridiculous undergarments."

"And I shan't, now," Annabelle said, but she could not inject appropriate dismay knowing the vile garment was destroyed. "I suppose I will have to make do until we reach Jamaica."

"If we reach Jamaica," he corrected her. "And I don't want to hear any more talk of it. While you are in my company, you are to think of me, not some far-off man whom you have never met." He advanced on her, backed her up to the edge of the bunk. "And when you return to him, I guarantee you will still be thinking of me."

Her knees turned to water and she collapsed, chest constricting with a mixture of fear and excitement. Her nipples grew tight beneath her shift, the dark pink of them showing prominently against the sheer muslin of the garment. With one hand at the small of her back, he stroked the side of one breast. Her breath hitched, and she knew then why he supported her so. Without his arm strong around her back, she would collapse from sheer delight. His smile was almost a smirk as he lowered his mouth, maddeningly slowly. "My, but you are innocent."

"I'm not—" she began to protest, but his lips closed over the peak of one breast through the fabric, and her back arched like a drawn bow. Never had she felt such intense sensation. She had not been able to imagine what this would be like, not properly; she understood that now. The shivers of apprehension and arousal raced toward her most secret place, the part of her she had stroked beneath the covers while indulging in her most naughty fantasies. All from the touch of his mouth. What would happen when— No, she would not think of that. Her skin grew hot just imagining it.

"It has been a very long time since I've had a virgin," he murmured against her flesh. "The blood is too sweet for my tastes. But I forgot how much fun this is." His palm snaked beneath her shift, gliding across her belly and up to cup her breast.

She shuddered as a rush of heat flooded her core, swelling her untouched flesh and setting a nearly unbearable tension there. She pressed her thighs together and arched her back, moaning. Galerius slid up her body to cover her mouth with his again, his hands bunching the shift and raising it. He broke their kiss only long enough to pull the garment over her head and discard it, then pressed her to him again. When her exposed skin met his, she moaned and opened her legs, raising one to hook around his waist.

He laughed low in his throat and eased her leg back down. "Do not rush me." His cold, wet mouth moved from hers to kiss her chin, her jaw, suck her earlobe. Annabelle was powerless to do anything but clutch at his shoulders and gasp. He laved a trail down her neck, bit her shoulder gently. He smoothed his hands down her arms, raising gooseflesh there. Every movement he made brought him in contact with a new part of her body, a new part to be set alight with sensation. When his mouth closed over her breast again, she shrieked and writhed beneath him. When he stroked her other breast, rolled the nipple between his fingers, she could not breathe.

All the while, she burned, ached, rubbed against him and bit her lip to stop the senseless pleas that would escape if she tried to speak.

His body was cold and hard, as if it were carved out of stone, yet somehow he felt alive. His breath chilled the places on her skin where moisture still lingered from his kisses. He moved his attention from one breast to the other. The sensation lost nothing to repetition, and she writhed beneath him.

Never in her life had Annabelle felt so out of control, so reckless, so...free. All thoughts of being a proper lady fled, though she had not truly cared to act the part of a proper lady to begin with. Still, being loosed from the restraints of what was and wasn't allowed sent a delicious thrill through her.

Galerius slid down her body, though she gripped his arms and whimpered for him to stay where he was. He trailed his fingers down her stomach, and the flesh there trembled under his touch. He moved ever closer to the part of her that demanded his attention, sliding the muslin drawers over her hips. She held her breath as the cool air touched her enflamed flesh. She was too exposed, too open to his gaze and touch, in a way no one had seen her before. A pang of anxiety forced her legs together, but his body between them impeded her, and he dropped to his knees in front of the bunk and forced her legs wide apart with a hand on each thigh. The breath she had held rushed out of her in a shuddering moan she could not restrain. Certainly he did not intend to put his mouth on her there...certainly he would not...

He didn't, and she cried out in frustration as his lips fell upon the bend of her knee. With one massive forearm braced across her hips, putting maddening pressure on her mound without satisfying the burning need for his touch, he lifted her leg. His tongue traced a cold path up her thigh, closer and closer to her sex. She fought against him, squirmed and tried to lift her hips while he lazily kissed his way back to her knee.

"Please," she panted, hands clenching to fists in the bedclothes beneath her.

"Please? Please what?" he purred against her thigh. "Tell me, what should I do?"

Her voice froze in her throat. She knew what she wished him to do, but she could not say the words. “I want...”

“What do you want?” he urged. His hands inched down her thighs, his palms resting so terribly close to where she wanted them to be.

“I...” She raised up, whining in frustration.

He parted her with his thumbs, grazing her sensitive flesh. Had he decided, then, to have mercy on her? He bent his head and blew cold breath across her swollen sex, and she cried out in need. But he did not touch her further.

“You have not told me what to do.” His lips were so close that his words stirred the damp curls over her cleft.

She imagined his head buried between her thighs, and her fingers twisted in his copper hair. Still, she did not know the name for what she wanted, what she burned for with every part of her body—one particular part more than others. “I want...” One of her hands drifted down, over her belly. “I want you to put your mouth on me.”

He leaned closer, looked up her body and held her gaze. “Where?”

“Here,” she whispered, fingers dipping lower. “Right here.”

At first, he did nothing, and she feared she had done something wrong. Had she behaved too wantonly? Was he disgusted? He stared, transfixed, at her hand. Then, with a groan, he pushed it aside and pressed his mouth against her aching sex.

Annabelle’s body jolted as if struck by lightning. She had touched herself before, in secret, but her hand had never felt as wickedly delicious as his tongue did rolling over and over her swollen bud. Her body clenched, her knees clapped to the sides of his head, though she did not know whether she meant to push him away or trap him there. Her breath ripped from her throat on a scream of shocked pleasure. Her pulse pounded as if she rushed toward the edge of a dangerous precipice. Then, all at once, under the torturous swirl of his tongue, she tumbled over the edge.

She was vaguely aware that the high-pitched, panting cries she heard came from herself. She was aware, too, that Galerius had ceased his ministrations, and that he watched her with amusement. “You did not learn about that in any book, I’d wager.”

A shaking laugh escaped her. “No, I did not.”

He stroked one fingertip through the slick wetness of her cleft, drawing new desire from her satiated body. The realization that she lay utterly exposed to him, without the shameless need that had possessed her before to cushion the blow, made her suddenly long for the layers of clothing she had discarded.

“It would not help,” he told her, his voice low, almost predatory. “You could wrap yourself in sackcloth from head to toe, and I will still see you this way. Splayed out before me, wet and wanting.”

She knew that to be true. She suspected it was true even before he’d undressed her.

He dragged his fingertip over her still-sensitive pearl, and she moaned. "You make such beautiful sounds." He let his finger come to rest at her opening. "Let me hear them again."

Slowly, he pushed that finger inside of her. She gasped at the invasion, bucked her hips to draw him deeper. He curled his finger, rubbing some secret place that drove her quiet moans higher. Cold chills raced along every inch of her skin, but did not relieve the heat that burned in her. He pressed his thumb against her and gently circled it over her sensitized flesh. Muscles she did not realize she possessed flexed, tensed as she sped toward her release once more.

She was close, so close, when he withdrew his hand and shifted her, whimpering in protest, to lie properly on the bunk. He rose up on his knees between her spread legs, and for the first time, Annabelle saw his male organ, rigid and curved up toward his stomach. The head of it gleamed a flushed red, as wide and round as a plum, the shaft just as wide, bluish veins straining beneath the skin. He stroked it, gliding his hand up the massive length, the motion holding Annabelle's fascinated gaze. "Have you ever seen a man's cock before, Annabelle?"

She wet her lips, struggled to calm her ragged breaths. "In a—"

"Not in a book, Annabelle." He leaned over her, the head of his erection prodding at her cleft as he kissed her neck. "What kind of lady reads such books?" He pressed forward, rubbing the head of his cock against her aching, wet center. She opened her mouth to speak, to defend her honor, but the wide tip of him slipped into her cleft and her voice froze in her throat.

"The kind," he murmured against her ear, "who would beg me to fuck her?"

She clutched at his shoulders, dug her fingers into the cold, hard flesh and lifted her hips, but he did not enter her. "Please," she whispered.

"I took pity on you before. I will not this time." There was laughter in his voice.

Annabelle did not find the situation amusing in the slightest. "Please, I don't know—"

"You don't know what you want?" He pushed forward just slightly, then withdrew again. "I know what you want, and I think you do as well. You merely have to tell me."

"I..." She closed her eyes, barely believing the words she was about to utter. "I want you to...fuck me."

Her scandalized whisper had barely left her lips when he thrust, hard and fast, sheathing himself completely in her body. A startled cry escaped her at the sudden invasion. She had heard stories, from her sisters and from Mrs. Grimble, about the terrible pain she would experience when her maidenhead was torn. It was painful, but fleeting. Far more disconcerting was the feeling of him filling her, every cool inch of him stretching her burning flesh.

"Are you all right?" he whispered against her ear, surprisingly tender after his gruff commands and lewd talk.

“Yes,” she answered, but she was not at all right. She would not be until he ceased holding so maddeningly still, until he did something, anything, to sate the need that threatened to drive her mad. She rolled her hips and moaned in frustration when it was not enough.

He moved then, sliding slowly out so that just the tip of him remained, and entered her again, wringing a shudder from her. Another slow thrust, and she was lost in a haze of pleasure that burned through the blood in her veins.

Though her mind was lost, her body knew exactly how to proceed. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he moved inside of her, arched her back as he leaned down to take one of her hard nipples into his mouth.

He looked up, a smile quirking the corner of his mouth. “What is it?” she panted, uncertain at the amusement glittering in his dark eyes.

“You,” he said, pushing himself deeper, and she closed her eyes. “You’re not a virgin anymore.”

The sudden memory of what he had planned, the deal she’d made... Fangs flashed through her mind, and her eyes flew open. He loomed above her, still buried within her, his dark eyes glowing red. She shrieked and tried to scramble backwards, but he pinned her, hands holding her wrists to the bunk beneath her, the weight of his body crushing her.

“Please,” she whispered, and the word mocked her. Hadn’t she just begged him to touch her, to put his mouth on her, to fuck her?

There was nothing teasing about his expression. “We made an agreement. Now, it is time for you to uphold your end of it.”

He moved so fast, she did not have time to anticipate what he would do, and his fangs pierced her skin before she had time to scream. Still, she did scream, but not from the pain. The pull of his mouth against her neck sent shivers racing along her skin. Under her hands, which no longer fought to push him away, his skin grew warm. Inside of her, he pulsed, pushed, thrust faster and faster, sending her over the edge again as she screamed his name. Above her and inside of her, Galerius’s flesh burned shockingly hot. Or, perhaps she was cold. She was vaguely aware of him shuddering over her, exploding inside her. Then, blackness claimed her.

Chapter Four

Galerius rolled off Annabelle, breathing hard. He knew he shouldn't have taken as much blood as he had, but she would recover. He pushed the sweat-damp locks from her forehead and couldn't help his smile. As far as companions went, Annabelle lacked nothing. In fact, she had a decided advantage over Drummond. Though the Irishman was eager enough when he came to his captain's bed—and talented, that could not be denied—Galerius had always preferred a willing woman to a man.

That was why he had lost control the way he had, as he had not done in centuries. Not since the very first days of his immortal life. A chill crept up his spine at the memories of those early years, the blood and death that had surrounded him. No, his loss of control had not been as great, nor as devastating, as it could have been.

He inhaled her scent, reveled in the sweet innocence of her. Her blood pounded through his veins, awakening his body and his desire anew. He wanted nothing more than to wake her and bury himself again in her soft, wet heat, but letting her rest would be the wisest decision. There would be other nights, other chances to take her, once she had recovered her strength. Strangely, though, it was her body, and not her blood, that he hungered for.

As long as he stayed beside her, he would find no relief. He rose from the bed and pulled his clothes from the peg beside the bunk. He donned his trousers and linen shirt, then pulled on his boots and long canvas coat. Though he loathed most current fashions, he quite liked his coat. It was dark gray, like the surface of the sea by moonlight, and hung to the tops of his boots, and he imagined he cut a rather impressive figure in it. Oh, he might be a pirate and a blood-drinking fiend, but he still had his particular vanities.

Above deck, he found his human sailors at their evening work. He did not supervise them during the day, but Drummond insisted they worked very hard until the sun went down. Galerius nodded at one man who, when caught leaning against the mast, shot to his feet and hurried to look busy.

They would have to work much harder during the day, Galerius reasoned with himself, to keep the ship in such perfect order.

Drummond leaned against the rail, staring out at the night sky dotted with brilliant white, and Galerius joined him there, standing close so he could speak without being overheard. The crew could not see Drummond, but the spell might not last as long if they constantly caught their captain conversing with the

air and got a notion of ghosts on the ship. The human mind was a strong, stubborn thing, and would find the truth of a matter with very little evidence.

"I didn't expect to see you up here tonight," Drummond said with a lazy grin. "Was the lady not as you'd hoped? Or have I changed your tastes completely?"

"If any man could, Drummond, it would be you," Galerius said dryly. "The lady sleeps. I was...enthusiastic about my feeding."

At once, the Irishman's expression grew serious. "She sleeps, or she *sleeps*?"

"She lives. She just...sleeps. Do not worry, Ian. I am not some young, reckless creature," Galerius said, quick to ease his friend's mind. *Friend*. Yes, he supposed he had come to think of the human as a friend and ally over the past months. He'd begun to rely on him for far more than food and pleasure. "You may go and have a look at her, if you like."

"I've already seen her," Drummond confessed. "This afternoon, when she found the courage to come out of your cabin. She was a lucky find, wasn't she?"

Galerius made a noise, but did not answer the question. It was ridiculous to hide his feelings from Ian, but something about the girl made him guarded, careful, as though she were a secret for only him to keep. "How fares the old woman?"

Again, the levity disappeared from Drummond's face. "Beside herself. She has not eaten. She demands to see the girl. Apparently, she was responsible for her. And the girl was looking for her this afternoon. It will be impossible to keep them from finding each other, I fear."

Galerius often felt there was much that took place on his ship when he was bound to his coffin, but only at times such as these did the thought bother him. "What does the woman believe happened to Annabelle?"

Drummond shrugged. "Well, none of the crew have seen the girl, have they? They assume she was killed or cast overboard accidentally during the raid. So, that is what they told her."

Galerius cursed in his native tongue. It was good the old woman thought her charge dead; there would be no rescue attempts initiated when they abandoned her at the nearest port. It would raise the bounty on his own head, but the king's men would not be able to execute him more than once, so what was one more murder to his name? The danger, though, lay in what would happen if the two laid eyes on each other. If the old woman saw through the glamour, she would not be likely to keep quiet about it. And if she started speaking of ghosts and a dead girl roaming the ship, the hysteria would cause the crew to see Annabelle as well. Once that happened, well, the entire glamour would be destroyed, and Galerius would need a new crew. New men he would have to bespell into ignoring the strange habits of their captain, which was not easy work.

“Don’t let it worry you too much,” Drummond said, as if he had read his lover’s mind. “The old woman’s foot is still so swollen she can’t walk on it, and the girl...well, it isn’t likely she’ll be leaving your cabin soon, is it?”

Galerius nodded. “I may have need of your services after the next sunset. I do not wish to endanger her by overfeeding.”

“How considerate of you. Could it be that my captain is learning manners?” Drummond moved closer and splayed one hand on Galerius’s abdomen. “Will he say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ for a change, and let me have a turn giving orders?”

Galerius hissed as the human’s hand moved lower, stopping to cup his balls through his trousers. With a groan, he pushed that hand away. “Tomorrow night. Now, I must congratulate the men on their good work and consult the quartermaster on how the spoils will be divided.”

“As I suspected. No manners.” Drummond sighed. “What shall I do in the meantime?”

Though the idea of leaving the Irishman alone with Annabelle set off warning bells in his jealous mind, Galerius said, “Go, make sure the girl receives everything she needs.”

Drummond raised an eyebrow.

“Food, clothing, comforts.” Galerius ground his teeth. “Any other ‘needs’ will be dealt with by myself, do you understand?”

The human grinned broadly. “Of course. Don’t you trust me?”

With a growl, Galerius turned away and stalked off to meet the quartermaster.

The sight that awaited Drummond when he entered the captain’s cabin was nearly enough for him to forget his orders. The girl lay on her stomach, her dark hair fanned over the mattress like a spill of molasses. The bedclothes twisted around her legs, and the creamy pale skin of her thighs taunted him between slashes of the sheets.

He crept across the floor, though he knew she would not wake. Not after Galerius had fed her and loved her. A shiver crawled across his skin at his own memories of the captain’s bed. He climbed onto the bunk beside her and brushed the soft, smooth skin of her back. She smelled of perfume and perspiration. Drummond’s cock hardened as his hand drifted lower, stroking over the curve of her buttocks and dipping between her thighs. His fingers encountered her damp petals, and he groaned in frustration. In her sleep, she whimpered and shifted her hips restlessly. Then her eyes came open, and confusion wrinkled her brow as she stared at him.

Damn! This sort of thing never went over well with women. And, true to her sex, Annabelle sat up, clutching the sheet to her bosom and opening her mouth to shriek.

He silenced her with a hand over her mouth. "Hush! I'm supposed to be here. Do you think the captain would just leave you unguarded? Besides, who else can see you?"

She squirmed away from him, practically spitting venom. "I do not think this was the kind of guarding he had in mind!"

"My dear lady, what are you accusing me of?" he asked, blinking in mock surprise.

"Accusing you?" Once again, confusion created the dearest little lines between her eyebrows. Drummond almost wanted to kiss them away, but he was terribly fond of living, so heeded Galerius's orders. Annabelle shook her head and pressed one palm to her forehead. "You are a madman. You know very well that you were...touching me."

"Touching?" he sputtered and stood, making a great display of being outraged. "I was doing nothing of the sort!"

She frowned. "I was so sure..."

Astonishing! She actually believed him! "Sweet lady, I assure you, I was merely trying to wake you. I touched your shoulder, and for that I do apologize, but you were sleeping quite soundly, and I worried for your modesty."

Her face flamed red.

Drummond smiled to himself and covered it by turning away. "Shall I get you one of the captain's shirts? It may be more comfortable than your gown."

"My gown was ruined," she said with a furious blush. "Yes, thank you. A shirt would be...very fine."

"The captain likes you." Drummond had been able to tell from the moment Galerius had stepped on deck. He hadn't carried the weight of the world with him, for the first time since Drummond had known him. "You must be very special."

"I am not special," she said, and there was no coquettishness in it. She truly believed it. She was a fool.

He handed her the shirt and watched in the looking glass as she put it on. The light from the lantern cast her silhouette through the linen, which fell barely to her knees as she knelt on the bed. The tight buds of her nipples showed against the fabric, and he ached to go to her.

Patience. Galerius would share her. Just not tonight.

"How well do you know the captain?" Annabelle asked innocently. She could not possibly fathom how well he knew the captain.

Forcing himself to erase the smirk from his face, he turned back to her. "I have been on this ship for a year now."

"That is very fine," she said cautiously, "but I asked how well you know the captain, not how long you have been on board the ship."

Could she know? He rubbed a hand over his jaw. "The captain is my good friend. Why do you ask?"

She sighed and fell back on the bunk. "I should not be speaking to you. You'll likely tell him everything I say."

Not without a price, he thought. "I am nothing if not discreet."

She sighed, and her uncertainty warred across her features. Finally, she asked, "Do I have any hope at all of seeing my betrothed? Or does he intend to keep me forever?"

"I doubt he intends to keep you forever." Why he continued to speak, he had no idea, but something mean in him made him say, "He'll very likely get tired of you and dump you in some foreign port, if not off the side of the ship altogether."

Now I've done it, he thought as she burst into tears. Worse, he had no idea why he said such a thing to her. Jealously, perhaps, or fear that the same would happen to him now that Galerius had a new plaything. But that made no sense. He'd never seen Galerius be wantonly cruel to anyone, even if they'd deserved it. The captain enjoyed appearing to be a brute, but beneath the façade he was meek as a kitten.

Drummond went to Annabelle and put his arm around her slender shoulders. "I was only teasing," he assured her, astonished at how very protective he felt toward her, considering he was the one who had caused her to cry in the first place. "I'm sure that when the time is right, he will return you to where you need to be."

"Do not tease me!" She pulled away angrily and hopped off the bunk, stalking across the floor like a cat after a particularly troublesome mouse. "You have no idea what I have been through. Mrs. Grimbles is gone. Those—those pirates! They killed her! And now I've vanished from the high seas and no one knows I'm even gone!"

"And you weren't complaining so loudly just an hour ago." He leaned back on his elbows. "You'll reach your betrothed. Just a bit delayed, and far more happy for it. You couldn't have gotten away with what you have with some old chaperone doting on you, could you have?"

"You are disgusting!" she cried, and hurled a cup across the cabin at him.

He ducked it, luckily. She had an arm like a soldier and the cup was a heavy pewter one. "I did not wish to make you angry. I merely assumed you enjoyed the captain's company as much as I often do."

"Get out!" she screamed, and snatched up the wine bottle, raising it threateningly.

There was no time for her to throw it. Galerius entered the cabin, all storm and fury, and seized her arm before she could let it fly. Still, when he shouted, it was not at the girl who had nearly spilled a perfectly good bottle of brine-preserved blood. "Ian, what did you do?"

"I want to go home!" Annabelle shrieked, twisting out of Galerius's grasp.

"No, you want to go to Jamaica," Drummond supplied helpfully, and Galerius scowled at him.

"Neither of you are going anywhere. Except, perhaps, you, Drummond. To the bottom of the sea."

Knowing when his presence was not required, Drummond excused himself and left the cabin.

"I want to go home," Annabelle repeated, though some of the fire had gone out of her. "I want to know what happened to Mrs. Grimble."

"She died." Galerius did not like to lie, but he could not have this girl going in search of her guardian. Better she think her dead than know Mrs. Grimble would be left behind the next time they put into port. Annabelle might try to sneak a message to her betrothed that way, and Galerius was not about to let her go that easily.

"You are a monster!" she screamed, rushing at him, intent on clawing his face.

He caught her easily by her arms and crushed her to him. "You know I am, and yet you say it as though it were a surprise."

It did not make her accusation cut any less to affirm it. So, she thought him a monster. That was well enough. Let her think what she would.

She fell to her knees, her back shaking with sobs she tried to quiet.

He would truly be a monster if he left her that way, tearful and without comfort. He knelt beside her. "You cared for this woman who was your companion."

"No." She shook her head and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her shirt. It was *his* shirt she wore, he realized, and strangely, that sent a stab of desire through him. "No," she repeated. "She was a horrible woman. She never stopped complaining. But I did not want her to die."

He wanted to tell her, so badly that the words were on his lips almost before he could stop them. The sight of a woman's tears was a powerful thing. Instead, he said, "I did not want this life. But it is what I have. You might learn to think the same way."

She looked up, her eyes full of tears. "Drummond...Ian said..."

"He said what?" Galerius could kill the man for her tears.

A blush flared in her white cheeks. "He said you did with him what you did..." She looked toward the bunk, then at the floor, ashamed.

"There is no need for shyness," he said with a chuckle. "I know very well what I do with him."

"It's true, then? You have...unnatural appetites?" Her eyes were wide and still red from tears, and she looked close to another bout of them.

Which was why he felt so terrible for laughing at her. "Unnatural appetites? I drink blood, but the appetite you concern yourself with is the one I satisfy with Drummond in my bed?"

"It *is* unnatural," she insisted. "I hardly think the church—"

"One might argue that you've violated the sacred laws of your church as well. Lying with a man who is a demon. Reading your father's very unchaste books." He clucked his tongue. "I am grateful I am not bound by such nonsense as your church." While she gaped at him, jaw nearly to her chest, he continued.

“Unnatural? What could be more natural than taking pleasure in a lover’s body and returning that pleasure? Didn’t you enjoy yourself in my bed?”

“That is hardly the same!” She pressed a hand to her chest, and Galerius worried for a moment the shock might overcome her. “I am a woman, and you are a—”

“Demon, by your own accusation. Tell me, why shouldn’t a man lie with another man, if they both take pleasure in it?” He arched a brow. “Have you ever seen two men together?”

She glared at him. “You know very well I have not!”

“I thought perhaps your father had some literature on the subject.” He turned away to hide his smile. “If you had, you would have realized how far from unnatural the act is.”

“Well, thank God I have never had an opportunity to see such a thing!” She crossed her arms over her chest and turned up her nose.

“Until now,” he said, turning to the cupboard beside the door. Inside, he found hardtack and salted meat, and he pulled them down and took them to the table.

A nervous laugh burst from Annabelle. “You cannot be serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He took a bottle of wine—real wine, this bottle—and poured a cup for her. “I took too much of your blood. You will need a night to regain your strength. Tomorrow, I will sup from Drummond. It might do you good to watch.”

“You cannot force me to,” she said, squeezing her eyes shut as though the act she so detested took place in front of her right that moment.

“No, I cannot,” he said, feigning a sigh of resignation. “I suppose, then, I shall have to make you a participant.”

“Never!” She stood, her fists balled at her sides. “I would never! And you only needed to do *that* one time. So you wouldn’t drink virgin blood.”

“I never said we would only do it once.” He wagged a finger at her. Before she could protest, he moved to her, faster than she could see, and put his arms around her, pulling her back tight against the front of his body. He leaned down, letting his breath stir the wisps of curls at her temples, and said, “And I do not believe you can resist me. Or your curiosity.”

He peered into her mind, saw exactly what he expected. Two well-muscled, naked bodies moving over each other, glazed by lantern light. A nice thought, but that was all it was. She could imagine no further, and he felt her frustration.

Releasing her, he went toward the door.

“Where are you going?” she demanded.

“To get you some rations from the galley. If you were to try to eat that biscuit without soaking it in a bit of coffee, you would break all of those pretty teeth out of your head.” He put his hand on the door and paused. “I can see into your mind, you know. You won’t be able to stay away tomorrow night.”

He closed the door just in time to avoid being hit by flying hardtack.

Chapter Five

Though Annabelle loathed admitting it, she *was* curious about what she would see when Galerius fed from Drummond. She'd tried to work out the details in her imagination and had come up woefully short. Galerius had promised her a chance to watch without Drummond knowing of her presence. She was grateful for that. There was something about the Irishman that unnerved her. Whenever he spoke, it seemed there was a hidden, and horribly inappropriate, double meaning to his words all the time. It was made a thousand times worse by knowing she was not in on the joke. She did not like to feel as though she were being made fun of, but she had no idea how else to proceed with him to get the upper hand. She would not feel sorry for him that she spied on him tonight.

Strangely, she was not afraid of what she might see. The idea of watching, unseen, while another couple engaged in the act of love, was curiously exciting. It was the notion of watching Galerius touching another, giving another the same pleasure he had shared with her, that bothered her. It made her blood burn with jealousy, though she had no claim on Galerius, and certainly no interest in having one.

At nightfall, Galerius rose from his coffin, irritable and distracted. "I must feed, it is nothing more than that," he reassured her, and that troubled her more, to know her jealousy was so obvious.

"Go out on deck," he told her. "After you see Drummond enter, you may come in again, and he will not see you. Only, take care not to make too much noise, or he will know you are there."

He would use a glamour, she realized, and the thought unnerved her. Would he remove it again, or would there be another person on the ship who would not see her? She obeyed his instructions, waiting until she saw Drummond's dark head as he descended the steps into the cabin. Then, her breath frozen in her chest, dread burning in her stomach, she made her way toward the door.

Inside, they spoke in low, hushed voices. She pressed her ear against the door and listened. Drummond's tone was softer, less contrived, than when he addressed her. "I have cursed the sun all day. I thought it would never set."

"Were you so eager for me?" Galerius also sounded unlike himself to her ears.

"Do you need proof of my words?"

Annabelle opened the door, just a sliver, heard Galerius's intake of breath as Drummond took his captain's hand and pressed it against the front of his trousers. With a low growl of approval, Galerius gripped him by the hair at his nape and pulled Drummond in for a hard, desperate kiss.

Her heart hammering against her ribs, Annabelle moved to close the door. What she looked upon was too intimate, and to watch anymore too intrusive. Then, without pulling his lips from Drummond's, Galerius fixed her with his piercing blue gaze and beckoned to her.

Annabelle entered the cabin, shutting the door quietly and sat on the steps, her hands twisting the hem of the shirt she wore. Drummond, still unaware of her presence, splayed his hands across Galerius's chest. "I did like the night off," he mused aloud. "It gave me time to anticipate."

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder, is that it?" Galerius asked as his fingers worked the ties on the other man's shirt.

Drummond laughed and pulled the garment over his head. "It wasn't really my heart that missed your attention."

Galerius pushed Drummond's trousers down and the Irishman's member sprang free. Not as impressive in size as Galerius's, but he would suit. Then, shocked at that thought, Annabelle pushed it from her mind.

It was not quick enough, though, and she remembered too late that Galerius would have heard it. A smile quirked the corner of his mouth, and she could not tell if it was for her benefit. Only when he grasped Drummond's cock, pumping his hand up and down the shaft, causing the man's head to fall back and his eyes to close, did Galerius look at her. "Do you like that?" he asked, never taking his eyes from hers as he continued to stroke Drummond's hard length, and Annabelle nodded along with the strangled, "Yes," that burst from Drummond's lips.

Galerius smirked and turned his attention back to Drummond. "One day apart, and already you crave me?"

"Oh, yes," Drummond gasped, clasping his own hand over Galerius's. "Like a man dying of thirst craves water."

"Still so poetic, with your cock in my hand." Galerius laughed.

Drummond breathed heavily as he replied, "You don't think my talent for speaking would desert me over something so base as physical pleasure?"

The way they spoke to each other amazed Annabelle. These were not the tender words of two lovers, but the good-natured challenges of a friendly rivalry.

"While I appreciate your pretty words, Ian, I would much prefer your talented tongue to be put to other work." Galerius put a hand on Drummond's shoulder, and the man sank to his knees before Galerius, his hands pulling down the linen trousers the captain wore.

Any thought of further analyzing the relationship between the two men completely fled Annabelle's mind when, to her utter astonishment, Drummond grasped Galerius's cock and slid his lips over the head.

Galerius's face contorted in pleasure that looked almost like pain, and his fingers dug into Drummond's shoulders. Drummond held Galerius in his hand, pumping his fist furiously as he worked his

mouth over the hot, swollen flesh. He paused in his rhythmic assault to slide his mouth down the shaft, and Galerius groaned and flexed his hips.

Drummond leaned back and looked up at him quizzically. “Why so gentle? Afraid you’ll break me? Or have you forgotten how to please me in one night?”

Something dark flared to life in Galerius’s expression, and he forced Drummond’s head down, forced him to take him into his mouth again, and jerked his hips forward. Drummond gagged and laughed, low in his throat, where he took more of Galerius in.

Wet heat pooled between Annabelle’s thighs, and she squeezed them together, shifting against the step. She pressed the heel of her hand against her tightly clenched thighs and almost cried out in her frustration.

Galerius broke from the haze of his pleasure and rasped, “Touch yourself,” a command that Drummond eagerly obeyed, but that Annabelle knew was for her. Hesitantly, she slid her hand between her legs, but she did not touch the slick folds there. The action only made the ache there worse, and that ache intensified as she watched Galerius’s thickness swallowed down by Drummond. She whimpered and pressed the back of her other hand to her mouth. Hadn’t Galerius warned her not to make a sound? How had he expected she would not cry out in disappointment to see that flesh that had filled her, that had brought her to the height of her pleasure the night before, but not be able to touch it or feel him plunging into her body?

Galerius still looked at her, commanding with his gaze, and there was no reason to resist further. She let her legs fall slowly apart and cupped her sex. Almost without thought, she curled her fingers, letting one slip into her aching channel, circling her bud with her thumb. Galerius groaned, and the sound drove the urgency in her body higher.

Drummond still worked Galerius’s cock in his mouth while he stroked himself. The unfamiliar sight of a man pleasuring himself held Annabelle hypnotized. Did he feel the same thing she felt, the thrill of performing such a personal act in front of his lover? She moved her fingers in time with Drummond’s hand, imagining what it would be like to be where he was, to be on her knees before Galerius, taking his cock into her mouth. She closed her eyes and saw the image as though it took place before her. Saw her mouth opened wide around his shaft, her hand between her legs. She heard Galerius make a strangled noise, and wet heat flooded over her fingers. When she opened her eyes, she realized his tortured sound had not been a part of her fantasy. His head thrown back, fingers plunged into Drummond’s dark hair, Galerius gave a shout and pushed his lover’s head farther down, forcing him to take the entire length into his throat. His body quivering, it appeared as though Galerius wouldn’t be able to stand, such was the force of his release.

Annabelle’s thumb worked furiously against her sensitive nub, but it wasn’t enough, not nearly enough after what she had felt the night before. She pushed another finger into her cleft to join the one that already pumped in and out of her.

Abandoning his own pleasure, Drummond eased back and gripped the captain's shaft, stroking him even as Galerius hissed in what appeared to be discomfort. Galerius swatted Ian's hand away.

Drummond moved to the bunk. From her vantage point, Annabelle realized with disappointment, she wouldn't be able to see them there. She pointed to the table, and Galerius nodded, just enough that the movement wouldn't seem odd if Drummond noticed. Through considerable effort, she pulled her hand away from her dripping sex and moved to the table. This close to Galerius, she couldn't help but touch him, and let her fingers trace a line across his chest as she passed. She studied his face carefully as he looked into her eyes. His lips twitched as he suppressed a smile, but he had no other reaction. Damn him! She wanted to see him affected by her touch the way she was affected by him, the way he was affected by Drummond.

Galerius turned away from her and went to the bunk, where Drummond already awaited him. When the captain knelt on the bed, Drummond reached for him, hands roving over the hard muscles of Galerius's chest and stomach. Galerius pulled Ian's mouth to his and Annabelle saw their tongues twine as Drummond's lips opened wider.

"You're still hard for me," the Irishman groaned against Galerius's mouth, his hand grasping at the captain's straining shaft. Another pang of longing pierced Annabelle at the sight, and she eased one hip onto the table, then the other, sliding backward to sit on the tabletop. Desire burned her core, and her channel clutched on emptiness, seeking something to fill it. She obliged readily, pushing her fingers back in as deep as they would go. She was unable to silence the moan of relief that ripped from her throat, but the men did not notice.

"Are you going to take me, then?" Drummond asked the captain, nipping at his ear. "Or are you going to make me wait another night?"

Gripping the back of Ian's neck, Galerius flipped him onto his stomach and forced his head to the mattress. "I think you truly believed I *would* be letting you give me orders."

"Well, I did have some hope," came the muffled reply.

"Be quiet." Galerius reached for something beside the bunk: a small, blue glass jar, Annabelle realized as she watched him pull off the cover. Her curiosity piqued as Galerius dipped his fingers inside and withdrew them covered in glistening unguent.

Drummond turned his head and blew errant strands of hair from his face. "That's not very nice, you know. Making me wait."

"I told you to be quiet." Galerius smeared the grease over the head of his cock and pumped his fist up and down the shaft. Then, to Annabelle's confusion, he slipped his fingers into the cleft of Drummond's upraised buttocks, wiping more of the grease there.

No, surely he could not mean to—

Drummond's fingers fisted in the bedclothes, and he groaned as Galerius pressed the head of his cock where his fingers had been. Annabelle's face grew hot, and she knew she must be flushing as red as a tulip. She looked away. It was too sinful, too wrong. There hadn't even been pictures of such an act in Father's book, that was how shocking it all was!

Shocking, but terribly interesting. Though she had resolved to quit watching such a terrible spectacle, Drummond moaned, "Oh God, yes," and she could not stop herself from taking a peek.

On his knees behind Drummond, Galerius flexed his hips, driving deep into the man. With one hand on Ian's shoulder, pulling his body back, he reached with the other to stroke his cock. "Do you like that, then? Is this what you were after?"

Drummond gasped, braced himself with his forearms on the bed. He trembled, eyes closed, face screwed up with pleasure, or pain, Annabelle could not tell which. When he did not answer, Galerius bucked harder against him and twisted his hand in Drummond's hair, pulling his head back. "Where are your clever words now, Ian?"

Again, Drummond groaned, and the sound shot to Annabelle's core. She worked her fingers frantically, desperate to reach her release.

"Is this enough for you?" Galerius purred into Drummond's ear.

His body shuddering, Ian replied, "Too much. I'm going to—" His words were cut off by a long moan as his cock surged in Galerius's hands. Silvery-white ropes of fluid fell to the bed, and Annabelle's breath caught in her chest. Galerius still pumped into Drummond, making him gasp for breath, as if he were drowning in pleasure.

The darts of excitement that raced beneath Annabelle's fingers came faster, building with such intensity that she feared she would scream and reveal her presence. But she doubted Drummond would hear her, lost as he was to his release that seemed to go on and on, his body jerking against Galerius. With a growl that was almost frightening, Galerius wrenched Drummond's head back and bit into the man's neck. Drummond shouted and writhed against Galerius, pierced by both his fangs and his cock.

The sight was too much. Annabelle bit her lip to stifle her cry as her hips bucked against the table, her release slamming into her like a physical force. Her fingers seemed to continue thrusting in and out of her sheath of their own volition, for the rest of her was paralyzed by the waves of intense pleasure that rocked through her.

On the bed, Galerius pulled his cock from Drummond, his milky-white seed spurting from the head and falling on Ian's back. When he pulled his mouth from the Irishman's neck, the twin puncture wounds there closed up, leaving no evidence behind.

Heart beating heavily, Annabelle felt her neck. Where there should have been wounds, there were none. She pressed her hand to her chest to try and calm her frantically beating heart, and rose on wobbling legs to leave the cabin. Surely, Drummond would find it odd if he left and did not find her on deck.

With a contented sigh, Drummond fell back on the mattress, as though he'd just enjoyed a perfectly lovely evening at the theatre and not the utter ecstasy Annabelle had seen him experience. "Now, for my payment," he said, and she stopped in her progress to the door.

"I would have thought your participation reaped its own rewards," Galerius said, not sounding at all pleased at Drummond's demand. With a weary noise, he pulled a dagger from beneath the mattress and made a shallow cut across his forearm. "Have at it, but be quick. I have other matters to attend to this night."

To Annabelle's horror, Drummond fixed his mouth over the wound in Galerius's arm and sucked greedily at the blood there. Her stomach turned. Why would he wish to drink of the captain's blood? Did they share the same affliction?

"This cannot go on for much longer, you know," Galerius said, and Annabelle did not know if it was for her benefit or Drummond's. "If I give you much more of my blood, you'll become as I am."

"I was afraid you'd say something of the like. It's because of the girl, isn't it?" Drummond did not sound jealous or disappointed.

Annabelle watched Galerius carefully. She could sense his hesitation. He knew she was still in the cabin with them, but he did not look at her. "She...is a part of it. But I cannot make you what I am, Drummond. If I could, I would have both of you. But the price you ask is too high."

"And what of Annabelle?" Drummond asked. "When she grows old and withers, when she is not content to remain human when she could have eternal life? What will you do then?"

"You act as though I have some special attachment to her." Galerius rolled from the bunk and took his robe from the peg beside the bed. "I do not."

The words stung Annabelle, more deeply than she would have imagined they could. Surely, it didn't matter. The only man who should have any kind of attachment to her, and the only man she should have any kind of attachment to in return, was her fiancé. It was only natural, she reasoned, that she would have some kind of infatuation with Galerius, but it should not matter if he felt the same.

"You will. How you feel for her now has little to do with how you will feel in a year's time." Drummond laughed. "You tried to cut my throat my first night on board. Now we're great friends. More friendly than any men I've ever known."

"I might have some tender feelings toward her, but I assure you they stem merely from the fact that she is a woman, and far more delicate than yourself." Galerius bent to pick up Drummond's clothes from the floor.

"Tender feelings grow," Drummond warned.

Galerius threw him his clothes and growled, "Get out, before I throw you out." But his expression was kind, if troubled. He did not look at Annabelle, even after Drummond had gone.

She knew she must say something. She would not be able to stand it if Galerius thought she was mooning over him like some love-struck girl. It would be too embarrassing, and besides, she had her future husband to think of. She was betrothed, practically wedded, really. “You know, I do not expect you to grow to have feelings for me.”

“I know. You have your man in Jamaica.” He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “You believe I will release you one day, to go to him?”

“You’re releasing Drummond,” she said uncertainly. “You said you would let me go when we reached Jamaica—”

Galerius’s eyes turned dark, dangerous. “I said I would let you go *if* we reached Jamaica. And I also told you I did not want to hear of your betrothed again, did I not?”

Annabelle’s eyes stung suddenly. He would allow Drummond to speak candidly, but not her? Not after what they had shared?

Of course, it had meant nothing to him. Why should it have? It had only seemed so momentous to her because she had never been with a man. He’d been with hundreds of women, probably, and—

“Thousands,” he corrected, interrupting her thoughts. “You forget I am not like you, Annabelle. I have lived for many lifetimes.”

“And you will not remember me when I am gone,” she said, hating the quivering of her voice. “I understand.”

He did not answer her, and she left the cabin, tears filling her eyes.

Chapter Six

Annabelle slept the rest of the uncomfortable night upon a pile of empty sacks in the hold. They smelled of unwashed sailor, and she did not like to speculate who might have been sleeping on them before her. It was cold, with no proper blanket, and her sleep was miserable and fitful.

She woke to, “Ah, there you are. What are you doing, still asleep this late in the day?”

Drummond. Groaning to herself, Annabelle sat up, stretching sore limbs and trying her best not to look at the man. “What else is there to do on this ship? I can speak to no one, no one can see me... I might as well sleep the time away.”

“Nothing to do?” Drummond seemed offended at the idea. “I’ve been on board this ship for a year, and I have never run out of interesting things to do.”

Like drink the captain’s blood, Annabelle thought, but she did not say it. Though Drummond had not known she watched him the night before, she could not banish the images of him from her mind. Could not help but remember how his hand gripped his own cock, how good that cock would feel inside of her—

“I’m sure we could both think of interesting things to do,” Drummond continued, as though he had read her mind, and a hot blush rose to her cheeks. “You’re thinking of them right now, I imagine.”

“I am not!” She pulled an empty sack across her bare legs, as though the scratchy burlap could provide a shield from Drummond’s wickedness.

“What a filthy little mind you have!” Drummond sat beside her. “I was talking about all the fun tricks you could play on the crew! Did I tell you, I once had them convinced the ship was haunted?”

She nodded irritably and stood. “You told me. And I am not interested in playing tricks on these poor men. It’s bad enough that they have to sail with a...a demon for a captain.”

“A demon?” Drummond leaned back on his elbows. “Why do you call him that?”

“Because that is what he is,” she insisted, though she did not feel the certainty she projected in her words.

Drummond cocked an eyebrow. “Yesterday you referred to him as a man. Now he’s a demon?”

She knew the game he played. He would confuse her with words and trick her into saying something that she either did not mean or did not mean to reveal. It was a trick she was used to. Her sister, Charlotte, was a wonder at it, always getting other people into trouble. Annabelle turned away.

She got only a few steps before Drummond's hand caught her arm. He was gentle, but strong enough to keep her from getting away without listening to him. "I'm sorry," he said, and he sounded as genuine as he had the night before, in the captain's cabin. "You don't like to be teased, I can see that now."

"You can see that *now*?" she snapped, and wrenched her arm away from him.

"You're jealous," he said, and the truth of his statement pierced the veil of her anger.

She turned to face him, her arms clenched tight to her sides. "Why would I be jealous of you?"

"You weren't with Galerius last night because I was. And you're jealous." He wasn't gloating, or teasing. "You shouldn't be."

"Oh, do continue to tell me how I should feel." She walked farther into the hold, and Drummond hurried to cut off her retreat.

"You shouldn't be jealous. You're the interloper. But I don't mind your presence, truly. I have no feelings for Galerius, and want nothing from him, other than friendship, I assure you." Drummond looked over his shoulder, almost nervously.

"What is back there that you do not want me to see?" She pushed past him, but he cut her off again.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "But it's dark, and you could hurt yourself. Besides, you haven't listened to my...proposal."

She scrunched her face in confusion. "Proposal?"

"Yes, my proposal." His smooth, teasing manner was back, as though he were powerless to remain honest a second longer. "I was thinking you might be jealous of me because you're not as experienced as I am. Where physical love is concerned, I mean."

A flush of anger and embarrassment heated her face, and she could not meet his eyes. "It is nothing to brag about, sir."

"Sir?" He reached out and brushed one of her tangled ringlets from her neck. The skin there was damp with perspiration, and his fingers glided over it, following the errant curl from the curve of her neck over her shoulder, then traced her jaw back, from her ear to her chin. "Why are we being so formal? I was about to offer my help in the matter."

"Your help?" She swallowed as his fingers trailed down the column of her throat and between her collarbones.

"As long as you feel inadequate, you'll always view me as a threat, instead of the dear friend I could come to be." He tugged the laces that closed the deep vee of the shirt, but he did not untie them. "I could teach you."

Perhaps he was tricking her with clever words, but Annabelle could not see how that was important, when her blood beat through her veins at every touch of his hand. Still, she would not admit to him the effect he had on her. "Teach me what, sir? How to be annoying and rude?"

"I'm rude?" He leaned forward, as though he would kiss her cheek. Instead, he whispered into her ear, "I have never spied on you, Annabelle, though you watched me last night, with Galerius."

Her choked gasp of surprise was too fast to cover, and now she could not lie if she wished to. "He...Galerius..."

Drummond nodded, a half-smile quirking his lips. "Oh, I am sure it was his idea. But I am also sure you enjoyed watching and wouldn't have refused."

She opened her mouth to protest, but knew it was of little use, so she closed it again.

Idly stroking his fingers up her arm, he continued, "I am also sure you would not have refused if we had asked you to join us."

Join them? Was such a thing possible? "I think you misunderstand... Galerius forced me to—"

"Oh, do not blame the captain." Drummond slowly wagged his finger at her and brought it to rest just between her breasts. "Tell me, did you touch yourself while you watched us? Did you wish you could have been in my place?"

She batted his hand away. If they were to play such games while the captain slept, she would be an equal opponent. "There is something I would like to learn."

Drummond's eyes lit with anticipation. "Oh? And what would that be?"

"You took him into your mouth. Can you show me how to do that?" She matched his raised eyebrow with one of her own, and he laughed.

"I suppose yes, I could." He hesitated a moment, and it gave Annabelle great satisfaction to think she had set him on his guard. "You're serious?"

She nodded and, to display how serious she truly was, she dropped to her knees before him. "Like this?"

A sharp laugh escaped him, one he was not expecting, Annabelle thought. "Yes, eventually. First, may I show you something?"

He lead her back to the pallet she'd been sleeping on and laid back on it, making himself rather comfortable, Annabelle thought, for someone who was supposed to be teaching. "Last night, Galerius was eager to feed and ready to lie with me. But sometimes he likes to delay that satisfaction. Both kinds. What would you do to him, to make him want you?"

That was a difficult question. Annabelle hadn't needed to make him want her. He simply had. She searched her memory and finally settled on the only thing that seemed reasonable. Uncertainly, she climbed onto the pallet between Drummond's outstretched legs and leaned over him. He said nothing, but stared up at her with a bemused expression. Her stomach fluttering, she leaned down and pressed her lips against his warm mouth. When she sat back, he smiled slowly and said, "Well, that's a good start. But maybe something more like this."

He sat up and grabbed her, his arms tight around her back as his mouth covered hers. Her lips parted beneath his, and his tongue darted out, tracing her bottom lip before slipping past her teeth to tangle with her own. He gripped the hair at her nape and pulled her head back, mouth moving over her throat, gently nipping at her pale white skin.

When he released her, she swayed on her knees. “That,” he told her, breathing rapidly, “is a bit more interesting, is it not?”

She nodded and touched two fingers to her swollen lips.

“Now you try it,” he told her, and he laid back. “Go ahead.”

Emboldened by his kiss, she straddled his lap and leaned down to kiss him. When his arms came up to enfold her, she pushed them back to the pallet, and he laughed. She sucked his lower lip into her mouth, teasing him before running her tongue over the stubbled curve of his jaw, up to his ear. He made a startled sound, and she smiled to herself.

“You’re doing very well,” he rasped, lifting his hips just slightly beneath hers.

She ran her hands up his arms, from his elbows to his shoulders, then released him to tug at his shirt. It would be a tricky thing to take off by herself, so she was grateful when he sat up a little and pulled it over his head.

Drummond was different than Galerius, physically. He was not as large and, though he was muscular, it was a lean, ropey kind of muscle, as though he’d been stretched out. She felt his ribs, close to the surface of his tan skin, ran her fingers through the dark hair that dusted over his chest. She leaned down and touched her tongue to one of his nipples. He hissed at the contact, then smiled. “Perhaps you don’t need any instruction from me.”

That might have been true, she realized. Perhaps all of it was instinctual. Perhaps she was simply a wicked, unladylike thing. Either way, exploration seemed far more appealing than perfect execution, and she truly was enjoying herself.

That realization shocked her. She didn’t like Drummond. She’d called him annoying and rude, because he was, but there was something perversely satisfying in the control she felt she had over him now. Still, it seemed like there should be so much more she could do with all the bare skin she saw before her. “What now?” she asked, suddenly afraid he would change his mind when she’d just begun to enjoy their encounter.

He reached for the hem of her shirt, and she moved to push his hands away. “You’re supposed to be teaching me how to please you.” She shook her head. “I meant Galerius.”

“You’re right, I am, and I’m about to teach you a very important part of the lesson,” he said, pulling the shirt over her head. She gasped at the cool air that touched her skin. He reached out and smoothed his hands down her arms. “And that is, a man’s interest is easily held by a woman if she is naked in his lap.”

She moaned as he cupped her breasts and brushed his thumbs in lazy circles over her nipples. With considerable effort, she gripped his wrists and pulled his hands away. Pinning his hands above his head, she kissed him again, her breasts brushing his chest, nipples tightening from the friction.

She captured his groan in her mouth, then slid down his body, nipping at his neck, his chest, his belly, following the crisp black line of hair to the waist of his breeches. She ran her tongue along the seam between the cloth and his skin, and he sucked in a breath.

While it was great fun doing such things to Drummond, she imagined doing them to Galerius and squeezed her thighs shut against the throbbing ache between them. Just the thought of Galerius's fists gripping the sheet beneath him, the thought of his breath coming quick and shallow as she teased him, was almost enough to take her over the edge. She forced such pleasant images from her mind to concentrate on the task at hand.

"Keep going, you're doing a fine job," Drummond told her, the hitch in his breathing betraying the calm in his words.

"Thank you," she murmured, trying to sound as nonchalant as if he'd offered her a cup of tea. Still, her hands shook as she untied the laces of his breeches. Beneath the soft leather, his imprisoned shaft strained toward her hand. She parted the fabric, revealing the hard flesh she'd imagined touching the night before. Faced with such an intimate part, Annabelle did not know how to proceed. She knew how she would *like* to proceed, but the confidence she'd felt disappeared. What if she did something wrong? He would mock her, that was certain. Drummond was exactly like the boys she had known back in England. Always pretending to have some superiority over her, when really they were no better or richer or smarter than she.

"Would you like further instruction?" Drummond asked, a patronizing note to his otherwise friendly question.

"No," Annabelle stated firmly. He might think, as all those boys at home had thought, that she was simple and innocent. She would show him how wrong that assumption was, and she would not make a mistake.

"Very confident, aren't we?" He sighed and pushed his breeches down, over his hips. "Proceed, then, if you wish."

Wetting her lips, she leaned over him and took his shaft in her hand. He was thick and heavy against her palm. Her heartbeat quickened. If the art of sex was in delaying pleasure, she could certainly manage that. She would take great satisfaction in giving him none. She lowered her head, let her lips come just close enough to the head of him that he would feel her breath against him. She opened her mouth as if to take him in, and then she pulled back.

"You were doing wonderfully," he practically panted. "Why did you stop?"

“Why did you take Galerius’s blood last night?” She stroked her hand up and down his cock, then stopped.

He lifted his hips, confusion and desperation at war on his face. “What?”

“You drank his blood. I saw you do it. Why?” She flexed her hand, and he groaned. When he did not seem inclined to answer her, she pulled her hand away.

“Oh, yes. That.” He pushed his hair back from his forehead. “Well, he told me what he is. Shortly after he kidnapped me from the port in Calais. You know, you can keep doing what you were doing while I tell you this incredibly boring story.”

Annabelle rolled her eyes, but took him in her hand and stroked him a few times. True to his word, he continued, “And he told me how one becomes as he is. And he told me there are benefits to drinking blood from a creature like him.”

“What kind of benefits?” No, she had the answer she wanted. Didn’t she? It wasn’t as though she would ever...could ever...

“For one, it improves the health. I’ve been at sea for a year, not a cold, not a sniffle, not a cough. And, I’m stronger after I take his blood. Not permanently, but for a while.” His words were swallowed up in a moan as he said, “Not that it matters, anyway.”

“That can’t be all. You’re trying to be like him, aren’t you? I heard him tell you that you would become like him if you took much more.” She looked him in the eye, but he couldn’t keep his open, whether from her hand stroking him or because he would lie to her, she did not know.

“I don’t want to be like him,” he managed, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. “I just wanted—”

She let him go, and his cock bounced back against his belly with a smack. “What did you want, Ian? Tell me, or I might go back to being the shy maiden you expected me to be.”

Grimacing and laughing at the same time, he said, “Fine. If you insist on knowing. I’ve been taking his blood for some time now, and I’ve acquired some of his abilities. The most desirable of which is the ability to feel what he is feeling. I can’t read his mind, the way he can read mine. But I can feel the shape of his thoughts. I feel his emotions. Experience his pleasure.”

A shiver raced up Annabelle’s spine. Galerius had been almost mindless with passion when he’d been with Drummond. What would it have been like to experience that wildness herself?

“You won’t be able to convince him,” he said, his tone serious. “He wouldn’t dare, with you. There is something about you that he’s drawn to. He shields his thoughts carefully around me, but he can’t completely hide what he feels about you.”

Annabelle was pleased and disturbed at the same time. “You read my thoughts?”

“No. I can’t. But I didn’t need to.” He reached down and touched her face. “Now, are we finished with this foolishness?”

Foolishness! She slapped his thigh, though she knew it was petulant, and he laughed. There was so much tenderness in his expression that Annabelle could not help but laugh with him. She leaned down and kissed the hard plane of his stomach, rolled her tongue across the ridges of muscle there. He did not laugh then, but groaned, and Annabelle let her hair trail over his abdomen as she slid lower. Again, she blew hot breath across his cock, but this time she opened her mouth and touched her tongue to the base of him, where his shaft met the soft, loose skin below. He held his breath, and she slid her tongue up the underside of his cock, almost to the tip. Then, brushing her hair aside so he could see her, so she could look him in the eye, she covered the tip of him with her mouth.

He bucked his hips, and her eyes widened with surprise as he pushed deeper into her mouth. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, scrubbing a hand over his face.

She gripped the base of his cock and experimentally slid her mouth up and down his length. His eyes closed, Drummond looked shockingly like Galerius had the night before. Lost to pleasure, completely powerless. She swirled her tongue around his shaft, her jaw pleasantly aching from the stretch of her lips around him. Another part of her ached, ached to be filled by him the way he filled her mouth. She whimpered and took more of him in, to the back of her throat, until she could take no more, and swallowed, flexing against the head of his cock.

Drummond gave an unintelligible shout of surprise, then managed, through clenched teeth, "Are you sure you need tutoring?"

She pulled him free, still stroking with her hand, and replied, "I've never done this before."

"You're a natural talent, then." He smiled, a smile that promised all kinds of wicked delights, and a shiver raced down her spine. He tugged her across his leg, so that she sat beside them rather than between them. When she gave him a puzzled look, he responded, "Oh, please, continue with what you were doing."

Timidly this time, she bent to taste him. His hips rose, but he did not force himself into her mouth. He smoothed his hands down her back, over her buttocks, and she could not help but push against his hand. She slowly rolled her tongue around him, then opened her lips wider to take him all in. As his cock slipped into her mouth, his finger slipped into her dripping cleft, and she gasped.

"Don't let this distract you," he instructed lazily. "I just find the whole experience more entertaining if I keep my hands busy."

He pumped his finger in and out, curling it to stroke her walls with his fingertip. Annabelle found it difficult to concentrate on her task while he touched her, found it impossible when he stretched her with another finger. She lifted her head and pulled away from him, intent on straddling his lap and taking his cock inside her, when he stopped her, a look of fearful shock on his face.

"It's not that I don't want to," he explained hastily. "I...I don't think it's a good idea."

"Because of Galerius?" she asked, sitting beside him again, feeling much more naked and exposed after his rejection.

“Yes,” he answered uncertainly. “And because you’re rather new at all this, and he’ll be expecting to have you in his bed tonight. I dare say he was probably more gentle with you before than he will be now.”

Somehow, that did not frighten her. In fact, when Annabelle imagined Galerius treating her with the same playful roughness he’d shown to Drummond, her desire spiked even higher. She almost wept at the thought of waiting for satisfaction.

As if sensing her desperation, Drummond said, “But that’s not to say all is lost.” He urged her to straddle his chest, facing away from him, and leaned her forward. His stubbled chin scraped against her most intimate parts, and she squealed at the feeling, and the shock of being so exposed to him. His cock was still erect, straining up from his belly, and she took it into her mouth again. Drummond’s chin scraped over her cleft, and she arched back. His hands fell on her thighs. He parted her with his thumbs and licked her, his wicked, pointed tongue sliding up and down, but never reaching where his ministrations would be most appreciated. She reached with one hand to cup his balls, her mouth and tongue still working on his shaft, as he continued to lave at her. Panting, she strained to move so he would come into contact with the little bud that throbbed in anticipation, but he held her fast, his strong fingers kneading her buttocks. Still, she slid her lips up and down his cock. She dove down and came up slowly, dragging and flexing her tongue up the whole of his length before dropping down again. She sucked, making her mouth tighter around him, while she undulated her hips against his face.

Finally, with incredible slowness, he slid his tongue down, down, to stop with teasing pressure just over the hard little nub. She squirmed against him, moaning, struggling to concentrate on sliding him in and out of her mouth. She moved her hand up and down him, pumping him with short strokes that her mouth matched, and he groaned against her, the sound muffled by her moist, open flesh.

His tongue darted around her in a teasing dance, then set to a steady rhythm that caused her legs to tremble. She cried out and gripped his thighs, her fingers set into claws.

“Don’t stop,” he ordered, pulling her sensitized flesh between his lips.

She stroked him faster with her hand, sucked harder with her mouth. His heartbeat pulsed faster in his cock, and she flicked her tongue over the spot where it beat hardest. His hips jerked, his tongue worked harder on her wanting flesh. The racing, rushing feeling flooded her, and she ground herself against his mouth, crying out and bucking her hips to escape the excruciating pleasure at the same time she sought more. She came, her thighs shaking on either side of his head, screaming around his thick cock. He shouted, pushed his shaft farther into her mouth, and she accepted it readily, moaning in residual pleasure as he exploded in her mouth. His thick, salty essence invaded her throat, and she swallowed it down, too shocked by the suddenness of his climax to do anything else.

He cleared his throat, sounded slightly unsteady. “Well, I think your fears of inadequacy are largely unfounded.”

Collecting her wits, she rolled off him, panting. She could scarcely believe what she'd done. Some dark, nasty voice in the back of her mind made a noise of disappointment, and words like "shameful" and "harlot" burned haughtily through her brain.

Drummond looked at her with strange tenderness. "Don't do that," he said, stern yet soft at the same time.

"What?" She reached for Galerius's shirt and made a note to demand more modest clothing from him when she spoke with him later that night.

Drummond grasped her wrist. "Don't shame yourself. There was nothing unnatural about what we did. Did you enjoy it?"

She nodded weakly.

"As did I. We are not children. We took pleasure from each other, as nature intended." His forehead creased in frustration, but not at her. For her, his eyes held only sympathy. "You're only ashamed because you've been taught that such interactions are shameful."

"Not always," she replied indignantly. "Not within the bonds of holy matrimony."

"And before there were priests and churches? Before there was 'holy matrimony', what then?" He lifted an eyebrow, daring her to answer him. "Do you believe anyone felt such shame before there was a church to tell them how filthy their actions were?"

"It's not the same," she answered uncertainly. "Is it?"

"What we did here didn't hurt anyone, did it?" he asked, then answered for her. "No, of course it didn't. So, what was the harm in it?"

While she considered, he pulled her down to lie beside him. The feeling of lying beside a warm, naked body was a shock to her. It was strangely comfortable to nestle her head in his shoulder and feel the light perspiration on his skin against her cheek.

"You know, I feel rather badly for you, Annabelle," Drummond continued, idly walking his fingers along her arm. "It's more difficult for women, isn't it? You're taught your entire lives to be pleasing for your future husband, but they neglect to tell you the most pleasing thing you can be is comfortable in his bed."

She closed her eyes, giving in to the sleepy warmth that emanated from him. "You know a lot about being a woman, then?"

He snorted at that. "Obviously not. But I grew up around them. I know the rules that apply to me don't necessarily apply to them, and vice versa. In some cases, that's very sad."

"Mmmm?" she managed, covering her mouth to hide a yawn.

Drummond needed no further inducement to continue speaking. "Well, this, for example. Men are allowed to take whatever pleasures they wish, discreetly, of course. I'm sure you were terribly shocked to

see me with Galerius and thought I was some kind of degenerate, but believe me, there are more men doing that than you'd realize."

"Oh, I don't believe that." She lazily stroked his nipple and smiled as it hardened under her fingertip.

"Well, you wouldn't. You're the stubborn type of woman who doesn't listen to every word she's told." He kissed her forehead, an action so gentle and unexpected that it shocked Annabelle into silence. "I like that about you."

She had a pithy answer at the ready, but somehow it slipped away from her as she melted into sleep.

Chapter Seven

When Galerius woke the next night, Annabelle awaited him in his cabin. She jumped when he pushed the lid from his coffin and sat up.

Something gnawed painfully inside of him at that. She feared him, and why shouldn't she? He was everything she had accused him of being: a monster, a demon. It troubled him more that her fear hurt him. "Good evening, Annabelle. I trust you kept yourself occupied without me today?"

Her face flamed, and he thought he saw a flash of someone—Drummond?—flit through her mind, tinged with remembered pleasure. So, she had enjoyed watching him with Ian, despite the awkwardness that had followed.

"Why must you sleep in that?" she asked, changing the subject rather deftly. "It seems terribly uncomfortable."

"It is." Something about the stiffness of her posture troubled him. It was probably nothing, just more maidenly shyness. That would fade, in time.

"Then why confine yourself to it, when this bed is far more comfortable?" She blushed a bit as she said it, and in her mind imagined what she had done in that bed, with him, just two nights before. She anticipated more of the same, awaited it with eagerness. Galerius wished he could give her what she desired that very moment, but there was work to be done above deck. "I must sleep in it to protect myself."

"From what?" Her legs shifted restlessly in the bedclothes.

His cock demanded that he push her down and spread those milky white thighs, thrust into her until there was no shade of this girl of gentle breeding left, but the hungry, desperate thing she had been the night before. She'd displayed herself shamelessly to him, brought herself to climax without a care that he'd seen. He wanted her that way again, wet and splayed and wanting.

He shook himself from his reverie. "I must sleep in it to stay out of the daylight. If I can keep myself awake, I can survive for an hour or two. But the sun steals my strength, and were I to succumb, to let myself sleep in its light, I would wither and die before it set again."

Annabelle gasped and covered her face. "How horrible," she cried, her voice muffled by her hands. He wondered if it was him she found horrible, or the tale he had just told her.

He dressed quickly. If he did not, he would have her, and no work would be finished. He needed to consult with his first mate before the man went to his bed for the night. His crew knew nothing of his

nature, thinking only that he preferred the night to the daytime. It was not so unusual a thing, at sea, for a man to have grown accustomed to a night of hard work, rather than a day, and they accepted it easily.

Annabelle watched him, the question formed on her lips but not uttered, until he pulled on his heavy canvas coat and moved toward the door. "Aren't you..." She hesitated. "Aren't you going to stay with me?"

"I will return," he told her. Her face fell, and he went to the side of the bed. She looked up at him, bewildered, wondering what she had done wrong to make him not wish to lie with her. He cupped her jaw in his hand and rubbed his thumb across her lips. He leaned down and was delighted when she rose to meet his mouth. He kissed her, deeply, for as long as he dared. When he teetered on the edge of his ability to walk away rather than push her to the bed and make her scream with pleasure, he pulled back. "I want to find you in this bed when I return."

She gave a sweet little noise of disappointment, and it was all he could do to turn away from her.

"The old woman has become crazed."

Galerius made a noise, but Drummond could tell that his attention was far away. In his cabin, no doubt, where Annabelle waited for him. A strangely protective anger flared in him at the thought, and he forced it away. The girl belonged to Galerius. Not that it would keep Ian's hands off her, but he couldn't allow himself to grow any more fond of her than he already had. No matter how Galerius might protest, he did feel something for the girl, and Drummond would not hurt his friend so.

"Did you hear me, Captain?" Sitting across the narrow galley table, Thom, Galerius's first mate, peered from beneath bushy brows. "The old woman. She wandered out, alarmed some of the crew."

"Alarmed?" Galerius reached for the tin cup in front of him. He would pretend to drink it. Drummond had seen him do it before and wondered how it was that the crew fell for such obvious cheap tricks. When Galerius walked away, the cup would still be full.

"It's bad enough having a woman on board, Captain," Thom said, leaning forward as though sharing some great secret. "But with the recent haunting and the old woman's ramblings, the men are gettin' restless."

"Superstitious fools. If you'd let me, I'd beat the fear of shadows right out of them," Drummond said, and he meant it. He'd grown up with a fierce Irish father and fearsome Irish mother, yet both of them had believed in fairy stories and ill omens, to their ruination. He would not let anyone rule him, least of all the fates.

At his pronouncement, a smile twitched the corners of Galerius's lips, but it was only visible because he knew it would be there. Thom wouldn't notice it, because he did not know to look. He expected a serious expression and he received it.

“What,” Galerius began slowly, raising his cup to his lips but not drinking, again, “has she said to upset the crew so?”

“Ghosts!” Thom’s hands trembled, sloshing coffee from his tin cup to stain the wooden table. “She’s seeing people who aren’t there, talking of a man and a woman arguing below decks! Of course, I tell the men not to listen to any of her raving, but they’re simple men, Captain, not like you or I.”

Only a complicated man such as Thom could have sailed for over a year with a blood-drinking demon disguised as a man and not notice, but jump at shadows in broad daylight.

“You must remember the ransom the lady will fetch us,” Galerius said calmly. “If the men dissent, remind them of that.”

“Aye, Captain. And what of the ghosts?” Thom scanned the low ceiling overhead, as though he would see some apparition flying there.

Galerius nodded and made a dismissive noise. “I doubt you’ll have any further trouble with those. The ship was well and thoroughly blessed at our last port.”

Well and truly blessed by Drummond, visible to the crew for the first time, disguised in a hastily arranged cassock. He’d had a grand time mumbling made-up words under his breath and commanding the evil spirits to fling themselves into the harbor. He did not tell Galerius that he’d found it entertaining, though, as it was supposed to have been his punishment for starting the haunting rumors in the first place.

“If that’s all then, Captain, I’ll see to the crew.” Thom rose and left Galerius alone, or seemingly alone, in the galley.

“What have you planned tonight?” Drummond asked, straining to keep his jealous thoughts from reflecting in his words. “For the girl?”

“I intend to feed on her.” Galerius was distracted as he poured his coffee back into the tin pot on the table for someone else to take. “What concern is it of yours?”

“No concern. I merely enjoy the sordid details. If I am not lucky enough to view them firsthand, as some of your other conquests might be.” He raised an eyebrow and met Galerius’s gaze head-on.

With a heavy sigh, Galerius rose. “It is different. I wished for her to see us together so that the thought would not frighten her. You are not so frightened, I think, of what happens between a man and a woman.”

“Not frightened,” Drummond admitted. “Though I do miss it.”

“And you will continue to,” Galerius warned.

Drummond’s every instinct urged him to assert his claim, to attack Galerius there and fight for supremacy. But having seen the passion in Annabelle, the near limitless well of desire, Drummond had the sense to know that one of them alone would never be enough to satisfy her. He could be patient and wait for Galerius to realize that, himself, or for Annabelle to realize it and force Galerius to accept it.

That, and Drummond was no match for Galerius in a physical fight, and certainly not foolish enough to think so.

“Go,” Drummond ordered with a shove, friendly, but fierce, like a lion cub playing with his brother. “Your bed grows cold, but I doubt your woman does.”

Galerius grinned and left, and Drummond resigned himself to patience.

Hours went by, and Galerius did not return. Annabelle passed the time at first by reading from a book of poetry she found beneath the table. It was written in Latin, and Annabelle had loathed her Latin lessons, so the reading was slow going. When her head began to ache, she gave up on the reading and for a time lay on the bunk, staring up at the boards of the deck over her head. As she’d read the little book of poems, she’d wondered why Galerius would have such a thing, and wondered if he was touched by the romantic words of the poet. Then she’d decided he’d probably stolen it from someone he’d murdered. He was, after all, a pirate and a demon.

She got up from the bed and wandered across the floor, examining the small room. She’d had little mind to pay attention to details when she’d been in it before. She’d either been fearing for her life or...occupied with other things. She flushed at the memory and could not bring herself to look at the table, where she’d splayed last night, touching herself for Galerius to see.

She turned her attention to the back wall, where wooden cupboards rose to waist height and windows of wavy, red glass were stacked in a grid across the back of the ship. A candlestick and flint sat atop one of the cupboards, and she lit the taper.

It was not ladylike to snoop, but Annabelle would be the first to deny that she was a lady. Her curiosity always seemed to get the better of her in situations where she was left unattended with a cabinet or closet or desk drawer that wasn’t her own, and this was certainly no exception. She knelt beside the first cabinet and opened it, holding the candle up so she could see past the shadows. Inside were two large boxes, both very heavy-looking and bearing foreboding locks. She closed it. She wasn’t interested in money or stealing any of it. The next cupboard was equally disappointing. A few extra pairs of boots, a broken object that might have been an astrolabe once, a dusty silver candelabra. She moved on to the final cupboard. When she opened the door, a strange, peaceful feeling known only to truly deviant spies like herself came over her. Her snooping had not been in vain, and there were all sorts of delightful items to paw through. Dresses, folded in neat little bundles, and jewelry, and...

She froze. Why did Galerius have all of these things? Where were their owners?

Heart pounding, she pulled out the dresses. They were all ancient and out of style, rather like costumes one would expect to find in a playhouse, but authentically old, limned with dust and stiff from lying unused. She shoved them back into the cupboard.

Galerius was a monster, no matter how charming he might be. Had he...no, she could not think it...had he killed the women to whom those dresses had belonged?

“Only some of them.”

She whirled at the sound of his voice. She had not heard him enter the cabin, but now every heavy tread of his boots on the floor sounded like the beating of a drum urging a prisoner to the gallows.

“I joke.” He sounded tired, looked tired as he sat on the bed and began removing his boots. “They were simply left behind when my acquaintance with the owners ended. I’ve kept them, because I cared for those women, no matter what might have occurred between us. I don’t wish to forget them.”

His sorrow was so genuine, Annabelle felt ill for mistrusting him. “Galerius, I am sorry—”

“No, do not apologize for your thoughts. They are your own. It was only out of habit that I intruded.” He leaned his elbows on his knees, hanging his head.

Annabelle did not know what to do. Seeing him like this, almost human, almost vulnerable, seemed far more intimate than any of the other things they’d done together.

He straightened with a sigh, and his gaze was caught by something on the bed. Annabelle started forward, as if she could have prevented him from seeing the book there. It seemed more invasive to have read his book without asking than it was to have searched through his cupboards.

“Were you reading this?” he asked, his brow furrowed.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I was bored and—”

He looked up with a smile—at least more of a smile than Annabelle had ever seen on his face. “You can read Latin?”

“Some.” She wondered if he would now think she was strange. “My father gave me lessons. He wanted his daughters to be able to read, even if it would never be required of us.”

“I wonder if he would have had the same attitude toward books if he had known the type you were looking at.” Galerius said with another smile, and Annabelle blushed. “What did you think of this?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Not much. Oh, but I’m sure it’s lovely!”

He patted the bunk beside him, and she went to sit, still slightly unsure of herself. He frowned down at the book and turned a few pages. “What did you not like? Catallus was one of the most lauded poets of his time. Unless you heard Cicero tell it, of course.”

“Of course,” she said with a little laugh, and then realized he was not joking. “My God. You knew him, didn’t you?”

This seemed to embarrass him. “As I told you, I’m very old.”

It made more sense now. His name, Galerius, wasn’t as likely as “Thomas” or “Gregory”. And his strange way of speaking, as though there were a foreign accent lost somewhere in his words; discerning what type of accent was like trying to pick a very complicated lock. “Were you Roman, then?”

“Was I?” His smile faded. “I was born Roman, yes. I will always be a Roman, no matter what I become.” He gestured with the book, and it was clear the subject of his past was closed to her. “Come, let me read one to you. Perhaps you’ll view it differently if you hear it from a native speaker’s lips.”

She smiled politely, though she doubted Caesar himself could make such a dull poem interesting. “Yes, perhaps. I had difficulty understand the bit about the moon.”

He pushed himself back onto the bunk, and Annabelle crawled awkwardly to sit beside him, her hands folded primly in her lap. He clucked his tongue and pulled her down to lie beside him, her head against his shoulder. He held the small book with his free arm, but he recited the poem as a parson recites a bible verse, mostly from memory.

Oh, perhaps not so very much like a parson, Annabelle corrected herself. And certainly not like a teacher. Galerius’s voice rose and fell with the long and short sounds of the language, but it did not sound stilted and unnatural, like someone giving a scholarly reading.

“*Soles occidere et redire possunt: nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux, nox est perpetua una dormienda,*” he read, and paused. “Suns may set, and suns may rise again: but when our brief light has set, night is one long, everlasting sleep.”

She watched his face as he read, his eyes moving across the page, and what seemed like all the sadness in the world in them.

“Was that the part you had trouble with?” he asked, and she realized with a start that he had turned his attention to her, and she’d been caught staring.

She turned to the book. “Yes. That was it. Thank you, I couldn’t translate it.”

“You’re welcome.” He nodded toward the page. “What about the next lines? *Da mi basia mille, deinde centum dein mille altera, dein secunda centum, deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum—*”

“—*dein, cum milia multa fecerimus, conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus, aut ne quis malus invidere possit, cum tantum sciat esse basiorum,*” she finished with him. ““Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred, then another thousand, and then another hundred, and, when we’ve counted up the many thousands, let us confuse them so as not to know them all, so that no enemy may cast an evil eye, when he finds out that there were so many kisses.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Very good. You could translate the kisses, but not the moon?”

She felt a flush creeping up her neck, but did not care, for now Galerius turned toward her, casting the book aside to stroke the side of her face. His skin was colder and dry, almost like touching a...

“A corpse.” He cursed and sat up. “I am sorry. I have waited too long to feed. I will not ask you to touch me.”

She shook her head, barely able to comprehend what had just occurred. “But you feed from me,” she protested. “That was our arrangement.”

He turned to her, a tortured, hungry look on his face. And his eyes, those were worse. Desperate, feral, swallowed up by the dark shadows that lurked there.

“You’re not a monster,” Annabelle said, before she realized she intended to say it at all. If he had been reading her mind at the moment, he would have found her statement quite sincere.

Galerius looked at her as though she were mad, and perhaps she was. She had known him only a few days, and yet she could not bear to think of him in pain. Despite the fact he was not human, and despite the fact she did not completely understand his world, she could not convince herself he was a monster. She could not believe he was evil.

She leaned forward. Her moist, warm breath fell on his cold lips, but she did not touch him. "*Da mi basia mille*," she said quietly.

He complied, covering her mouth with his and pushing her back to the mattress. She opened her mouth under his, her body rising to meet his as he pulled her beneath him.

"I can't wait," he groaned, pulling her head back to bare her throat. "Forgive me."

She wanted to tell him there was nothing to forgive, but his teeth pierced her skin and she could not help the startled cry that escaped her lips. She had forgotten how much it had hurt before, and then she'd been quite distracted by all of the physical pleasure going on at the same time. Still, once the initial pain abated, the pleasant weight of him pressing her to the bed and the gentle draw of his mouth against her skin pulled a different sound from her. She splayed her fingers over his back, feeling the muscles rippling beneath the thin linen of his shirt. He grew warmer as he drank, and she did as well, aching heat flooding her core.

Galerius withdrew from her, his mouth red with her blood. He turned his face away, and she stopped him with a hand on his jaw. "Don't, please."

"You asked me before about the others. I did not kill them. But I have killed, in the past." His voice was rough, as though he'd been thirsty for days, rather than having just drunk from her veins. "I do not wish for you to think yourself safe with me."

The idea that she wouldn't be safe with him struck her as absurd, and she realized then that since their first night together, when he'd brought her to heights of pleasure she could not have dreamt of in her wildest fantasies, she had not feared him, could not believe he would do anything to harm her.

"I would not, if I had the choice." He practically trembled beside her. "I have made mistakes before. I've killed—"

She shushed him, pulled him down once more. "But I live."

He fought a war with himself in the space of a heartbeat, and then his mouth was on hers, the coppery taste of her own blood invading as his tongue slid over hers.

He pulled back, his last line of defense. Breathing hard, he growled, "You were right to fear me, Annabelle."

He flipped her onto her stomach, raking his fingernails down her back, scratching without truly hurting her. If he sought to make her fear him, he went about it the wrong way. She cried out, arched her back into his touch, unashamed though she knew she appeared like a wild thing, a cat in heat.

Galerius growled, a truly feral sound, and pushed her down, his hard body, hot after drinking her blood, pressing against the length of hers. He bit her neck, not with his fangs, not to wound her, but she squealed all the same. A tearing sound preceded the chill air of the cabin against her back. The shirt lay beneath her now, and covered her arms, but it was useless, so she shrugged out of it. He pulled her to her knees and for a moment, she thought he might take her as he had taken Drummond. Before she had time to ponder that, or decide whether she would like him to do such a thing, he pulled her back flush to his chest. The heat of him burned through his shirt, and with the briefest motion the garment was gone.

“I could, you know,” he whispered against her ear. “I could take you that way. Would you like that?”

She bit her lip, did not trust herself to answer.

“I could do anything I wanted to you,” he continued, his hot breath teasing her ear. “Doesn’t that frighten you?”

She did not have to answer him, for she knew he would look into her mind and see the truth there. Did he frighten her? Yes. Did she fear him? No.

He twisted his hand in her hair and jerked her head back, kissing her hard. “On your knees,” he ordered, and gave her a shove. She held her breath, arms trembling, barely able to support herself. He reached between her legs and cupped her mound. She was wet and open already, and he easily slipped two fingers inside of her.

“You believe that because of what I make you feel, I am not a threat?” he pumped his fingers in and out mercilessly.

“No,” she moaned.

“No?” His fingers ceased their punishing motion. “You would order me to stop?”

“No.” She shook her head, gasping for breath. “I think you are not a threat to me because of what *you* feel.”

His cock replaced his fingers in one brutal thrust, and she cried out, unused to being so roughly treated. The discomfort faded quickly, replaced by rapidly building pleasure. She burst over the crest of her climax from the relentless pounding of his shaft inside of her, and then again when he used his hand to stroke her.

Drunk on the violence and unrelenting pleasure, she thrashed against him like a wild creature caught in a snare. He withdrew almost completely, slamming back into her hard enough to force the breath from her lungs. He held her hips, and every thrust brought her knees up from the mattress. Finally, he pushed deeper within her, holding her tight to him with a hand on her shoulder, and his cock pulsed deep within her, flooding her with his seed.

Legs shaking, Annabelle fell to the bed, her chest heaving as she struggled to catch her breath. Galerius withdrew from her and dropped to the bed beside her, on his back with an arm thrown across his

eyes. A thin sheen of blood-tinged sweat covered him, and she touched her fingers to his skin, then brought them to her lips.

“It won’t work. Not in so small a quantity,” he told her.

That wasn’t why she had tasted it, but she could not explain the sudden, absurd need to taste him, to have another memory of him to add to the portrait her senses had painted. They lay together in silence for a long time. Robbed of the warmth of his body, Annabelle shivered, and Galerius was quick to pull the bedclothes over them and take her into his arms.

He had tried so hard, Annabelle reflected, to make her fear him without scaring her, to demonstrate his power without causing her pain. That she had matched his hunger, and his violence, having begged him for more, seemed to surprise him...

It surprised her as well. Her daydreams had never conjured anything half so rough, and if they had, she would have been too frightened to ever lie with a man, even if she had made her way to her betrothed’s estate. But a strangely powerful feeling had settled over her. Now that she had been treated as though she were not breakable, not a delicate girl, she felt like a woman. A woman made of flesh and bone.

And blood.

Chapter Eight

Annabelle's first week aboard the *Howling Hades* passed in a haze of as much pleasure as confusion. At night, Drummond and Annabelle each took their turns in Galerius's bed. While the captain slept during the day, they shared each others' company. Some days, Annabelle continued her explorations with Drummond. Others, they merely lay together in the hold and talked of things of little consequence; their lives before, what they might do after. Occasionally, Annabelle would cry when she thought of her poor chaperone, lost to the sea, and Drummond would not try to comfort her with words, but he would hold her until she had shed her tears.

Still, they could tease each other, with their bodies and with their words, and Annabelle found herself growing quite fond of the time she spent with him. Though he refused to lie with her as she did with Galerius, and that rejection bothered her more than she thought it should, she had no doubt that the Irishman had come to think of her as a friend. A friend was a valuable thing to have, when one was a ghost aboard a ship.

Clad in one of the gowns from the cupboard, Annabelle stepped onto the deck, rubbing her eyes at the adjustment from the darkness of the cabin and the sunlight above.

"Well, well, well," Drummond said, but from where, Annabelle could not see. His voice came from behind her, but he had not been in the cabin. She turned and gazed up, where he stood at the railing of the forecastle, smiling down at her. "You look like a proper fairy story, now."

She smoothed the stiff velvet of the skirt and flushed. "The intent was not to dress a part. I merely needed clothes."

He scoffed. "You? Needed clothes? What on earth has the captain been teaching you?"

She walked farther out onto the deck, and he came down to meet her. She twisted her braid in her hands to keep from touching him. It was so strange, almost troubling, that she could want Galerius so much that she practically burned for him, but feel just as helplessly drawn to Drummond. Before, she would have thought such a thing impossible. She'd expected to feel desire only for her husband, once she'd met him. It had never occurred to her that other men might inspire her lust, and more than one at a time.

She looked over the crew on the deck, the younger men with their shirts off, backs rippling as they worked to haul ropes and climb rigging, the older men tarring the cracks in the deck and mending canvas with their rough hands. It was so very short a leap from watching them work to imagining their backs straining as they pumped into her, their calloused hands rubbing over her nipples.

“Look at you,” Drummond said, clucking his tongue. “Not an hour out of the captain’s bed, and already you’re aching for another tumble.”

“I was thinking,” she said breathily, though she had not intended it to sound so. She wet her lips and tried again. “I was thinking it must not be so very wrong for a woman to desire men as men desire women. Or for a woman to want...certain things.”

“Certain things?” Drummond echoed, an amused expression on his face. “Would you care to elaborate on these things?”

“Well, for example,” she began, scarcely believing what she was about to admit, “I don’t think it’s right that my betrothed will expect me to stay absolutely faithful to him.”

This struck Drummond speechless, and Annabelle was free to continue.

“I think I shall make it quite clear that I should have just as many mistresses as he would have. Not mistresses, of course, but whatever the male equivalent would be.” She nodded, quite satisfied at her very forward way of thinking.

“You might be busy, servicing your harem at all times of the day. When will you have time for anything else?” Drummond asked with a laugh.

“I think I shall never care to have time for anything else,” she pronounced, thrilled at the feeling of pure wickedness that diffused through her whole being.

“Oh, but you must have time for embroidery and painting and picking out fabric for the fine gowns your husband will buy you.” Drummond put a finger to his lips. “I suppose that if you had too many men who relied on you for their relief, you could take two of them at a time.”

Annabelle felt her face go red. At least she knew it was from the heat that burned there now. All of her bravado gone, she squeaked, “Two at a time? Is that even...is it possible?”

Drummond’s arm snaked out to wrap around her waist, and he pulled her to his side. His warm breath teased her ear as he whispered, “Oh yes, it is possible.”

Her heart beat wildly, and she forced herself to laugh and say, “I don’t believe you.” But hadn’t Galerius made a similar comment to her before? That if she would not consent to watch him with Drummond, that he would make her join them?

Drummond released her, and her body ached for his touch. With a smirk, he said, “I wouldn’t expect you to. After all, you have such a...limited imagination where these things are concerned.”

Her mouth dropped open, and she gaped at him in anger. How dare he throw her naiveté in her face! How dare he assume that because she was only newly inducted into the mysteries of carnal pleasures that she would have no talent for it! “No imagination indeed,” she muttered, stalking away from him.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” he called after her. “That is, it’s nothing that you couldn’t overcome.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “With help.”

"I don't need your help." She made a sharp half-turn and marched to the rail. The salt breeze cooled her flaming face.

Drummond followed her—of course he would, he seemed to live to vex her—and leaned beside her, watching the waves but saying nothing. It seemed he would stand there all day, maddeningly silent. Finally, after gazing on the endlessly churning sea proved as hopelessly boring as it had been aboard the *Helen of Troy*, she turned her back on the water and said sullenly, "You would be surprised at how much I know. I've read books." That was a bit of a lie. There hadn't been as much reading involved as flipping through the illustrations with prurient curiosity. But he didn't need to know that.

"I'm sure you have." He slowly walked to face her. "So, you would have no problem...proving it."

Her face flaming, she twisted two handfuls of her skirt. "Right now?"

"Right now." A slow smile spread across his face. "Right here."

Annabelle looked around them. The crew swarmed everywhere. As one sailor hurried past her with a bucket of hot tar, she had to sidestep him. "Right here?"

"Why not?" Drummond began unfastening the cuffs of his shirtsleeves, the presumptuous... Annabelle struggled to think of the worse word she could imagine. The presumptuous ass! "They can't see us," he continued, pulling the loose ties at his collar free. "They can't hear us. And you have to admit, the thought of it arouses you. Your breath has quickened, your throat is flushed. Those beautiful gray eyes are practically glazed over in anticipation."

He mistook her flush for desire, when it was one of anger. "You think an awful lot of yourself. Why would I lie with you? Simply because you're the only man available?"

He smirked. "Not because I'm the only man available. You'll lie with me because you want me."

"Your opinion of yourself is rather high." Though her fingers trembled, they strayed to the ties at her sleeves. She loosened one, then the other, then reached for the ribbons that crisscrossed at her bosom. She pulled one tail of the bow at the top, slowly, enjoying the way Drummond's hungry gaze followed her every movement

"If you won't lie with me," he asked, pulling his shirt over his head, "then who?"

She pulled her arms free of the bodice of her gown and let it slip to the deck at her feet. Exposed to the chill air, her nipples puckered and her skin turned to gooseflesh. Well, it was partly from the chill air. A rush of heat flooded her core, and her knees went weak at the thrill of being so exposed, before so many people. Even if only Drummond could see her, the effect was heady. She slid one hand over the tops of her breasts, then down the valley between them, over the soft plane of her stomach. Every inch her hand covered, Drummond covered with his gaze, and she teased him, running her fingers across the top of the tightly curled hair on her mound.

Drummond grinned. "Lovely. Come here."

She shook her head and backed away slowly. From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the men working at patching the canvas. The sail was stretched out on the deck, the sailors kneeling around it. The most encouraging, wicked thrill shot through her.

“What are you doing?” Drummond asked, following as she approached the edge of the sail.

She dropped to her knees and timidly placed one hand on the material. None of them seemed to notice, and she gave it a little tug, just to make certain they would not. She climbed onto it, holding her breath, certain something would happen to force them to see her. But the men did not. They kept working.

Drummond gave a laugh. “You’re right, you are rather adventurous, aren’t you?”

She turned on her back, propped on her elbows, but she said nothing. When Drummond fell to his knees and crawled forward, she stopped him with a foot against his chest. “I told you, I won’t lie with you.”

His face fell, and Annabelle almost laughed at his crestfallen expression, as though he were a little boy who’d been denied a puppy. Then that expression changed to another insufferable smirk. “You’re teasing me.”

“You’ve only just caught on?” She scooted back and laid flat, her heart pounding wildly in her chest. On either side of her, the sailors worked at their task, their hands moving just inches from her naked body. They could not see her, could not hear her, but if they touched her...

The fear of discovery only heightened her arousal, and her body ached as she smoothed her hands across her breasts, her belly, her thighs, but she did not touch where she so very much wanted to. If she had learned anything from Drummond, it was that delaying pleasure brought greater gratification.

She closed her eyes and imagined the men’s hands on her, faceless, nameless bodies brushing against her. She let her knees fall open, and Drummond made a strangled noise.

She paid him no mind, but slid her palm over the gentle rise of her stomach, inching lower to cup her mound. Her folds were already slick. She dipped her fingers into the wetness and brought them to her mouth, opening her eyes to watch Drummond as she tasted herself on her fingers.

“I take it back,” he said, wetting his lips. “You have plenty of imagination.”

She laughed and let her eyes fall closed again as she touched herself in earnest, pulling more slick heat from her core. Lost to the heady thrill, she bucked her hips against her hand and rolled her sensitive nub between two fingers.

With a groan, Drummond tried again to move closer, and she stilled her hand. “Will you show me?” she asked, panting, as he crawled over her.

“Show you what?” He gripped the base of his cock, hard and eager for her, and braced himself over her, the tip of him just brushing her mound.

“What it’s like to lie with two men.” It took all of her self-control not to reach for him, to slide him home.

His face was unreadable. A muscle twitched in his clenched jaw. Finally, he nodded.

When he did, Annabelle squirmed from beneath him and climbed to her feet.

Drummond stared up at her, still holding his cock, confusion creasing his brow. “What are you...wait...”

“Tonight,” she promised, and strode away, scooping up the discarded gown. Her body still burned for release, and she planned to have it, locked safely in the cabin where Drummond could not follow.

When the sun went down, Annabelle was not in Galerius’s cabin. He rose from his coffin with a snarl. The little wench had lain in his bed most of the day, pleasuring herself over and over. It had been almost impossible to sleep with her breathy moans in his ears and the scent of her arousal surrounding him. He’d fully intended to rise and have her, no matter how he found her.

Instead, Drummond stood before him, a knowing smile on his lips. “You were expecting someone else, I think.”

“Where is she?” Galerius snarled, reaching for his coat. He would find her and drag her into a corner, have her up against the wall. The thought of it forced more blood into his already hard cock.

“I believe tonight is my turn,” Drummond said, stepping into his path to stop him. He curled his fingers around Galerius’s painfully engorged shaft through the coarse material of his trousers, and Galerius almost spilled right there. “If you’ll have me,” Drummond purred, knowing full well the effect he was having with his hand.

Galerius growled and shoved him toward the bunk, shedding his trousers as he followed. There was something feral about his couplings with Drummond, some primal bent to punish the other man, to dominate him. It was almost as intoxicating as being with Annabelle.

Almost.

Drummond tugged at his own clothes, but not quickly enough. Galerius needed to sheath his aching cock in a willing body, now. He rent Drummond’s shirt and tossed it aside, meant to do the same to his breeches when a pair of cool hands tentatively caressed his back. Annabelle. Her presence at once calmed him and inflamed him further. He’d been so lost to his need that she had been able to catch him unaware, a dangerous lapse in his control.

“Drummond, get out,” he snarled, knowing he was unnecessarily harsh, but not caring.

“No,” Annabelle said, a tremble in her voice. “I want him to stay.”

He shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I do.” She slid onto the bunk beside Drummond. She was nude, the creamy paleness of her skin gilded by the lantern light. She trailed her fingertips across Drummond’s abdomen, and his cock twitched against his stomach in response, but he did not touch her. “I want you both.”

“And I do not wish to share,” Galerius growled, grasping her wrist.

“Then don’t.” Annabelle crawled to him, pressing her warm, naked body flush against him, and whispered against his mouth, “Do not let him have me as you would. But let him stay. It is something I have long imagined. Two men taking me, allowing me to pleasure them as they pleasure me.”

“Something you read in a book, no doubt,” Galerius ground out, his cock straining against her thighs.

She did not reply, but dropped to her hands and knees to take him into her mouth. His entire body shuddered at the feel of her warm, wet mouth on his shaft, heightened by the suddenness of her action. He’d imagined her doing this to him, but had not asked her to, and now he saw how foolish that had been.

Drummond had said nothing, Galerius realized with the portion of his mind that could still function beyond the hot, wet pull of Annabelle’s lips. That part of his consciousness was fast receding, and he struggled to focus. “I suppose you have no objection to this, then?”

The Irishman gave his answer with a lazy, insufferable grin. “Far be it from me to deny a lady.”

Drummond’s mind displayed a graphic picture of Annabelle pinned between their bodies, her head thrown back, shrieking with abandon.

“She will always be yours, Galerius.” Was that sadness he heard in the Irishman’s voice?

There was little time to consider it. Annabelle moaned, and the sound vibrated around Galerius’s cock as she swirled her tongue around and around the tip. He was nearly ready to spill when she pulled him free from her mouth.

“Please,” she asked, kneeling before him again. Drummond knelt behind her, boldly putting his arms around her and cupping her breasts. She gasped and pressed back against him, and Galerius was unable to say no to her. He leaned forward and captured her lips with his, covering her startled cry as Drummond’s hand slid down her waist, to her sex. As she writhed against the other man’s hand, Galerius moved his mouth down her neck, to her breast.

“You are mine,” he whispered against her skin, and she shivered. He looked into her eyes, and saw the confirmation there. She was his, and would be, even if she should someday leave his side.

Chapter Nine

Annabelle's head reeled with the assault on her senses. Drummond's fingers worked quickly to bring her to the very edge of her climax, but he withdrew them before she plunged over. She whimpered, shifting restlessly on her knees. Drummond's cock slipped between her legs, rubbing at her entrance, but not filling her. She canted her hips back, desperate for more contact, but he quickly moved away with an admonishing cluck of his tongue.

Annabelle opened her eyes, and the sight of Galerius's head bent over her breast, his tongue laving her nipple, was almost enough to bring the release she so desperately needed. When Galerius's mouth moved lower, she tensed.

Drummond helped her lie back, all while Galerius's lips roved closer and closer to her mound. She lifted her hips, moaning at the heaviness centered in her core and the wetness there. But Galerius would not be rushed, and he held her hips fast to the bed.

"Please," she begged Drummond, but she did not know what she asked him for, beyond her climax. He leaned over her, claimed her lips in a searing kiss. His tongue stroked hers, the way she wished Galerius's tongue would stroke over the enflamed bud of her sex. He rolled her nipples between his fingers, pulled them to taut peaks, and she writhed as much as she could with Galerius holding her down. For his part, the captain traced each petal of her sex with his thumbs, grazing her aching pearl. Dipping one finger into her core, he spread the wetness upward, slicking it over her most sensitive spot.

She whimpered, and Drummond chuckled. "You're being terribly mean to her," he said, rubbing the pad of his thumb over the rosy tip of her breast in a maddening parody of what Galerius did to her.

"I suppose I am." Galerius dipped his head and gave her one long, slow lick, from the opening of her sex to her quivering bud.

Annabelle panted and shrieked, certain she would die if she did not come, fearing that she would expire from pleasure when she finally did. "Please," she begged, gripping Drummond's arms, holding on as if to a lifeline. He covered her mouth, cutting off her pleas, thrusting his tongue into her mouth as Galerius plunged his tongue inside of her.

Annabelle arched up from the bunk, clawing at Drummond's arms now. She was close, so very close, but Galerius pulled his mouth away, left her aching. Without seeming to have moved, he was beside her, leaning close to her ear. "Do you want to come, Annabelle?"

"Yes!" She rolled her hips, ground her backside into the sheet beneath her. "Yes, please!"

Galerius dipped his fingers into her, and she clamped down on them. “Do you know what we will do to you?” Galerius whispered, and she moaned in frustration. He traced the shell of her ear with his tongue before he continued. “We will fill you with our cocks, here,” he pumped his fingers a few times, then slid them out of her and slicked her wetness down, to where Annabelle had not been touched before. “And here.”

Her breath left her on a gasp. Since she’d seen Galerius take Drummond that way, she’d wondered how it might feel. Still, as Galerius smoothed more of her secretions over the tight aperture, she felt more trepidation than excitement.

Drummond moved behind them, and she heard him rummage for something beside the bed. His fingers replaced Galerius’s, slick with the unguent the men used when they’d lain together before. Galerius pulled her to her knees and smoothed his hands down her body, awakening new waves of sensation in her already painfully sensitized skin. She shivered as Drummond’s fingers delved deeper, putting insistent pressure on her back passage. Galerius lifted one of her breasts in his hand and sucked her nipple into his mouth, his teeth raking over the peak. Drummond eased one finger inside of her and kept it still for a moment, allowing her to adjust to the intrusion. Every instinct in Annabelle’s body told her to stay still as well, but the aching heat in her core urged her to move, to seek out Galerius’s body. She squirmed on the finger impaling her, shocked at the darts of sensation that shot through her.

“Relax,” Drummond whispered against her neck. “You are doing very well.” He moved the finger in and out firmly, aided by the grease. Then, he withdrew it entirely, smearing more of the unguent between her buttocks. His finger slipped in again easily, and then another, and she winced at the unaccustomed fullness.

She did not have time to worry over it, as Galerius lay on his back, his head between her spread legs, and urged her thighs wider apart, so that her mound hovered just over his mouth. His cold breath stirred the curls at her center, and she nearly came then.

Drummond slicked her with more grease, and continued to thrust his two fingers into her virgin opening. The heat from her body liquefied the unguent, making her nearly as wet there as between her legs, where Galerius lapped at her hard bud. Her hips jerked in rhythm to Drummond’s strokes. Her thighs trembled beneath Galerius’s hands, and she cried out, begged, coming perilously close to a release she feared she would be denied once more.

Drummond pulled his fingers free and replaced them with the blunt head of his cock. Her climax eluded her again as reality intruded, and she stiffened in fear.

“You’ll look so beautiful with my cock in you,” Drummond groaned, and his words, coupled with his hot breath on her neck and Galerius’s mouth working her, brought her over the edge. She bucked and screamed, then screamed again as the head of Drummond’s cock pushed into her rear channel. The crashing pleasure of her release contrasted sharply with the pain of Drummond’s entrance. Though he was

aided by the grease, the sensation of him filling her sent a wave of heat through her body while shivers of exertion brought sweat to her skin. Galerius did not relent with his tongue, quickly forcing Annabelle back up the summit to another shattering climax. Drummond slipped deeper into her as she ground her hips against Galerius's face. She screamed again as another raging release paralyzed her body, and the scream ended on a sob as she leaned against Drummond for support.

Galerius sat up, her juices still glistening on his mouth, and he kissed her so that she could taste herself. "How does it feel?" he asked when he pulled back. "How does it feel to have his cock inside of you like this?"

She swallowed, uncertain of her ability to speak. "It feels..." She groaned as Drummond pushed farther into her, as far as he could in their current position...

His hands on her hips, Drummond pulled her back as he lay down, bringing her to sit astride his thighs, and she cried out again as he slipped deeper inside.

Galerius leaned over her, the look in his eyes so intense it burned. She was meant to see it, she knew. He wanted her to feel his hunger, his possession, to the very depths of her soul.

"Yes," he growled, an affirmation of her thoughts. And she cried out, fear of him, of the emotions she read on his face, crowding together with the pleasure that still wracked her body. He entered her, her passage tighter than before, making him seem even larger, more impossible to take. She spread her legs and threw her head back.

Beneath her, Drummond's body tensed, and she knew he held on to his control with the barest grasp. He reached over her to run his hands down Galerius's arms, and then down the smooth, round slope of Annabelle's thighs where she sat astride him. Galerius withdrew and pushed back in, slowly, and she and Ian moaned in unison.

"I can feel him," Drummond panted against her ear. "Inside of you. Stroking against me, through you."

She trembled between them, wanting to move with them but held captive by their bodies and her pleasure. As Galerius's thick cock thrust into her with long, deliberate strokes, Drummond moved beneath her, rocking her body on his own shaft in time to Galerius's thrusts. As one withdrew, the other entered, leaving Annabelle gasping for breath under the unceasing onslaught of sensation. She wanted to wrap her legs around Galerius, but it was impossible, so she settled for one arm around his back while the other reached to twine her fingers in Drummond's hair. She braced the balls of her feet on the bunk and matched their rhythm, straining toward another climax.

The power of her own body overwhelmed her. Though both men were physically larger and more powerful than her, they both struggled to hold themselves in check, staving off their release until they had satiated her burning need. Her heart felt as though it would explode from her chest, full to bursting with emotion for them both.

With love for them both.

She bucked between them, her release crashing over her without warning. Her head reeled at her sudden realization, and she struggled to clear it as her climax faded, leaving her limp between them. Love? She couldn't love them. She had a fiancé waiting for her. She loved him, or would, she was certain of it, when she finally saw him.

Above her, Galerius went rigid, then spilled inside of her with a groan. Drummond followed with a shout, his cock throbbing with his release.

"Let me up!" She pushed against Galerius's chest, and he withdrew from her. Drummond did the same, and both men kneeled before her, their faces tight with concern, their breathing heavy.

"What is it? Did I hurt you?" Drummond asked, reaching for her arm.

She shrugged off his touch and curled her legs beneath her body. "No. I just...I can't..."

A look of understanding flickered through Galerius's eyes, and a moment later, it was gone. But he had read her thoughts, she was certain of it. She trembled, holding back a sob.

"Drummond, get out," Galerius said, his voice a broken whisper.

His captain's command wounded him; the hurt was apparent in his eyes. He swallowed and cast a worried glance at Annabelle, then pulled himself from the bed and gathered his clothes on his way to the door.

"Annabelle," Galerius began, pushing a damp curl from her forehead.

She could not bear to hear what it was he would say to her. Not knowing whether it would be a rejection or if he shared the same feelings did not matter. Either way, she did not wish to know.

"I want to be left alone. Please, I just wish to be alone." She turned her face away and prayed he would excuse himself from her thoughts as well as from her presence.

He did not leave immediately, his entire body tense, as though he would say something more, but was unsure whether he should or not. Then he rose from the bed and slowly dressed.

A suggestion came to her mind in the form of Galerius's voice. *Speak to me.*

She squeezed her eyes shut tight and held her breath, waiting for him to go before she felt safe to draw another one.

Chapter Ten

Damn Ian! Galerius stalked across the deck, knowing he must look as terrifying as the dark clouds that roiled in the sky above. As Galerius surveyed the weather, he caught sight of a boy standing watch at the top of the main mast. The lad's eyes drifted closed, and he swayed.

"Thom!" Galerius barked, and the youth above him startled, then, realizing where he stood and how precarious his position was, wobbled and regained his balance just in time.

The first mate, his official business for the day finished, lounged on the steps of the forecastle, a mouth-harp in his cupped hands. He lifted his head and nodded. "Cap'n, there something you need?"

"I need you to get that foolish bird down from there before he breaks his wings!" Galerius waved the boy down. "We can't afford to lose a man in a messy accident."

"He can't sleep when he's supposed to," Thom said simply, lowering his mouth to his harp. "None of the men can, with the haunting and the old woman's raving."

"He looks damned capable of it up there! There is no excuse for such irresponsibility on my ship." He stalked away, knowing he had been too harsh. It didn't matter. His stomach roared. He needed to find Drummond. He would wring his neck, then feed from him.

It had to have been Drummond's idea. Galerius had seen inside of both Ian's and Annabelle's minds. Annabelle was an innocent, a maid who had been gifted with sensual imagination but not knowledge. She could not have thought up this scenario on her own.

"You're wrong." Drummond sat on the rail of the forecastle, swinging his leg. He would fall over and smash his head on the deck, if he wasn't careful. Galerius hoped he wouldn't be careful.

"Now, that's no way to be. I'm frustrated as well." Ian hopped down from his perch as Galerius strode up the stairs.

"Stop. I did not give you permission to enter my mind." When had the Irishman learned to read his mind? It was damned inconvenient, the way Drummond's powers grew with every taste of Galerius's blood.

Drummond did not heed his command. *"You would prefer to converse out loud, so you appear even crazier than you already do? The men are already speaking openly of haunting. They whisper about mutiny."*

"I know what they whisper of!" he roared, realizing too late that he'd said it aloud. The sound of Thom's playing ceased abruptly, and Galerius knew he'd only added to his crew's suspicions. Perhaps he should keep himself locked in his cabin from now on. Better to be thought a recluse than a madman.

"*You saw into her mind,*" Ian probed gently. "*What upset her so?*"

Galerius clenched his hands to fists involuntarily. He had no desire to share Annabelle with this man, or anyone. In centuries, no woman had ever affected him so powerfully. His feelings for her, whatever they were, were deeper than the base need to possess. Yet that was the one emotion that drove him to near madness. He wanted to be the only man who touched her, the only one to fill her body and make her scream with pleasure. The fact that she cared for another tore his dead heart from his chest.

He took a breath to calm himself. What was it about Annabelle that affected him so? He'd been with thousands of women and men across centuries of time, and never once had he experienced such all-consuming need. Her innocence inflamed him, and her joy in all the newly discovered wonders of her body touched a part of his soul that had long ago grown jaded.

"*I do not know what upset her,*" he lied. "*She is a woman. They are creatures stranger than even I.*"

"*Do you need to feed?*" Ian moved closer and placed one warm hand on Galerius's cold cheek.

"*Of course I do.*" What a foolish question. His muscles ached as though he were imprisoned in a mortal body, the fatigue of not feeding threatening to force him into his coffin. But though he had known he would drink Drummond's blood this night, he craved Annabelle.

Drummond's posture went stiff, and he pulled his hand away.

Cursing his unintentional rejection, Galerius turned. "*Do not feel as though I'm casting you aside, friend. I am entranced with my new conquest, that is all.*"

He motioned for Ian to follow him, and faithfully, the man did. They could not go back to the cabin, so Galerius moved to the hold.

"This way," he instructed, keeping his voice low. The ship's surgeon came this way often to check on the old woman, so they could not stay under the forecastle. But if they worked aft and kept behind the bulkhead, they would not be found.

"Here? How romantic," Ian quipped as he sank to the floor and reached for the ties on Galerius's breeches.

"No." He brushed Ian's hands away. "Not tonight."

"Tonight is full of surprises." Drummond smirked.

It was true, Galerius did not usually turn down Ian's particular talents, but tonight his mind was focused solely on Annabelle. He could not, in good conscience, let Drummond pleasure him when he would only be thinking of her.

He needed something else, something that would take his mind off of Annabelle and place it firmly on Ian. "Something different tonight. Call it a change of tastes." He motioned to the human's breeches. "Touch yourself, so that I may watch."

"That is an order I can live with." Drummond hastily shed his breeches and shirt and reclined against the bulkhead. "You're certain we won't be disturbed?"

"You won't be." Whether Galerius would be or not was something else entirely, but the aspect of the forbidden quickened his blood. After centuries of living, few things excited him anymore. Now that he was blessed with not one but two companions who could stir him like none had before, he should be pleased, not tormented.

Drummond was already hard, and he stroked himself slowly, looking up with a grin. "Well, I'm glad I still interest you, at least."

"You will always interest me." The words were truthful and struck Galerius's soul. The need he felt for Annabelle was new and wild, but he still yearned for Ian. Though he could be maddening, the Irishman was often the only person on the ship who Galerius could turn to for advice and, yes, comfort. Though a monster he may be, he was not above that.

The heavy weight of arousal filled his loins as he watched Drummond work his hand up and down his shaft. Though he was reluctant to open his mind to the human again, Galerius explored Ian's thoughts, seeking out only those of pleasure and excitement. It did not take long. The man's whole existence seemed devoted to hedonism. But Galerius was able to sort through memories and fantasies, to find the core of the present, to feel what the human felt with every tug of his hand sliding up and down his cock.

Galerius moaned and closed his eyes, but held the image of Drummond in his head as he let the man's sensations of pleasure wash through him. His own cock strained at his laces, and he hurried to free it, sighing with relief when his fingers closed around its width. He stroked himself in time to Drummond's movements, the dual sensations nearly overcoming him.

"Do you know what you do to me?" Drummond's voice echoed in Galerius's head. *"To watch you stand there, not allowing me to touch you, knowing you're feeling everything I am doing to myself... This is torture."*

Galerius grinned and opened his eyes. *"And you enjoy this kind of torture."*

"I enjoy upholding my end of our bargain. Feeding you, both of your appetites." Ian rose to his knees and reached for Galerius, but Galerius stepped back before the human could make contact.

Faster than the human would be able to see, Galerius gripped him by the shoulders and pulled him to his feet. Drummond staggered back, dizzy by the sudden movement, and a burst of laughter escaped his throat.

"I still have some tricks I've held secret," Galerius whispered against Ian's ear, then traced the shell of it with his tongue.

Drummond shuddered, his hand still gripping his cock. “If you don’t stop that, you’ll have a mess on your breeches, and no one to blame for it but yourself.”

Ignoring him, Galerius sucked at his earlobe and looped an arm around Drummond’s back, pulling him close. The lean, tightly corded muscles of the human’s back flexed as he took in a gasp the moment their bodies came into contact.

The sensation of Ian’s naked body pressed against his clothed one sent an almost painful surge of arousal through Galerius, and he moaned against the man’s stubbled cheek.

“Ah, skip this bit. Just fuck me,” Ian groaned, his fingers kneading Galerius’s shoulders. “I’m already worked up a fair bit. Any more of this and I’ll likely explode.”

“There is something to be said for delayed pleasure. Your impatience shows me that you haven’t learned that lesson yet.” With his mind firmly closed to Drummond’s, Galerius did not have to acknowledge his own impatience. Though his body begged for release, Galerius reveled in the heady imagination that came to him with heightened arousal. The willingness to explore things he would never have considered otherwise. The eagerness to engage in that which he had considered, but had not been brave enough to try. Centuries might have given him experience, but no amount of time could remove all reservations, not even from himself.

He dropped to his knees before Drummond. Ian had washed himself, leaving behind only the faint scent of the grease he’d used with Annabelle. Galerius pressed his cheek against the human’s warm thigh, and Drummond shivered.

Galerius had been with men before, many times. This, however, was something he’d never done. It had seemed something his companions should do for him, and, while he cared for their pleasure as much as his own, he’d never had a desire to reciprocate. Ian was a different case altogether. The human had managed to endear himself to his master in less time than it had usually taken Galerius to grow bored of his companions. Now that they had discussed the inevitable end of their time together, Galerius could not get his fill of him.

Drummond’s breath caught and held at the first touch of Galerius’s tongue against the skin of his thigh. His cock twitched, but his hand fell away, leaving himself open for his captain’s attentions.

As unfamiliar as the act should seem to him, Galerius was surprised to find himself doing naturally what he enjoyed having done to him. He braced both hands on Drummond’s buttocks, trailing his fingers around the outsides of his thighs, to the soft inner flesh of them, then up to the crisp black curls around the base of his shaft. Galerius nudged that hard flesh with his cheek, let his cold breath drift over the tight, heated skin. Ian’s sac was drawn up tightly in reaction to the cold brushing over it, and Galerius traced the seam of it with his tongue.

“God!” Ian breathed, his soft accent turning the word into a profane prayer as he placed tense hands on Galerius’s head. The human’s body was practically straining with desire, and knowing he had caused it

gave Galerius no small pleasure. His own shaft, impossibly hard already, surged for contact with something, anything, to slake his need.

He ran his tongue up in one long stroke from the base of Drummond's shaft to the tip, where a drop of silky liquid gleamed in the slit at the head of his cock. He closed his fingers around Ian's hard flesh and rubbed the evidence of his desire down the length of him. Covering the wide head with his mouth, he followed the trail of his hand with his mouth. Drummond stumbled back, leaning against the bulkhead for support, his fingernails digging into the wood.

Drummond's cock was velvety smooth again Galerius's tongue, and he took particular delight in savoring the feeling, licking in arcs and whorls as his mouth glided back up. Though this act had always seemed submissive to him, Galerius realized there was a certain power in holding this part of Drummond, taking him into his mouth the way the human had often welcomed Galerius into his body. Perhaps Ian was less of a servant than Galerius had thought him.

"Ah, that's the way," Drummond whispered, his hands tightening on Galerius's head. When he looked up, he saw the human's face turned up, perspiration gleaming on his jaw. Galerius reached for his own aching member and stroked himself in time to the gentle thrusts Drummond made into his mouth. He moaned around the man's cock, and an answering shudder wracked Ian's body. He gasped and pushed Galerius back, babbling, "I'm going to...if you don't..."

Galerius stood and pulled Drummond's shuddering body against his, felt Ian's cock jerk as his hot seed splashed against his stomach. To know that he'd brought Ian such pleasure, to feel it in his own body through the human's thoughts, was unlike anything he'd felt with another man before. He sank his fangs into Drummond's neck as his own release crashed through him, and the heady sweetness of Ian's blood, combined with the almost overpowering physical pleasure, pulled a primal roar from Galerius's throat.

When he'd had his fill, he released Drummond and pressed his face to his neck. They slid to the floor, and Drummond looped an arm around Galerius's shoulders. "That was an unexpected change. Welcome, though."

"I am glad you enjoyed it." There was something gratifying in being told he'd done well...

Drummond sat up, frowning. "You don't think of me as just another conquest, do you?"

The question caught Galerius off guard. He did not make a habit of discussing such things with his companions. He sought to make it clear to them that though he appreciated their company and thought of them fondly when they were gone, he did not allow himself to feel deeper emotions toward them.

"Do not feel you need to spare my feelings," Drummond added quickly. "I do not doubt your friendship. But you called Annabelle a conquest. I would prefer you think on me a bit more kindly."

"I do," Galerius insisted. "I chose my words badly."

Drummond nodded. "Yes, you did. Annabelle should be so much more than a conquest to the man who holds her heart."

There was a sadness in Ian's voice that both compelled Galerius to tell him the truth of Annabelle's feelings and hide it as well. The human felt tender feelings toward her. That could not be encouraged, not when Galerius so selfishly wished to keep her for himself. Drummond was human, though...not a monster...perhaps Annabelle deserved that...

Galerius pushed those thoughts away. "It does not matter. Soon enough she will be married to her intended."

"And I'll be gone," Drummond reminded him unfairly. "What will my captain do then?"

That was a question he did not wish to dwell on. He resisted the puzzling urge to kiss Drummond again and pushed himself to his feet. "What I've always done. I will find a new companion."

Later, when he'd washed and dressed, Galerius sought out his first mate once more, hoping his rash behavior earlier would be forgotten. It was too optimistic, he realized, as his mind was still occupied by Annabelle.

"—with the wind being what it is. Captain, are you listening?"

"I'm sorry, my thoughts strayed. I was thinking of the prisoner. How does she fare?" The old woman had been crazy, rambling the night before. Galerius had used his powers to calm her, but her state worried him.

It seemed he'd had nothing but worries since they'd sacked the *Helen of Troy*.

Thom scrubbed a hand over his chin. "Surgeon says she's not going to last as far as Hispaniola. This morning, the fever was on her. Some of the men are worried she has the spot. Want to put her overboard."

Galerius made a noise in response. He could not kill the woman. Not when Annabelle had been so concerned for her.

"So, shall we?" Thom asked. "Throw her over?"

"No. We will wait. It could be any number of ailments causing her fever." Then, so as not to appear too soft, he added, "We won't get much ransom for a dead woman."

"The spoils from the ship were ample. I think I speak on behalf of the men when I say I'd rather share paltry loot than the plague," Thom pressed.

"I understand your concern. Normally, I would put it before the crew to decide. For now, trust my judgment, and wait." Galerius hoped the answer would hold his first mate for now.

"Aye, I trust ye, Captain. I'd march straight through the gates of hell if you told me it would be a snow storm on the other side," Thom vowed, though Galerius knew better than to believe the histrionic promises of a pirate.

His first mate continued, "But the men have had a hard year. First with the haunting—"

The haunting! Damn Drummond to hell. It was another good reason to leave the whelp behind when they reached port.

“—and then the failed raid off the coast of Portugal. It might be too much to ask of them to live with a plague-ridden old bag on board.”

“It’s only until Hispaniola. And any man who wishes to leave my service there may do so, and be compensated amply. We can run with a smaller crew.”

Thom grunted and nodded. It was as affirmative an answer as Galerius could expect. It was courting disaster, Galerius knew, to ask much more of this crew. He didn’t relish the idea of a mutiny. Nor did he wish to think of what would happen to Annabelle and Ian if they were left behind on the ship. Would the spell even continue to work? Drummond might be put overboard as a stowaway, or forced into service on the crew, but Annabelle... He did not wish to think about it. The men who sailed his ship had not sailed because they were upstanding gentlemen in their home countries. If the choice came to killing the old woman or putting Annabelle in danger, he would rip the crone’s throat out and throw her over the rail himself.

It was foolish to feel so protective of the girl when she did not bother to protect herself. How could she love him freely and without the fear that one day he would accidentally harm her, forget his strength and his need and...

No, he would not let those memories come back to him. He hadn’t thought of those dark times for centuries. Yet every time he looked at Annabelle, the horror flooded back. She trusted him. That could very well be a fatal mistake.

“I’ll inform the surgeon of our decision, then?” Thom asked, once again drawing Galerius from his thoughts of Annabelle.

He nodded, then replied, “Yes. And tell him I don’t want to hear of any idle talk circulating among the men. For now, this is a matter concerning the three of us and the old woman.”

Galerius bent over the maps spread out on the table and frowned. Hispaniola. He’d promised the men there would be reward there. It was so close to Jamaica, though...

If he changed their heading now, there would be a mutiny for certain. If they continued on, though, it would mean holding true to the promise he made to Annabelle, for now he could not bear to lie to her.

He pounded his fist on the map, ignoring the alarmed looks of the sailors around him. Let her insipid fiancé have her, then. The only thing Galerius could offer her was never-ending night.

Annabelle waited until Galerius was settled into his coffin before rising. She did not flatter herself that she had fooled him. He would have known she was awake, but gentleman that he could be, he’d allowed her the ruse.

She found the threadbare velvet dress and pulled it on, then went to work on her hair with the silver comb she'd found in Galerius's belongings. All the while, she had the keen sense that he watched her somehow, though he lay in his coffin.

He had seen into her mind, and he knew what she had begun to feel, both for him and for Drummond. And he knew, as well as she, that those feelings were horribly wrong. She had a fiancé waiting for her! That was who she should have those feelings for, the man who awaited her on his plantation in Jamaica, who would expect her soon and notice when she did not turn up.

On the few days she'd spent on the *Helen of Troy*, she'd imagined what it would be like to meet her fiancé. She'd wondered if he would meet her at the docks, and not liking the picture she had made in her mind, she changed the location to his plantation. Never having seen a plantation before, she'd substituted an English farm, but placed a grand manor house on the property. He would sweep down the steps and await her breathlessly, and she would emerge from the carriage like a princess in a fairy story. And then, right then, that was the moment she was supposed to feel the emotions that had somehow been misdirected to the two men on the ship.

How could she have let this happen? She could not stand another moment in the cabin, knowing Galerius monitored her, probably waiting to reject her. She cursed the worst word she could think of and stomped out, up the steps to the deck.

It was a particularly uncomfortable part of this curse Galerius had put on her that she could not stomp and cry and receive adequate attention for it. She paced up and down the deck in her most violent huff, but none of the sailors could see her and truly appreciate it. After a few futile minutes, she sank to the floor.

This was a disaster. It had all been quite fun at first, but she hadn't known what it would be like to spend so much time with a man. Men. Especially men like Drummond and Galerius.

How impossible, that she felt such similar feelings for both of them! Perhaps it would be easier to accept it if she found herself falling in love with Galerius *or* Drummond, but surely she could not love them both. One woman loved one man. And that was only if they were terribly lucky. Some women never loved their husbands. Mother certainly had never cared for Father. But if you were going to love someone, it was supposed to be the man you married.

She couldn't marry Galerius. She was promised to someone else, and besides that, he wasn't a human man. And though Drummond was, well...he didn't own a plantation. She must be sensible about her future, and especially about what would benefit her family.

"Thinking about lemons?" Drummond sat beside her on the deck, leaning back on his hands.

Her face twisted up in confusion. "What?"

"You have a sour face on." He turned his face up to the early morning sun. "It's going to be a lovely morning."

“For you, perhaps!” She climbed to her feet. Of course, the one person who could truly appreciate her tantrum would show up late and probably not even care! She stomped to the rail and stared down at the water.

He joined her, covering one of her hands with his. “Annabelle, what’s wrong? You’re more brattish than usual.”

In spite of herself, she giggled. Damn him for taking her out of her terrible mood with just his presence. It added yet another piece for her confused mind to puzzle out. “I’ve just been thinking.”

“About last night?” Drummond looped an arm around her shoulder, as though she were a friend and nothing more. Strange, considering the subject he’d brought up. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. You wished to try something adventurous, and you didn’t care for it. It happens to the best of us.”

“No, I did care for it.” Oh, how to make him understand. He was a man. He didn’t have to fear enjoying those types of activities. He didn’t have to worry about his future husband thinking him a wanton woman.

He didn’t have to give up the most delicious pleasure he’d ever known, just so he could live what would doubtless be a dull, boring life. It was terribly unfair.

“Imagine you were in my position,” she began diplomatically. “And you had never...indulged in the things I have done with Galerius, and with you.”

Drummond made a noise of understanding. “And you worry how your fiancé will react to your...experience.”

“Well, that. And other things.” She stared down at her hands. Why was it so much more difficult to discuss these things than to do them? “I am worried he won’t know how to...how to...”

“How to please you? That’s easy. You’ll have to show him.” Drummond seemed quite satisfied with his answer. It was unfortunate that it was, as he would say, *shite*.

“Oh, you don’t know anything,” she huffed, and marched away.

He caught her by the arm and stepped in front of her. “Annabelle, if I don’t know anything, enlighten me. You’re obviously in distress. I don’t enjoy seeing you this way. Let me help you.”

True tenderness reverberated in his words, and desperation as well. Her heart heavy with sadness, she said quietly, “It won’t be the same.”

“Well, of course it won’t be the same. Your fiancé won’t drink your blood—I should hope—and frankly, no one is going to compare to me.” He grinned broadly at his joke, but Annabelle did not.

Tears filled her eyes. “It won’t be the same, because I...love you.”

He said nothing for an agonizing moment, and Annabelle braced herself for his rejection. *Let it come*, she thought, bitter and defiant. She did not care if he did not return her love. All that mattered was that he knew how she felt, and perhaps he could understand the gnawing dread she felt when she imagined a life without him. And without Galerius.

Still silent, Ian took a step toward her, his expression unreadable. Then, without a word, he pulled her into his arms and nearly smothered her with a kiss so deep and passionate that her bare toes gripped the deck. Something foreign and a bit clumsy pushed into her mind, and she realized then that it was Drummond.

She pushed back, gasping from lack of breath and surprise. "How did you—"

"I'm sorry, Annabelle," he apologized, all the color draining from his face. "I would never...I was just so..."

"This is because you drank his blood, isn't it?" A strange, terrible thought occurred to her. "You're becoming like him!"

"Not as quickly as you think!" He raked a hand through his dark hair. "I haven't had his blood for over a week now. But the effects are getting stronger. Please, believe me, I never expected for this to happen. I knew it could, but—"

Annabelle's stomach turned. "How long?"

He blinked. "What do you mean?"

"How long will you be human?" She folded her arms. "He says he's not a human being. So, you won't be anymore, either. How long do you think it will be, before I become your trough to feed from?"

His mouth took on a hard line, and he stepped close to her. "I would never ask that of you. Never!"

"You may never ask, but you may not have a choice," she said quietly.

With a growl, he turned from her. He did not go far before he faced her again. "You love me, but you do not believe I wouldn't use you in that way. You must not love me as I love you, for if you did, you would understand I cannot, could never, harm you in such a way."

"Ian!" she called after him as he stalked angrily away from her. Still, she knew enough of his character from these long days at sea to know that following him now, when he was fresh from the argument, would not lead to any resolution. She would wait and speak to him when his anger cooled.

It was only after she had resigned herself to spending the day alone that she realized he had told her he loved her.

Chapter Eleven

“Something troubles you.”

Annabelle lifted her beautiful face from the sheets. Her hair, mussed into lazy knots, and her lips, swollen and flushed, gave testament to the love they had made. Despite having just been inside her lush body, Galerius hardened anew at the sight of her, well-fucked and dreamy-eyed as she lay prone beside him.

Still, behind that contented façade, something stirred in her mind, something she tried desperately to keep Galerius from knowing. It frustrated and disappointed him. Ever since she had shared her body with both him and Drummond, her thoughts had been closed to him. At first, he’d thought it had been because they had spent almost a week in a near-chaste, hellish state while her body cleansed itself. Though he had no aversion to her blood—though it would not nourish him—her human taboos remained intact, and she had not allowed him to enter her. She had worked hard to please him in other ways, and he had accepted her ministrations with gratitude, but nothing compared to the feeling of burying himself deep inside her body, of being the only man to have her in such a way. Surely, that had been the reason for the void between them.

Sadly, it had not been. Even now, as she gazed up at him with a sweet, slow smile, he could not guess what the meaning was behind it. “Nothing troubles me,” she said, pillowing her head on her arms. “I am perfectly happy here, right where I am.”

“I thought perhaps you worried about your fiancé, your obligations in Jamaica.” He trailed a teasing finger down her back.

She stiffened. Ah, so there it was. She still wished to leave him.

Why? He wanted to rage at the gods he had long ago stopped believing in. Never, in his long lifetime, had it mattered to him if a woman lost interest and left him. Not that they often did. Usually, it was he who ended their companionships. Why was this woman so stubbornly insistent on settling into a dull, landlocked life with a husband who would never satisfy her?

Or perhaps it was Drummond she thought of. Galerius struggled to maintain control on the jealousy that burned through him, demanding that he find his friend and defend his rights to Annabelle. Ian was as agreeable a companion as Galerius ever had sailed with. Annabelle’s emotions had been muddled and confused, but it had been very clear to Galerius she had feelings for both of them, not just one. While that meant she felt something for Ian, it also meant she felt something for him as well.

Why, then, did she care so much about rushing home to her damned fiancé? He rolled to his back and closed his eyes. He tried again to probe her mind, but somehow she kept him out. Occasionally, humans did learn to protect themselves, whether it was conscious or not.

“It was you who said you did not want me to speak of him again.”

Damn her, but she was right. “I meant to tease you. I did not realize you still pined for him.”

“I do not pine for anyone.” She sat up, wrapping the sheet around herself. “Whatever thoughts I might have had regarding what will happen when I leave here have been of a practical nature only, I assure you.”

Now he cursed himself.

She turned to him, her brow creased with suspicion. “Why the *Helen of Troy*?”

“It was an easy target.” He recalled how easy it had truly been, and felt no pride in it. “You were running with a small crew and very little defense.”

“So, you took advantage of our weakness?” It was not a question, but an accusation. He could not form an answer before she said, “I only ask because I wonder at the mind of a man who can be so ruthless.”

“I am not ruthless.” Why did he feel such a tremendous need to explain himself?

“Your men killed an old woman. They tossed her overboard because she was of no use to them. Surely, if you objected to such actions, you would have reprimanded them.” She made no attempt to mask her opinion of him as she looked at him with clear, shrewd eyes.

“Annabelle,” he began, finding his throat unusually tight. “Have I not treated you well?”

“Yes, I suppose you have,” she agreed.

He nodded to her statement. “And just a moment ago you said that you were happy here.”

“Yes, but as kind as you have been to me, you weren’t terribly kind to those you killed aboard the *Helen of Troy*, were you?” She shrugged and laid down her head. “I do not mean to bring up such unpleasantness, but I find it terribly strange that you worry what I think of my fiancé when you should perhaps worry what I think of you.”

Anger burned through his newly replenished blood, and he pulled himself from the bunk, where only moments before he’d been content to stay with her. She said nothing, but watched as he dressed himself and pulled on his heavy coat. When he was finished, he tossed her dress to her and said, “Put that on.”

She sat up, confusion clear in the slant of her brows, but she did not argue with him. When she was dressed, he said, “Follow me,” and did not bother to look back to see if she obeyed. He was so keenly aware of her that he heard her light tread across the deck and her heartbeat speeding with every step they took. He led her to the hold, where Drummond lounged on a pile of empty burlap sacks, and held up a finger when the man questioned him. “This does not concern you, Ian.”

Annabelle followed him to the very back of the hold, where the old chaperone lay on a hastily erected cot. Her pasty skin had grown much more pale in her sickness, and a sheen of sweat stood out on her brow.

Separated from each other by the glamour, Annabelle could not see the woman and the woman could not see Annabelle. With a small shift in concentration, Galerius lifted the spell, and Annabelle gasped.

“I don’t understand—” she began, but was cut off by the old woman’s startled exclamation.

“Annabelle? My dear girl!” The old woman reached for her, and Annabelle knelt beside the cot, allowing the crone to take her hands. As the old woman raved, Annabelle looked up to Galerius, her eyes full of sorrow.

He knew what she would ask him. He would let her ask it in her own time. He turned his back on the touching scene and withdrew to the solitude of his cabin.

As Galerius left, Annabelle turned her attention to Mrs. Grimble. The woman struggled in the grip of a terrible fever, and her eyes shone wild and bright.

“You know, I had the strangest dream,” she babbled, her gaze roaming from Annabelle’s face to the planks above their heads. “You were kidnapped, before my very eyes. But here you are!”

“Yes, I’m here now.” Annabelle caught her bottom lip between her teeth. She did not know what to do. She had never been near a sick person before, lest she become ill as well. Now, it was on her alone to comfort this poor woman.

“You know, I think we are in terrible danger,” Mrs. Grimble confided, her grip hardening around Annabelle’s hand.

Annabelle hushed her and extricated her fingers. “No, no. We are in good hands. You merely had a bad dream, because you’re feeling under the weather. Rest now, please. I do worry so over you.”

“Oh!” Mrs. Grimble’s eyes lit up with stars at that. “Oh, my dear, you must not worry over me. It is true, I am gravely ill. But you have more important matters to attend.”

“You are courageous.” It was good to see that something of the woman’s usual temperament remained. Perhaps her fever was not as bad as it seemed, and she would be on the mend soon enough.

Mrs. Grimble relaxed, her eyes drifting closed, but her pleased smile did not fade. Annabelle eased to her feet, not wishing to disturb the woman further. Though it would be the proper thing to sit beside her and tenderly nurse her back to health, Annabelle wanted nothing more than to be far, far away.

As she walked away, she realized how very shocking the entire experience was, and she fell heavily against a stack of crates, her breath squeezing from her lungs in loud sobs.

At once, Ian was beside her, a strong, heavy hand on her shoulder.

She did not wait for his prompting to speak. “She was alive this whole time. And Galerius did not tell me.”

“He had reason,” Ian whispered, steering her to their palette.

Annabelle gave in to the pressure of his hands on her shoulders to seat her, for she could not have thought to do it on her own. It was terribly disconcerting, to believe someone dead for many weeks and

then find that someone was not dead at all! “There are no reasons! No decent ones. I’ve been tortured, thinking of my poor chaperone dead at the bottom of the sea. Do not mistake me, I disliked her rules and her long stories, but I did not wish her dead!”

Wrapping a sheltering arm around her shoulders, Ian said softly, “It was possible the woman would not live. She still might not. Galerius thought it would be easier—”

“You knew about this?” The absolute gall of these, these...men! “You knew about it as well, but you did not think I was, what, capable of resisting a faint?”

“Galerius did not think—”

“No, he did not!” Annabelle stood and stomped past Drummond, her face aflame with anger. “Neither of you thought about how I felt in the matter! You kept this your little secret between the two of you.”

“Annabelle, wait!” he called to her, but she did not slow her steps. She marched straight to the cabin and flung the door open, not caring if the rest of the crew were alerted to the disturbance.

“You lied to me!” she shrieked and, to her satisfaction, her entrance did seem to startle him. Good. He deserved to be startled.

He turned from where he stood staring out of an open porthole at the blue-black night. “Yes, I lied to you, Annabelle.” He did not look her in the eye. “I’m a pirate, and a monster. I have not pretended to be anything else.”

“You have not pretended?” She stamped down the steps, her pulse pounding with rage. “You have lain with me almost every night! You have pretended to love me—”

“I have never said that I love you!” He moved past her, toward the door.

For a moment, Annabelle was paralyzed by her anger. When it became apparent he planned to escape the argument by leaving the cabin, she forced herself to follow him.

As he strode across the deck, his crew gave him a wide berth, but as he passed them, they shot him murderous glances. If he treated them half as badly as he had treated her and Drummond, it was a wonder they did not mutiny.

He read her thoughts; she could tell from the way his back stiffened and his hands clenched to fists at his sides.

“You will not walk away from me, Galerius! No matter what you are, be it a pirate or a blood-drinking monster, I am not a woman to be lied to!” That sounded strong, and she was rather bewildered as to where it had come from. Still, she could not back down now without seeming silly. “Why did you lie to me? Why did you let me believe that you killed Mrs. Grimble?”

He did not answer her, and she remembered then that he could not. The crew would not see her there, trailing behind their captain. She was about to demand that he answer her, no matter how crazy his crew might think him, when he stopped and looked about, his expression going suddenly alarmed.

It was a feeling she shared, as she watched the sailors abandon their positions and stalk slowly toward Galerius. Annabelle stepped closer to him, not wishing to be separated.

“Men.” Galerius nodded to them, as though nothing were out of the ordinary. “Good evening.”

“Evening, Captain.” One of the men nodded in return. “Let’s not make this difficult.”

“Difficult?” Galerius raised an eyebrow. “I face a watery grave. The only difficulty here seems to be what lies ahead of me.”

“*Stay close to me,*” he whispered into her mind. “*No matter what happens, you must trust me.*”

Annabelle’s thoughts whirled. As angry as she had been at Galerius moments before, she trusted he would not let her be harmed. But what about Drummond? What would happen to him if Galerius was thrown over? When the spell was lifted, would he face the same fate? Without Galerius to protect him, he stood little chance on the open sea...

And what of their chances? Galerius might not need to breathe, but she certainly did. And the toothsome monsters that swam below the waves, what could he do to keep them away?

She pressed a hand to her chest. Her own ribs had become tighter than the most crushing corset, and she struggled to breathe.

“*Calm yourself. As long as you are safe, I don’t care what happens to me.*” It was not Galerius’s voice in her head this time, and she startled. Drummond stood near the forecastle, his eyes trained intently on her. Her own eyes filled with tears as she watched him, and weak images drifted into her mind, pictures of her face, flushed with pleasure as they had made love. Images of her standing at the rail, staring out hopelessly at the sea the very day she’d woken on the ship. The memories, though hazy about the edges as Drummond’s mental connection to her weakened, were tinted with the sharp remembrance of love. Then whatever connection they’d made unraveled completely, and a painful sobbed wrenched from her throat.

“Come on now, Captain. Up you go,” the first mate urged, almost gently.

“*I cannot leave him!*” Annabelle clutched at Galerius’s shoulder, casting a pleading gaze at his face, but he did not respond.

Galerius pulled himself to sit on the rail and slung one leg over. “This is how it ends, then? After four years sailing together, after the money we’ve made for each other, this is how I am repaid?”

“*Climb up behind me, and do not let go.*” His words did not order, but compelled. Against her will, she felt her body moving toward the rail, and her arms boosting herself up. She locked her hands around his chest, and he pressed a large, cold palm over her fingers. To the men on the deck, she supposed it would have looked like a salute of some sort, but she did not care now if the game were given away. She struggled against her own mind, tried to force herself to resist, but Galerius had too strong a hold over her, both mentally and physically. He threw his other leg over the rail and pulled her with him, the paralyzing control breaking as they plummeted toward the water far below. She screamed and clawed for the side of the ship,

but it was far too late, and they'd fallen farther away than it had seemed. The cold water hit her, shocking her lungs to take a huge breath, and she drew in saltwater with it.

Her head broke the surface and she splashed ineffectively. Panicked, she searched for Galerius in the water, but did not see him. Above, she heard the noise of the crew celebrating, and then nothing at all as the ship sailed quickly away. She tried desperately to spot any sign of Drummond standing at the rail, though she knew he would be hidden by now, for his own safety.

Her arms ached from the weight of her dress, and she fell beneath the surface of the waves again, fighting against the pull of the water.

"Be calm, I am here." The words entered her mind at the same time Galerius's arms closed around her waist, lifting her from the waves with ease. She gulped in air, clinging to Galerius, then dissolved into sobs that made it nearly harder to breathe than the water had.

"Reserve your strength," he ordered, but his tone was hushed. "I am sorry it has come to this, but I will not let harm befall you."

"What about the sun?" she wailed, pressing her face against his neck, droplets of saltwater trapped between them. "The sun will come up and you will sleep, and you will drown!"

"I will worry about the sun. You cannot. Rest now, I can carry us both." His words inspired a sudden drowsiness. It was his doing, she knew, and she fought against it. In the end, it was too much, and she slept, her cold body huddled against his.

The rocking of the ship woke her, and confusion roused her further. The ship? They'd been thrown overboard last night!

Well, perhaps not thrown. Galerius had leapt and she'd been dragged. It mattered little, when the end result was the same.

She peeled open one eye, her face stiff from the salt water that had dried on it. Galerius still held her in his arms, and he marched purposefully through thigh-deep waves. Ahead of them, a thin strip of white sand, illuminated by a round, ripe moon, awaited them. There were no lights in the darkness, save the stars above them and the moonlit glistening of shimmering trees.

"Where are we?" she mumbled, the last vestiges of Galerius's artificial sleep releasing her.

"Land. That is all I know." He spoke with the same harsh tone as the captain who had first confronted her in his cabin, angry and threatening. This time, at least, he was not threatening her. "I noticed some small islands on the chart yesterday. I should have known they would drop me near them."

"That was thoughtful of them." At least they had not been cast into open water, far from any hope of survival.

"It may seem that way now. In a few days, when you're dying of thirst, it will not." A muscle in his jaw flexed, and he swung her down to stand in the now knee-deep water.

"It's the ocean! How would I go thirsty?" she reached down and scooped up some water in her hands. "I doubt I'll drink it completely dry in a few days!"

Galerius's hand closed over her wrist, shocking her with his grip. "Sea water, Annabelle. You can't drink it. You will, eventually, from desperation. But it will kill you, when you do. Might as well be an ocean of poison."

He stalked away from her to the sand, where he sat and pulled off his boots, grimacing as he did so.

Annabelle sank to her knees in the shallows, the waves lapping at her sodden dress. "Then, I am doomed?"

"Most certainly," Galerius said grimly.

Her eyes misting with tears, Annabelle stood, gripping two handfuls of wet sand in her fists. She hurled first one, then the other, at Galerius.

He flinched and ducked the second handful, though the first struck him in the chest with a satisfying explosion of mud. "What are you doing?"

"Why did you bring me with you?" she screamed, scooping up another handful. She released it with a ragged cry, but missed him. "Why did you force me off the ship if it was only to die? You should have left me! At least Drummond could have—"

"And what would he have done?" Galerius climbed to his feet, not bothering to brush the sand off his chest and shoulders. He grabbed her, his fingers digging into her upper arms cruelly. "Do you think he would have been able to protect you? From the men on the ship? Why do you think you were not visible to them?"

She ignored his questions and spat, "You are a brute!"

"Am I? Do you know what kind of men pirates are? You think me a brute, but have you given a second's thought to what would occur when I left you alone? Ian will have it easy. They'll likely either throw him overboard or press him into service and kick him off at the next port. But they would have kept you, Annabelle. By the time the sun came up, you would have been spread for every man on that ship." He released her, letting her stumble back.

"At least I would be alive!" she shouted, hating the tears that crept into her words. There was nothing to be done about them. Galerius was right, of course. She would rather die now than be abused by the men on board the ship, until there was nothing left of her to hold their interest. And she knew Drummond would have died to protect her. She did not want him dead, and the thought of them throwing him overboard forced fresh sobs to her throat.

Galerius looked to the stars, then away in disgust. "You will still be alive, gods above forgive me."

“What do you mean?” She swayed on her feet, exhaustion—real this time, not some trick of the mind—seizing her muscles. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep, with thick, dry blankets pulled over her head, but the sand and her wet dress would have to do.

He would not answer her, shaking his head as though dismissing a foolish notion. “It is a conversation for another time,” he said, closing the subject completely. “You need warmth. Take off that dress and lay it out to dry, far up the beach. Do not enter the trees, not until we know what lurks there.”

“Could there be a panther?” she asked with a shiver. She’d seen panthers in books, and had hoped she would never meet one. The illustrations always depicted them amongst tropical trees, and the ones that clumped together into murky blackness at the sand’s end certainly appeared exotic enough.

Galerius shook his head. “No, but there could be boars, or any kind of harmful snake. Listen to me and do not go in.”

He would not have to give her further warning. She quickly stripped out of her dress, though it felt strange, exposing her naked body to the outdoors. She rubbed her arms and scanned the tree line, hoping there were no other residents about who could see her. She’d seen illustrations of those types of people, too, strange civilizations that lived in the jungles and ran about mostly nude. Perhaps if some of those natives were about and able to see her, they would not think her terribly strange. The thought still unnerved her.

“There are no signs that anyone else is alive here,” Galerius reassured her. “Go, and I will make us a fire.”

After she laid her dress out on the dry, white sand, she sat, pulling her knees beneath her, and watched as Galerius moved up and down the beach, going quite far, but never leaving her sight. It amazed her, the way he strode with such confidence, as if he’d been to this very island before. His easy way of surviving—at least, for now, she thought glumly—put her at ease, or as close to it as she would likely become.

In a short while, he’d collected enough debris from around the tree line to build a small pile on the sand, and soon he’d kindled it into a fire.

A splinter of memory came to her, and she clapped her hands excitedly. “I once read in one of my father’s books that soldiers can make fire with nothing more than a few sticks and no flint. Were you a soldier?”

A troubled expression crossed Galerius’s face. “I do not think now is the appropriate time to discuss my past. It would be far more productive to look toward your future.”

“You said I didn’t have a future,” she pointed out. “You said I was doomed.”

“No, I said you would live. You’ve yet to ask me how I plan to save you.” The fire lent a golden glow to his pale skin, and deepened the shadows on his face. Annabelle could not be sure if the sadness she saw there was a trick of the light.

She cleared her throat. “I did ask. In a way. You put me off then, remember?”

“So I did.” He patted the sand beside him. Annabelle was uncertain whether she wished to be close to him now. He was in a foul temper, and though she had no fear he would hurt her, she did not feel his mood was justified. He hadn’t been hypnotized and forced off a ship in the middle of the sea. He hadn’t been doomed to die of some...some...*ocean madness* in mere days.

His shoulders slumped. “Annabelle, I promise you, everything I did was in your best interest. Everything up until...tonight.”

A prickling sensation crawled over Annabelle’s skin, the same as she often had felt going into long-closed-up rooms of the estate. A pang of homesickness shocked her, and she swallowed an unexpected lump in her throat. Still, the foreboding feeling remained, like one of the ghosts her sister Charlotte had often teased her about. “Why? What will you do to me tonight?”

He held out his hand and beckoned her nearer, and then she understood. He did not wish her to suffer, so he would put her out of her misery now! She scrambled back on her hands, realizing too late that she should have fled into the trees when she’d had the chance.

Perhaps she still did! Better to take her chances with the horrible, unknown creatures there than with the one who planned to murder her where she sat! She climbed to her feet and shot toward the trees, the branches slashing at her face and the fallen leaves slicing her feet as she ran. She turned to look over her shoulder, to see how closely he followed, and promptly collided with something solid and cold.

Galerius stood in front of her, and he grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her. “Are you mad? Why would you run from me?”

“Because you’re going to kill me!” She twisted in his arms for a moment, then, realizing her foolishness all at once, she stopped. “But you said I would survive.”

“And you will survive, if you don’t get yourself killed.” He lifted her tenderly in his arms and walked them both back to the fire, where he deposited her onto the sand a little less gently than she would have liked. “Perhaps I should have left you on the ship, since you have so little faith in me, and so much faith in that Irishman!”

“That Irishman is your friend!” she shot back. “Or was, before you cast him aside.”

“I did not cast him aside, I left him to take care of himself. There is a difference!” Galerius loomed over her, his face twisted in fury, and for a moment it seemed he might be content to kill her.

She swallowed a lump in her throat. “Oh, does your jealousy make it different? Because you wished to keep me to yourself, you abandoned him to face the wrath of your crew?”

Galerius scoffed, and Annabelle climbed to her feet, brushing the sand from her backside. “You didn’t need to leave him. I wanted to be with him, but it was clear that he cared too much about hurting you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this?” Galerius took a step toward her.

Staring into his eyes, she held her ground. “Because I do not like being treated as though I am property, that my feelings and wishes are not mine to have!”

This seemed to shock Galerius out of his anger. While he stood, mouth gaping as he attempted to find something to say back, she told him, “He could not have stolen me away from you... Agreement or not, I am not yours to keep. I do not belong to you, or to Drummond, or to some man on a far-off plantation. The more you try to keep me, the less of me you’ll have.”

It took him a very long time to speak, and when he did, it was with an uncharacteristic softness, a lack of confidence that was disquieting. “I did not realize you felt that way. Or I did, but I did not want to admit to myself that I had been treating you like property. I have acted badly only because...I love you. I love you, and I do not wish to lose you.”

Now it was Annabelle’s turn to be shocked. She shook her head slowly. “You have not acted as though you love me. You have been cold and threatening! I have feasted upon the scraps of kindness you’ve thrown me, but no more! I will not stand for this trick!”

“It is not a trick.” He moved slowly toward her, reaching to cup her jaw in his large hand. “I have treated you badly. I have pushed you away because I thought I would have to let you go.”

“You still might.” Tears squeezed from the corners of her eyes. “You knew what I had begun to feel for you. You knew, and yet you were cruel to me!”

“Because I wished to ease our parting. Now, it seems we will not be parted. Not now. Not ever.” He bent his head to hers, and she stepped back.

“This is insanity.” Though her head swam with the desire to be touched by him, and her body demanded she cast aside the petty quibbles of her brain, she could not. “I love Drummond.”

He looked as though she had slapped him. With a shuddering breath, he stepped back. “He will look for you, and we will find him once we are rescued.”

Men! She gave Galerius a shove that would have sent a human man sprawling in the sand. “No! You do not understand. I love you. But I love him as well. You must share me with him. You must chance losing me, or you will have none of me at all.

“I have made up my mind in this. There is no reason I cannot love you both, and that you cannot both love me. And there is no reason you cannot love Drummond as well. I see it in your face every time you look at him. I see how much you value him, as a friend and as a lover. Perhaps I am naïve, perhaps I am just a silly, inexperienced girl, but I doubt you can give me one reason, apart from your own selfishness, that we could not be happy together, the three of us.”

He did not speak for a long time, and when he did, it was to ask in a trembling voice, “How can I know that you will not reject me? That you will not decide a human life with Ian is worth more to you than a life with a monster?”

“Because I am not going to choose.” She shrugged, helpless to explain it further. “It will not come to a decision between you, because I want you both.”

Another long silence, and Annabelle squirmed. The bravery she'd felt when she'd faced him before had fled her, and she fixated on his words, unsure of what they had meant. "A human life? What do you mean?"

He did not meet her eyes. "I promised you that you would not die here. There is but one way I can save you."

Unconsciously, she took a step back. Then another.

"This is madness!" Galerius roared in frustration. "You are terrified of me! How could you possibly love me?"

"How could I love either of you?" she blurted, tears coming to her eyes. "I am supposed to love my husband, when he finally finds me and weds me! I am supposed to be a good wife to him, and ease my family's burden! I can't be in love with you or Drummond, but that doesn't change the fact that I would rather be with both of you than do what I was sent away from home to do!"

They stared at each other like strangers and, for a moment, Annabelle did fear him. "But I cannot be...like you. Not yet. Please."

The firelight deepened the lines of sadness etched into Galerius's face. He looked away, but Annabelle caught a hint of a bitter grimace. "You do not understand how little time you have."

"I know!" she begged desperately. "Give me one more day of sunlight. Tomorrow night. Wait just that long."

Chapter Twelve

“Annabelle!” Ian cursed and jumped over the side of the boat he’d rowed from the *Howling Hades*. He pulled, his muscles aching with every movement, until the boat ran aground and he could be assured it would not move as he scoured the island for Annabelle.

For the hundredth time, no, the thousandth, he cursed that demon Galerius to the pits he’d likely come from. The sun sapped Ian’s strength, but he kept moving forward. He could not leave Annabelle to die on the open sea, however that death might come.

“Annabelle!” he shouted, the salt air stinging his throat. He wanted nothing more than to collapse on the sand and sleep, but he knew better. He would die, then, and who would rescue Annabelle?

Not Galerius, the traitor. A man who would abandon a friend to the whims of fate deserved exactly the same treatment... Oh, Ian should have known better than to trust him. A sharp pain, like a dagger splitting his heart in two, assaulted him at the memory of his lover, and he hated himself that he felt so deeply for the man still. He promised his wounded pride that he did not come here looking to rescue Galerius as well. He would leave him on the beach, begging for mercy as he rowed Annabelle back to the ship.

And then what? His conscience asked him. *Will you be able to live with yourself? You’re already inextricably connected to him. Will you be able to live with the guilt of his death?*

Even if he could, Annabelle could never forgive such a thing. She had a pure and tender heart, and she would not leave Galerius to die alone on the island, even if she had been mortally terrified when he’d dragged her overboard.

Each step he took toward the trees at the head of the beach seemed a mile, and he felt his tears before he realized he wept from sheer exhaustion. He fell, his face hitting the wet sand, and he closed his eyes with a whimper. He had failed her, and now he would never see her again.

A thin sound drifted to him, flitting at the edge of his hearing like a housefly near his ear. He struggled to raise his head, and the white sand burned too bright against the blue sky. A sliver of darkness began to take shape, gliding nearer and nearer to him. The tinny noise took shape as a voice, and he forced himself to sit up at what it said: “Ian!”

His head swam, and he realized Annabelle ran toward him, like a vision out of his deepest desires. He might have thought himself dead if she hadn’t looked so dirty and haggard, her underclothes stained with sand.

She fell to her knees beside him, and he collapsed gratefully into her arms, whether she wanted him there or not. She peppered his face with kisses and tears, stroking his hair back from his face.

"Don't fret over me," he rasped, but he could not pretend he was in fine shape, not even to reassure her.

"You're freezing!" She felt all along his brow and his bare forearms. "What has happened to you?"

"I need...out of the light," he managed, his tongue thick in his mouth. "Please, I need out of the light."

She went deathly still, and for a moment Ian wondered if it had all been a dream, and now she would vanish. She did not. Instead, she stood and dragged him, grunting with exertion, toward the shade of the trees.

"You've become like him," she said, her voice strained with either emotion or the effort of moving him.

He tried to wet his lips with his parched tongue. "Yes. I am afraid I have, my love."

It sounded as though she let loose a sob.

"Don't cry, please," he begged feebly. She released him, and the shade mercifully allowed his senses to return somewhat. He turned his head and saw her on her knees, digging in the sand. "What are you doing?"

"You need to go into the ground!" she sobbed, pawing at the sand with renewed vigor.

"Don't hurt yourself. I'm fine where I am." He swallowed, knowing he would sound truly pathetic when he said, "Just stay with me. Put your arms around me, so I know you're still there."

"While you die?" she asked, her voice full of tears.

He managed a dry laugh. "No. While I sleep. I need to sleep now."

She lay beside him on the sand, spreading her skirts out over him, as though they could shield him from the certain death she knew the sun would cause. "You came back for me."

"Course I did," he mumbled against her warm bosom. "I love you."

Then he slept.

At sundown, Galerius burst from his resting place in an explosion of sand and didn't stop moving for an instant, running down the beach as though his life depended on it, and it might. Annabelle's certainly did.

There was another of his kind on the island.

He did not take the time to contemplate the incredibly unlikely odds. He'd learned long ago that his kind could be counted on to bend the rules where the uncanny and unbelievable were concerned. All that

mattered now was that Annabelle was alone and unprotected on the island while another roamed, probably in search of a meal.

He had not gone far down the beach when he heard her cry his name, an anguished sound that made him yearn for more speed, though he would reach her side in seconds.

When he did, he found a sight he did not expect. Drummond lay on the sand, blue and still in death, Annabelle's slight form draped over his chest. If Galerius had not known the reason for Ian's sleep, he might have wept as she did. Knowing the reason, and knowing he was the cause of it, afflicted Galerius with a paralyzing grief. He did not weep for what he had done, because there was no use, and he did not tell Annabelle what had happened to Drummond, for that would not have been useful at the moment, either. Instead, he looked across the waves to the hulking black form of his ship resting placidly on the twilight horizon.

"Galerius," Annabelle sobbed, bringing his attention back to the beach.

He knelt beside her and took her into his arms, and she held on to him, crying as though her heart were breaking. He laid a hand on her tangled hair and hushed her, looking over her shoulder at Drummond. He hadn't gone to ground; if he had, he would be far better equipped to handle the transition. Now he waited, trapped between life and death. By some miracle, he had come back to the island.

Galerius's heart seized in his chest. Of course, Drummond had come to rescue Annabelle, and now Galerius would lose her. If he had been more ruthless, perhaps he would have abandoned Ian there. But he could never do such a thing.

"He came to rescue me," Annabelle sobbed against Galerius's neck.

He pulled her gently back and tilted up her chin so their gazes met. "I know he did. And now you shall have to rescue him."

She shook her head slightly in confusion. "He's..."

"Dead. Yes. But the living death that precedes all awakenings of our kind." He swallowed, his throat thick with thirst, but her blood was not meant for him this night. "He needs you to feed him."

Uncertainly, she reached out to touch Drummond's cold face. "How? He cannot bite me. Not like this."

"No, he cannot." Galerius took her hand in his and raised it gently to his mouth. "I am sorry, I cannot make this painless for you."

Before she could utter a protest, he sank his fangs into the fleshy pad at the base of her thumb, and she cried out in alarm. He expected her to twist her hand away as a defense, and he let her do it, though it tore her flesh further. Blood streamed down her arm, and she held up her hand helplessly, her mouth open, unable to make a sound.

He took her arm and pushed her hand over Drummond's slack mouth, letting the blood drip in. He prayed they had not run out of time. Galerius had no idea how long one newly turned could survive if they

did not awaken. After what seemed an endless time, Drummond's chest began to move with the shuddering beat of his new, dead heart, and Galerius fell back on the sand, exhausted with relief.

"It isn't working," Annabelle wept; then a startled cry tore from her throat. Drummond's mouth closed over her palm, and then his hand over her wrist as he slowly began to animate. All the while, he drank. He sat up, pulled Annabelle into his lap, gripped her waist with one desperate hand as he sucked harder, pulling more of her blood into his mouth.

"Ian." Galerius spoke calmly, but commandingly. He did not wish to anger one so new, for their behavior could be unpredictable. "Enough. You do not wish to harm her."

Reluctantly, Drummond pulled his mouth from Annabelle's hand. He cast his gaze about in confusion. Galerius knew what went through his mind then. Why was he there, with the taste of blood in his mouth? What had happened to him? And why the persistent thirst, when the warm wetness still rested on his lips?

"You took too much from me," Galerius explained, his undead heart squeezing tight in his chest. "I let you take too much."

"I am...like you, then?" When Ian spoke, his voice was rough, animal.

"You are." Galerius nodded to the ship. "How did you get here so fast?"

"We were off course," he explained slowly, like a man awakening from a dream. "Much closer to port than you'd calculated. They put in, and the 'ghost' responsible for the haunting revealed himself."

"No!" Annabelle cried, clearly delighted. "How clever of you, Ian!"

"Very clever, indeed. More clever, still, to know which island to sail to." Galerius smiled. It had been no accident that Drummond had been drawn to them. The sharing of blood had created a bond more powerful than death between the two of them. Being lost hardly compared to death.

He looked at them, Annabelle and Ian, and felt a pang of loneliness so keen that it brought tears to his eyes. How would he live without the two of them? The thought of returning to his lonely existence was unbearable. He would do better to walk into the sea and let a Leviathan take him.

"Galerius, what's wrong?" Annabelle asked, standing. Drummond stood as well, never letting go of her hand, which had already begun to heal from the bite.

"I am already mourning the two of you," he stated baldly, hating himself for the pathetic tenor of the words. "Do not worry. I do not intend to keep you apart."

"Galerius, what on earth are you talking about?" Annabelle demanded.

"You love each other. It is clear in your every action. I cannot keep you separated. I hold you both too close to my heart to make you unhappy." That it was the truth did not make it hurt any less. He focused instead on his ship in the distance. "Give me time to find another crew. That is all I ask. You know, now, Drummond, what an impossible task it is to pilot a vessel on one's own."

"You aren't going anywhere." This time it was Ian and not Annabelle who spoke.

If he thought to leave Galerius on this damnable island, he would have a fight coming to him. "It is still my ship, Ian. No matter how capably you sailed it."

"You aren't going anywhere," Drummond repeated. "Because I won't let you."

"Nor I," Annabelle piped up quickly.

Drummond continued. "I love you, you fool. I wouldn't have stayed with you for so long if I did not."

"And what did I say last night?" Annabelle came toward Galerius and held out her other hand, linking the three of them when he took it. "You will have both of us, or none of us at all."

Ian released Annabelle's hand and stepped back. "Only if you love me."

The idiot! Galerius let his hand linger in Annabelle's, letting go only to reach out and cup Ian's jaw. He kissed him, daring for once to be tender, not fearing the pain it would cause him to let him go. "I have loved you for some time now. I have only been too stubborn to see it myself."

Annabelle came to stand beside them. "What now? What happened to Mrs. Grumble?"

"Ah, that's the sticky bit," Drummond said, scratching his head. "She's at an inn in port, but she can't stay there indefinitely. And she asked for Annabelle."

"I have to go to her. We have to get her home. I can't just leave her stranded!" Annabelle looked pleadingly between the two of them.

"The only option I had time to think up—and please keep in mind, I was becoming a blood-drinking monster as I had this thought—was that we should take dear Mrs. Grumble to Jamaica." Drummond looked to Galerius nervously. "You know I'm right."

"No!" Annabelle shook her head, backing slowly away from them. "No, I want to stay with you two!"

"No one is going to take you from us," Galerius vowed. "But he's right. The only person with the ability to return Mrs. Grumble to England without risking capture is your fiancé."

Drummond put his arm around Annabelle's waist and pulled her to stand between them. He kissed her, and Galerius leaned his head on her shoulder, one hand stroking her hair. Relief and desire mingled in him, having both of his lovers so close. Acknowledging the love he felt for them seemed only to intensify it, and he grew hard for them. Then, a thought occurred to him that troubled him deeply. "Ian, you have never lain with Annabelle?"

The question obviously caught both of them by surprise, for neither Annabelle nor Drummond could find words to speak. Galerius answered for them. "I have been unfair to keep you two apart. And Ian, you must be in need of relief. Feeding inspires lust, no matter how experienced you are."

As if to prove his words, he reached down and gripped Drummond's cock through his trousers. Ian was hard and heavy, and his eyes drifted closed as Galerius stroked him.

"Annabelle, you must want him desperately." There was no jealousy now, not when he knew that they both belonged to him, and himself to them. "I want to see you with him."

A visible shiver went through Annabelle, and already she reached to divest herself of her undergarments. Drummond caught her up in his arms and kissed her, all too ready to comply with Galerius's request.

Galerius's cock twitched impatiently against his stomach as he watched Drummond set Annabelle back on her feet and slowly draw her thin drawers down her legs. Ian took one small foot in his hand to lift it free of the fabric, then gently lowered it before repeating the action on the other. Annabelle pulled her short chemise over her head and tossed it to the sand, and gooseflesh stood out on her moonlit skin.

Slowly, reverently, Drummond lowered his lips to the skin above her knee. Annabelle's head fell back and she moaned, and Galerius felt a stab of jealousy then, for he had never seen her react that way just from his touch.

"Delayed pleasure," Drummond murmured with a smile, and Galerius chuckled. How like Ian to throw Galerius's own words back at him.

"Do not delay mine," Annabelle ordered, shocking both men into silence. If she noticed their reaction to her uncharacteristically bold comment, Galerius did not know. She rolled her head on her neck, her tangled hair falling around her bare shoulders as she gave them both a lazy smile.

Drummond slid a hand up the inside of Annabelle's leg, parting her thighs and coming to rest tightly against her mound. She moaned and shifted her feet, then dove her fingers into Ian's hair and pulled his face to the juncture of her thighs. It was all the inducement Drummond needed. Wrapping his arms around her to support her, he buried his mouth in her mound with a groan. A startled little gasp escaped Annabelle.

Galerius reached into his trousers and pulled his shaft free, stroking himself with a grip almost painfully tight. Watching Annabelle experience pleasure under Drummond's skilled mouth soothed his jealous heart and enflamed his lust like nothing he'd ever experienced before. He felt as though he would die if he could not have her or Ian, but did not want to intrude on the incredibly intimate scene before him.

Annabelle's moans grew louder, her breathing sharper. When her knees buckled, Ian was ready to catch her. He lowered her to the sand, replacing his mouth with his fingers, stroking her as he kissed his way from her belly to her breasts. Her hips lifted against his hand, and her eyes squeezed shut. Galerius had seen her climax often enough to know that she hung on the very precipice of her release. Drummond lay between her legs and guided his cock with his hand. Galerius's mouth went dry at the memory of what it felt like to enter Annabelle's tight, wet quim, and he groaned in unison with Ian. Annabelle's body bucked, and she cried out, her eyes flying open in disbelief as Drummond pushed farther inside of her. As her climax abated, she leaned up to capture Ian's mouth, then turned her gaze to Galerius. Drummond glanced toward him as well and panted, "Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to come fuck us?"

It seemed inappropriate to laugh, but Galerius could not help it. He was so filled with joy at the sight of his two dearest friends, his lovers, his beloveds, awaiting him, he could not contain his emotion.

He knelt beside Drummond and kissed him, his lips and tongue communicating the passion he could not adequately voice. When their lips broke apart, Ian hissed, driving harder into Annabelle. Galerius lay beside her and ran his tongue over the shell of her ear, and whispered, “How does it feel to have him inside of you?”

Lost in her own pleasure, Annabelle could not answer, but Drummond took the opportunity to speak for her. “I’ve waited so long,” he panted with a half-smile. “I’ve dreamed of this ever since you brought her on board.”

It should have bothered Galerius that his lover had coveted Annabelle in the past, but now that concern seemed ridiculous. She turned to Galerius, her arms seeking him out, and he kissed her as she squealed another long climax against his mouth.

“Jesus, Annabelle... I’m sorry, I can’t...” Drummond groaned and thrust his hips hard, shuddering as he spilled into her. The throaty groan that issued from him sent Galerius over the edge. He gripped himself tighter as his cock twitched and spasmed, jetting his milky seed onto Annabelle’s thighs.

Drummond and Galerius collapsed together, and Annabelle laughed. “You two look as though you’ve just run a mile!”

The night air was warm, but their exertion had chilled them. Galerius draped one arm over Annabelle’s stomach, and Drummond captured his hand, entwining their fingers together. They lay in contented silence, until Annabelle sighed.

Galerius looked up at her, caught the look of worry that she tried to hide.

“It’s nothing,” she said defensively, before he could even question her. “It’s just that... What if my fiancé asserts his claim to me? What if he turns you over as pirates? What if he forces me to stay?”

“That will never happen,” Galerius vowed, his every possessive instinct roaring to protect her.

Drummond kissed her to reassure her and smiled against her lips. “We won’t let anyone take you from us. It’s the three of us now.”

She turned to Galerius and looked up into his eyes. “Forever?”

He looked to Drummond over the top of her head, and the Irishman smiled back.

“Forever,” Galerius vowed, and he meant it.

About the Author

The alter-ego of USA Today Bestselling Author [Jennifer Armintrout](#), Abigail Barnette was born during a conversation with author [Bronwyn Green](#), who encouraged Jennifer to develop an elaborate fantasy persona—complete with nom de plume—under which to pen erotic romance. Abigail enjoys long naps in fairy-filled glades, running through corridors in tragically romantic haunted castles, and drinking goblet after goblet of spiced wine.

To learn more about Abigail Barnette, please visit www.abigailbarnette.com, or visit her blog at www.abigailbarnette.blogspot.com.

Rumplestiltskin is not his name and this hunk's no gnarled old goblin.

Demon Lover

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Fairytale Fantasies, Book 2

In his quest to land her a rich husband, Gwyneth's father has gone one step too far and bragged to the king's steward. Now she faces an impossible task: spin a room full of straw into gold by morning, or their lives are forfeit. She despairs, until a black-garbed figure offers to solve her problem for a price. One kiss.

He returns the second night, and the third. With each sensual encounter, the stakes escalate along with her attraction to her mysterious visitor. Then he claims the ultimate price—her child—and she realizes too late she's made a deal with the king of the Underworld.

From the moment he kisses her, Ragnorak knows Gwyneth's child will be a worthy heir for his kingdom. But with each touch, he wants more. He wants her to be queen of his strangely beautiful world—and for her to want to stay. But that will mean giving her the ultimate weapon—the power of his name.

Gwyneth has only three chances to drive her demon lover over the edge of bliss. But when the stakes suddenly shift, it's Ragnorak who stands to lose everything...

Warning: This book turns a well-known fairytale upside down, and involves hot sex with a villainous demon—or is he...?

Enjoy the following excerpt for Demon Lover:

Once more Gwyneth waited in the room full of straw, desperate and alone, but with a sliver of hope which she hadn't possessed the previous night. For now she knew there was someone who could give her the magic to perform the impossible task. But what could she do to summon him?

She stood in the center of the room, sneezing as the chaff in the air tickled her nose, and examined the chamber from corner to corner. How *had* he entered the room? Did one of the great stone blocks which made up the walls and floor move aside to provide him entrance? And where exactly had he come from?

She licked her lips and cleared her throat. "Sir," she called softly, "I beseech you to come to me again. I need your help. Please."

There was no answer. The dead silence was disturbed only by a tiny rustle, perhaps of a mouse brought in with one of the bales of straw.

Gwyneth clasped her hands together. "I cannot do this alone. I need your magic. Please, I'll do anything you require if only you will save me once more."

More silence. What if he didn't come this time? Now that the king was convinced she could perform the task, he might take her refusal to accomplish it a second time as willful disobedience—perhaps treason. Could she convince him that her magic power was used up since the full moon of the fifth month was

waning? She couldn't be expected to produce gold again until another eighteen years had passed, according to her father's bizarre claim.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tears slipped from the corners to trickle down her cheeks. "Please, I need you," she whispered.

"Then you shall have me, my lady." The voice murmuring near her ear, hot breath tickling her neck, nearly jolted her out of her skin. She started to whirl to face him and her shoulder slammed into his hard chest. He stood right behind her, as solid and immovable as a wall.

One gloved finger reached out and caught the tear which had dripped nearly to her jaw. "Diamonds," he murmured. "More beautiful than the green glass you wear around your neck."

Gwyneth automatically reached up to touch the elaborate emerald necklace that draped her throat. "You're here," was all she could manage to say.

He dipped his hooded head slightly. "Your wish is my command, but as before, I will demand a payment."

What this time? Her heart pounded as she remembered the ravishing kiss last night, the way it had stolen her breath away and made her skin burn.

"I have this necklace." She fingered the cold, hard gems. "Although I don't know how I would explain its loss to the king."

"Then you don't really *have* the necklace if it doesn't belong to you." He stroked a hand down her arm from shoulder to wrist, and her flesh tingled. "But you have other jewels more precious than those. Rubies." He touched her lips lightly with a fingertip. "Star sapphires." He indicated her blue eyes. "And a single precious pearl."

One gloved hand slid down the front of her gown to cup her mound through the layers of silk and petticoats. He pressed hard with his finger on the very bud she had massaged earlier, and warmth bloomed from the sensitive spot.

Gwyneth drew in a sharp breath.

For a sizzling moment they remained locked together with his hand on her pussy the only point of contact, and then, abruptly, the demon stepped away from her. She felt the absence of his commanding presence which had made the air around her positively crackle with energy.

She licked her lips before she spoke. "What would you have me give?"

He looked around the room. "There's more work to be done tonight."

It was true. The room was filled with nearly half as much straw as the previous night.

"I would need more than a kiss this time."

Scissors of fear and excitement snipped through her mask of calm. "How much more?"

"I want to touch you. Everywhere. And I want you to touch me."

Her excitement mounted. He would unmask, then. She would see his face at last. But then the other half of what he demanded struck her. He wanted to see and touch her body—naked. She'd never been naked in front of anyone in her entire life.

At her hesitation, he added, "I will not have sex with you, nor will I force you to do anything you don't enjoy. But I must have something for my trouble."

Gwyneth had no other options, and a deep-seated part of her wanted to know his touch and to have his gaze travel over her body. Just thinking about it set her afire all over again.

"Very well. It's a deal."

"Then you may begin to spin. I suggest you hurry, as there's a great deal of work to be done and I demand some time at the end of the evening for myself."

Gwyneth gazed at the mountainous bales of straw and empty spindles waiting to be filled. Her fingers were already swollen and sore despite the balm one of the serving women had treated them with. The task before her seemed monumental—but *at least not impossible now*, she reminded herself as she cut the twine on the first bale of straw.

She sat on the stool and fed the strands into the flyer while her foot pumped the treadle, making the wheel spin round. Gold thread began to coil around the first empty bobbin. She fed her lapful of straw into the machine and reached for more, all the while rhythmically pumping her foot up and down. It was impossible to see at what point the strands of straw became metallic gold. The wheel was a blur, the distaff spun and Gwyneth gave up trying to see the moment of change, accepting the magic as she did the mysterious wizard himself.

She hummed softly and rocked in time to the rhythm of her foot on the treadle. All the while she was acutely aware of the man who watched her.

"Do you enjoy spinning?" he suddenly asked.

"When I'm not doing it to save my life, yes."

"What is that song you hum?"

"An old spinning song one of the women in the village taught me. It helps me keep a rhythm so the thread is spun evenly."

"Your mother didn't teach you?"

"No. She died when I was very young."

"I see." He had moved to stand beside her, watching her hands move and standing with his own clasped behind his back. "And what of your father?"

"He raised me the best way he could, I believe."

"The way one would raise a prize calf for the market." His tone was as sour as week old milk.

She stopped spinning and turned to him, glaring. "My father loves me. He wants the best for me. Is there any harm in that?"

“When it puts you at the king’s mercy? Yes.”

Gwyneth nearly knocked her stool over as she rose and marched over to fetch another bale of straw. She was sweating as she dragged the heavy load past the dark-cloaked man.

“You will never be done in time at this rate, and there won’t be time for my payment,” he remarked. “I will help you to finish faster.”

With a swirl of his hooded cape, he turned from her and brought over another bale of straw. He handed her bundles of straw and replaced her distaff each time it was full of gold. Gwyneth’s hands flew as she fed straw into the flyer, her foot was a blur operating the treadle and the wheel spun so fast it made her dizzy. She was fairly certain the stranger was responsible for this increased speed with his mysterious magic.

Much sooner than the previous evening, or at least she thought so, although she had no timepiece with which to measure the night, the seemingly insurmountable task was finished. Rows and rows of golden thread sat on the floor. Only a few bobbins were still empty, and there was no straw left except for chaff and dust that littered the floor.

Her back stiffened as Gwyneth became aware of the stranger standing behind her. His hands rested on her shoulders, heavy and warm. She was torn between pulling away from the unfamiliar touch and purring like a cat as he kneaded her muscles lightly.

“Are you ready to pay my price?” The low rumble of his voice set her very bones trembling in a not entirely unpleasant way.

Love has a trick up its sleeve.

Foxes' Den

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Duals and Donovans: The Different, Book 2

Some guys just don't take rejection well. Sure, Akane's affair with an uptight sorcerer's boy toy backfired, but two hundred years locked in a mortal body is cruel and unusual punishment for a Trickster avatar. To free her fox form, she needs sex magic with a male of her own kind. Except none exist.

Adorable Trickster-touched fox dual Taggart Ross-Donovan is the closest she's found. Even better, he's married to Paul Donovan, whose red magic sizzles the air around him. One night with them will generate the extraordinary power needed to set her free.

The last thing Tag and Paul expect to find under a sorcerer's curse is a kitsune, a beautiful one who gets under their skin without even trying. Tag is more than ready to take the risk she needs. Paul has reservations, but it's nothing Tag can't overcome with a little sensual persuasion.

No one goes into the ritual with more hope than Akane...or more fear. Failure will leave her forever entrapped. Worse, she's falling for two mortals. And there's only one thing that can kill a kitsune—unrequited love.

Warning: Contains sly fox men (with tails), foxy fox women (with multiple tails), sexy witches chasing tail, Trickster magic, cranky sorcerers, and enough gay, het and MMF sex to torch your Kindle.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Foxes' Den:

For a moment, overwhelmed by the wealth of gorgeous man around her, Akane almost forget the curse, forgot why she was able to be with them at all, forgot everything except that she hadn't dared to have sex for...well, she didn't want to think about how long, but it was longer than these two men had been alive.

She was pulled back to the reality of her circumstances when Paul intoned, "I honor your body as I honor the Goddess, the female principle in all life." Tag followed along a few beats behind. Paul's tone was solemn, Tag's predictably less so.

The Donovan tradition was alien to her, their names for the divine Powers not the ones she knew, but the principles were familiar and she could figure out what she needed to say. "I honor your bodies as I honor the God, the male principle in all life."

"As we honor each others'," Paul and Tag said, this time in perfect unison.

They weren't here simply to share pleasure. Her future rode on the magic they could work together.

But the way she saw it, the more they enjoyed working the magic, the more likely it was to succeed. And how could a kitsune, even a cursed one, not enjoy herself with two such magnificent men?

Between them, Akane sank to her knees with a grace she had forgotten she possessed. She reached out, taking one cock in each hand, and began to stroke.

Even in this human form, locked away from most of her magic, she sensed silver cords of love binding the two men, sensed the energy passing along that cord between them. If only she'd looked for that kind of connection between Hiro and Masao...but no, she'd been too sure of herself. And since they'd been in denial about their true feelings, she might not have seen anything anyway.

Energy streamed from both men into her, streaming into the foul black weight she'd been carrying around in her spirit for two hundred years.

She didn't want to hope too much, but it already seemed a little lighter.

Not surprisingly, Paul's energy was the more directed of the two, a focused ray of scarlet passion and white healing that might be aimed by his cock, but seemed to come out of his soul and cut into the curse like a katana. What she felt from Tag was a wild river of positive energy: lust, caring, love and support for Paul, protectiveness like a wild animal might feel toward its mate.

And mixed in with it all, a degree of affection that humbled her.

Tag genuinely liked her.

Many men had desired her; some had fancied they loved her, and a few perhaps had. But Tag knew her for what she was and understood her terrible mistakes and liked her anyway.

It touched and troubled her in equal measure. A fox dual like Tag was the closest thing to a potential true mate a kitsune would likely find. But he already had a husband, and she knew better than to disturb that bonding. Not to mention that pesky mortality.

This was why kitsune rarely found a true, lasting love, unless they were of a disposition to love another female.

No. Negative thinking would affect the magic. She must take what they offered and no more, and think positive to let the magic flow. Once her curse was broken and she wasn't trapped in the physical realm, she wouldn't worry about foolishness such as a permanent partner. Life, after all, was mutable, and so was she.

To distract from the pull of Tag, she turned her attentions to Paul.

She took Paul's long, slender cock, throbbing with heat and human magic, into her mouth, working up and down until he made a strangled noise and she tasted a hint of tangy pre-come.

She would have continued, with pleasure, if Paul hadn't pulled back and said, "No. Tag's turn. Got to keep it balanced."

He was the witch, the one who knew how to set her free.

It was playing with fire, but she'd always liked dangerous games. Sure, it was how she'd ended up in this fix, but there had been many other bits of fun, risky business in her immortal life, and most of them had worked out fine—in the long run, at least.

And what female could resist a gorgeous man telling her to do exactly what she wanted to do anyway?

Better yet two men, because while Tag wasn't saying a word, his body language and even his scent told her he was in need.

Tag's cock was redolent with a lighter version of a fox's musk, and it tasted like home in a way no male ever had. What was the witch phrase—*hearth, home, heart*? A kitsune had no hearth, no fixed home.

But they had hearts, hearts that they normally kept closely guarded.

Akane was perilously close to losing hers to this fox and to the long, lean witch who loved him.

No. That couldn't be. She couldn't be falling in love so easily after more than a thousand years of resisting it. Must be a heady combination of gratitude, hope and raw lust. She focused on the moment, on the taste and texture of his cock and the weight of Paul's in her hands, on the heat in her belly as her own arousal grew. She swore the curse was already melting, and the outline of her human form wavered and softened.

Or maybe she was drunk on lust. Moisture dripped down her thighs, and she ached for fucking, but at the same time, she didn't want to stop what she was doing.

Paul moved closer to his lover, offering up his cock along with Tag's. Akane's eyes widened, but she took the hint.

It made sense. She needed both the fox's wild energy and the witch's power to see the curse broken. The two men were bonded, practically one soul, magically speaking.

And besides, if she worked both of them into her mouth at once, it would be a new experience. As an immortal with over a thousand lusty years under her obi, it wasn't often she managed to have those.

Akane rearranged the men a little so they were at what looked like a better angle, then wrapped a hand around the base of each cock.

She swirled her tongue over the head of Paul's cock first, welcoming him back, then did the same for Tag. Amazing how they tasted so different and yet were both so delicious.

Then she stretched her mouth open wide and took in as much of both cocks as she could.

This wasn't going to be the best blowjob she'd ever given. It was hard to get too artistic when she couldn't do much in the way of licking or swirling or even moving her head because her mouth was so full, and her jaw was going to be sore before long, and because of the odd angle, she could barely get the heads into her mouth. For the moment, though, it felt amazingly powerful to feel herself so filled.

And to know that they were getting additional pleasure from their cocks touching.

The flavors of their pre-come mingled on her tongue. The flavors of their energies mingled as well and jolted through her. Something unclenched inside her.

For the first time in two centuries, she felt her tails. They weren't there in any sense someone not well-versed in magic would recognize. She doubted even Paul could feel them, though she tried to flick one

of them against him. But the base of her spine didn't feel truncated and naked, and the merest hint of soft fur swept against her legs.

Something prickled against her scalp as her proper ears made themselves known. The shushing of the surf grew louder. She heard a wood mouse scurrying around under the pavilion, even over the surf and the rain. Tag's musk and Paul's smell of cloves and Ivory soap were sharper, but so were all the other smells—rainy Oregon fall, ocean at high tide, a touch of mustiness and mouse in the cabin, lingering hints of Tag and Paul making love here several days before and the scent of fresh linens they'd put on afterward, a lingering trace of the coffee someone had enjoyed there earlier in the day, the candles and even the flame itself.

She pulled back long enough to say "It's working. Paul, Tag, it's working."

Then she threw herself into sucking with renewed lust, turning her sharper senses to the wonderful panoply of tastes, smells, sights and sounds the two men offered.

As she sucked, they kissed. She felt their tongues meeting hers, dancing in her soul.

This time, Paul was the one to pull away. "Time for the bed," he said, his voice hoarse with desire and his control obviously strained. "Now."

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