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The Macgregor's Daughter

DEE JULIAN

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by

Dee Julian



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The Macgregor's Daughter
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Prologue

England, June 1776

Freedom hovered so close she could smell it.

Anadreya Richardson tightened her grip on the pistol. She removed her mask and emerged from the safety of a manicured shrub. No lamplight dispelled the darkness in this secluded section of the palace gardens, and the absence of the moon offered the perfect opportunity to escape.

Dreya crept toward the high stone wall. Her heart raced. She counted off twenty paces west and halted. Thick vines of ivy covered this section of the wall. She pushed through the tangled mess and found the metal hinges of a gate.

"Bless you, Uncle Charles."

She slipped the pistol inside a pocket of her sixteenth century Saint Magdalene costume and retrieved the key hidden inside her bodice. Her fingers trembled, but she managed to insert the key into the lock. The stiff mechanism refused to budge.

Please, please open!

Determined to conquer her rising fear, Dreya forced a slow breath and tried again. Finally, the key turned inside the rusty lock, and the gate creaked open. She exhaled a breath of relief.

Until a strong arm snaked around her waist.

Do not scream!

His hand closed over her mouth, and her heart raced with dread.

"What's your hurry, my sweet?" a male voice droned in her ear.

His warm breath sent shivers down her spine. By the polished tone of his voice, he wasn't one of the king's guards. Probably a guest who'd wandered away from the masquerade ball.

"Do you know how this entrance to Queen's House differs from all the others?" He removed his hand from her mouth and spun her around. "It's generally used for secret liaisons."

Dreya steadied her nerves. This man stood a good five inches taller than she, but darkness hid his features. If she ran, he would catch her in no time.

"How dare you touch me," she snapped, assuming the proper English accent. "Release me at once."

"I apologize, my lady, but allowing you the opportunity to disappear beyond this wall is not an option."

Did he recognize her? No, he would've called the guards.

Dreya gathered her wits and sweetened her tone. "My lord, apparently you've confused me with someone else. Now if you don't mind—"

"Oh, but I do." His fingers brushed her chin before they inched upward. "You removed your mask. What a pity. I would've enjoyed the task."

Dreya inched away.

He followed. "You're quite the mystery, slipping away before the unmasking hour."

The awkward silence stretched for several moments.

"Why did you leave the ball?" he demanded.

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"I grew bored."

"I can offer a cure."

Dreya backed into the wall, and the rough stone scraped her palms. His seductive tone left little doubt as to why he'd followed her. "How very gallant, my lord, but I'm...."

"Late for another liaison?"

She didn't bother responding to the vulgar suggestion.

He trapped her against the wall. "I'd be happy to take his place."

"And I'd be pleased if you stepped aside."

"A bit eager are we, my lady?"

"Only to be rid of your company, my lord."

He laughed low. "No gentleman escort and too inexperienced to be a man's mistress, so more than likely...." His pleasant tone changed in an abrupt manner. "You're a thief! If I searched your bodice, would I find a collection of stolen jewels?"

How dare this pompous idiot!

Outraged, Dreya stomped on his foot.

He swore beneath his breath.

She dashed toward the gate.

He snatched the hood of her cape and yanked her back against his chest. "I admire your spirit, my lady, but you've just committed a foolish mistake."

"Let go of me."

His hands slid down her arms. "Is the word 'please' not in your vocabulary?"

Dreya gritted her teeth. "What do you want?"

"An interesting question, but first...." Again, he spun her around. "Who are you?"

"Who are *you*? And why have you accosted me?"

"Any lady who attends a ball yet refuses to join in the festivities is worthy of attention. Wouldn't you agree? As to your first question...." He tucked a finger beneath her chin. "I'm the gentleman who intends to call the king's guards unless you tell me your name within the next five seconds."

She released a nervous breath. "Ana."

"Now that wasn't so difficult, was it? Do you possess a surname?"

Dreya changed the subject. "My lord, I understand your suspicions." She slipped one hand inside her pocket. "But I'm no thief." Her fingers closed around the handle of the pistol. "I merely overheard a guest speaking of this secret entrance and thought to see it for myself."

"How did you obtain a key to the gate?"

"I borrowed it. Now let me pass."

"You're in no position to make demands, Lady Ana."

With the utmost satisfaction, Dreya withdrew the pistol and shoved the barrel beneath his chin. "I disagree, my lord."

He grew so still she thought he'd stopped breathing.

"Your English accent was quite convincing until the very end, Miss Richardson. You should be more careful."

Suffocating apprehension wrapped its tentacles around her throat. "Have we met?"

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"Does it matter?"

"It might if I weren't running short on time."

"You realize if you discharge that weapon, the sound will alert the guards?"

"Yes, but at least I'll be rid of you."

"Amusing," he quipped. "Care to explain how you escaped the tower?"

"No, but you'll be pleased to know it wasn't easy."

"You're quite clever, I'll grant you that, but spying on one's enemy is a dangerous venture. It should never be attempted by a mere slip of a girl."

"I am *not* a spy."

"Yes, I remember how vehemently you declared your innocence before the king."

She stared at him. "And you are...?"

"The Marquis of Canderlay."

Anger crawled up her spine. "The king's favorite lackey and the very blackguard who had me arrested. I should shoot you now and be done with it."

"You dare blame me for intercepting your damaging missive bound for the colonies?"

"You intercepted nothing. A servant from my uncle's household betrayed my trust. My letter, no doubt, was handed to you on a silver serving tray."

"You are a foreigner standing on English soil. Did you really think you wouldn't be watched?"

"Is it a crime to warn loved ones they're about to be invaded?" Dreya countered. "I don't expect you to understand my reasoning, Lord Canderlay, nor do I care." She inched along the wall toward the gate. "I will, however, ask you to escort me to my horse."

He raised his hands, palms outward. "Do I have a choice?"

"Of course, but I doubt you'd care for the two I have in mind." She backed through the gate, holding the pistol steady. "This way, my lord."

Once outside the wall she whistled low, and Pegasus trotted up behind her. She reached around for his reins.

"You planned your escape well," the marquis declared. "But I warn you, should we ever meet again—"

"I look forward to it," Dreya taunted. "And since you had the decency to forewarn me, I'll do the same for you." She leveled the weapon at his chest but allowed her finger to relax against the trigger. "I'm a fair shot with a pistol and could easily drop you where you stand. Perhaps one day you'll appreciate the fact that I did not."

"Perhaps, Miss Richardson. Then again, one day you may very well wish you had."

Chapter One

Dragon's Breath

One of the Western Isles of Scotland

August 1781

Death enjoyed pursuing Lucian Sebastian Spence, Marquis of Canderlay. And now, thanks to Jonas Quinn and his crew of ruthless mercenaries, Death held the upper hand.

Thrown into the sea by an explosion in the belly of his ship, Lucian hadn't even a longboat beneath him. And worse, the blast had left him blind.

Surrounded by a void of pitch-black, the sea churned about him, and a cold, heavy numbness tugged at his arms and legs. His head pounded with the constant roar of the ocean. His thirst intensified with each passing second. His face and lips burned, branded from hours beneath the sun and wind.

Though aware that he drifted in and out of consciousness, he couldn't say how much time had passed or how long he'd floated in the chilled waters off the western coast of Scotland. It must now be night though, for he noted the absence of the sun's warmth upon his head. Earlier he'd heard the cries of seagulls. Land should be nearby, but he would need to rely on the current to carry him there.

A wave crashed over his head, and the cold saltwater burned his eyes. He struggled to hang on to the piece of driftwood that had so far prevented his descent to the bottom of the sea where no doubt the *Falcon* and her crew already waited.

Damn you, Quinn! You shouldn't have interfered.

The knot of tension lodged between his shoulders crawled up the back of his neck. Exhaustion reached down to his very soul. He couldn't endure much more of this dreadful existence. Perhaps he should surrender to the dark and blissful silence beneath the sea.

Do not give up, mon amour!

The plea echoing inside Lucian's head mimicked the sweet voice of his mother. A comforting thought. Except, his mother no longer lived, and he now stood at the same precarious precipice. His very survival might depend on how long he could hold on to his sanity.

He raised his hand to the gash at his temple. Still oozing. Would his blood attract sharks? The image of a water pitcher emerged from the darkness behind his eyes. How ironic. Surrounded by water, yet he desired water above everything else.

A series of choppy waves caught Lucian off-guard and pushed him under. He resurfaced and realized he'd lost his hold on the driftwood. Sickening panic squeezed his chest. He forced a deep breath, and a sharp pain assaulted his ribcage.

He would die alone. No honor. No tribute. No worthy praise for the King of England's loyal spy.

"Sebastian!"

A woman's voice. How did she know the name his father used?

"Sebastian, where are you?"

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Lucian tried to respond but choked on the words. Was this tender voice a product of extreme weariness, or had he stepped over the edge to insanity?

A powerful wave picked him up and slammed his body into something solid. It jolted his attention back to the present in the harshest manner possible. The jagged edge tore through his shirt and into the flesh at his shoulder. He cried out. Or thought he did. Seconds passed before he realized he'd collided with a rock. And where there were rocks....

He sucked in a shallow breath before slipping beneath the waves. Several feet down, his fingers touched the sandy bottom. Relief coursed through his tormented mind. He resurfaced and rolled onto his back, exhausted. Half an hour later, the current washed him ashore.

Lucian struggled out of the water and collapsed to his knees, his legs unable to support his weight. He lay on his stomach, and the spinning in his head eased to some extent. He welcomed the shifting sand beneath him, but the tattered clothing on his back provided little barrier against the wind coming off the sea.

He clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering. If he wished to survive the night, he must seek shelter away from the surf—a difficult challenge for a blind man with no idea of which direction to start.

Summoning the last of his strength, Lucian dug his fingers into the wet sand and crawled forward.

* * * *

“Sebastian!” Dreya Macgregor reined in her mount. “Where the devil is that dog?”

The moon peeked out from beneath a cloud. She scanned the beach and the waters beyond where surge after surge of white-capped waves rushed ashore.

“I know you are here, scoundrel.” Her thoughts strayed to another sea-loving rogue. “Be safe, Father, and come home soon.”

Since meeting Ethan Macgregor and discovering she was his daughter, she'd given up the name Richardson. She owned no claim to it, after all.

Dreya stifled the usual wave of humiliation. Even as the laird's by-blow, the villagers on this island accepted her, but she wanted much more. She longed for their respect.

Pegasus snorted, pulling her away from self-pity.

“Are you bored, love?”

The Arabian jerked against his reins, bobbing his head up and down and prancing in a sideways gait.

Dreya stroked his neck. “Behave, rogue. One mischievous beast is all I can handle this night.”

She rode farther down the beach where rocks littered the landscape. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the outline of a shaggy dog frolicking in the waves about fifty yards out.

“Ah ha. There you are.”

She whistled. The dog lifted his head. She whistled again, and he bounded through the water and across the sand toward her. Halfway there, he changed directions then disappeared into a low crevice. His frantic barking told her he

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wouldn't be returning any time soon.

Dreya dismounted. She looped the reins over the saddle and worked her way around the rocks. "What have you found this time, my shaggy beast? Another dangerous turtle?"

The dog continued to bark.

The soft light from the moon illuminated an uneven pathway, and she hurried up the embankment. At the top, she glanced into the shallow crevice where Sebastian stood guard over whatever had captured his attention.

And it wasn't a turtle.

Dreya sucked in a quick breath.

Face down in the sand lay the lifeless body of a man.

* * * *

Whispers came and went like the dawn. He couldn't determine day or night, for someone had wrapped a cloth about his head, obstructing his vision. At least the fog swirling inside his mind had dissipated somewhat, and he no longer drifted through a distorted compilation of sounds. But with awareness came constant pain in his ribcage, his left temple and shoulder, and most of all, his eyes. The latter burned hot enough to rival the fires of hell.

"It's been a week," whispered a female voice somewhere at the foot of his bed. "He should have awakened."

"Ah've done a' Ah kin. 'Tis up tae th' guid faither noo."

The last voice belonged to an older woman with a thick Scottish brogue. She must've treated his wounds. But why cover his eyes?

Fragments of an elusive memory skirted the edges of his mind, just out of reach. He remained still, hopeful the voices would provide a clue as to what had happened to him.

"Perhaps you've given him too much medication."

"Mair than likely Ah gie him tay wee."

Footsteps echoed on a bare floor.

"This room is too stuffy. Should we not raise a window?"

"If ye wish tae dae him mair harm than guid, lass, fur his fever comes an' goes at will."

"Yes, of course." She sighed. "It's well past midnight, Edwina. You must be exhausted."

"Aye, mah bones ur creaking a bit loud. Ye want Ah shuid ask one o' th' maids tae sit wi' him till morn?"

"No, I'll fetch someone before I go to bed. Good night, Edwina. And thank you."

"Guid nicht, child."

Footsteps shuffled away, and the next sound signaled the closing of a door. She came to him then, this woman and her gentle lilac scent. Her cool hand touched his cheek, and he forced his breathing to remain even.

"Who are you?" she inquired, her words floating to his ears in a soft whisper.

Something skittered across his mind. A vague impression of someone he'd met in a different time, different place. But the memory kept its distance until the

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feeling slithered away.

Damn this ridiculous blindfold!

But if he ripped it off....

"What happened, *monsieur*?"

Am I French?

"Are you a pirate?" she inquired, with a hint of amusement in her voice. "You certainly look the part."

What the devil did she mean by that remark? Before his brain could think up a proper response, he drifted off again.

* * * *

Dreya turned the lamp down low and pulled a chair next to the stranger's bed. Handsome and well over six feet tall, his breathing flowed in a steady rhythm. The night she found him, he'd mumbled a few words in French regarding his blindness, but he hadn't spoken since.

In order to break his fever and make it easier to bathe him, Edwina had stripped him down to his drawers. A sheet hid the lower portion of his body, but the powerful muscles in his chest and arms indicated familiarity with some form of physical labor. To prevent him from starving, Edwina ordered he be spoon-fed a thin broth several times a day.

Her attention shifted to his lips. They were no longer blistered and rough, for she'd saturated them twice a day with a thick balm. His half-beard and mustache hadn't grown out of hand yet, but each needed a good trim.

She studied the bandage covering the upper portion of his face. He'd remained unconscious the night her men carried him to the castle, so she hadn't caught even a glimpse of his eyes. Did they match the black hair that fell to his shoulders?

A moan escaped the man's throat.

Dreya jumped from the chair. "*Essayez de ne pas vous déplacer*. Try not to move." She sat on the edge of the bed and placed her hands on his shoulders. "*Avez-vous la douleur*? Are you in pain?"

"*Oui, mes yeux*."

His eyes!

"*J'obtiendrai la medecine*."

He tried to rise.

She pushed him back against the pillows. "Please, you must rest."

He reached for the bandage.

"No, *monsieur*. You must leave it be."

He shook his head, mumbling beneath his breath.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot understand you," Dreya said in French. "Speak slowly."

"*De l'eau*."

Water.

She should've realized he'd be thirsty.

Dreya lifted the water jug from the night table and filled a glass. She raised the man's head. After he quenched his thirst, she eased him back against the pillows.

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"Do you speak English, *monsieur*?"

No response.

She moved closer. "*Monsieur*?"

He'd fallen asleep once again.

* * * *

He awoke with a start. His mind had cleared, but he still resided in a black void with nothing but sound to keep him company. How long? He couldn't say. At least the sea no longer threatened him.

Footsteps moved about the room. He'd grown used to the servants performing their usual chores, but the faint scent of lilac meant only one thing. *She* had returned to stand watch over him.

He forced his breathing to return to normal. His thoughts remained on the same questions. She could provide answers. A plan of attack formed in his mind.

He moaned, pretending distress.

"I'm here, *monsieur*."

The moment the woman's breath touched his cheek, he pulled her across his body and onto the other side of the bed. A wicked, hot pain shot straight to his ribs, but he managed to straddle her and cover her mouth before pinning her arms behind her back.

"Stop struggling," he ordered in English.

After several moments, she obeyed.

"*Merçi, mademoiselle*."

The upright position, along with the increased pounding inside his head, shifted his sense of balance. A wave of nausea threatened to empty whatever contents swirled inside his stomach. He grew disoriented.

"Before I remove my hand from your mouth...." He sucked in several breaths to ease the dizziness. "You should remember it'll not be far from your throat. I'd advise you not to call for help." The dizziness abated somewhat, and he slid his hand from her mouth to the nuisance covering his eyes.

"You are wounded. Removing the cloth would not be wise."

"Perhaps not for you."

"For you," she retorted.

If the icy contempt in her voice was an indication of her character, it would be unwise to free this woman's hands. He would continue this game. But only for a short time.

"Who are you?" he inquired.

"I am Dreyä, the Macgregor's daughter, but you may address me as Mistress Macgregor."

"It is indeed a pleasure to meet you, Mistress Macgregor. Where am I?"

"An island off the coast of Scotland."

"I've reached that conclusion already." Unease tightened in his gut. "Am I your prisoner?"

What had prompted such a question?

"Not at the moment."

But that could change, her tone implied.

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"Does this island have a name?"

No response.

He shifted his weight, and his fingers brushed across her mouth. "Your lips are very soft, *ma cherie*. I wonder how they taste."

"You'd be smart to curb your curiosity, pirate."

"So...you believe me the scourge of the sea, eh? What led you to this conclusion?"

"Your lack of manners, for one thing. And of course the way you were dressed when I found you."

"Found me? What do you mean?"

"You washed ashore about a week ago."

An accident at sea? Perhaps he'd fallen overboard. He searched his memory but obtained no clue.

"Release me at once," she demanded.

"Not yet, *mon amour*. I'm not usually the talkative sort when there's a lady in my bed, but so far I've enjoyed our conversation."

"Well I've not enjoyed it one bit."

"No? Then I apologize. And if you do not cease that annoying habit of avoiding my questions, you'll discover I'm a very impatient man."

"I'd not press my good fortune, *monsieur*. You're an unwanted guest. If you do not release me, my father will make certain your next place of residence is the dungeon."

Annoyed, he pulled her hands from behind her back and pressed them down beside her head. He leaned forward, and the dizziness returned. For one brief second he feared he'd pass out, but this game of wills had gone on too long for him to back down now.

He inhaled a slow breath. "Strange, but I've suddenly discovered a fondness for lilac."

"Let go of me," she snapped, attempting to free her hands.

She wasn't a weakling by any means, but he wasn't as strong as he needed her to believe. Each time she fought against him, the stabbing pain in his ribs snatched his breath.

What I wouldn't give for a bottle of brandy!

"Get off me," she ordered, bucking beneath him.

"I must warn you, *cherie*, when you move as you're doing now, certain parts of your..." He cleared his throat before rewording the indecent thought. "Let's just say you have my full attention at the moment."

She stilled, but the faint brush of her breasts against his bare chest did nothing to discourage his pulsing manhood.

"Have you any children, *monsieur*?"

"A strange question, *mademoiselle*. Are you offering your services?"

"Certainly not," she retorted. "But I swear, if you do not release me, you'll lose any chance of a future heir."

He quickly repositioned himself between her legs.

"Bloody pirate, if I had a sword—"

"You'd run it straight through my wretched heart, would you not, *cherie*?"

She offered no verbal agreement, and her adamant refusal to answer his

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questions merely reinforced his determination to get them—before his strength failed.

"Pirates are rather fond of the night," he declared. "And they usually take what they want. I'm no different."

"If you dare touch me—"

"I accept your offer. And if this night represents my last among the living...." He pressed his manhood against her inner thigh. "I intend to fully enjoy it."

"Your indecent behavior surpasses your lack of attire, and your conduct appalls me."

"Is that so?"

"But perhaps...."

"Yes?"

"Perhaps my haughty manner pushed you too far."

"Indeed."

"I doubt you'd really strangle me, for I'm sure you're a reasonable gentleman."

"Pirates are not reasonable nor are they gentlemen."

"No, but most are particular regarding their women."

"Are they?"

"I meant...I doubt you'd get much pleasure from me."

He smiled. "I don't."

"I'm no beauty, *monsieur*."

"Ah, *cherie*, beauty means little to a man sporting a blindfold." He gripped both her wrists in one hand, and the other inched upward until his fingers halted just below one of her breasts. "It would seem you've a nice enough form though. Nice enough to please any man, I'd wager."

She tried to rise.

His weight kept her pinned to the mattress. "A feisty wench is such a pleasure to bed." He trapped her hands to his bare chest, and warmth spread across his skin. "I'd wager a sack full of gold coins you'd not disappoint me."

"I'll not be your doxy, pirate. Find some simple-minded female who enjoys your company."

"Ah, but you're the woman so conveniently within my reach."

"Only because you've kept me here against my will."

He waited a full ten seconds. "Do not worry, *mademoiselle*. Your virtue is quite safe with me. Besides, my women scream with pleasure not fright."

"An exaggerated opinion, no doubt."

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Shall we call a truce, *cherie*? If you'll answer a few questions, I'll release you."

She hesitated. "Very well, *monsieur*. I agree to your terms."

"*Merci*. Now then...where am I?"

"Dragon's Breath Castle."

An odd name. Yet vaguely familiar.

"What happened to your ship? Were you clumsy and fell overboard?" Acute sarcasm oozed from her tone. "Or perhaps you were tossed into the sea as punishment for some crime."

He would've retaliated against the insult, but she asked questions he couldn't answer.

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"Surely you haven't forgotten." In the space of a quick breath, her tone changed from hostile arrogance to complete astonishment. "Have you?"

He could offer no intelligent response.

"But....how can you not recall how you lost your sight?"

"My sight?"

He released the woman and fumbled with the cloth over his eyes. Her fingers brushed his aside. A few moments later, a rush of cool air slithered across his brow and the bridge of his nose. At first, he thought his eyes were still closed. Until the moment it dawned upon him that they were wide open.

Devil take it! I am blind!

He'd assumed his wounds were to his face or his head. Not his eyes. He probed his thoughts for a memory, any memory, which might offer an explanation. There were none.

"My God," she said, a wealth of sympathy accompanying her tone of voice now. "You have no idea what happened."

"Ridiculous," he snapped. "Obviously I experienced some sort of accident at sea." He raked his fingers through his hair and forced his mind to concentrate. "I speak both French and English as well as German. Perhaps I am a diplomat."

Her silence indicated she disagreed.

Why can I not remember?

He drew a shaky breath, the enormity of the situation all too clear. No matter how hard he tried to retrieve them, his memories remained locked behind an impenetrable darkness, and he'd misplaced the only key. Whatever caused his blindness cost him much more than his sight. His past ceased to exist as well. He recalled nothing.

Not even his name.

Chapter Two

Sculpted from black rock and built in a catty-cornered fashion atop the highest crag, Dragon's Breath Castle stood an impenetrable fortress and a flawless monument to the architect who designed it. The guard posted in the high tower could view the entire island at a glance.

Dreya stood in front of the drawing room windows, basking in the morning sun's warmth.

"Finney wis a nicht upset wi' ye this morn', mistress," Fulke Mortimer, the captain of the guards, said behind her. "He didnae wish tae put tae sea till noon."

"Captain Finnegan will do as he's told or step down as the *Dragonfly's* captain."

"Auld goat," Edwina muttered. "'Tis years bygone that time."

Dreya agreed. She didn't much care for Horace Finnegan or his lofty, one-sided opinion of women either.

"Finney's rough around th' edges, Ah'll gie ye that," Fulke defended. "But he's jist as concerned aboot th' Macgregor as th' rest o' us."

Edwina grunted. "'Tis th' laird's pursuit o' a dangerous tradition he shuid fret aboot."

Dreya turned from the window. "What tradition?"

Fulke shook his head at the old healer.

She paid no mind to his warning. "Smuggling gunpowder tae Captain Derek."

"But that's treason. Edwina, how could you allow him to commit such a foolish crime?"

"Dae ye think th' mon listens tae me, child?"

Dreya glared at Fulke. "Why wasn't I told?"

"He ne'er wanted ye tae fret. If Edwina hud held her tongue—"

"Do not blame Edwina. This is Father's doing. Good heavens, this could explain why the *Dragon Master* is almost a month overdue."

"Noo dinnae ye git ahead o' yersel', lass. Ye've leed oan this island five years. How often haes th' laird sailed aff fur a month or mair?"

"Too many times."

And now she knew why.

Dreya glanced in the direction of the village harbor. Wisps of smoke rose above several waterfront establishments. Soon the island's few peddlers would gather to hawk their wares. To the south, a couple strolled through the meadow on their way to the castle—Fulke's oldest daughter, Sarah, and her constant companion, Colin Seaton.

"Ah cannae reckon how a mon cuid forgit his ain name," Fulke remarked.

"Most likely frae th' wound at his temple," Edwina stated. "'Tis a wee miracle he isnae as daft as yer wife's sister."

Dreya strolled to the fireplace where Fulke warmed his hands. His cropped brown hair stood on end. She suspected he'd walked the windy parapet all night.

"Thir's something aboot that Frenchie Ah dinnae care fur.

"Thare isnae much that escapes yer nose y gob." Edwina quipped.

"Ye dinnae agree? Wha is he then? Dae ye possess th' gift or nae?"

"Ah see whit Ah'm meant tae see." The old woman tucked a strand of gray hair

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beneath her white cap. "Nothin' else."

A look of frustration flashed across Fulke's face. "Och, it matters nae tae me wha he is. Ah'd wager mah best cow he's a micht concerned noo that he's found his-sel oan Scots soil."

"Whoever he is or whatever he's done," Dreyra said, "we'll receive no answers until his memory returns."

"Ye expect he'd come richt oot an' tell us if that shuid happen?" Fulke inquired. "Na, mistress. He's na reason tae trust us jist as we cannae trust him. Which gives me cause tae think he's givin us a bluidy guid performance."

"Yer lips ur blawin' in th' wind, Fulke. Th' mon is blind. He's nae a threat."

"How kin ye be sure 'tis nae a trick?"

"His eyes dinnae react tae licht nor dark," Edwina replied.

Fulke scratched his head. "Pirates," he growled beneath his breath. "'Tis a' that e'er washes ashore oan this island. Most o' 'em ur dead by th' time thay git here, but this mon hud tae be a breathin'."

"Edwina, what do you suppose caused his blindness?"

"A cannae say fur certain, lass, but whin ah dressed his wounds that first nicht, ah caught a whiff o' gunpowder oan his claes."

Fulke spat into the fire. "Ah suspect his ship swapped cannon fire wi' anither. Likely the English, th' redcoat bastards. Why Frenchie's ship wid be sailing aboot th' western coast o' Scootlund, I dinnae ken. God's blood, haes he nae heard th' cannons of war?" He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Mibbie th' Macgregor struck a bargain wi' th' mon's captain."

"Having just learned of Father's penchant for smuggling, it's entirely possible. I pray he and his crew have not become victims of a French vessel looking to score a Scottish bounty."

Fulke rubbed his chin. "A few weeks in th' dungeon wi' ainlie breid an' water in his belly an' that Frenchie will sing lik' a bonny doo."

"Ah wid nae advise it," Edwina warned.

He grunted indifference.

"Our uninvited guest may or may not have the answers we seek," Dreyra said. "But we can ill afford to mistreat him."

"Mistress, if th' mon Edwina's bin coddlin' is th' reason th' Macgregor haes nae returned—"

"Let th' matter be, Fulke," the healer admonished.

"Ah merely spoke mah mind, woman."

"Aye, but yer mind strolls doon th' wrong path, an' Ah cannae allow ye tae frighten th' lass."

Fulke aimed an apologetic grimace toward Dreyra and without another word, he turned and departed the room.

"He kin suppose a' he likes," Edwina grumbled. "Wee guid it'll dae him. Oor guest needs time tae heal his mind an' body."

Dreyra studied the silver-handled broadsword mounted above the fireplace. The last Macgregor to brandish the weapon died in battle over two hundred years ago. His cause a worthy one...to rid the island of unsavory pirates. She hoped she hadn't done her ancestor a grave injustice.

"Do you suppose it's just a coincidence our Frenchman arrived the very week

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the *Dragon Master* is due home?"

"Mair than likely Fate hud a haun in it."

Dreya turned away. Fate was often unkind, and she'd always placed her faith in something a bit more solid. Her instincts. And those instincts warned the man resting upstairs could not be trusted.

* * * *

The long nines fired in rapid succession. Brilliant flashes illuminated the darkness as two ships battled for dominance. Thunderous booms from their cannons resounded again and again, whistling through the night and shaking the deck beneath his feet.

He shouted a frenzy of orders to his crew. Suddenly every action, every command came about in slow motion. Several of his men fell at the point of a long barreled pistol. Others met their fate beneath the blade of a cutlass. The foul stench of death permeated the air, sickening his gut.

In a flash, he stood in a different place in the battle and chased a three-fingered man up the main mast. Clouds of smoke billowed upward 'til it engulfed him. He choked on the smell of scorched flesh, and his lungs burned with every breath. Just as he feared he would black out, a fierce explosion rocked the ship below, and the force of the blast hurled him into the sea.

And complete blackness.

He awoke in a panic, fighting the covers and gasping for breath. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck. He forced the beat of his heart to return to normal and lay back against the pillows.

Every night he prayed for a clue to his identity, yet each time he awoke, the same haunting nightmare tormented his soul. The last few days his remaining senses kept him from losing his sanity. Asleep, they did nothing but add to his terror.

His mind's eye conjured up the image of a swift sloop flying a bird of prey alongside her French colors.

My ship?

He ran his hands through his hair, dampness clinging to his fingers. France had sided with the colonies against England, but he couldn't say which country he'd aligned himself with. Or more importantly, what recent battle he'd lost. His speech reflected a French accent, yet his thoughts remained English. He could offer no explanation for this.

Someone knocked on his bedroom door.

"Enter."

The door creaked.

"Ah've brought ye somethin', lad," the healer said, her footsteps shuffling across the room. "Figured ye micht wish tae shift aboot afore long, sae Ah searched thro' a trunk in th' attic an' found ye some breeks an' several shirts."

"*Merci*, madam. I appreciate your forethought."

"How ur yer ribs this morn?"

"I can breathe a little easier now."

Her hands worked diligently until the last of the cloth fell, and that same

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welcome breeze danced across his face. He squinted and blinked several times.

No light. No shadow. Not one bloody object could he distinguish.

The healer gripped his chin before turning his head to the side. "This wound tae yer temple is deep, but it'll heal wi' time. Whit about yer eyes?"

She asked this question each time she changed his bandage.

"The darkness remains the same," he replied.

"Whit o' th' burning?"

"It's lessened somewhat."

"'Tis guid then." She sighed. "Ah'm na doctor o' th' eyes. Ye shuid seek an expert thare. . Still, 'tis mah opinion yer sight will return."

"And my memory?"

"That as weel, lad, if ye dinnae dwell oan it. Noo...." She tilted his head back. "Keep still."

The cold liquid flooded his eyes, and it took every ounce of control not to flinch. The healer replaced the cloth about his eyes just before someone else knocked upon his bedroom door.

"Come," the healer called.

"Edwina, when you're finished with this pirate, I'd like a word with you."

The scent of lilac teased his nostrils. "Ah, *Mademoiselle* Macgregor. How nice to hear your voice again."

She ignored his greeting.

Did she avoid him because he'd tossed her across his bed that first night?

He smiled.

"Oor guest appears tae be healin' nicely," Edwina stated.

"Yes, but might we avoid further trouble if we shoot him now?"

Sarcastic with a touch of spoiled arrogance. Exactly the sort of attitude he expected from her.

"But I suppose that might be considered uncivilized," she added with false sincerity.

Judging from their first encounter, this woman knew a great deal more than he regarding rude behavior, but he'd allow her the upper hand for the moment.

"Yer in need o' a shave, lad."

"And a bath," Mistress Macgregor remarked in a clipped tone.

"The bath I can manage, but I'm not sure my nerves are up to the challenge of holding a straight razor against my throat."

Edwina chuckled. "Whin th' Macgregor consumes a wee bit much o' th' whiskey, he's nae timid aboot askin' his daughter tae hulp wi' his groomin'." She hesitated. "Mibbie she'll dae th' same fur ye."

"I'd rather one of the maids attend this particular task," the mistress countered.

"I'd prefer you."

"I'll not object to ordering your bath, *monsieur*. As for the shave, someone else can have the pleasure. I've a dozen other chores this morning."

He couldn't resist goading her further. "What sin can a blind man commit with the point of a blade to his throat?"

"Why must you twist every conversation into a bloody challenge?"

A brief silence settled about the room.

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Edwina coughed. "Thir's a washbasin filled wi' water oan th' bureau. Ah'll lea ye tae settle yer differences, fur Ah've a sick babe tae attend."

"Thank you, Madam Edwina."

"Ye'r welcome, lad."

Dreya Macgregor mumbled a curse. "Wipe that smirk from your mouth, *monsieur*."

"You're no fun at all, *mademoiselle*."

He enjoyed tormenting this haughty woman.

Her footsteps headed across the room. A bureau door opened then slammed shut.

"You're a great deal of trouble, pirate."

"I wish I could recall my name. Your excessive use of the word 'pirate' grows rather old."

"We've nothing else to call you."

"Use your imagination."

"Very well." Her weight settled on the bed beside him. "How about...Lucifer?"

"Too wicked for an honest man."

She gripped his chin, her fingers soft. "You have a grand opinion of yourself, *monsieur*."

He covered her hand with his. "Shave this clean," he instructed, sliding her fingers from the bottom of his ear down the line of his jaw. "But leave the mustache and chin."

She did not move. Nor did she respond.

"Is something wrong?" he inquired.

"No." She slipped her fingers from his grasp. "I'm just trying to decide the best way to go about this."

"Take all the time you need. Is that chamomile I smell?"

"Yes." She lathered his face. "It's my father's favorite."

He allowed her to finish. "You've avoided me, *cherie*. Why?"

"Given our first meeting, does this surprise you?"

"Not at all."

She tilted his head back, put the razor to his throat, and scraped upward.

"However," he teased, "I'm willing to accept an apology for your rude behavior that night."

"If you receive an apology, *monsieur*, I can assure you it will not be from me."

"Ah, how I've missed your pointed barbs."

"Really? I've not missed your insults at all."

"It must be difficult for you without the Macgregor."

"What do you mean?"

"I overheard your servants. They're worried because his ship is weeks overdue."

"My father is quite capable of taking care of himself. I'm certain he and his crew will return soon. Now close your mouth and keep still."

"If he doesn't return, what will you do, Dreya?"

"In this castle, I am addressed as Mistress Macgregor."

"Dreya," he repeated. "Now how does a Scottish lass come by such a fine English name?"

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"I wouldn't be so inquisitive if I were you, *monsieur*. It's a dangerous habit."

He shrugged. "I merely attempted to engage in polite conversation. And now that we are politely conversing, may I inquire about your lack of a Scottish accent?"

"No, you may not."

"My apologies. I meant no offense."

"Shall we change the subject?" She ran the blade around the edge of his chin. "Or better still, you could remain silent."

"No enjoyment in that."

"Perhaps not for you."

He steered the subject back to her. "I suppose finding a suitable husband on this island might prove a rather difficult task."

"I had no idea you were in the market."

"But this probably doesn't trouble you in the least," he stated, ignoring her sarcastic remark. "As such matters are usually left to the laird."

"I am twenty and three, and while I love my father and respect his opinion above all others," she pulled the razor against the last remaining stubble on his neck, "I hardly need his approval involving personal matters."

"*Oui*, I'm sure he has his hands full with you. Still, a woman with such fire must attract plenty of eager suitors."

"As you so cleverly pointed out, *monsieur*, this is an island and not a very opportunistic setting to engage in the popular sport of husband hunting."

"But pirates are aplenty here." He reached out, and his fingers brushed her cheek. "Against my better judgment, *mademoiselle*, and without my approval...." His thumb traced her lower lip. "You've captured my interest with amazing speed."

"You're quite good, *monsieur*." She inched out of his reach. "It's a shame your charm is wasted on me."

"Admit it. You and I suit one another well."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but my interest in you is strictly of a curious nature, and that curiosity has diminished considerably these past few days."

"Are you certain, *cherie*?"

She placed the sharp edge of the blade to his throat. "Quite. In fact, ever since the night you assaulted me, I've experienced nothing but strong dislike for you, pirate."

"What say you call me something else besides pirate, eh?"

"You didn't care for Lucifer, but let me think...." She removed the blade from his throat, and the razor clanked as it settled into the washbasin. "What's the French word for arrogant?"

"*Mon Dieu*, you're an infuriating woman and most fortunate I've not regained my full strength. Otherwise I'd throw you across my knee and give you what you deserve."

"Brave words from a man who cannot perform his own grooming."

He gripped her around the waist and tossed her across the bed. She landed on her backside, and he straddled her, pinning her arms at her sides.

"Alas, here we are again, *mon amour*."

"Take your hands off me."

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“Are you always so demanding?”

“Would you *please* get off me?”

“That’s better. There may be a flaw in your manners, sweet Dreya, but you were right about one thing. It could take several weeks before I can groom myself properly. In the meantime, care to learn what sort of tasks I can perform without the use of my vision?”

Chapter Three

"It's not the middle of the night this time," Dreya warned, anger racing through her blood. "All I need do is scream."

"Then do so, *mademoiselle*. Scream as loud as you like but understand this. For all the trouble you've caused me—"

"I've caused you? You're either an idiot or the fever has brought about hallucinations."

"If your sharp tongue continues to stab my character in the back, I warn you, I'll demand satisfaction."

"Then choose your weapon, sir, for I'm a formidable opponent with both pistol and sword."

"I don't doubt your marksmanship, but you've mistaken my form of retribution. If I were truly a pirate, *cherie*, do you honestly believe I'd ask for your favors?"

Good point, but Dreya wouldn't give him the satisfaction of admitting the logic of such reasoning.

"Dreya," he whispered.

She pushed against him, but his painful grip on her forearms held firm.

"What I wouldn't give to look into your eyes as I taste your lips."

"I did not grant you permission to use my given name and certainly not to take unwanted liberties."

"*Oui*, but I'm not in the habit of taking orders from a woman with less manners than a drunken seaman."

"You dare question my manners? You may not recall, but pirates rank at the bottom of the etiquette list."

"Let's compromise, shall we? You stop addressing me as pirate, and I'll consider treating you like a lady."

"Why should I trust you?"

"*Mon Dieu*, such a stubborn woman." He shifted both her wrists into one hand before he seized her chin with the other. "But I don't mind at the moment. In fact, I'm retracting my offer of a compromise." He planted a firm kiss upon her mouth.

Dreya sank her teeth into his lower lip.

"You little vixen—"

"Do that again and I'll slit your throat while you sleep."

"No, *mon amour*, I'll not sleep with you in my bed." He offered a devilish grin. "Nor will you."

She jabbed her knee into his sensitive area.

He groaned, and rolled off her.

Realizing her advantage, Dreya scrambled from the bed.

He snatched the hem of her gown.

She stumbled and fell.

"Are you injured, *mademoiselle*?"

Bloody insolent fool!

He wrapped the bed sheet around the lower portion of his body and swung his feet to the floor. "Dreya, are you all right?"

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She refused to acknowledge his plea.

"Bloody hell, woman, answer me."

"Let me be."

"Are you injured?"

"No." She massaged the ache in her ankle. "I'm just catching my breath."

"I'm sorry I caused you to stumble. It was unintentional." He slipped from the bed to the floor. "But jabbing your knee into my...well, that was a deliberate act on your part and not very amusing."

"You gave me no choice."

"If you think back to where this argument began, you might recall you were the one who placed a razor to my throat."

"And I did so at your insistence."

"*Oui*, I suppose you did." He reached out, and his hand brushed against her slipper. His fingers inched forward until they touched her ankle.

Warmth radiated up her leg and into her stomach.

"Tell me where it hurts, *cherie*."

She yanked her foot from his grasp. "Are you a doctor, *monsieur*?"

"Probably not."

"Well then, if I need a medical opinion from a boorish, uncouth pirate, I'll be sure to ask you."

"I'm boorish and uncouth? You must've landed on your head." He leaned back against the bed. "I may not recall my name or my profession, *mademoiselle*, but I'm certain I'm no pirate. Nor do I wish to be."

"You're definitely more educated."

"With all the other questions cluttering my mind, how or why I've received a gentleman's education seems unimportant."

Not to Drea. She studied his mouth. How did a crooked grin have the power to snatch her breath away one moment and cause anger the next? "Have you remembered anything useful?"

He shook his head.

Her attention rested on his bare chest before it traveled down to the sheet wrapped around his torso. Heat crept up her neck and into her cheeks.

Thank heavens the man is blind!

Good lord, what a horrible thought!

"What color are your eyes?"

The question caught her off-guard. "Why?"

"Come, *cherie*," he coaxed. "I'm merely painting a mental portrait of my kind benefactor."

Would this mental portrait someday match a wanted poster? What would he say if she told him the King of England placed a bounty of one thousand pounds upon her head? He would probably laugh and then offer her some sort of misguided praise.

She sighed. "Blue."

"As in a clear sky?"

"Darker."

"Ah, stormy, no doubt. And your hair?"

"My father calls the color chestnut."

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"That's the exact description your servants gave me." He slung one arm over his knee. "I'm pleased you did not lie."

"Why did you question the servants regarding my appearance?"

"Just curious."

"Since your vision is impaired, perhaps you'd like a description of yourself."

"From you? No."

Dreya almost laughed out loud.

"Your people are most loyal," he said. "I'd wager they're brave as well. For what other reason would they follow orders from a lass spewing curses foul enough to rival a...?"

"Pirate?"

He acknowledged her insult with a single nod. "Well done, love. I suppose I deserved that."

"You most certainly...." She stopped short. "*Monsieur*, you've misplaced your French accent."

"Have I?" He shrugged. "Perhaps it's lurking about the castle, hoping to catch a glimpse of your Scottish one."

Their playful banter had taken a dangerous turn.

She stood. "I'd better order your bath before it slips my mind. Shall I assist you to bed?"

"A tempting offer, but I can manage on my own."

"Very well then." She headed for the door.

"I understand your mistrust, *cherie*."

Dreya turned.

"The French and English are at war over the colonies. A more reasonable course of action, on your part, would be to lock me away and send a message to the British Navy."

She smiled. "What causes you to believe I haven't?"

* * * *

Later that evening, Dreya set a candle upon the night table and slipped into bed. Her head sank into the pillow, and the tension eased from her neck and shoulders. She hadn't slept a full night in over a month.

She rolled onto her side and stared at the candle's flickering flame. To lose one's sight would be frightening, to say the least, but her strange guest had adjusted well.

Why must my thoughts drift back to that rogue?

She despised his inflated opinion of himself. Each time she found herself alone with him, he tossed her about like a trollop.

A scratching noise came from outside her door. She propped up on one elbow. No doubt Sebastian wished to head down to the beach for a swim. Perhaps a late night stroll would do her good as well.

Dreya threw back the covers and hurried to the door. She unlatched it, and the dog pushed his way into the room. But instead of his usual routine of attacking her until she gave in and dressed, he jumped into the middle of the bed and collapsed.

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"What's this? Aren't you well, love?"

His somber gaze followed her back to the bed. She slipped beneath the covers, and he crawled toward her.

"You've received a recent bath, scoundrel. Remind me to thank the stable lad."

His tail thumped against the bedcovers.

"What sort of mischief did you get into?"

He rolled over, playing the docile servant.

"Oh, I see. You're innocent." Dreya ran her hand along the dog's belly. "What do you think of our Frenchman?"

Sebastian yawned.

"I agree." She blew out the candle and hugged the dog close.

* * * *

Dreya shook off the fog of sleep and jerked upright. Sebastian's wild barking mixed with the clanging noise from the bell tower echoed inside her head.

"The bell tower!"

A ship neared the Dragon's mouth.

She slid from the warmth of her bed and raced across the room to the window overlooking the sea. It couldn't be much past the hour of midnight, for the moon shone high above the water, yet she glimpsed no outline of a ship.

Dreya retraced her steps and lit a candle. Sebastian sniffed the floor beside the fireplace. She dressed and hurried over to him. She pushed against one of the stones, and the secret panel slid back. The dog rushed into darkness.

She followed him inside the narrow passageway. Her candle flickered against the cool draft. After locating the lantern and removing it from its rusty hook, she lit the wick and blew out the candle. Managing the treacherous stone stairway took some time, and as she descended, the clang from the tower grew louder. At last the entrance to the grotto came into view.

Dreya stepped out into the night breeze. The bell tower stood about forty feet above her, and the deafening noise jarred her entire body. She swung the lantern back and forth, and the ringing ceased, replaced by a fading echo. Finally, the specter of a tall ship sailed into the narrow inlet. Too large for either of the dragon ships or her cousin Derek's frigate.

Sebastian barked in anticipation.

"I'm sorry, scoundrel. It's not the Macgregor."

Overhead, activity continued, and Fulke shouted orders to his men. "Fool captain," he snapped. "If his ship's riding low, she'll break apart oan th' rocks."

"Who is she?"

He shook his head.

Dreya scanned the woods and the area surrounding the village. Strung out over a quarter mile, numerous lanterns dotted the landscape. Some of the villagers headed for the castle. Others ran toward the dock.

"Fulke, are the cannons ready?"

"Aye."

"Then fire a warning over the ship's bow."

He signaled to the man positioned behind the center dragon cannon some

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twenty feet above them.

Dreya set the lantern aside. She knelt beside the dog and covered his ears. Within seconds a loud boom thundered into the night, and the grotto vibrated with the force of its discharge.

A faint light flickered from the ship's crow's nest and continued in rapid succession.

"She's th' bluidy *Predator*," Fulke growled. "Th' captain's askin' tae speak wi' th' Macgregor."

She stared at the approaching ship. Many of the older villagers told farfetched tales of Jonas Quinn. Her father swore the crusty old mercenary had roamed the sea for decades and that even the British fleet feared to tangle with him.

"Mistress?"

Dreya nodded. "Give them permission to proceed, but make sure they understand they are not to sail past this castle."

"It'll be as clear as a sunny day." After relaying the message to his men, Fulke set his hand on her shoulder. "Go, lass. This be na place fur a woman."

"I'll not cower in my room. Besides, I wish to hear what Quinn has to say." She pointed toward the weapon slung across his shoulder. "May I borrow your rifle?"

He raised a brow but nevertheless handed it over. "Tak' care noo. 'Tis set tae fire."

"Perfect."

Half an hour passed with excruciating slowness. Tension knotted her neck and shoulders. Her stomach churned. Finally, with sails lowered, the ship dropped anchor close to the castle's foundation. Its main deck stood about fifty yards below the grotto.

Dreya steeled her nerves. She'd better sound convincing. With rifle in hand, she stepped onto the head of the nearest dragon-shaped edifice. "Ah am th' Macgregor's daughter! State yer business wi' this castle!"

Several crewmen stood about with bandaged arms. Others nursed wounds to the head. Then, a giant of a man limped from the shadows, his left arm resting in a sling.

"Jonas Quinn, captain and privateer for the English crown." He halted beneath the ship's main torch. "It's a pleasure to meet you, lass, but I asked to speak with the Macgregor."

Dreya kept her tone casual. "That wid be impossible fur mah faither enjoys celebratin', an' at th' moment he's a bit soused tae mak' much use o' polite conversation." Her grip on the rifle tightened. "Tak' mah word fur it, captain. Ye wid be ill advised tae disturb th' sleep o' a drunken Scotsmon."

"I appreciate your concern, but my ship requires repairs as well as supplies." He hobbled toward the stern. "Half my crew needs medical attention."

"Huv ye a ship's doctor?"

"Aye, but he's dead."

"Ah'm sorry fur yer loss, but we cannae hulp ye."

"You refuse to treat my wounded?"

Dreya sighed. "This island haes na doctor. Only an auld healer, an' Ah'll nae endanger her life fur th' sake o' a few pirates. If ye must, send th' worst o' yer wounded ashore. We'll dae whit we kin fur 'em."

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"Insufficient!"

"Then Ah suggest ye return tae' th' mainland."

Quinn stroked his beard. "In case you haven't noticed, this ship flies under the English banner. If you refuse to provide us with necessary aid, you're interfering in the king's business."

"Ah'm certain England's monarch will ken if Ah question th' legitimacy o' yer banner."

He fumbled inside the pocket of his coat and withdrew a piece of paper. "I have here a letter of marque allowing me to do the king's bidding."

"Ah may be a mere woman, captain, but Ah'm hardly a fool. Yer letter cuid easily be forged."

"Such a clever wench." Quinn's gruff voice carried above the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks below. "What I spoke was the truth, but my ship and crew will survive until we reach Glasgow. There's another matter I'm more concerned with."

"Oh?"

"My first mate."

"Whit's he done?"

"Got himself lost at sea. Several weeks ago we engaged a French ship about a half day's sail from here. My men had just boarded her when a blast from the hold knocked them overboard."

Dreya's thoughts wandered to the man she'd rescued.

"We hauled aboard any scalawag still breathing and spent hours searching the floaters, but my first mate wasn't among the dead. Nor was the *Falcon's* captain. Since this island is near, I hoped my first mate swam ashore."

"Ye'r jist noo searchin' fur him?"

"As I said before, my ship was damaged. After the battle, we drifted several days while working on repairs. We spent the last month limping back."

"Why head fur an unfriendly island instead o' th' mainland?"

"If not for the questionable status of my first mate, I would've."

Dreya didn't believe him. "Yer crewmon is nae 'ere."

"Then he's dead, I suppose. But in regards to the *Falcon's* captain, the British navy has placed a generous bounty on Lucian Adams' privateering head. Whether he's still breathing or long since maggot food, I aim to collect that bounty."

"If any pirates wash ashore, mibbie mah faither will ask one o' th' dragon ships tae contact ye. As fur th' French privateer, kin ye provide a description o' him?"

Quinn cocked his head to one side. "Adams isn't much to look at, but you'll recognize him right away by the long scar down his right cheek. If you've a mind to look further, you'll find a skull and crossbones branded in the middle of his chest."

Her guest had no such mark, but he could be a member of Captain Adams' crew. Dreya frowned. Or Quinn's.

"Yer first mate?" she prompted.

"I suspect most women find Pierre handsome enough but be warned, lass. When it comes to chasing skirts, he's as subtle as a brothel whore needing coin."

Uneasiness settled around Dreya, but she controlled her emotions along with

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her tongue. "As Ah said earlier, Captain Quinn, we kin dae nothin' fur ye ur yer men. Ah suggest ye depart this inlet afore yer ship becomes a permanent fixture."

He gripped the rail with his uninjured hand. "I'll leave when the Macgregor bids me."

Dreya lifted the rifle and took aim. Under the full moon, Quinn stood an easy target. She pulled the trigger, and thin trails of smoke escaped from the end of the long barrel. In the same space of breath, Quinn's hat flew backward across the deck, and his crew scurried for cover. He did not.

"Well, men, we've a skilled marksman before us," he said, his voice resounding with impatience rather than alarm. "Perhaps this lass is unaware that I could easily dislodge her from her dragon throne."

Armed guards crowded the wall above the grotto, their rifles ready and aimed. A reassuring sound.

"That wid be a mistake, pirate," Fulke warned. "Fur ye'll ne'er see her hit th' water."

An odd stillness settled about the inlet. Quinn's head tilted upward, his gaze surveying the intimidating row of cannons. Finally, his attention returned to Dreya, and a chill slid down her spine and into the bottom of her stomach.

"Seems I've misjudged you, Mistress Macgregor. You can be certain I'll not do so again."

Dreya forced her breathing to return to normal. What would her father say to end this?

"Dinnae enter th' dragon's mouth again wi'oot oor permission, Captain Quinn, ur whit's left o' yer carcass whin th' vultures ur through wi' it will be flown atop this castle as its banner. Noo, Ah'll ask ye once mair tae lea an' be quick about it!"

He remained where he stood, his silence a direct challenge to her authority. She sensed his mounting hatred. How much bravado is too much? Had she placed her clan in unnecessary danger?

Jonas Quinn, notorious mercenary and privateer, shouted a command to his crew, and they scattered like rats fleeing an enormous snake. The latter description fit Quinn perfectly. With one last glare at Dreya, the snake offered an elaborate bow before slithering back into the shadows of his ship.

Chapter Four

He'd almost drifted back to sleep, but the creak of a door snatched his full attention. "Who's there?"

No response.

He pushed up on one elbow, careful not to use the sore muscles surrounding his ribs. "I can hear you breathing."

In response, the door slammed shut so hard the glass rattled in the window across the room.

"Then perhaps you heard the warning from the tower as well," Mistress Macgregor remarked in a menacing tone.

"I'm blind, *mademoiselle*, not deaf. My ears are still ringing from the noise. Has the Macgregor returned?"

"No."

"But something has disturbed you, has it not?"

Her footsteps drew closer along with the faint odor of candle wax.

"You're very perceptive, *monsieur*."

"Perception increases when one is blind, *cherie*." He slid back against the pillows. "Why the warning from the tower?"

"Does the vessel *Predator* mean anything to you?"

"No, I don't recognize the name."

"She belongs to Jonas Quinn, a bloody pirate turned mercenary. Since his ship now flies the English banner, he calls himself a privateer, and he wasted little time informing me of his letter of marque from King George."

"A letter of marque...a license to plunder and raid."

"I agree, and I'm sure Quinn thinks to earn a tidy profit from this war. Though why England would employ such a criminal is beyond me."

"There is little conscience when it comes to war. What did Quinn want?"

"He claimed his ship was damaged and that his men needed medical attention. He sought permission to dock at the village harbor."

"You refused?"

"I certainly did. Why would he sail to Dragon's Breath? The Scottish coast lies no more than a day away."

"Did you ask him?"

"Why waste my breath? He would probably offer a lie."

"A clever deduction, but why are you angry with me?"

"I'm getting to that," she retorted. "After I denied Quinn entrance into the harbor, he finally admitted he's searching for his first mate. Seems the poor devil became lost several weeks ago after battling a French privateer whose ship sank due to some sort of explosion."

His gut tightened, and an odd sensation crawled up his spine.

"Quinn hoped, or so he wanted me to believe, that his man had washed ashore at Dragon's Breath. I assured him he was mistaken."

"Good for you."

"Not exactly. You see, after I'd mentally vouched for your questionable character, Captain Quinn provided me with a description of his first mate." Her hesitation should have been a warning. "One might say it fit you like a well-worn

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glove.”

“Confirming what you believed all along. Well, you must be very pleased with yourself, *mademoiselle*.”

“What am I supposed to think, *monsieur*? You still cannot remember your name.”

He sorted through the details of her story and came up with a question of his own. “If you were so convinced of my identity, why not hand me over to Quinn?”

“I almost did. If I had, he might have had the decency to tell me who you are before he hung you.”

He ran his hands through his hair. “The other ship...the one that sank—”

“She sailed under the name *Falcon*.”

Bird of prey.

“Do you know who captained her?” he inquired.

“According to Quinn, his name is...or was...Lucian Adams, and he provided a description of this Frenchman. Seems there’s a scar down his right cheek and a skull and crossbones branded upon his chest.”

He hesitated. “Have I—”

“No, but getting back to Quinn’s first mate, I was told he’s a bit of a skirt chaser.”

“Ah, so you’ve established my identity based upon your limited perception of my character? So tell me, *mademoiselle*, have I lived up to your haughty expectations?”

“You flatter yourself, pirate.”

Put her across my knee or toss her onto her back and....

And what? In his condition, any type of physical activity would be most uncomfortable.

“A battle at sea a short distance from this island,” she added. “Two men missing. One description matches you.” She sighed. “What conclusions would you have drawn, *monsieur*?”

Good point. He reached around to rearrange his pillows, and pain sliced through his ribs, snatching his breath.

“Here, let me help you,” she snapped. “If you re-injure yourself, Edwina will place the blame on me, and I’ll never hear the end of it.”

Surrounded by the faint scent of lilac, he lay motionless while she repositioned the pillows behind his shoulders. It would be so easy to pull her down beside him. Easy to taste her lips and allow his hands to caress....

Bloody hell and damnation! What the devil is wrong with me? Am I in such need of a woman’s touch that I’d risk my life?

“Is something wrong?” she inquired.

“No, I was just pondering the state of my sanity.”

“I questioned mine the very night I rescued you.” She finished fluffing his pillows. “I’m not a simpleton. I realize a man like Quinn would consider his needs before any other, but what would he gain by lying about his first mate?”

“I’m not sure.” He gathered his wits, vowing to convince her he didn’t possess the heart of a pirate, and wondering if he could convince himself first. “I doubt Quinn was concerned for his missing crewman. As for Lucian Adams, perhaps Quinn sought information and concluded any sane Frenchman wouldn’t dare

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reveal his identity to a group of Scots.”

“Is that a confession?”

“No, just an observation.”

She fell silent, and he sensed her studying him.

“Finding oneself at the mercy of one’s enemy might be reason enough to feign loss of memory,” she stated at last.

“I assure you I’m not pretending.”

With her silence came the vision of an imaginary noose tightening about his throat.

“In mid August, my father set sail on the *Dragon Master* for a short trip to Glasgow,” she said. “It is now approaching the end of September, and I suspect it’s possible you know precisely what happened to him and his crew.”

Had he attacked the Scottish vessel for her bounty?

“I don’t trust you, *monsieur*. In fact, you’ve given me every reason not to.”

“If it will comfort you, *mademoiselle*, you are welcome to sit at my feet and watch my every move. I’ll even allow you to cradle a broadsword to your breast.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Pity,” he teased. “I was looking forward to having you in my bed once again.”

“Your taunts no longer agitate me, pirate, for I’ve posted a guard outside your door. If you give me any reason to call him, I promise he won’t hesitate to plunge a dagger into your heart.”

“Must we always be at odds with one another, *cherie*?”

“Apparently so.”

“I don’t care for your mistrust, but I understand it. And aside from assaulting your pride, I’ve done you no harm. Nor do I wish to. If you truly believed me a murderous pirate, you would hang me and forget I ever washed ashore.”

“Don’t tempt me. When my father returns, I suspect he’ll throw you in the dungeon just to be rid of you. And if you are fortunate to ever again view the light of day, you won’t be able to determine a woman from a side of beef.”

“If my other senses function properly, I won’t need my eyes to appreciate a beautiful, intelligent lass. Of course, I’d have to find one with both qualities first.”

“As subtle as a brothel whore,” she muttered, contempt oozing from her tone.

He had no idea what she meant by that remark but figured it wise not to ask.

“You’d best pray your memory returns soon, *monsieur*.” Her footsteps headed away from his bed. “Before I decide you’re not worth all this trouble.”

* * * *

An hour before dawn, Dreya closed her book and set it on the night table beside the bed. Sleep would not be visiting her any time soon. She stifled a yawn and considered going in search of Sebastian for a jaunt down to the beach, but the dog would probably be more of a nuisance than a companion. Perhaps she’d stroll down to the stone garden in back of the castle. The salty breeze from the sea might lift her spirits.

She crawled out of bed and slipped on her robe and slippers. On the way to door, she picked up the candle. The corridor outside her room sat blanketed in a river of darkness. Why had the servants doused every wall sconce?

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"Auld castles ur filled wi' spirits o' th' dead playing tricks upon th' living," her father had declared on more than one occasion. "Fond o' th' darkness, thay be. Especially at Dragon's Breath."

Dreya had laughed at his words. Now, staring into a pitch-black void and listening to the echoes of an eerie silence, she wished she'd paid more heed to his subtle warning.

She crept into the hall but left the door to her room ajar. She wasn't sure why. It may have had something to do with the sensation that she wasn't alone. Or perhaps the candlelight's limited view pushed her overactive imagination to the limit.

Chiding herself for being a coward, she headed in the direction of the stairs, trying to ignore the odd shadows produced by the candle's faint light.

Dreya reached the end of the hall, and a sudden draft swirled around her feet. The candle flickered, and the fragile flame disappeared in an instant. Once again, an inky black silence swallowed the corridor. A battering of gale winds broke against the castle. The mournful howl sent shivers down her spine. Perhaps traipsing about in the dark wasn't such a grand idea. She should go back to her room and crawl beneath the covers.

Defeated by sheer imagination, Dreya whirled around and smacked straight into something solid. A silent scream lodged in her throat. She backed up, her heart thumping. She'd collided with something huge...and very much alive.

"Urr ye a' richt, mistress?"

Immediate relief weakened her knees, and she almost sank to the floor. "Colin Seaton, how dare you sneak up on me." The urge to thump him hard in the chest ran through her mind. "Do you wish to send me to an early grave?"

"Ah merely thought tae test yer bravery, lass."

"Did you consider what might have occurred if I'd carried a dagger in my hand instead of this useless candle?"

"Na, mistress. Ah cannae say Ah did."

"And what the devil were you doing lurking about the castle this time of night?"

"Ye asked me tae staun guard outside Frenchie's room."

"Yes, of course, but the corridor wasn't lit, and I simply forgot you were there." She sucked in a breath. "What in heaven's name gave you the idea to sneak up on me? Do you realize I was two seconds from screaming at the top of my lungs and waking the entire castle?"

"Ah meant na harm. Jist haein a bit o' fun."

"Well...play your tricks upon someone else."

"Aye, mistress," he said, his tone amused.

She brushed past him. "Why didn't you relight the wall sconces?"

"Ah must've dozed aff," Colin replied, trailing behind.

Dreya sighed. What a fine guard she'd chosen.

"Ah've a tin o' matches in mah pocket," he added. "It will nae tak' me but a moment tae dae th' task." Seconds later, a match flared to life, illuminating a small portion of the wall in front of him.

After he relit the sconces and her candle, Dreya spied a food tray on a nearby chair. It may have gone unnoticed except for the two spoons resting inside the

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large bowl. "I see you did not go hungry this night."

He grinned. "Mah mither sent me a hearty meal afore she took tae her bed."

"With two spoons?"

"Weel...."

"I know from Edwina that your mother is in poor health," Dreya said. "So someone else must've brought you food and kept you company this evening. Sarah Mortimer, perhaps?"

Before he could confirm or deny her suspicions, a shattering noise disrupted the conversation.

"That came frae Frenchie's room."

Dreya ran to the door and hurried inside. Light from the corridor revealed an empty bed. He lay curled up on the floor, shivering. The remains of a broken lamp lay at his feet, the oil soaking into the carpet.

She rushed to his side, snatched the covers from the bed and wrapped them about his body. "*Monsieur*, what happened? Are you hurt?"

"*Qui suis-je?*" he asked, his teeth chattering. "*Qui suis-je?*"

Who am I?

"I wish to God I knew, *monsieur*." Dreya smoothed back the hair clinging to his forehead. Sweat glistened on his brow and soaked through his nightshirt. His feverish skin burned her fingers. "Colin, go wake Edwina." She turned. "And please, hurry!"

* * * *

The aroma of food wafted beneath his nose, and his mouth watered. He turned his head to one side, praying the constant throb at his temple would subside.

"Guid morn tae ye, lad," the healer said, her voice near his face. "Ah see ye've returned frae Death's door."

He grunted.

She chuckled. "Ah expect ye'll feel better wi' somethin' in yer belly."

He cleared his raw throat. "I am rather hungry."

"Ah shuid think sae. We've nae heard a sound frae ye thae last three days except yer breathin'. 'Ere, let me hulp ye sit up." She propped several pillows behind his back before her weight settled down on the bed beside him. "Ah've brung ye a specialty broth. 'Tis fair plain, but it'll stick tae yer gut lik' pitch oan a rooftop."

"What are the ingredients?"

"Ye'r better aff none th wiser, lad, an' that's th' truth." She gripped his chin before slipping a spoonful of broth inside his mouth.

Warmth surrounded his tongue, and he tasted the sweetness of honey mixed with the bitterness of whiskey. The other ingredients he couldn't identify.

"I've no wish to insult you, Madam Edwina." The liquid burned a path down his throat, and he coughed to clear it. "But whatever this is, it's most unpleasant."

"Aye. Ah'll nae argie wi' ye aboot that."

He drew a labored breath. "What happened? Why have I been unconscious?"

"Th' fever come oan ye quick lik' in th' middle o' th' nicht. If the lass hud nae

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discovered ye whin she did, Ah suspect ye wid be visitin' wi' th' Guid Faither about noo."

His vixen possessed a heart? Impossible. And what caused her to lurk about his bedroom in the middle of the night?

"My entire body aches as though it fell beneath the hooves of an unruly stallion." He swallowed another spoonful of the strange broth. "I dare say I cannot move one muscle without causing pain. Not even my fingers."

"Aye, 'twas brought about by th' shiverin'."

"Are you sure *Mademoiselle* Macgregor didn't attack me?"

"Th' lass haes a temper, Ah will grant ye that, but a kinder hert ye will ne'er fin'. 'Twas her wha stayed wi ye aw nicht." She fed him another spoonful. "She wiped yer brow while ye mumbled lik' a daft mon an' remained by yer side an' kept ye warm till th' fever passed. Ah sent her tae bed aboot an oor ago."

He held up his hand. "I believe I've had enough of this."

"Allow yer stomach tae settle fur noo. Kin Ah fetch ye a glass o' water afore Ah tak' mah lea?"

"No, I'm fine."

"If ye change yer mind, Ah will lea a pitcher oan the table beside yer bed along wi' this broth." Her weight lifted from the mattress. "Mibbie ye will finish it later."

"*Merci*, Madam Edwina. It would seem I am once again in your debt for prolonging my life."

"Ye dinnae owe me, lad. 'Tis mah choice tae serve others."

"When your mistress wakes, would you ask her to pay me a visit?"

"Ah expect she will be in tae check oan ye afore th' sun disappears. Noo, Ah wid be pleased if ye'd dae somethin' fur me."

"You've only to ask."

She touched his shoulder. "Keep oot o' th' nicht air 'til Ah say different."

"No more open windows?"

"Aye, thay ur tae be closed at dusk."

"Very well."

"Eat whit's brung ye even if ye nae hungert." "

"Anything else?"

"Nothin' but th' wisdom o' mah eighty an' five years upon this earth." She gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. "If ye wish tae hear it."

"I do."

"But kin ye listen wi' yer hert instead o' yer mind?"

"I believe so."

She chuckled low. "Misfortune is a crafty devil. He comes an' goes at will but is often drawn tae they wha expect him."

"Yet what man lives a perfect life?"

"Aye, whit lass? This island haes hud its share o' hardship. 'Tis difficult tae glimpse th' sun durin' a thunderstorm, yet th' folk 'ere huv nae a doubt it's exactly whaur it's suppose tae be."

"Never give up, is that it?"

"Aye, noo ye ken mah meaning. Whit e'er be strewn o'er yer path, guid or ill, ye kin be certain 'twas na mistake. Mind this, lad. Kindness is a gift an' must ne'er

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be hidden awa' nor hoarded. Praise th' Guid Faither an' send it oan its wey."

Kindness begets kindness.

Someone had taught him this at a young age. He wished he could recall who. "I may never remember my name or regain my sight, but I'm certain I'll never forget my time on this island."

Or Dreyra Macgregor.

"Aye, an' that be the kinch," the healer mumbled.

Had she read his thoughts?

"Ah, weel. Th' sun cannae forgit th' moon, nor will th' ocean forgit th' caress o' a gentle wind. 'Tis nae mah place tae question such matters."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"It's jist as weel, lad. Ah've learned oor time oan this earth is a mere speck o' ink oan one page o' a sacred book. Thare be mony worthy roads. Th' passable ones ur straight an' wide but o' na interest. Others run along a treacherous ridge, but th' view is finer than any ither."

He smiled. "You've a pleasant way of looking at life's obstacles."

"'Twas mah grandmother wha taught me that life is lik' a kettle o' stew. Ye micht tamper wi' th' ingredients, but dinnae forgit tae toss in a few spices fur flavor."

He almost laughed out loud, for no spice on God's earth could do Dreyra Macgregor justice.

Chapter Five

"Gypsy, you pagan by-blow," Jonas Quinn snapped at the dark skinned Arab standing inside the doorway to his cabin. "We finished repairs to this ship two days ago. Where the devil have you been?"

"Walking the streets of Glasgow as you instructed."

"Drink yourself under a table again?"

"I visited over two dozen taverns, and my boots have long since worn thin, but you will be pleased to learn I drank nothing stronger than ale." Gypsy pulled up a chair and straddled it. "I have uncovered some rather interesting information."

Jonas walked around his desk. "It had better be worth your weight and mine in gold."

The Arab smiled. His soft-spoken mannerisms could unearth secrets buried for centuries, but he'd sailed with the *Predator's* crew for so long no one remembered his true name.

Including Jonas.

"The *Dragon Master* sailed into Glasgow for supplies in the middle of August." Gypsy placed his lean forearms across the back of his chair. "One month later, a second dragon ship reached this port. Her captain asked questions regarding the Macgregor's last visit, for he has not yet returned home."

"Is that so?" Jonas eased his injured arm from the sling and stretched his sore wrist. "The afternoon we spotted the *Falcon*, I'd have wagered all I ever looted that the *Dragon Master* sat anchored off her port side. When she turned and fled north, I recognized the dragon figurehead on her bow."

"This should please King George."

"Yes, but informing the old bastard also puts us at a disadvantage."

"How is that?"

Jonas grabbed a bottle of rum. "George III wants to hang a noose around Ethan Macgregor's neck." He poured two glasses and handed one to Gypsy. "We cannot bargain with the king if the bloody Scotsman is dead."

"I see, but do you suppose the woman who claims she is the Macgregor's daughter would interest his majesty?"

"Claims? You mean she's not?"

"Who can say?"

"God's teeth, you just did."

"No, no, captain. But please, allow me to start from the beginning." Gypsy set his glass on the table and withdrew a folded section of parchment from his coat pocket. "I found this in the magistrate's office last evening."

'Found' usually meant 'stole' for the Arab.

Jonas snatched the paper. He smoothed out the wrinkles and squinted at the drawing of a young woman with bold and daring eyes. His attention shifted to the notation at the bottom of the page.

One thousand pounds for the capture of American spy, Anadreya Richardson.

"Do you not recognize her, captain?"

Jonas strolled to the window and held the paper beneath the faint light. "Well I'll be damned and tried for treason." He swung around. "Is this the Macgregor

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chit?"

Gypsy nodded. "Your English king issued that bounty at the beginning of the war."

"Seems she traded her American identity for that of a smuggler's daughter. A profitable but costly mistake." He eased his arm back inside the sling. "Her connection to the Macgregor is unclear, but the very fact that she is American and wanted for spying is damaging evidence against the Scotsman. Will it be enough to appease George III?" He shrugged. "It's possible."

"Will you inform the English where to find her?"

"No. I'll deal with her myself when the time comes."

"But, captain, the bounty—"

"A mere pittance and not worth the trouble. The lass will be useful at some point. Especially if Ethan Macgregor lives." Jonas studied the drawing again. "Strange, but she reminds me of a woman I met in Lancaster when I was a young buck. Quite fond of her, I was." He tossed the paper onto his desk. "Almost asked her to be my wife."

"Almost?"

"I discovered she'd sent two previous husbands to their graves."

Gypsy crossed himself. "Allah be praised, but that is precisely the reason I avoid those silly creatures."

Jonas suspected the Arab's preference went younger and in the opposite direction, but he knew better than to question another man's morals. Or lack thereof. He pushed the window ajar, and the pungent odor of saltwater and decaying fish entered the cabin.

"It is a shame the *Falcon's* first officer gave us no useful information before you slit his throat," Gypsy remarked.

"At the time I was more concerned with fishing Lucian Adams out of the water. Twenty-five thousand pounds was ours for the taking, plus his ship's bounty, and we allowed both to slip to the bottom of the sea."

"Even if Adams survived the explosion, he would not have lasted more than a few days in the water. Which reminds me, captain...the woman reacted rather strangely when you switched Pierre's description with that of Adams."

"I noticed."

"I am pleased you heeded her warning. My carcass would look quite hideous flying atop that black castle." Gypsy sighed. "I miss the gay life of Paris. Our English banner is more of a curse than a license to plunder, and this ridiculous war is nothing but an inconvenience."

"An army of farmers carrying muskets and a Continental Navy consisting of a handful of ships," Jonas remarked with amusement. "If the French hadn't entered this skirmish, our coffers wouldn't be near as full."

"After the war ends, do you suppose Mad George will place another bounty upon our heads?"

"Probably. Unless we bring him Ethan Macgregor."

"Captain, you said the Scotsman is likely dead. I say we set sail for the Caribbean."

"Patience, my friend, and mayhap I'll fetch you a hot-blooded wench from Dragon's Breath to warm your bed."

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Gypsy looked alarmed. "Thank you, captain, but I am afraid I must politely decline such an offer," he declared. "You think the king will grant you the island and castle?"

"Why not?"

"By Allah and all that is holy, captain, you cannot be serious. Need I remind you that insane creature aimed a rifle at your head?"

"If she wanted me dead, I'd be in a watery grave right now."

"That does not mean she will not finish the deed should you storm the castle."

"It would be useless to attack that fortress."

Gypsy's expression relaxed.

"But that sharp-tongued girl hasn't seen the last of us."

"Let the English come for her." Gypsy mumbled a few words in Arabic before he switched back to English. "You cannot toy with the Devil's own blood and survive. I've heard the Scots on that island have a penchant for torture."

"Tis nothing but rumor."

"I disagree. We are outsiders— mistrusted and despised. They will never allow us to settle among them. I do not wish to offend you, captain, but I do not intend to live out the rest of my many years concerned for my very life."

Jonas stared at the man. "I do not plan to live among them."

* * * *

"Thir's na rush," Edwina said. "Tak' yer time."

He opened his eyes. Shards of light intruded upon the darkness. His eyes watered, and he squeezed them shut. "It appears I've made some progress."

"How sae?"

He blinked and tried to focus on the healer. "My vision consists of shadows and blurred images now."

"Tis a guid sign." She moved between him and the light. "Since yer weel oan th' mend, 'twould be best tae keep thae curtains drawn during the day."

"How long will light continue to bother me?"

"Likely a few weeks. Yer eyes suffered along wi' th' rest o' yer body. How is yer head?"

"If you mean has my memory returned...." He sighed. "No, not yet."

"Dinnae fret, lad. It will come. Ah see yer sportin' th' claes Ah brung ye."

"*Oui*, madam, and I appreciate them. Especially the trousers."

She chuckled. "We cannae huv ye struttin' aboot th' castle in yer drawers, noo kin we?"

"Not without an affront to my dignity. What gentleman do I thank for the use of his attire?"

"The Macgregor. He wis a strappin' lad in his youth, but at present he haes nae use fur breeks that na langer fit his wide arse."

He chuckled, and for once his ribs didn't object.

"Haes yer appetite returned?"

"It has. Have you spoken with *Mademoiselle* Macgregor?"

"Aye, this morn. Haes she nae visited ye?"

He shook his head.

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"Weel, Ah expect thare be plenty oan her mind." The healer's shadow bent over him. "Haud still, lad."

He blinked, allowing the liquid she'd dropped into his eyes to ease the burning. "Madam Edwina, I'm rather curious about these drops. Is this another special potion?"

"Na, 'tis merely a tincture o' bilberry, honey, an' water tae soothe burns an' irritations o' th' skin."

"Are you preparing to blindfold me again?"

"Aye, 'tis best fur noo."

Complete darkness returned the moment she placed the cloth bandage in front of his eyes.

"I do not mean to complain," he said. "But if I spent a few more days cooped up in this room, I'll go mad."

"Ah expect yer used tae lyin' abed wi' a milk-faced, heavy-bosomed lass tae keep ye entertained."

He thought of Dreya. In his mind, she didn't quite fit Edwina's description of entertainment. Nevertheless, she often held his interest.

"Ah ken th' frustration a mon such as yersel' micht endure wi' ainlie yer imagination an' thae four walls tae keep ye company. 'Twould drive a healthy mon tae drink, Ah suspect."

"There were times I would've welcomed a glass of strong brandy. I just wasn't sure I could keep it down. As for my imagination, every now and then I hear a few unsavory phrases coming from the guard outside my room, but little else breaks the monotony."

"Ah'll inquire aboot moving ye tae a room overlookin' th' sea. Mibbie th' light o' th' moon will nae cause ye pain."

"*Merci*, madam. That's very thoughtful of you, but I've no wish to cause you any more trouble."

"Nonsense, 'tis na trouble. Ye kin use th' bedroom Captain Derek prefers. Ah'm sure he wid nae mind."

"Captain Derek?"

"Aye, he visits th' island often."

"Another lost pirate?"

"Ah wid nae ca' th' mon a pirate, although he cracks a devil o' a grin," the healer remarked fondly. "He's devoted tae th' lass, o' coorse."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "Do *mademoiselle's* mannerisms improve when this gentleman visits?"

"Aye, she's most pleasant wi' him."

A strange sensation pricked his chest. "What does the Macgregor think of this relationship?"

"Ah didnae ask."

Her evasive comment peaked his curiosity even more. "This Captain Derek...he and the Macgregor are friends?"

"Thir's a wee difference in thair age, but thay git along weel. Mair sae whin thay share th' bottle."

What if Dreya's father didn't return? Would this man stake his claim to her as well as the island?

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"What do you suppose became of the Macgregor and his crew?" he inquired.

"Dinnae ye fret fur Ethan. He will return whin he haes a mind tae." She finished tying the bandage at the back of his head and tapped his shoulder. "Thare noo. 'Tis done."

He relaxed into the chair. "Madam Edwina, I've decided to accept your offer of a larger room, but would you ask your mistress if I might be allowed outside the castle? I'd ask her myself, but I'm afraid she's avoiding me again."

"That Ah'll dae fur ye, lad. 'Tis fair waither we're blessed wi' an' most unusual fur October. Ye shuid stretch yer legs an' soak up some o' th' sun's warmth afore it's replaced by a winter chill."

"I'd enjoy that, but I'll not hold hands with the unfriendly oaf *mademoiselle* positioned outside my door."

Edwina chuckled. "That'd be Colin Seaton. He's a guid lad an' harmless enough."

"You haven't heard his growl. I tried to initiate a conversation with the man last evening, but he wasn't very accommodating."

"'Tis oor wey toward strangers."

"How do I change that?"

"Become pairt o' th' clan," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "Ah tell ye whit, lad. Ah'll ask th' mistress if ye kin accompany her th' neist time she an' Bastian head doon tae th' beach."

"Bastian? Not another pirate, I hope."

"Na, 'tis th' Macgregor's sheep dug. 'Twas he wha found ye lyin' upon th' sand, mair dead than alive."

"Another one of my rescuers. Perhaps I'll meet him soon."

"Ah fin' it streenge he haes nae barged in 'ere awready. Most times ye'll fin' him an' th' lass oan th' beach below th' castle. Him ridin' th' surf, and her chasin' him oan that white demon."

"What type of horse?"

"Th' lass brung him 'ere frae England, but Ah dinnae ken his origins. He'll nae let a soul sit astride him but her."

"A temperamental horse for a temperamental woman. Did her mother possess the same fiery qualities?"

"Ah cannae say, but she wur a fine English lady."

English? This explained Drey's lack of a Scottish accent.

"Th' woman didnae deserve th' misery tossed upon her lap, tae be sure."

"How long since the Macgregor's wife passed away?"

Edwina muttered a few words in Gaelic before she switched back to English. "Weel, ah dinnae care tae speak ill o' th' dead, but that mean-spirited daughter o' a lowlander departed this earth some sixteen years ago."

Had he misunderstood?

"Did you not say *mademoiselle's* mother was English?"

"Aye, 'tis sae."

"Then...the Macgregor's wife—"

"Wisnae th' lass' mither, an' Ah thank th' Guid Faither fur huvin' th' foresight tae arrange matters as He did."

Drey's was illegitimate?

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Silence filled the room, and he thought the healer had slipped away.

"Ethan is a guid mon," she said at last. "He lost his hert th' day he met Lady Jessamine, but he hud na say whin it come tae choosin' a wife."

"What happened to her?"

"Dead noo, along wi' th' mon she wed. That be th' reason th' lass come home."

And with those last words, she left him to ponder this new information. Edwina had better things to do than gossip. So why had she broken a servant's code of honor by divulging sensitive information regarding her mistress?

He could only conclude it wasn't by accident.

Chapter Six

Dreya tried again to focus on the household accounts ledger for the month of October. The task should have required no more than an hour, but this morning she couldn't pay attention.

She pushed away from the desk and closed her eyes. The familiar scent of whiskey and tobacco hung in the Macgregor's study. That same smell had embedded itself into the fabric of the furniture and drapes.

She missed her father's voice as he thundered from room to room on the main floor searching for his favorite pipe or the latest bottle of whiskey-- the one he swore he hadn't yet finished. She missed how he teased her about the broadsword hanging above the fireplace mantel in the drawing room.

"How kin ye win a battle, lass, if ye cannae raise yer weapon? Mibbie Ah shuid buy ye one o' those dainty cutlasses th' English fobs ur sae fond o'."

Dry wood popped in the fireplace, and she shifted to a more comfortable position in the chair.

Twill dae ye na guid tae worry, lass.

Dreya opened her eyes.

Edwina Mason stood at the door. With her white hair and stooped body, one might think the healer already had a foot in the grave, but her gray eyes reflected a youthful spirit.

"Yer mind wanders, child."

"Yes, I suppose so. Did you wish to speak to me?"

"Aye, aboot oor guest. He requires fresh air."

Dreya sighed. "Open his window."

"Ah wis thinkin' mair o' a brisk walk aboot th' grounds."

"Does he not walk about his room?"

"Ye cannae expect th' mon tae remain cooped up lik' an animal an' be glad fur it." Edwina approached the desk, an expression of criticism upon her wrinkled face. "Breathin' th' same air day efter day is nae healthy fur his mind nor body."

"Prisoners are not entitled to sympathy."

"He's nae a prisoner."

"Nor is he our friend."

"Th' mon doesnae stray far frae his bed, an' that cannae be guid fur him."

Dreya closed the ledger with a snap. "What am I to do? Offer the pirate a brisk ride about the island? Pack a picnic lunch?"

Edwina smiled and pointed a gnarled finger. "Aye, noo that's jist whit he needs."

"No."

"Ye'r bein' a micht hasty."

"And if you had your way, he'd be offered a manservant. I'm sorry, Edwina, but I'll not stroll about on the arm of that arrogant rogue."

"Ah wid nae expect it, child. 'Tis nae yer place. Ah'll ask one o' th' maids."

"Absolutely not," Dreya declared. "No woman...young, old or half dead...would be safe with that man."

"He's a gentleman an' harmless enough. A wee bit o' female companionship shuid improve his spirits."

The Macgregor's Daughter

"I don't give a fig about his spirits."

"Och, lass. How does he upset ye sae?"

"I don't trust him. And neither should you."

"Aye, but ye'll listen tae that black-hearted Quinn?" Edwina admonished. "Th' mon wid sell his ain mither fur a gold coin, an' yet ye've taken his word as th' blessed truth?" She shook her head. "Na, thare be somethin' else botherin' ye, child. Somethin' ye've tried tae bury, but ye cannae fin' a hole whit's deep enough."

The healer read emotions like others read books.

Dreya rose from the chair and headed for the warmth of the fire. "For eighteen years I believed the lie my mother concocted to hide her past. If she had trusted me with the truth, that I wasn't John Richardson's daughter, I would've understood."

"Even th' vast ocean couldnae keep Jessamine's secrets frae follaein her. It wur a difficult decision fur yer widowed uncle tae break his word tae yer mither, but he did sae in order tae save ye frae an English prison."

"I realize that." Dreya faced her. "And I'm thankful he sent a message to the Macgregor, but it was my mother's place to tell me about my father long before Uncle Charles did."

"Mibbie she tried."

"I doubt that. She did, however, destroy my faith in her."

"Dae ye regret th' Macgregor is yer faither?"

"No, of course not."

"Then dinnae fault yer sweet mither or th' mon wha raised ye as his ain fur daein' whit thay believed richt. If ye hud drawn thair lot in life, cuid ye swear ye wid dae different?"

Dreya turned her back, tears gathering in her eyes. Whatever she would've done, whatever the outcome, she would've told her child the truth. A huge lump formed in her throat. She stared into the fire, and her thoughts drifted backward.

Jessamine and John Richardson died of consumption within hours of one another. They were laid to rest on a cold December day. Icy rain pelted her face as she and her cousin Derek climbed the hill toward the old cemetery overlooking the sea. Before lowering the two coffins into the frozen ground, the vicar offered a few meaningless words of prayer.

Her life might've returned to normal except for the unexpected arrival of a well-dressed Englishman eighteen months later who claimed to be her uncle.

"Lord Hawthorne be a guid mon," Edwina said. "Whin he wrote th' Macgregor o' Jessamine's death, Ethan cuid nae be consoled. Yet whin he learned he'd sired a daughter, his sorrow turned tae joy, an' he swore tae protect his ain blood wi' his life."

"I'm grateful to my father for helping me escape England, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm illegitimate."

"Nothin' kin change that, lass."

Dreya turned. "You don't understand. If I'd known the truth—"

"Whit wid ye huv done? Ye wur blessed wi' a kind mither wha shared her faith in th' Guid Faither, her laughter, an' her loove. 'Twas her shame she didnae wish tae burden ye wi'."

Dreya swallowed around her anger. "If I sound bitter or selfish, it's just...I

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missed so much. I never got the chance to meet my mother's parents or Grandfather Macgregor."

Edwina's expression grew distant. "Simon Macgregor ne'er considered Ethan's happiness afore he promised that lowlander Campbell his ainlie son. Thay struck th' deal by Ethan's tenth year. By his ain da's words, Ethan wid forfeit Dragon's Breath if he wed anither."

"Father told me, and I do not blame him."

"But ye cannae forgie yer mither?"

"If she had told me the truth, yes. I'm nothing but a mistake, Edwina."

"Oor blessed Faither created ye, child, an' He does nae mak' mistakes."

"Would you still believe this if you born on the wrong side of the blanket?"

A twinkle entered the healer's eyes. "Whit causes ye tae think Ah wisnae?"

Dreya smiled. "Oh, very well. I surrender. I'll appoint someone to escort our pirate about the castle grounds, but one of the castle guards will accompany them as well."

"Urr ye feart o' a blind mon, lass? Whit harm haes he done ye?"

What harm?

Dreya's heart raced at the mere sight of his crooked pirate grin. And with his touch, heat rushed to her cheeks and intensified before it moved to more sensitive areas of her body.

"I'm not afraid of any man. Our guest is nothing more to me than an irritation."

"Ye've met yer match wi' this one, an' that's th' truth. But Ah imagine it's a wee bit difficult fur a lass tae keep a level head around such a handsome mon. Dinnae tempt fate, Ah say." Edwina shook her head, making a clucking noise with her tongue. "Aye, ye'r wise beyond yer years, child." She headed toward the door. "Best lea this mon tae a mair experienced lass."

* * * *

"You look rather decent this afternoon," Dreya Macgregor remarked in a casual tone.

"Then you approve of me, *mademoiselle*?"

"That's not what I meant."

If this vixen thought to goad him into saying or doing something to end such a pleasurable afternoon stroll, she would suffer extreme disappointment.

"Your hair tied at the nape suits your profession."

"My profession?"

"Sailor, seaman, or whatever it's called."

They walked on in silence for several minutes.

"You're unusually quiet, *monsieur*."

"And you're complaining?"

"Not in the least. Your unexpected silence is quite refreshing, yet it also prompts me to question what's going through your mind."

"All the thoughts generally present when a man finds himself alone with a beautiful woman."

"You cannot see my face, so you'll have to do better than that."

The Macgregor's Daughter

"If you recall, *cherie*, I drew a mental portrait of you some time ago."

"Ah, that explains things," she quipped. "Such fair winds are unusual for the second week of October, but they are most welcome. Our warm weather will end soon, for already the sky turns a dismal gray. After the rains pass, snow will follow."

He cocked his head to one side. "I realize this must sound ridiculous, but I feel as though we've met before. These past two weeks, that same thought crossed my mind numerous times, especially during our daily jaunts to the beach, but I must be mistaken. Where would we have met?"

"Where, indeed." She tightened her grip on his arm. "Watch your step. There's a small tree lying across our path."

"I can manage it." He cleared the obstacle then assisted her. "Last night's storm sounded fierce. The wind must have uprooted everything that wasn't nailed down."

"Dragon's Breath was built atop the highest crag, but the gale winds usually sound more violent than they actually are."

"That's good to know."

"So....you think we've met before?"

"I realize that's rather unlikely, but it certainly feels like it."

"The villagers on this island are superstitious. Edwina is their healer, and they look to her for everything from broken bones to broken vows. She believes nothing is left to chance but that a person's life travels in a familiar pattern or full circle. If you and I were friends long ago, say in another life, then we would eventually befriend one another in this one. If we were enemies—"

"What if we were more than friends?"

"I...I'm not sure. You'd have to ask Edwina."

"Perhaps I will."

"Have you remembered anything more concerning your past?"

Should he confess that, courtesy of his latest nightmare, he now knew for certain he was Lucian Adams?

Probably not.

"I can visualize my mother's face," he said instead. "She was quite beautiful."

"Was?"

"I believe she's dead."

"I'm sorry. What about your father?"

He shook his head. "I can recall nothing of the man, but Madam Edwina seems to think the rest of my memories will fall into place before long."

"At least you're making progress. Are you satisfied with the larger bedroom?"

"*Oui*, it's most comfortable, but I'm even more grateful you took the guard from outside my door."

"Edwina's idea, and she was rather persistent."

Lucian smiled. "Even though your words are more civil, *mademoiselle*, something tells me you still cannot bring yourself to trust me."

She halted. "Do *you* trust me, pirate?"

"With my life," he replied without hesitation. "But I didn't at first. Not until I realized how easy it would be for you to string a rope about my neck."

"I still have that option."

The Macgregor's Daughter

"As I stated before, *cherie*, I'm no threat to you or the people of this island."

She urged him forward. "You've resided among us almost two months now, yet I...we...know very little about you."

Lucian supposed therein lay the cause of her continued distrust, and he couldn't fault her reasoning.

A dog barked somewhere ahead of him.

"Sebastian, do not wander too far away, scoundrel."

"When I regain my sight, remind me to thank your loyal companion for saving my life."

"It's Bastian's obsession with the sea you should be grateful for."

"I completely understand."

"Is this a feeling or a memory?"

"Both...neither." Lucian shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"I don't care for the sea. I find it boring and too often lonely."

"Loneliness comes from the heart, *mademoiselle*. If you had someone to share it with—"

"What causes you to believe I've not?" she snapped. "Need I remind you, I do not want nor will I accept advice from a pirate."

Lucian almost told her he knew exactly what she needed, but he kept this opinion to himself. He couldn't risk the chance she'd take it as an insult. For two weeks now they'd shared a precarious truce on their walks down to the beach. As long as he held his tongue about his identity and kept his rude comments to a minimum, that truce would remain intact.

He switched tactics. "The name Sebastian seems familiar to me."

"My father had a distant English relative he was fond of."

A brisk wind whistled through the trees, revealing the recollection of a quaint old drawing room. Lucian sensed he had often sat by the fire in that room, pondering one dilemma or another. He could even smell the leather of his chair and the musty drapes lining the two narrow windows.

He probed deeper, and the gray marbled floor of a foyer came into view. So finely polished a lad could start out at a brisk run and slide all the way to the dining room door. Something told him he'd done so several times in his youth. If he headed up the long mahogany staircase to the third floor, his room was behind the last door on the right. He'd often lain in bed and listened to the mournful howl of the wind as it rounded one corner of....

An English manor?

The idea sliced through his thoughts, leaving confusion in its wake. He'd once lived in England?

Am I English or French?

A distinct chill snaked up his spine, and he secured the collar of his borrowed coat about his neck.

"If you're cold—"

"I'm fine," Lucian assured her. He had no intention of giving up an afternoon of freedom. "When was Dragon's Breath built?"

"Around 1510."

He waited, but she offered nothing else. "It's an unusual name."

"You mean no one's told you the castle's history?"

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"Not one word."

"Well, according to legend, the Macgregor who bought this island became soused one warm midsummer night a few weeks after he'd settled into his new castle. He swaggered up to the master suite, threw open the windows facing the sea, and a strong wind slapped him hard across the face. 'By heavens,' he declared in a booming voice. 'Tis as het an' as foul as a dragon's breath.'"

"That's it?"

"My father swears it's the truth."

Lucian chuckled then grew serious. "Madam Edwina is convinced the Macgregor will return. This may sound a bit odd, but I'm beginning to believe her."

"It's rather difficult at times, but I try not to question Edwina or her strange beliefs." Her fingers dug into his arm, and she pulled him toward her. "We shouldn't stroll too close to the edge of these cliffs. There are too many soft spots where the ground has eroded."

He allowed her to direct him to firmer footing before they walked on in silence. Within seconds, an unruly gust of wind hit him full in the face, flapping his shirt and trousers.

Ah, the familiar caress of the sea.

As satisfying as a woman's fingers running through his hair. Or her warm body beneath his. At least he hadn't forgotten the more pleasurable things.

"Careful." She gripped his hand and pulled him along behind her. "If you stumble now, we'll both end up at the bottom of this incline in no time."

Lucian inhaled the scent of saltwater and fish. The sand shifted beneath his boots, and he longed to remove the nuisance from his eyes.

"This is a nice spot to sit," she said and disentangled her hand from his.

He bowed. "After you, *mademoiselle*."

"Thank you, *monsieur*."

Lucian sat down and leaned back on his elbows, savoring the warm sand and the sound of the ocean. "Where is our four-legged friend?"

"Riding the surf as though it were a stallion."

"Speaking of stallions, I understand you prefer to ride astride."

"Edwina talks too much."

"Not nearly enough."

She relented with a sigh. "Pegasus is Arabian. He's easier to control riding astride."

"I cannot imagine being forced to use a proper sidesaddle on an island like this where the ground consists of treacherous rocks."

"Exactly."

Lucian lay on his back and placed his hands behind his head. He'd basked beneath the sun before but in a warmer climate. And he believed he'd removed his clothes before going for a swim.

"I'm told your eyes are green," she remarked.

He hid a smile. "What wicked thoughts have you thinking of my eyes?"

"I was merely curious, that's all."

"No doubt they should be black like my heart, is that it?"

"It would be a perfect match."

The Macgregor's Daughter

"And with that bold tongue of yours, *mademoiselle*, I'd have guessed your hair resembled unruly flames, not the tame color of chestnut." A devilish thought entered his mind. "It's most unfortunate, for I do so enjoy a feisty red-haired wench."

"Well then," she quipped right on cue, "I should be quite safe from your unwanted advances."

Safe?

No, she'd lost that luxury the first night he'd trapped her body beneath his.

Lucian almost laughed. The man brave enough to set his sights on Dreya Macgregor would be in for a difficult challenge. Difficult if not impossible. But the reward of owning her heart might well be worth the trouble.

The revelation shocked him. He didn't care for this woman. She irritated him more than his blindness or his loss of memory. The only reason he remained civil to her was because she held his fate in the palm of her hand.

"Sebastian, no!"

Before Lucian could ask, a solid weight straddled his chest, and cold water sloshed across the exposed areas of his face. The dog's tongue and fur left a trail of wetness on whatever they touched. Then mercifully, the weight lifted.

"I'm sorry. This rogue has forgotten his manners."

"No harm done." Lucian sat up and brushed his forearm across his mouth. "He does seem rather fond of me."

"He probably learned of your mutual love for the sea and thought you'd accompany him for a swim."

"I would enjoy that." He reached out, and his fingers brushed across the dog's ears. "Perhaps when my sight returns, *mon ami*."

"Go on, scoundrel. Go rescue that piece of driftwood."

Driftwood!

A memory inched close to the surface then vanished.

"And stay away from those small turtles," Mistress Macgregor shouted. "I've no wish to extract one from your snout."

Lucian wiped sand from his mouth.

"Why does a man become a pirate?"

He shrugged. "I cannot answer that, *mademoiselle*."

"All right then, why become a privateer? Or corsair, I suppose I should say?"

"It's a profitable business."

"Especially in times of war."

"In order to survive, *cherie*, we each do what's needed. But that's enough about me. I wish to know more of you."

"I'm afraid that's a very boring subject."

"I understand your mother passed away several years ago. You must miss her."

"Yes." Her hesitation lasted several seconds. "Everyone she met admired her, but I remember her laughter most of all. It filled the room with such incredible warmth."

"Your father must have loved her deeply."

She didn't respond, and guilt pricked his gut because he already knew the truth. What did he expect? That she'd trust him enough to reveal something so

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private?

"Has no honorable gentleman attempted to capture your heart?"

"What brings us back to that subject?"

"Captain Derek."

"Derek? Who the devil...?"

"Has this man tamed you, Dreyra?"

"I've no wish to be tamed."

"I'd wager your father feels differently."

"Have you met my father?"

"I'm not sure."

"Then you cannot speak for him."

"You are correct, *mademoiselle*." Lucian reached out, and his thumb grazed her cheek. "My apologies."

He lingered, waiting for her to object. She didn't. He traced a path down to her lips, full and inviting, urging him to attempt a kiss. He cupped her chin and drew closer, until the smell of lilac teased his senses.

"*Monsieur*, I do not think—"

"Do not allow your mind to rob you of a simple pleasure, *mademoiselle*." His hands slid to the small of her waist, and he pulled her close. Anticipation raced through his blood. "One harmless kiss between us will change nothing."

Chapter Seven

Dreya allowed him full possession of her mouth. His clean, male scent intoxicated her, and his gentle touch revealed experience. He knew exactly what to do. Although this new, heart pounding excitement left her breathless, logic warned she should maintain her distance.

She discovered one problem with this reasoning. She couldn't move, couldn't back away. Her brain issued a stern warning, but her heart paid no attention, and her body agreed.

The kiss deepened, and he threaded his fingers through her hair. She should stop this before it's too late.

Why?

He eased her down upon the sand, and his palm brushed across one of her breasts.

Her breath quickened, and every ounce of reasoning took flight. She tasted her own rising passion and realized she neared the point of losing control.

What the devil am I doing? This man cannot to be trusted.

He ended the kiss in an abrupt manner.

Humiliation stung Dreya's cheeks. He probably thought her a harlot. Or worse. "Wipe that smirk off your mouth, pirate."

"She has returned."

She frowned. "Who?"

He rolled onto his back and placed his arms beneath his head. "The vixen who swore she'd hang me if I dared touch her has replaced the sweet maiden I came here with."

"I know very little about you, *monsieur*. And not near enough to allow your kiss."

"Ah, but you did."

Sebastian charged up the beach, and Dreya scrambled to her feet. The thought entered her mind to warn her companion of the coming onslaught, but she decided against it.

Sebastian gave her little thought. Instead, he straddled the Frenchman.

"Whoa...what the devil—"

The dog offered his new friend a wet kiss before he plopped down in the middle of the man's chest.

"*Merci, mon ami*. I enjoy your company, as well, but not to this extent." He ruffled the dog's ears before pushing him away.

"The clouds are darkening," Dreya said. She brushed the sand from her cloak. "We should go."

"Very well." He stood and shook sand from his trousers.

Allowing familiarities from this man proved disastrous, but she didn't have a choice, for he needed her assistance. She placed her hand upon his arm.

"You're shivering." His fingers slid over hers. "Shall I warm you?"

"Do not concern yourself with me, for I am well able...." A familiar sound caught her attention. She turned. A rider on horseback galloped toward them.

"Whoever he is," her companion remarked, "he's in a considerable hurry."

Dreya removed her hand from his arm.

The Macgregor's Daughter

Seconds later, Fulke reined in his mount. "Afternoon, mistress."

"Good afternoon, Fulke. Is something wrong?"

"Two lads found a body oan th' wast side o' th' island aboot an oor ago. Frae th' looks o' him, Ah wid say he's bin thare a month or mair."

"Any idea who the man was?"

"Ah cannae say Ah've seen him afore, but Ah figure th' current must've carried him 'ere aboot th' same time as yer friend 'ere. Ainlie this mon died afore he hit the water."

"How can you be sure?"

"Mistress," Fulke leaned forward in the saddle, "whit's left o' his skull haes a hole in it th' size o' an apple. Thir's somethin' else. Thir's a skull an' crossbones branded o'er his chest."

"Then...this man was Lucian Adams?"

"Ah doubt it. 'Tis th' same skull an' crossbones Quinn flew atop his main mast afore he sided wi' th' English."

"Are you sure?"

"Any mon who's e'er sailed th' seas wid ne'er forgit such a banner."

"Quinn claimed Adams carried the skull and crossbones. Why would he lie?"

"He's a pirate, lass. Need Ah say mair?"

Dreya turned. "Are you Lucian Adams?"

He nodded. "I believe so."

"When were you going to tell me?"

He did not respond.

Frustrated, she turned to Fulke. "Quinn wanted me to think this man was his first mate. Why?"

"He likely figured we'd turn a member o' his crew o'er tae him wi'oot hesitation." Fulke removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Th' dead mon wis a thievin' pirate, aw richt. He's missing several fingers oan his left haun."

"If my nightmares are correct," Adams stated, "I chased this man up the main mast before my ship exploded." He stepped forward and held out his hands in surrender. "*Mademoiselle* Macgregor, I place myself at your mercy."

"What, pray tell, am I supposed to do with you?" Dreya turned to Fulke. "Find the old vicar and have him say a few words of prayer before you return the body to sea."

"It'll be done." The Scotsman replaced his hat then turned his horse toward the village.

Adams remained silent until the sound of horse's hooves pounding the sand grew faint. "So...I am not your prisoner?"

"Not yet."

"May I ask why?"

"No." Dreya tucked her arm through his. "If we do not head back to the castle now, we'll get caught by the rain."

"You're not angry?"

"That you're Lucian Adams?"

He nodded.

"No."

"Care to explain?"

The Macgregor's Daughter

"Not at the moment."

Dreya guided him up a steep incline. At the top, she stumbled.

Adams caught her around the waist. "Perhaps I should lead the way."

"And walk us straight off a cliff?"

"I'm not that clumsy."

"No, but you are blind."

"Not completely."

She turned on him. "What do you mean?"

"Did Madam Edwina not tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"That my vision has improved."

"No, she said nothing. That's excellent news, of course, but if your vision is well on the mend, why does she continue to cover your eyes?"

"Because any light, however faint, still causes mild discomfort."

"Oh, I see. Well I'm sure that will pass." She steered him onward. "No doubt you'll soon walk about the grounds without the use of a guide."

"*Oui*, but then you'll no longer visit my bedroom."

Dreya's stomach fluttered, and her heartbeat sped up. She should reprimand such a remark. She said nothing.

A quick yelp caught her attention, and she halted. "That's Sebastian."

"It sounds as though he's gotten himself into some kind of trouble."

The dog yelped again. This time more urgent than before.

A fine mist blew across her face. She grabbed her companion by the hand and hurried up the embankment. At the top she paused to catch her breath.

"Sebastian!" Adams shouted.

Another yelp accompanied by a desperate whine.

"Where is he?" Dreya inquired, her heart in her throat.

Thunder loomed in the distance.

"There's a devil of an echo bouncing around up here," Adams said. He cocked his head to one side and pointed left. "Over there...a few yards ahead."

"Stay here."

Dreya raced along the path, following the sound of the dog's terrified yelps. At the cliff's edge, she halted and peered over the side, looking at a straight drop of a hundred feet or more.

"Sebastian?"

Another pitiful whine. She glanced right. About ten feet down, Sebastian stood on his hind legs on a ledge so narrow he had no room for the rest of his body. His front feet clawed at the dirt and tried frantically to gain leverage, but the incline proved too steep. Each time he attempted to climb, the ledge crumbled a little more beneath his weight.

Dreya sank to her knees. "Bastian, no! Do not move!"

The dog stared at her, his round eyes pleading for help. If he slipped off that ledge, he had little chance of surviving.

"Is it as bad as it sounds?"

Dreya twisted around on one knee. Adams stood just behind her. He'd discarded the bandage.

I've met this man before.

The Macgregor's Daughter

She put aside her suspicions. "It's worse. He's on a narrow ledge that won't last long."

Adams squinted, and his eyes watered against the faint light. He blinked hard and refocused. "How can I help if I cannot see any better than this?"

Dreya stood. "Will you be all right until I return?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the castle."

"There's no time. How far down is he?"

"Five or six feet. Maybe less."

He nodded left. "Is that a small tree hanging partially over the cliff?"

"Yes. What are you planning?"

"Something I'm sure I've never done without the full use of my sight. How wide is the ledge?"

"I'm not sure, but it's getting smaller by the second."

"How far across from the tree?"

"Maybe seven feet."

The poor dog let out a feeble whine, and the sound tore at Dreya's heart. "Bastian, my love, please don't move!"

Adams gripped her shoulders and turned her to face him. "Is the tree's roots still attached to the ground?"

She glanced down. "Yes, most of them."

"Splendid. Do you have anything about you I can use as a rope?"

"My cloak...no, I've a sash."

"It'll have to do."

Dreya undid the sash and pressed it into the palm of his hand.

He tested its strength then removed his belt and looped the sash through the buckle.

Dreya swallowed a knot of fear. "If you're thinking about climbing down there—"

"That's exactly what I'm thinking."

"Are you insane?"

"Do you have a better suggestion?"

"Yes! I'm the logical choice."

He shook his head. "Our friend weighs a good sixty pounds, and you lack the strength to carry him back to safety." She opened her mouth, but he gripped her chin and planted a kiss to her lips. "Do not worry, *ma chérie*. I aim to finish what we started this afternoon."

Thunder rumbled in the distance and shook the ground. The approaching storm would be upon them within a matter of minutes.

Adams straddled the tree and hooked his belt around the trunk. The sash end he wound around his right hand before he stepped over the edge of the cliff.

"Be careful," Dreya pleaded.

"Try to keep Sebastian calm."

The dog whimpered again at the mention of his name.

"Be a good fellow, love," she urged in a coaxing tone. "And please do not move."

"Hold tight, *mon ami*, and I'll extract you from this mess before you know it."

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He slid a few feet down. "Dreya, what's this?"

"A vine. It travels down the cliff and well below that ledge, but it doesn't reach back to the top. It appears strong enough to hold your weight, but I cannot be sure."

"Only one way to find out."

Adams yanked hard. The vine loosened, knocking bits of dirt onto the top of his head. He yanked once more, and it swung free. Fortunately, the root remained embedded in the cliff. He wound his left hand around the vine before releasing his hold on the sash then continued downward.

"I see the dog's blurry outline, but I cannot judge distance. Am I directly across from the ledge?"

"Almost."

Lightning flashed overhead, and he covered his eyes.

Another low rumble, closer this time, and the slight mist turned into a drizzle.

Adams continued down the vine, but Sebastian's sharp cry warned he was almost out of time.

"Hurry!" Dreya yelled. "The ledge is crumbling."

Adams pushed away from the cliff, and Dreya held her breath, certain the dog she'd come to love was seconds away from a horrible death. Just as the ledge crumbled into nothing, Lucian Adams swung away from the cliff and caught Sebastian's body between his legs. For one brief moment, pirate and dog glided through the air before both slammed into the face of the cliff.

Sebastian's terrified eyes showed he wasn't quite comfortable with this situation either and he let out a yelp, his front feet clawing the air for solid footing.

"Calm down, *mon ami*," Adams commanded. He reached down, gripped the hair on the back of the dog's neck and hauled him upward.

"How can I help?"

"I'm not sure." Using one knee for support, he wrapped his left arm around the dog's middle while the other held onto the vine. "First, I cannot climb back up this wet vine using only one hand."

"Shouldn't you have considered that problem beforehand?"

"Second," he said, ignoring her remark. "I miscalculated Sebastian's weight. He's about eighty pounds. And third, my ribs aren't near as healed as I'd thought."

"Hold on. I've an idea."

"I hope it's better than my last one."

Dreya lay on her stomach, mud soaking through her cloak. She inched the upper part of her body over the edge. "Can you push him above you just enough for me to reach him?"

"I'll give it a try."

Sebastian's shivering grew worse.

Adams rested the dog's weight upon one knee, and then slid his hand beneath the animal's hind parts. He prodded the dog upward until its rear sat upon his chest. "Now then," he grunted between breaths. "Let's see if he remembers how to climb."

"Bastian," Dreya coaxed. "Come here, love."

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The dog cowered at first, until the instinct for survival took control. He dug his front paws into the embankment and crawled upward.

"A little higher," she urged.

With one last push from Adams, Sebastian came within her reach. Dreya wiped her mud-slicked hands on her skirt and then grabbed the hair on the dog's neck and dragged him to safety.

"You scared me out of my wits." She hugged him close, wet fur and all. "Please don't ever do that again."

Adams clawed his way to safety and rolled onto his back, panting with exhaustion. He lay there with his eyes closed, one arm draped around his ribcage.

A twinge of guilt stung Dreya. She hadn't even offered to help him. "I've never seen anything quite so brave. Thank you."

He wiped the rain from his face and struggled to a sitting position. He untied the sash from his belt and tossed it to her before nodding toward Sebastian. "Is he hurt?"

"No, merely frightened." She ruffled the hair curling around the dog's face.

Lighting flashed across the sky, and a loud crack of thunder followed. Sebastian raised his head, and his breathing stilled just before he bolted from Dreya's embrace.

"He's racing toward the castle."

"A downpour is approaching," Adams warned. "I can hear it drawing closer."

She scrambled to her feet. "Give me your hand."

He stood and did as she requested. "I'm not as quick as our four-legged friend."

"There's a lean-to some yards back," Dreya called over her shoulder. She retraced their steps and headed toward the safety of a thatch of trees in the opposite direction of the cliffs. "I cannot swear to its condition, but it should provide adequate shelter." She picked her way through the trees and soggy underbrush, dragging Adams behind her. "At least until the rain passes."

"I don't mind the rain. It's the damp clothes I object to."

"We're fortunate. If not for our recent mild weather, not only would we be wet, we'd be freezing by now."

"I've no doubt we'll reach that point soon enough."

Dreya's boot sank into the soft ground, and she stumbled.

Adams caught her around the waist. "Are you certain this lean-to exists?"

"It did two years ago."

"You'd best find it soon, *cherie*."

She glanced around, trying to gain some point of reference, but the dark sky interfered with her sense of direction. All of a sudden, she spied an oblong shape jutting out from a steep embankment to her left. "This way."

Dreya pulled him inside the safety of the lean-to seconds before the full force of the storm descended in a torrential downpour. Adams stood with his back to her, his head tilted at an odd angle because of his height.

"There's dry straw beneath our feet," she said. "Would you care to sit?"

He turned. "Indeed."

Dreya removed her cloak and shook the rain from it before spreading it upon the floor. The lean-to smelled of dampness and dirt. She knelt, careful not to

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transfer mud from her boots.

Adams removed his coat and placed it in the opposite corner. He sat down, leaned against the wall, and stretched out his long legs, one boot crossed over the other.

Lightning flashed through the opening of the lean-to, illuminating the inside. Dreya cringed, and the expected clap of thunder shattered the silence a few seconds later.

"It's merely a storm, *cherie*. Nothing to be frightened of."

"I know, but I...well, I've never cared much for these things."

"You are safe with me."

She raised a brow. "Am I?"

With a roguish smile, he leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Why risk your life to save Sebastian?"

"He saved mine. For several weeks now I've longed for some type of strenuous activity other than walking about my room or down to the sea. I had no idea it would overwhelm me all in one afternoon."

Dreya laughed.

"A pleasing sound," he remarked. "Perhaps I should risk my life more often."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm merely teasing you."

Dreya huddled in her corner. Each time lightning flashed, she shuddered. No matter how much she disliked the storm, it offered her the chance to study the man sitting across from her. Mud caked the front of his trousers and his dark hair. Another flash of light revealed his clean white shirt. It appeared out of place with the rest of his soiled and wet attire.

She glanced at her own clothes. Mud caked her boots. If allowed to dry, it would be difficult to remove. She ran her finger around the boot's edge, and then slung the mud away from her. A split second after the deed, she realized Adams sat in the direction of her aim.

Dreya grimaced. "Heavens...I didn't mean to...."

Another flash of lightning. Was he scraping mud from his chin?

She placed her hand over her mouth but couldn't stop the laughter. "I'm sorry, Lucian. I mean, Captain Adams."

He wiped his hand on the leg of his trousers and leaned forward. "Are we not past such formalities?"

"I suppose so. Good heavens, I smell like wet dog."

"I noticed."

She frowned at him. "So do you."

"Is that so?" Adams sprang forward. He snatched her ankles and yanked her along the straw floor. Her bottom came to a halt with the point of his knee nestled squarely between her legs. "I'd enjoy a hot bath, *mademoiselle*." He leaned over her, and a surge of intense heat shot to her core. "Care to join me?"

She steadied her racing heart along with her breathing. "Thank you, *monsieur*, but modesty insists I decline."

He sat back on his haunches and with a calculated slow motion, drew her to a sitting position. Instead of releasing her, he gripped her waist and hauled her upon his lap until her knees straddled his thighs and her hands rested upon his

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shoulders.

"Say it again," he urged, his voice soft.

Shivers danced along her skin.

He inched her knees further apart so that her bottom rested upon his thighs.

"Say my name."

She traced the deep scar at his temple. "Lucian."

He hooked his finger beneath her chin and pulled her mouth to his in a gentle kiss.

Dreya melted into his arms.

His tongue darted inside her mouth, and his hands moved down to caress her backside. His manhood pulsed beneath her.

A fiery heat overwhelmed her, creating a delicious sensation at her core.

Adams broke the kiss in abrupt fashion. "No, *cherie*. Not here." He shook his head. "Not like this."

An honorable pirate?

Trembling, Dreya moved away, disappointment replacing the ecstasy. She had no desire to halt the powerful sensations quivering inside her, but she needed time to consider her emotional state.

"The storm has passed," he said in a casual tone.

Did he refer to what had just happened between them?

She glanced toward the opening. "So it has." She picked up her cloak. "We should go."

He got to his feet and headed outside.

She secured the cloak about her shoulders and followed.

Adams stood a few feet away, fumbling with the bandage to shield his eyes.

"Here, allow me."

"*Merci, mademoiselle*, but I believe I can manage." He touched her cheek, and a crooked smile graced his lips. "What I wouldn't give to see your face clearly."

Dreya's gaze met his. Though watered from the strong light of the sun, his eyes were a beautiful shade of green. The deep color of a summer forest.

All of a sudden time reversed itself, and a blast of cold recognition jolted through her body all the way down to the soles of her feet.

The Marquis of Canderlay! No! How could this be?

Yet the undeniable truth stared back at her. A silent scream lodged in Dreya's throat, and tears burned behind her eyes. Why in heaven's name hadn't she recognized this man sooner?

"There is a definite chill in the air now," he said. After tying the bandage at the back of his head, he offered her his arm. "Ready, *mademoiselle*?"

"Yes," she replied, hoping her voice would not betray the turmoil raging inside her.

When his sight returns, he'll recognize me! No, not unless he regains his memory. How long do I have? Days? Weeks?

How long before this imposter, this man responsible for awakening a need for his touch, traced his own past to a dark night in a secluded garden where she'd dared point a pistol at his chest?

Chapter Eight

Edwina dipped a wooden spoon into a black pot hanging over the fireplace and set about stirring the brew. "A week be mair than enough, lass. 'Tis cold in that dungeon."

"I sent him blankets, and he's well fed, but that's exactly where he'll stay until I decide what to do with him." Dreya turned from the window of the two-room hut Edwina seldom used. "I've instructed the guards to bring him a warm brick at night."

"Thay ur askin' questions."

"Let them. I explained my actions to Fulke."

"Aye, but nae tae his content."

"He understands that I do not trust Captain Adams and he accepts it."

Edwina sighed. "'Tis years since ye've seen th' Englishmon. Perhaps ye'r mistaken."

"Not bloody likely. The mistake belongs to Canderlay. He should've never accused me of spying or hauled me before King George. I tell you, Edwina, the marquis stood no less than two feet away from me." She paced back to the fireplace. "Lucian Adams is that same man. We've nurtured an imposter, and you of all people should have seen through his disguise."

Edwina shrugged but offered no comment in her defense.

"If his hair were shorter...if his face had been clean shaven as before—"

"'Twas kept frae ye fur a reason."

"Exactly. But why? What game does he play?"

"Ye'll ken soon enough."

Dreya halted. "You don't sound the least bit bothered by this turn of events. Did you know his true identity all along?"

The old healer leaned over the pot and sniffed. "A wee bit much o' th' elderberry."

"Edwina, I don't possess the gift of second sight, so please...enlighten me."

"Ye ca' it a gift. Ah deem it a curse. Most times Ah cannae explain mah visions cause thay dinnae mak' sense, but Ah'll nae argie wi' th' One wha gie 'em tae me."

"Steer your visions toward Canderlay. Why would he become a privateer? Does he hope to turn a profit from the war?"

"An Englishmon privateerin' fur th' French?" Edwina chuckled. "Ah expect he'd raither be drawn an' quartered."

"That can be arranged." Dreya plopped down into a nearby chair. "Why would he pretend to be French? The marquis is no dandy out for adventure. He would never...." She gripped the arm of her chair. "God's teeth and bloody hell," she muttered beneath her breath. "I cannot believe I didn't think of it before."

"Whit, child?"

She stared at Edwina. "What if Canderlay's committed the same sin he accused me of five years ago?"

"It wid nae be th' first time th' English sent a mon tae spy oan yer faither, an' Ah suspect it'll nae be th' last."

"How long has he masqueraded as a Frenchman?" Dreya's stomach lurched. "Long enough to have gathered enough information to place Father's neck in an

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English noose ten times over?"

"Na matter whit ye think o' th' mon, he rescued Bastian wi'oot thought fur his ain safety. 'Twas most gallant."

How could Edwina remain so calm? Didn't she realize the consequences if Canderlay returned to England?

"Yes, he acted in an honorable manner for once in his noble life, but that's because he doesn't remember who he is." Dreya bit her lip. "Or does he? When his sight returns and he sees my face...."

He'll remember the way I responded to his touch.

Her stomach quivered.

"Wid ye care fur a cup o' tea, lass?"

"What?"

"Tea."

"Oh, no, thank you. Edwina, what do you suppose King George would've done to me five years ago had he known he held the Macgregor's daughter in the tower?"

"Wha kin say?"

A shiver traveled down Dreya's spine, and she bolted from the chair. "I have several choices here, but allowing Canderlay to leave this island when he's well enough isn't one of them."

"Ye didnae huv tae send him tae th' dungeon, child. That be severe, dinnae ye think?"

"Why are you defending that man? Trust me, he's not worthy of your sympathy."

"Ah've some insight intae his reasoning." The healer dropped a handful of dried leaves into the pot and stirred them about. "In th' colonies, if ye believed a stranger meant tae cause trouble, whit wid ye dae?"

"You mean after I had him arrested?"

The old woman smiled, but her concentration never wavered from the concoction brewing in the pot.

"You've made your point very well, Edwina. Lord Canderlay did what he believed necessary to protect his country, but that doesn't mean I should simply hand him the rope to hang my father with."

"Wait fur Captain Derek, lass."

"Derek will draw the same conclusions. And besides, I doubt my cousin will pay us another visit until next year."

"Twill be sooner than ye think." Edwina's hand stilled over the pot, and the castle's bell tower rang out.

Dreya stared at the woman. If the approaching ship were indeed the *Sea Mistress*, she well understood why the villagers crossed themselves whenever they passed Edwina.

"Go, child. Greet yer cousin but heed this warnin'. Keep certain truths tae yersel'."

"What? Do you not think Derek has a right to know who this French corsair really is?"

"Aye, but 'tis nae his time tae ken such matters."

"Did you not just say a second ago to wait for Derek? And now you wish me to

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lie to him?"

"Huv faith, child. 'Tis nae an easy task tae abandon yer commonsense."

For a fraction of a second, Dreya suspected a touch of madness ran in Edwina Mason's family. Insanity might explain so many things about this woman but not her healing touch. She offered this gift of kindness straight from her heart.

"Go, lass, but keep yer tongue about ye."

She trusted Edwina. So did her father. "All right. I'll do my best, but do not mistake this for a solemn promise."

Edwina cracked a sly smile.

Dreya hurried outside the hut. The tower ceased its warning, and she mounted Pegasus and turned north. After approaching the meadow below the castle, she spied the lowered sails of a tall frigate preparing to enter the dragon's mouth. She reined in the Arabian and shielded her eyes against the setting sun, searching for the ship's standard.

And there it flew, billowing against the fierce winds-- the red, white and blue banner of the *Sea Mistress*.

* * * *

Lucian pulled the thick blanket around his shoulders and leaned back against the wall. For over a week now he'd languished in this damp and decaying prison without so much as an explanation from Dreya Macgregor. What the devil had he said or done to deserve such treatment?

"I dared kiss a Scottish hellfire."

And had been promptly burned. Whether Dreya admitted it or not, at the time she had bloody well enjoyed it. Perhaps therein lay the cause of his current predicament.

He stared into the darkness, the mattress beneath him so thin and rotted the feathers poked through. He expected this sort of treatment the very moment he admitted he was Lucian Adams, so why had she delayed his punishment?

"Because she's a bloody conniving woman," he muttered aloud. "If I get my hands on her again--"

The door at the top of the stairs unbolted and creaked open. A stream of light infiltrated the dungeon.

Lucian got to his feet.

"Edwina, ye ken Ah'm nae allowed tae open his cell," declared a man's rough voice.

"Aye, cease yer belly achin'. Ah've heard it afore."

At the bottom of the stairs, the guard's attention shot to Lucian. "Step back, pirate."

He obeyed.

The man knelt. He raised the slot beside the door and slid a food tray through the narrow opening. "Ye see?" He said to Edwina. "This be so oor prisoner doesnae huv th' chance tae escape."

"Ah'm neither daft nor blind, lad," she snapped. "Go oan wi' ye noo." She smiled at Lucian. "Urr ye weel, Captain Adams?"

"Splendid, madam." He waited until the guard trudged back up the stairs and

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closed the door before adding, "Am I to be given a reason for this treatment?"

"In due time, Ah expect. 'Tis guid yer sense o' humor hasnae failed ye."

"I have little else to keep me company."

She reached inside a pocket of her dress and produced a thin key.

Lucian grinned. "Madam Edwina, you are a resourceful woman."

She chuckled. "Some o' th' men folk oan this island believe Ah'm auld an' feeble-minded, sae Ah dinnae wish tae disappoint 'em." She unlocked the cell and pulled open the door. "Whit a fine deed ye done savin' Bastian. Ah expect th' lass will nae forgit such bravery."

"Nor does she reward it." Lucian picked up the tray and set it on the cot. "What do we have here?"

"Thir's beef stew, fresh baked breid, an' sweet cakes wi' a pot o' fresh brewed tea."

"*Merci*, but at the moment, I've not much of an appetite. Unless you care to explain why your mistress imprisoned me."

"Ah wish it wur that simple, lad, but ye'll come tae na harm. Ah swear it. Noo, whit o' yer eyes? Any pain?"

"No, this dungeon is quite suitable in that respect. In fact, it blocks all light, and I've no use for the blindfold. On the other hand, your lantern's glow distorts my vision."

She turned down the wick. "Yer sight will clear as yer eyes grow stronger. But sit doon. Ah've somethin' fur ye."

"I heard the warning from the tower. Has the Macgregor returned?"

"Na, 'twas th' *Sea Mistress*." She tilted his head back. "Close yer eyes."

"The name sounds familiar. Who captains her?"

"Captain Derek Reed frae th' colonies, but Ah expect ye've met afore."

"Why do you say that?"

"Urr ye nae a French privateer?"

"I am, but...are you implying the Macgregor is involved with smuggling weapons to the colonies? That would be—"

"Treason. Aye. But th' laird's business is his ain, an' Ah'll nae stick mah nose in whit doesnae concern me." She placed something metal across the bridge of his nose and hooked wired ends around his ears.

"Madam Edwina, am I wearing spectacles?"

"Aye, Captain Adams. Noo then. Open yer eyes."

Lucian obeyed. A sinking feeling crawled into the hollow of his gut. "My vision has worsened."

"Na, 'tis merely a trick o' th' mind," Edwina assured him. She turned up the lantern's wick. "Th' lens in yer spectacles wur replaced wi' dark-colored gless."

Lucian slid them up and down his nose while he focused on the lantern. "*Oui*, I see the difference."

He readjusted the spectacles to a better fit before scrutinizing the woman before him. Except for her round face, shadows hid most of her features. She'd coifed her white hair into a tidy bun at the nape of her neck, and dark, somber clothing covered her small body.

"Weel?" she insisted. "Will thay dae?"

"They certainly will, madam. That is, if I ever glimpse the light of day again."

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"Ye'll be free afore long."

Lucian remained skeptical. "You're not only an extraordinary healer, but an exceptional inventor as well."

"Na, Ah cannae accept praise fur this. 'Twas th' blacksmith's youngest son wha came tae me wi' th' idea some time ago." She rummaged through her pockets. "Born wi' an affliction o' th' eyes, he saw weel enough by nicht, but th' licht o' day caused him pain. 'Twas by mere chance he learned that by lookin' through tinted gless, his pain eased fair enough."

"What led him to this discovery?"

Edwina fished something from her pocket and placed it in the palm of his hand. "Drops fur yer eyes," she explained before continuing her story. "After a nicht o' drinkin', th' lad awoke in his da's stables wi' th' harsh light o' th' sun burnin' his eyes. He rolled o'er an' found a bottle o' th' Macgregor's finest lyin' neist tae him."

"So his spectacles and mine," a faint grin tugged at the corner of Lucian's mouth, "both were fashioned from a whiskey bottle?"

"Aye, an' Ah wid huv ne'er believed it if Ah hud nae watched th' lad's faither craft 'em mah-sel."

"Makes you feel rather special, doesn't it?" asked a masculine voice from the top of the stairs.

Lucian turned. A slender gentleman headed down the stairs.

"And you must be an exceptional gent," the man added in a lazy drawl. "Otherwise Dreya never would've given you my bedroom."

Lucian stood. "This horrible place is your bedroom?"

"On occasion." The man strolled through the cell door. "But that's not the room I meant."

Lucian studied the uniform. "You must be Captain Reed."

"I am indeed." He turned to the healer. "Hello, Edwina, my love. Have you missed me?"

"Lik' a sore tooth, lad, but 'tis guid ye'r back." She patted Lucian's arm. "Ah'll lea th' lantern fur ye."

"Will you not need it to find your way back?"

"Nothin' wrong wi' mah eyes," she replied with a chuckle.

After Edwina left the dungeon, Reed inquired, "What kind of spectacles are those?"

"An ingenious invention. They were fashioned from a whiskey bottle."

"Amazing, but your sight will eventually return, will it not?"

"So I've been told. Forgive me, Captain Reed, but...have we met?"

"Met? Hell, Lucian, we've drunk enough Scottish whiskey to sink a British man-of-war. Dreya warned me of your condition, but I never expected your memory would have so many holes in it."

Lucian sensed he'd shared more with this man than just whiskey, but it would be foolish to trust a friendship he didn't remember.

"Captain Reed—"

"Forget the formalities. Call me Derek."

A flood of random memories flashed through Lucian's mind, each one triggering a certain sound or smell. The onslaught left him confused and dizzy.

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Derek Reed. Tall. Fair-haired. Brown eyes. Devilish grin. Admired by the ladies. An officer in the Continental Navy. Captain of the Sea Mistress. Prefers cigars to pipe tobacco. Terrible shot with a pistol but a decent opponent with a sword.

"This probably isn't very important," Reed added in a matter-of-fact tone, "but what the hell did you do to Dreyer?"

"I'm not sure."

"She doesn't trust you, and I'm wondering why."

"She should. I suspect her father and I are smuggling allies."

"Not quite. It's mostly you and I."

"How long have we known one another?"

"Two years. We met in a tavern in—"

"Cherbourg," Lucian finished. "You needed a French privateer with a wealthy benefactor."

Reed nodded. "While your crew transferred the gunpowder and other weapons to the *Sea Mistress*, you and I would set a future date for the next rendezvous."

In his mind's eye, Lucian conjured up the *Falcon*. He'd stood on deck while his men struggled to roll heavy barrels up an unsteady gangplank. "And the Macgregor?"

"Hates the English with a fierce passion. He offered his dragon ships as a go between, but I rarely used them."

"His risk is greater."

"Exactly."

Lucian sifted through a maze of newfound memories. Some came through in a disjointed state. Others appeared connected. No recollection of the Macgregor's face came to mind, but he sensed something important lurked in a dark corner. Something hidden so well he couldn't quite reach it.

"I'm sorry to hear about the *Falcon*," Reed said. "Are you the only survivor?"

"Apparently." Guilt squeezed Lucian's chest. "My men were an able crew. Some had families...wives and children."

"They accepted the risks when they accepted the job."

Lucian could see himself seated behind the desk in his cabin, recording sets of figures on a page inside a logbook. "We carried 15 ton of round shot plus another 20 ton of gunpowder in the hold." Fragments of his past kept falling into place, but they came almost too fast to comprehend. "My look-out spotted the *Predator* near dusk. The *Dragon Master* lay hidden off our port side, so I signaled her captain to make his escape."

"Quinn aimed his guns toward the *Falcon*?"

Lucian nodded. "She rode too low in the water. No chance of escape."

"Did he recognize the dragon ship?"

"I'm not sure."

"In what direction did she turn?"

Lucian searched through his thoughts until he found what he needed. "North. Straight back into a fierce storm both ships weathered a few hours earlier."

His memory regarding that particular event cleared somewhat, but he still couldn't visualize Ethan Macgregor's face.

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"You gave the Scottish vessel a chance by placing the *Falcon* between her and the *Predator*," Reed said. "I would have done the same."

"I suppose it doesn't matter what I did. The *Dragon Master* is long overdue, and the Macgregor is likely dead."

"Christ, I hope not. I sailed back into this part of the world to bring good tidings, not mourn a friend."

"There's good news?"

"There certainly is. Do you recall a British general by the name of Cornwallis?"

Charles Cornwallis of Suffolk. Born December, seventeen hundred thirty eight. The eldest son of an earl. Educated at Eton and Clare College, Cambridge. Became an ensign in the First Grenadier Guards just before his eighteenth birthday.

Lucian knew a great deal more about the Englishman, but he couldn't say why. "My mind isn't a complete blank. What about him?"

"Several weeks ago, General Cornwallis marched his troops to the coast at Yorktown. He figured the town could be used as a supply base for the Royal Navy. I suspect with General Washington at his rear and your French Fleet waiting ahead of him, he realized he had no choice but to surrender."

Apprehension crawled inside Lucian's gut.

"That's right, my friend," Reed added. "During your prolonged recuperation on this Godforsaken spit of land, you missed the end of the war."

Chapter Nine

Dreya bit into a slice of buttered bread. To her right sat Edwina, sipping a bowl of broth. To her left, Fulke appeared content with dissecting a leg of mutton. Derek sat beside him, stuffing a chunk of beef into his mouth.

"Huv ye misplaced yer ship's cook?" Edwina teased.

"If only that were true, love."

"Let th' mon be, woman," Fulke scolded. "Eatin' th' same grub day efter day aboard ship gives him th' richt tae overfill his belly frae time tae time."

"Thank you, Fulke." Derek shifted his attention to Dreya. "You look older."

"Is this your way of handing out a compliment?"

"Sorry, poor choice of words. I meant you appear more gently bred with your hair piled atop your head. Your gown suits you as well." His brown eyes twinkled. "It fits in all the right places."

"I'm glad you approve," Dreya said with a smirk.

"Now that the war is over, I think I'll bring Mother here for a visit."

"Oh, Derek, that would be wonderful."

"Ah expect this island is a micht different than th' lady's plantation in th' colonies," Fulke remarked between bites.

"Yes, the weather here is more harsh than Virginia."

The conversation turned to the ordinary, and Dreya sipped tea and allowed her thoughts to stray. She'd caught Canderlay off guard by throwing him into the dungeon. Every day he demanded she visit him, and each time she refused, afraid he'd ask too many questions.

She couldn't avoid her cousin so easily. He watched her with a puzzled expression. Before long, he'd demand answers.

"Dreya?"

She blinked. "Yes?"

"You've been preoccupied all evening," Derek stated. "Is something troubling you?"

"I'm worried about Father."

"Ethan will turn up sooner or later. Now the laird's sheepdog is another story. Fulke mentioned the unfortunate accident."

"Yes, we almost lost the poor scoundrel."

"Since he's not chained to the dungeon wall, I suppose you locked him in the attic to atone for his crimes?"

"No, cousin, I'm not that cruel."

He grinned. "At least not to dogs."

"Bastian's cowerin' in th' stables," Edwina remarked. "He'll nae brave th' cliffs again sae soon."

Derek chuckled. "Lucian is quite the braggart, but his rescue of the dog sounds extraordinary."

"Aye," Fulke agreed. "Th' wey he tellt it, Ah'd huv wagered both o' 'em wid huv ended up oan th' rocks below th' cliff."

Dreya frowned. "You spoke with Adams?"

The Scotsman hesitated. "Weel, Ah didnae think thare wid be any harm in it."

"Did I not specifically state he should have no visitors?"

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"Aye, mistress, ye did, but that didnae stop Edwina 'ere."

"Och, Fulke, kin ye nae keep yer mouth closed whin it doesnae concern ye?" The old woman turned her irritation toward Dreya. "Whit's gotten intae ye, lass? Ye ken Bastian wid nae huv survived if Captain Adams hud nae saved him."

Dreya bristled. She understood Fulke's reaction but not Edwina's. The healer knew the imposter's true identity, and not only did she continue to refer to him as Captain Adams, she also heaped undue praise upon the man.

She pushed her plate aside and stood. "If you'll excuse me, I believe I need some fresh air."

Derek stood as well. "I'll accompany you."

"That won't be necessary."

Before he could object, Dreya exited the dining room. She dashed through the kitchen crowded with servants and out the castle's rear entrance. She didn't stop until she reached the stone garden. Under the full moon, the statues of ancient lords riding mythical dragons created an eerie scene.

She leaned against the wall. Wave after wave broke against the rocks below. The violence of the turbulent sea matched her seething anger.

Why did Canderlay have to wash ashore on this island? *Her* island? Was fate really that cruel?

A gust of wind swirled around her, tugging at her gown and whipping strands of her hair across her eyes. A bone-jarring shiver rushed over her, and she wrapped her arms about her body.

I cannot keep him in the dungeon indefinitely.

Edwina would never agree to such harsh treatment, but then Edwina didn't know the devious Marquis of Canderlay.

Dreya did. All too well.

A heavy coat settled across her shoulders, and she turned to find Derek beside her. "I have no idea why any sane person would refer to this place as a garden." He glanced around. "It's nothing more than a niche carved out of rock, and it has no chance of ever sustaining plant life."

"It's not that sort of garden, but merely a place to enjoy the view in peace and solitude."

"Indeed. I never grow tired of standing in this particular spot. On a clear day a man can see for miles." He faced her. "What's really bothering you, cousin."

"I told you. I'm worried about Father."

"I heard you the first time, but Ethan has disappeared before without sending word. Why is this time any different?"

"I...I'm not sure."

"You sent the *Dragonfly* in search of him?"

"Yes, but I've not received word from Captain Finnegan."

"I'm sure your father is fine." His silence lasted several seconds. "Have you read the letters from Mother?"

"Yes. Aunt Katherine is rather annoyed with you for sending her home."

"Now that the war is over, our tobacco plantation needs her far more than the hospital in Philadelphia."

"She feels useful nursing the sick. And now you've taken that away from her."

"She can be just as useful in Virginia."

The Macgregor's Daughter

"Where she'll see even less of you? Can you not understand she's lonely?"

"Which is why I sent her home." Derek frowned, impatience crinkling his brow. "The sea is my life now, Dreya. I make port once or twice a year, if that."

"I'm very happy for you, cousin, but the point is Richmond is over two hundred miles from Philadelphia."

"At least Mother will be among friends there."

"You speak of Aunt Katherine as if she were a child in need of proper guidance."

"That's not true."

"She can do whatever she likes."

"Dreya—"

"And she can live wherever she bloody well pleases."

"Have you finished ranting, cousin?"

She shrugged.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather you stay out of this matter." He held up his hand to quell any further argument. "And here's another thought for you to chew on. If you'd write Mother more often, she would be less concerned with what I'm doing."

"I write her a letter every month," Dreya defended, indignation settling with a thud in the pit of her stomach. "Is it my fault they are posted but once a year?"

"My apologies, and I promise to give her situation further thought." His stern expression relaxed. "How is Lord Hawthorne?"

"Father says Uncle Charles is doing well, but since we cannot write one another...." A lump formed in her throat, and she changed the subject. "Do you truly believe you can convince Aunt Katherine to visit Dragon's Breath?"

"I believe so. Now, about Lucian...." He kissed the top of her head, his breath ruffling her hair. "Why is he sitting in your dungeon?"

"It's quite simple. I don't trust him."

"He's a French corsair, Dreya. Not your enemy. And if your father were here, he'd say the same."

"Then you'd both be wrong."

"What do you mean?"

Edwina's earlier warning prevented any further explanation.

"Just as I thought," Derek quipped. "At any rate, Lucian's memory is on the mend."

Her insides quivered with trepidation. "He told you this?"

"No, but I witnessed it firsthand."

"He's remembered something about my father?"

"Yes. He told me the Macgregor was alive and well when they last parted company."

"Do you believe him?"

Derek cocked his head to one side. "Why the despondent look upon yer bonny face, lass?" he teased in a Scottish brogue. "I would think you'd be relieved the man you've nursed back to health is not only my friend but someone the Macgregor trusts as well."

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts.

"Release him, Dreya."

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"I cannot."

"Why?"

"You'll have to trust me, Derek."

"Lucian swears the last time he saw the *Dragon Master*, she'd headed back into a storm. Are you willing to blame him for something he couldn't control?"

"No, I'm simply pointing out we've his word and nothing else."

"Why would he lie?"

"Why indeed?"

Derek's brown eyes narrowed to slits. "You're hiding something from me, cousin, and I'd like to know what it is."

Dreya entwined her fingers to keep from balling her fists. Forget Edwina and her misguided sense of loyalty to Canderlay. For the sake of her conscience and for the people she loved more than anything else, the logical choice seemed simple.

"By your own admission," she said, choosing her words with care, "you've known Adams a short time. You have no idea what wrongs he committed before that."

"If any," Derek argued. "But considering the fact that I've known you much longer, I would never have guessed you were once branded a spy."

"That was a mistake, and you well know it."

"On your part, yes, but you're right, Dreya. I'm probably not a very good judge of character. And speaking of not making good decisions, what the hell were you thinking aiming a shot at Jonas Quinn?"

"He goaded me."

"I don't doubt that, but did you pause to think you were an easy mark standing atop that hideous dragon monument?"

"Oh, that Fulke. He cannot keep his mouth shut. Derek, you have no right to judge me in this matter. If my father were here, he would applaud my actions."

"When Ethan finds out what you did, he'll turn you over his knee."

"Not bloody likely. I am not a woman who cowers beneath the bedcovers."

"You are not a woman but a girl."

Anger snaked up her backbone, and harsh words flew to the tip of her tongue. Somehow she held them back. "I do not need to justify my actions to you."

"And Lucian didn't have to risk his life to rescue your dog, but he did. Shouldn't that one good deed poke holes through your suspicions?"

"I'm very grateful he saved Sebastian, but there's something you should know. Something I—"

"Mistress Macgregor?"

Dreya whirled around. "Here."

Fulke appeared from behind a dragon statue. "Pardon me, mistress, but Ah'll be takin' mah lea noo tae staun watch in th' tower."

"Very well. Has Edwina retired for the evening?"

"Ah expect sae."

"Thank you, Fulke. Good night then."

"Guid nicht, mistress." He nodded to Derek. "Captain Reed."

"Pleasant evening to you, Fulke." When they were alone again, he turned to Dreya. "Now, what were you saying?"

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She shook her head. "Perhaps we should postpone the rest of this argument until later."

"If that's what you wish."

"It is."

He tucked her arm beneath his and headed toward the rear door of the castle. "I neglected to mention I've a gift for you. I think you'll enjoy this one much better than the one I gave you last year."

"I happen to love the lilac soaps from Paris."

"Wait till you see the dragon dagger I purchased for you. I found it in a quaint little shop in Dublin."

"Derek, we're not blood related. You're under no obligation to—"

"A simple 'thank you' will do nicely."

Dreya grimaced. "Thank you. I'm sure I'll love it."

He smiled. "Haven't you learned by now the details of your birth are unimportant to those who love you?"

Heat rushed to her cheeks. "I...I didn't mean to sound so...."

"Prudish?" He laughed low. "Don't worry, Dreya. You're still my favorite cousin."

"I'm your only cousin, Derek."

He pinched her cheek. "Such an intelligent lass."

At the rear entrance, he opened the heavy door and ushered her inside. The kitchen stood deserted. "I believe I'll visit the village tavern this evening." He removed a cigar and tin of matches from his breast coat pocket. "Shall I bring back a bottle of whiskey for Lucian?"

"I suppose there's no harm in that." Dreya removed his coat and handed it back. "Have you informed your pirate friend that you and I are cousins?"

"No, he doesn't know we're related." Derek struck the match. He lit one end of the cigar and puffed. "Unless your people told him."

"I doubt they would. Most of the islanders would rather give up their lives than reveal any secrets."

"Or snuff out a man's life in order to keep those secrets."

Dreya hated to admit it, but Derek made a good point. No telling what the villagers would do to Canderlay if they discovered his true identity. Not that the marquis's safety concerned her in the least, but she didn't quite possess the stomach for lynching a man either.

"Why the long face?" Derek inquired. "I thought you'd be pleased Ethan's smuggling days ended with the war."

"I am, but that doesn't mean he can never be held accountable for what he smuggled during the war. And if your corsair friend ever regains his memory—"

"It won't matter."

"Unless he's not who he pretends to be."

"What do you mean? Dreya, what the devil is going on between you and Lucian?"

"Nothing. Oh, bloody hell, he's a pirate. Isn't that reason enough to dislike him?"

"Privateer," Derek corrected. "And no, it isn't." His hands rested on the top of her shoulders, keeping her in place. "Has he acted improperly with you?"

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"What a ridiculous notion. The question itself is improper."

"Is that so?" He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her along behind him to the back staircase.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting to the bottom of this."

"What? Where are we going?"

"To the dungeon," Derek replied in a somber tone.

* * * *

She kept her distance.

Lucian sensed her fear.

Perhaps she suspected his vision improved a little more each day, and some misguided sense of vanity played a part in her actions. But conceit didn't belong to a woman whose razor sharp tongue never shied away from offering a one-sided opinion. No, he didn't consider Dreya Macgregor a vain woman.

Untrustworthy?

Without a doubt.

He glared at her through the bars of his cell. "To what, or to whom, do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"You can thank me later," Reed quipped. "At the moment, I'm more interested in why there's so much animosity between you and my...." He cleared his throat. "Between you and this lass."

"I cannot speak for Mistress Macgregor." Lucian glanced around his cell. "But my current predicament has a great deal to do with my sour disposition."

His vixen paced in the shadows. Even though his anger had long since reached the breaking point, he'd have liked nothing better than to pull her into his arms and taste her lips again.

Fearing his manhood might betray his thoughts, Lucian glared at the woman. He suspected she glared back. Finally, she threw up her hands and headed up the long flight of stairs.

"Come back here, Dreya," Reed growled.

She spun around. "This is ridiculous, Derek. I have no idea why you brought me down here. This pirate...." She pointed her finger at Lucian. "This...rogue corsair...is an arrogant brute who derives great pleasure in using false pleasantry to dupe others. Needless to say, I'm not very fond of him."

"And you, *mademoiselle*, are a deceitful wench," Lucian countered. "Perhaps if you were turned over your father's knee more often, you wouldn't have become so spoiled."

"You see," she ranted to Reed. "He lacks even the simplest of good manners."

Had she directed her anger toward him because he declined what she offered in the lean-to? Or did the presence of Derek Reed prompt a guilty conscience?

Reed plopped down in a rickety chair. The aroma of his cigar wafted about the damp dungeon. "What I see, Dreya," he said between puffs, "is nothing I care to."

"Then you are as blind as this buffoon," she retorted.

The casual familiarity between them disturbed Lucian, and that fact angered him even more than this damp, cold dungeon. Had she allowed Reed a tender

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kiss? Had she shown him the same eagerness?

Reed ground out his cigar. "Lucian, how about riding down to the village with me? We'll celebrate the end of the war with the rest of the commoners."

"Absolutely not. He's my prisoner."

"Yes, and I'll take good care of him."

"I forbid you to release him."

Reed sighed. "Do you know what you need, lass?"

Her hands shifted to her hips in an act of defiance. "Not one bloody thing."

"A husband."

"To put me in my place?"

"To keep you out of trouble," Reed replied. "Which reminds me...how old are you now?"

She turned and stomped up the stairs. The iron door slammed shut, and the echo bounced around the walls of the dungeon for several seconds.

Reed stood. "That's the best way I know to get rid of her." He pulled a flask from the pocket of his coat and walked over to Lucian. "This brandy isn't the smoothest I've ever drank and certainly not what you're used to."

"Do I look as though I'd refuse such a generous offer?"

"Not at the moment." Reed handed the flask through the bars. "Forgive me, my friend, but I neglected to bring a glass."

"I'm not particular." Lucian unscrewed the top of the flask and turned it up.

"It's a shame you cannot accompany me to the village tavern."

"Oh, but I can." Lucian pushed against his cell door, and it swung open without so much as a creak.

"You picked the lock," Reed exclaimed low. "The same way you did when that Spanish tart shackled you to her bed. Lord, if I hadn't sailed to your rescue—"

"My memory is still rather foggy, but not to that degree. As I recall that noteworthy problem was yours, not mine."

Reed grinned. "So it was."

"As to my small amount of freedom, Madam Edwina brought my supper earlier, and she neglected to turn the key in the lock."

"How convenient."

"Wasn't it?"

"You may have settled one problem, my friend...." Reed's gaze drifted toward the top of the stairs. "But what the devil do we do about the large Scotsman standing guard outside that door?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

Lucian smiled. "On how much whiskey we get him to drink."

Chapter Ten

"I will not help you escape, my corsair friend," Reed declared in a low tone of voice.

Lucian's attention drifted about the crowded tavern. "Then what are we doing here?"

"Giving you a few hours reprieve."

"I requested freedom. Not a temporary stay of execution."

Reed grunted. "Dreya's right. You are arrogant."

"Speaking of *mademoiselle*, if she discovers that poor devil passed out in my cot, she'll send the entire castle after us."

"Forget Dreya. She's likely abed by now."

Lucian adjusted his spectacles. Most of the patrons were Reed's crew, and the villagers paid him no mind. Perfect, for his plans didn't include returning to that filthy dungeon any time soon.

Reed drained his glass and motioned to a barmaid. She brought out another bottle and set it between them.

"You know, Lucian, Edwina Mason is a crafty old woman but very strange. You speak her name to any man or woman on this island and before you can close your mouth, they've crossed themselves twice."

"Most people are frightened by what they don't understand."

"Especially these folks. I'm really quite fond of Edwina but just between you, me and this bottle of whiskey, I wouldn't care to anger her."

"You make it sound as though she has nothing better to do than go about casting spells upon innocent victims."

"I'm not accusing her of anything evil. I just think she's a bit odd."

"How do you mean?"

"Take for instance what happened earlier this year."

"You'll have to be more specific," Lucian stated.

"I hope this problem with your memory doesn't persist much longer."

"I apologize for the inconvenience."

Reed leaned back in his chair, the fingers of his right hand toying with the rim of his glass. "When the *Sea Mistress* departed Groix Roads in late March, it was to escort an old French East Indiaman, the *Marquis de Lafayette*. An American agent chartered her to carry a cargo of arms and uniforms to the Continental Army."

Another memory clicked into place.

"I seem to recall you didn't quite trust the French captain," Lucian said. "But what has this to do with Madam Edwina?"

"When I visited Dragon's Breath a few weeks earlier, she warned me about a Frenchman who wasn't who he pretended to be."

"Did she give you his name?"

"Lucian, we've spoken about this once before, and you asked me the same question then."

"Humor me."

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Reed offered an impatient sigh. "Edwina didn't say much about this mysterious Frenchman, but when I met the *De Lafayette's* captain, let's just say instinct told me he was the man she warned me about."

"I assume there's more?"

Reed downed half his whiskey. "We ran into a nasty storm a few days at sea. Lightning shattered the *Sea Mistress's* main topmast and carried away her main yard. Her foremast was damaged as well. We were in the middle of repairs when my lookout spotted the American frigate, *Alliance*. Captain Barry pulled alongside and offered aid, but I had the situation under control. I was, however, concerned about the delay along with my ship's inability to defend the *De Lafayette* should the need arise."

"So the *Alliance* took your place as escort?"

Reed nodded. "But it seems I miscalculated the damage to my ship. She needed extensive repairs, and Cherbourg wasn't more than a few days back."

Lucian stared into his glass. He'd sat at a small table in one corner of a tavern filled with foul smelling seamen who'd either just arrived or were ready to depart. The very moment he spotted Derek Reed, he pushed an overzealous female from his lap. The first thought rattling through his rum-soaked mind?

Do not waste this opportunity.

"But I've gotten away from my point about Edwina's uncanny warning," Reed added. "And now comes the part of the story you haven't heard. I reached Philadelphia back in late June, and the *Alliance* sat in port. I asked Captain Barry about the French ship he'd escorted in my place. You'll never believe what he told me."

"She never reached port."

"Exactly." Reed placed his forearms upon the table and leaned forward. "In early April, they had a run-in with a couple of British brigs. Two salvos from the *Alliance* robbed the larger vessel, *Mars*, of her rigging and forced her to strike her colors. Barry ordered the *De Lafayette's* captain to attend her while he pursued and captured the second brig, *Minerva*."

A strange sensation curled inside Lucian's gut.

"The *Mars*, though badly damaged, was repaired and sent on to Philadelphia under the American crew. The *Minerva*, crewed by the *De Lafayette*, was ordered to head there as well, but the traitorous French captain—"

"The man Madam Edwina warned you about?"

"Yes. He had another plan in mind. On the evening of April eighteenth, the *Minerva* slipped away, and the *Marquis de Lafayette* disappeared a few nights later. God only knows where Captain Barry's prize ended up."

The Bay of Biscay.

Lucian had received word of the incident. Why? He could only hazard a guess. He ran his hands through his hair, his heart pounding with anxiety. He didn't want to believe he possessed the disloyal qualities of a traitor, yet the last few minutes convinced him that certain events from his past might prove otherwise.

"On a rainy night in early April," Reed continued, "we limped back into Cherbourg, and I found you at Madam Dumont's."

"Who?"

"It's a quaint little establishment about a mile from the docks. You had a

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bottle of rum in one hand and a lovely wench in the other.”

“What did we discuss?”

“How would I know? You tossed her out of your lap before I had a chance to—”

“I meant you and me,” Lucian retorted.

“Oh, well, mostly business. You informed me your wealthy benefactor planned on purchasing a large shipment of gunpowder and other arms from Spain, but the transaction would take several months to complete. I explained my ship needed a few repairs, and I wouldn’t return to Cherbourg until early next year.”

Lucian could almost hear their conversation word for word. “I asked you where to store the shipment, and you mentioned a Scottish contact.”

“Yes, and I introduced you to Ethan Macgregor a week later.”

“Aboard the *Sea Mistress*.”

“Seems your past closes the distance a little more each time we speak.”

If back to normal meant he was a French traitor, Lucian didn’t wish to recall the rest.

Reed topped off both their glasses then held his up in salute. “Shall we drink to loyalty?”

Lucian raised his glass. “To the *Falcon* and her crew.”

And may the devil lay claim to my wretched soul if I’ve willingly caused their demise.

“To the *Falcon*’s crew,” Reed echoed.

Lucian drained his glass and set it aside. “What do you suppose became of the Macgregor?”

“I don’t know, but I intend to find out. I’ll start at Glasgow and work my way up the coast.”

“I realize it’s slightly out of your way, but would you mind taking me to Cherbourg?”

“Lucian....”

“If *mademoiselle* is the cause of your hesitation, we won’t inform her of our plans.”

Reed rubbed the stubble on his chin.

“If we leave tonight, no one will discover my absence until morning.”

“There’s one small problem. Each time a ship enters or leaves the narrow inlet below the castle, the bell tower sounds a warning. Since Dreya expects me to stay a few days, the very first thing she’ll do when she hears that warning—”

“She’ll check the dungeon,” Lucian finished, his hopes draining faster than their bottle of whiskey.

“And with you gone, she’ll suspect I aided in your escape. I’ve no wish to break her trust.”

Lucian didn’t plan to give up. “*Mademoiselle* believes me a cad, so I’ll offer her an apology and beg her forgiveness.”

“An apology?” A smirk formed at one corner of Reed’s mouth. “If you think that’s enough to purchase your freedom, you are truly feeble-minded, my friend. You’ll be right back in that cold, musty little cell fighting off the rats before one word of objection slips from your lips.”

“It’s worth a try.”

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"Not from where I'm sitting. Why are you in such a hurry to return to Cherbourg?"

"Because Cherbourg is familiar, and it's the last place the *Falcon* made port. If I wish to recover my past, that's the place to start." Lucian studied the other man's slender build. "By the way, I wonder if I might borrow your uniform jacket."

"May I ask why?"

"It's probably best not to. Oh, and I'll need your captain's hat."

"Should I ready my ship to sail with the tide?"

"That would be wise."

Apologizing to Dreya Macgregor didn't concern Lucian. His intentions were to make damn sure she couldn't sound the alarm before the American ship reached the open seas.

"Very well, my corsair friend." Reed downed the rest of his whiskey. "I'll go along with this mad scheme because I owe you, but I'm warning you right now...." He removed his jacket and hat and handed them over. "I'm laying odds against you coming back alive."

* * * *

Lucian drove the cart around the back of the castle to the stables. He set the brake, stuffed the rope inside his borrowed jacket, and hopped down.

A young man approached. "Ah'll see tae th' cart an' horse, Captain Derek. Best hurry inside afore thay snib th' door."

Lucian kept his hat low over his face and pretended to be too far into his cups to make polite conversation. He staggered toward the rear entrance to the castle and stumbled through the garden. The wind howled a mournful tune, and the dead eyes of stone statues watched with silent indignation.

Perhaps he had consumed a little too much whiskey after all. How else could he explain the eerie sensations crawling up his backbone?

He slipped inside the back door. No light. No servants.

Lucian eased the door shut, coaxed the bolt into place, and then crept toward the front of the castle. Darkness encompassed the main foyer, but a faint light glimmered beneath the door to one of the rooms beyond the huge staircase. He'd have to pass by that room in order to reach the back stairs.

He watched his step, careful not to bump into anything or make the slightest noise. Halfway to his destination, something creaked behind him. He whirled around. One of the massive front doors inched open and then slammed shut against its frame.

"Derek?"

Her voice came from the very room he needed to slip past.

Lucian raced toward the back staircase. He just reached it before the door opened, and light filtered into the foyer.

"Derek?"

Dreya Macgregor hesitated in the doorway, so close he could smell the lilac. Finally, she walked across the foyer and beyond his limited view.

"Whit urr ye daein', lass?" Edwina's voice called from somewhere above him.

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"I thought I heard a noise."

The front door banged against its frame with more force this time, and he feared others would come to investigate.

"That's what I heard. A servant must have let Sebastian outside and left the door ajar."

"Aye, 'tis likely whit happened."

The bolt slid into place with a resounding clang.

Lucian released a pent-up breath. He hadn't counted on the old healer strolling about the castle past the hour of ten o'clock. Could she sense his presence?

"If ye'r waitin' fur Captain Derek, Ah spotted him frae mah windae a few moments ago."

"Really? I wonder how I missed him?"

"Mayhap he returned tae th' dungeon."

The light grew stronger near the foot of the stairs, and Lucian receded further into the shadows.

"Yes, I'm certain Derek and his arrogant friend are having a jolly good time together."

"Ye'r nae thinkin' o' gaun doon thare, urr ye?"

"Do you think I should?"

"Weel.... whit harm kin thay dae?"

"Plenty. Edwina, may I borrow your candle?"

The faint light vanished in an instant.

"Och, child. That wis clumsy o' me."

"No, it was my fault. Stay here. I'll grab another candle."

Lucian offered a silent prayer of gratitude and hurried down to the dungeon.

* * * *

Dreya lit a candle and returned to the foyer, but Edwina had disappeared. "I had no idea she could move that fast."

She headed around to the back staircase and then down the tiers of zigzag steps. Normally a guard sat posted outside the iron door. Not tonight. Perhaps he'd stepped away to relieve himself.

Dreya unlatched the bolt and pulled the door ajar. A cold, musty dampness rushed to meet her. The room below reeked of rot and decay. And death. She shuddered. If she hadn't been so angry earlier, she would've detected the harsh smell when Derek dragged her down here.

Guilt pricked her conscience. This place wasn't fit for an animal, much less a man. She wasn't a cruel person, but Canderlay exposed a flaw in her character she couldn't explain.

She hesitated on the top step, peering into the darkness below. "Derek?"

"Here," came a muffled reply.

Dreya inched down the stairway. The candle flickered with each step. At the bottom, the faint light illuminated a portion of Canderlay's cell, and he shielded his eyes. She set the candle on the floor but kept her distance.

"Good evening, *mademoiselle*. I didn't think you'd visit again so soon."

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"Where's Derek?"

He jerked his head toward the cot. "Passed out."

"And the guard I placed outside this room?"

"I sent him to find you. Much as I admire Captain Reed, I have no wish to share my bed with him."

Dreya studied the figure sleeping on a small bed. A uniform jacket lay draped over his chest, but a captain's hat hid his face. A thick blanket covered the rest of his body. She couldn't determine if this man resembled Derek or a sack of potatoes.

She stared at Canderlay. "I met no one coming up the stairs."

He shrugged, infuriating her further.

"What can I do? Even if I managed to stand Derek upright, I cannot get him to his room on my own."

"I'd offer to help, but I'm sure you'd decline."

Something wasn't right. Derek rarely passed out no matter how much he drank.

"I'd better find the guard."

"Suit yourself."

Dreya turned in the direction of the stairs but then remembered the candle. Before she reached it, Canderlay grabbed her from behind. She screamed.

His hand clamped over her mouth, and his arm circled the small of her waist. He squeezed her ribs, forcing the air from her lungs, reminding her of that night in the palace garden.

"Not a sound, *cherie*," he whispered against her ear, his breath reeking of whiskey. "Cooperate and I give you my word no harm will come to you."

She despised feeling helpless, yet here she stood again...exactly where he wanted her.

He removed his hand from her mouth.

"How...?" Dreya wet her lips. "Who unlocked the door to your cell?"

"I picked the lock."

"Impossible. You're not that clever."

Canderlay pulled Dreya along behind him. Unsure what he intended, she kicked over the candle. In the blink of an eye, a pitch-black void swallowed up every trace of light in the dungeon.

"That was foolish, *cherie*." He shoved her into a chair.

She jumped to her feet.

He pushed her down again. "Sit. And be a good lass while I tie your hands."

"Why the devil should I?"

"Need I remind you that your beloved Captain Reed sleeps in that cot over there? You wouldn't wish him any harm, would you?"

"Bloody hell, if you dare—"

"Your language astounds me, *mademoiselle*." He secured her wrists to the chair and then grabbed her ankles.

Dreya struggled against the rope, but it wouldn't budge. At least the darkness hid her face.

"Tell me, sweet vixen," Canderlay implored, his warm breath caressing her cheek. "Why throw me into this rotting stench of a prison?"

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"A fitting place for vermin, do you not agree?"

"Does that sharp tongue of yours never cease?" he snapped. "You know very little about me and not near enough to question my character."

"What character? You're a bloody pirate."

"And you do not care for me at all. Is that it?"

"Exactly."

"Really? Well, devil take it, you could've fooled me. In fact, you did just that."

Dreya checked her anger. "Did it ever occur to you that perhaps I thought the darkness here might improve your ailing vision?"

He laughed, and the sound smacked of pure contempt. "No, it did not. If my health concerned you so much, why treat me like a common criminal?"

"Because you tossed me about your bed like a harlot...or a trollop."

"Which did you play?"

"What?"

"The harlot or the trollop?"

Humiliation stung Dreya's eyes. "Must you constantly seek amusement at my expense?"

He sighed. "I must, it seems."

Dreya swallowed the ache in her throat. "I imprisoned you because you are untrustworthy," she retorted, steering the conversation away from the embarrassing topic he'd chosen. "And tying me to this chair simply proves my point."

"I disagree, *mademoiselle*. You ordered your men to drag me down here because I dared touch you, and you enjoyed it. That's not distrust. It's guilt. Tell me truthfully, *cherie*. Does my kiss still linger on your lips?"

Yes!

"If you feared I'd take what you so generously offered in the lean-to, you needn't have worried." His snort ended in one breath and held a trace of pity. "You're not the sort of woman I'd ask to warm my bed."

Heat flooded Dreya's cheeks. "I'd rather push you from the bell tower than allow you to touch me again."

"Is that so?" He hesitated. "Shall I prove you wrong?"

Her heart fluttered, but she ignored the cruel taunt. "You might find your way out of this dungeon, but how do you plan to leave the island? You cannot abduct an entire ship's crew and force them to do your bidding."

"Oh, I assure you, *mademoiselle*, I have everything planned down to the smallest detail." Canderlay stuffed something that tasted of cloth inside her mouth so she couldn't speak. Afterwards, he knotted a second cloth behind her head. "I have a confession, *cherie*. I misled you earlier. You see, the man lying on that flea-infested cot you forced me to sleep on for many a miserable night is not your beloved Derek Reed. He's one of your castle guards."

What's happened to Derek?

"You'll be pleased to hear that Captain Reed...no, I suppose this will upset you terribly. Anyhow, he has agreed to help me escape this retched island."

No!

"Why would he do this, you ask? I suspect he wants you for himself."

He's my cousin, you idiot!

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“What’s that, *mademoiselle*? You thought I wouldn’t notice the smell of lilac on his coat or the familiarities between the two of you? Well, it was quite clear even to a man with impaired vision. And rather sickening, I might add.”

I should’ve shot you when I had the chance.

“Try not to carry on so. You’ll disturb the guard.”

Wait ‘til I get my hands around his bloody neck!

He gripped her chin, and a cascade of warm shivers danced down her spine. “I hope you’re not the sort of female who enjoys harboring resentment.”

No, but I’ll make an exception for you!

“Good, because I’m not a resentful fellow either, and I’ll even offer you a word of advice.” He leaned close, and the smell of whiskey invaded the short space between them. “Try not to fall asleep,” he whispered in her ear. “The rodents are rather large down here, and they’ll bite off the tips of your toes if your feet are still for more than two minutes.”

You don’t frighten me, English!

A grand lie, for a sizeable amount of fear already churned inside Dreyra’s heart. Especially for her beloved father.

“*Au revoir, ma cherie.*” Canderlay’s light kiss lingered on her bottom lip. “And don’t think for one moment I haven’t enjoyed this.”

Chapter Eleven

Dreya used her tongue to push the handkerchief out of her mouth. "Help me!" The guard in the cell mumbled.

"Hello?" She wet her lips. "Please...whoever you are, I need your help." The cot creaked, and her heart soared. Until a loud snore cut the silence. "Wake up, you soused idiot!"

The snoring amplified. The sound snatched any sympathy she'd previously entertained for the unfortunate guard.

Frustrated, Dreya strained against the rope, but the knotted end held tight. "Never again will I turn my back on the treacherous Marquis of Canderlay."

Something squeaked in a nearby corner.

Rats!

"Father, why must you dislike cats? We should have two or three running around this castle."

She forced her thoughts onto a larger, more dangerous animal. Canderlay. His smug tone still infuriated her.

"As for my conniving cousin...."

The bell tower's warning echoed in the night.

"No!"

She rocked the unstable chair back and forth. With a jolt, it collapsed beneath her weight, and she fell to the floor. Pain jarred her insides, and she bit her tongue. Tears stung her eyes, but she managed to extricate her legs from the broken chair and tangled rope. That left her hands. They were bound tighter than her ankles, and she couldn't free them.

Dreya staggered to her feet, searching for the stairs. She gathered her sense of direction and rushed forward but tripped on the bottom step. Before she could pick herself up off the floor, the bell tower ceased.

It's too late!

With no candle to light her way, she stumbled up the stairs and smacked into the closed door. Sharp pain radiated through her nose and forehead. Tears stung her eyes. With her bound hands, she reached for the latch. No matter how hard she tugged, it wouldn't budge.

"Bloody hell." She kicked the bottom of the door. "Help me! I'm trapped in the dungeon!" She kicked again, jamming her big toe this time.

Waves of pain and frustration welled in her throat. She gave up and leaned her forehead against the door. No one would find her until morning when one guard replaced the other. By that time, Canderlay would be safe.

Not so for her beloved father.

Anger gave way to despair, but Dreya forced back the onslaught of tears. She slid to the floor, drew her knees up, and waited for the dawn.

* * * *

The first rays of the morning sun peeked through the window of the captain's cabin. Lucian fished the dark spectacles from his pocket.

"I cannot believe you convinced Dreya to allow you to leave the island," Reed

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said. "However...." He tossed a pouch onto his desk. "A fair wager it was, and I'll not grumble."

"As I recall, we set no amount."

Reed shrugged.

Lucian reached for the bag of coins. "*Mademoiselle* didn't offer much of an argument. I even explained how the dungeon guard ended up in my cot."

"She accepted this?"

"Eventually."

Reed's brow inched upward.

Lucian maneuvered around the lie. "You and the Macgregor's daughter share a strong bond. What does she mean to you?"

"Plenty, but that's none of your business."

"No, I suppose not. You and your crew must be anxious to sail back to the colonies."

"The crew, yes, but my immediate plans are to search for the Macgregor."

"So you said last evening. Though it's a noble gesture, we may never know what happened to the *Dragon Master*."

"I've considered that possibility." Reed sipped his coffee. "But for Dreya's sake, I intend to try."

"I'd offer my services, but I'm afraid it will take some time to procure another vessel."

"No doubt your wealthy benefactor is upset that you lost the *Falcon*."

"I didn't lose her. I know exactly where she is."

"In several pieces at the bottom of the sea, yes, I know." Reed leaned back in his chair. "Why do you suppose my...Dreya continued to hold you prisoner after I vouched for your character?"

What is this woman to you? Fiancée? Lover? Or merely a warm body to relieve your boredom?

"It's a bit late for that particular question, is it not?" Lucian retorted. "But perhaps your character is in question as well."

"That might explain it, except I know Dreya quite well. Something troubled her. And I think that something was you."

"*Mademoiselle's* concern stemmed from her father's absence."

"Agreed, but she admitted she distrusts you. Did you give her reason? Take a few liberties, perhaps?"

Lucian smiled. "Is that what I'm accused of?"

"Did you?"

"No."

Another lie. He'd used every opportunity to tease or touch Dreya. Even after he'd tied her to the chair in the dungeon, he couldn't resist one last kiss.

"I'm curious, Captain Reed. How did you and Dreya Macgregor meet?"

"The usual way."

"Are you aware your vague answers are most annoying?"

"Then don't ask questions you've no business to ask."

Lucian peered over the top of his spectacles. "I believe I've hit upon the real source of discontent between us."

"I'm not aware of any disgruntlement between us, Captain Adams."

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"No? It doesn't bother you that *mademoiselle* and I spent a great deal of time together these past few months?"

"Should it?"

"That depends."

"If you're asking if I care for Dreyra, I believe you already know the answer."

Lucian sipped his tea. "I'm pleased you've finally gathered enough courage to speak the truth."

"What you know or think you know about my relationship with Dreyra is unimportant." Reed's attention darted about the room. "Would I prefer she marry a gentleman who offered her his love along with his name? Absolutely. Do I believe that gentleman is you?" His bold gaze shifted back to Lucian. "No."

Lucian's tea took a wrong turn, and he coughed it up. "Why would you think I'd take such a vixen to wife?"

"The fire burning between you, for one. You drool over her, Lucian, as though contemplating a tasty meal."

"If I looked at *mademoiselle* for more than two seconds, I assure you I was attempting to focus my vision. Is jealousy the true culprit here, Captain Reed? Are you thinking of offering for the lady?"

He raised a brow. "Does the idea distress you?"

"Only because I fear for your safety. If you care for the Macgregor's daughter as much as you claim, why does your attention often travel from one harlot's backside to the next?"

"I am who I am, Lucian. I've never pretended any different. Unlike this French privateer I met a few years ago who carries the manners and speech of a proper gentleman, yet..." He shrugged, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"There is no crime in education. Even for a lowly corsair."

"No, it's a privilege few men in your position or mine ever pursue."

"Agreed, but you've avoided my question, Captain Reed."

"Perhaps, Captain Adams, but then I don't owe you a glimpse into my private affairs." He leaned forward. "And just so you understand about Dreyra, she's not the final prize in some competition between us. She's much more valuable than any wager we've thought up to relieve the boredom."

"Ah, a formal declaration of love. How touching."

"Envy doesn't suit you, Lucian."

"Ridiculous. I've no interest in *mademoiselle*."

"Then there's no reason to fire a warning shot over your bow." Reed settled back into his chair. "Are you aware the Macgregor wrote a list of qualifications for his daughter's suitors?"

"What list?"

"First and foremost, any gentleman who offers for Dreyra should desire her above all her father's possessions. Second, this man would need some sort of trade skill in order to provide for her along with any offspring." Reed pushed back from his desk. "And third, he should be the sort of gentleman who enjoys making Dreyra smile."

"All honorable qualities, I'll give you that, but would you mind if I improve upon that list?"

"Not at all."

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"Whatever gentleman *mademoiselle* decides to wed, he must be patient for he'll have a difficult challenge ahead of him." Lucian drained his tea. "The woman is stubborn beyond reason. But the very moment she gives him her heart, rest assured it will be because his love is beyond question. And whatever opinions or conclusions you or I draw regarding this man's qualifications or lack thereof, it will not matter in the slightest to her."

"You'll have a devil of a time selling that bottle of snake oil to the Macgregor." Reed stood and headed across the cabin.

"I have no intention of selling Ethan Macgregor anything. And since the war is now over, I doubt his irrepressible daughter and I will ever meet again."

"Good, for I've no wish to call you out." Reed opened the door and shouted for his cabin boy. "Given your poor vision, Lucian, and the fact you cannot hit this ship from five paces away, any duel between us would be rather one-sided."

"Agreed, but it's your inferior handling of a pistol that would give me the victory."

"Your overconfidence is astounding."

The cabin boy rushed up, out of breath. "You called, Captain Reed?"

"Did you take that package to the castle as I instructed?"

"Sure did, sir. Whatever you give the lady, it didn't smell like the last package."

"That's because it wasn't filled with lilac soaps."

Lilac!

Anger inched downed Lucian's backbone. He hadn't even considered the possibility someone other than Dreya had chosen her enticing scent. And bloody hell, of all men, it had to be Derek Reed.

* * * *

The latch on the dungeon door jiggled, the sound so faint Dreya thought she might be dreaming. No one would look for her down here. Ever. She'd die in this horrible place, and the rats would eat her flesh long before anyone missed her.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself! Think of your father. If he lives, Canderlay will see he's hung for treason.

"Move awa' frae th' door, lass."

Dreya jerked awake. "Edwina?"

"Aye, child, but ye must move ur Ah cannae open th' door."

"Thank God." Dreya inched back, and a streak of light filtered in from the crack along the bottom. The latch lifted, and the door squeaked open.

Edwina held the lantern high. "Whit th' devil urr ye daein' doon 'ere?"

Dreya shielded her eyes. "That horrible Englishman tied me to a chair and escaped." She grabbed the door and struggled to her feet. "And Derek...my dear naïve cousin helped him."

"Captain Derek tied yer hauns?"

"No, but he..." Tears welled in her throat. "Dear God, Edwina. Canderlay is gone, and he holds this island's fate in his hands. If he recalls my father is a smuggler...if he saw my face and remembers who I am...."

"Ye must nae fret, child." Edwina placed her arm around Dreya's waist and

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guided her through the door. "Tis nae as ill as it seems. Ah expect ye learned a guid lessen frae this."

"Yes. Never turn your back on an Englishman."

"Ye'r th' blessed offspring o' a Macgregor fur sure. Thay ne'er cuid stomach th' English." Edwina hung the lantern on a low hook. "Ere noo. Let's untie this rope an' git ye oot o' this retched place."

Several minutes elapsed before she freed Dreyra's hands.

"Noo then, dry yer eyes. It will ne'er dae fur th' servants tae witness th' laird's daughter moanin' an' carryin' oan." Edwina straightened. "Ah dinnae care fur this dungeon. It howfs o' death. Na mon shuid live oot his last days in such a horrible place."

"I agree." Dreyra wiped her tears. "But I did what I thought best."

"Noo ye ken 'twas nae richt."

"I'm so afraid, Edwina. So very, very afraid."

"Aye, fur yer faither, but that auld goat leads a charmed life. Trust in th' Guid Faither, child."

"But Canderlay—"

"Th' lad battles his ain demons." Edwina patted Dreyra's hand. "Let it go, lass. Lea matters be ur ye'll dae mair harm than guid."

"Are you telling me I should not inform the guards of Canderlay's escape?"

"Whit guid wid it dae?"

Dreyra sighed. "I trust you with my life, Edwina, but I don't understand what you see in that imposter. When my father returns, I won't keep the truth from him one moment longer than necessary."

"Weel an' guid then." The healer picked up the lantern and headed up the stairs toward the main floor.

"Wait, there's a guard down there in the cell."

"Th' door is nae locked."

If Dreyra's desire to exit the dungeon hadn't been so strong, she might've asked Edwina how she knew this.

* * * *

Lucian lay crossways on his bed, staring at the ceiling and listening to the normal activity of the crew above deck. It reminded him of the time he'd spent aboard the *Falcon* and of the men he'd commanded. Good men. Men who didn't think twice about risking their lives for what they believed.

Who am I?

He closed his eyes. Except for the occasional nightmare, he recalled very little of the battle with Quinn.

Lucian rolled onto his side. For the most part, his health and vision had returned to normal. He no longer needed the dark spectacles unless he headed topside. Perhaps the remainder of his past would soon surface. He thought of Dreyra. She'd saved his life twice, and he'd repaid her by leaving her tied up in the dungeon.

"Ah, *cherie*, you gave me no choice."

Even though Reed staked his claim to the woman, guilt still tore at Lucian's

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soul. And what would Edwina think? The old healer had treated him with kindness.

Lucian sighed. "At least I repaid my debt to the dog." He stared at the opposite wall. "I believe I knew a Sebastian once." He eased his thoughts into a backward drift. "An English lad who couldn't do one bloody thing well enough to please his overbearing father."

The ship creaked and groaned, caught in the grip of a giant, invisible hand.

"A narrow minded man who...."

Something stirred in the back of his mind. A longing for respect, of wanting to please....

"*My* father."

The memories came so fast they overwhelmed him. One week after his father died, Lucian accompanied his mother back to France. She remained. Lucian did not.

He latched on to another painful memory. One buried deep and almost beyond recognition. He snatched every feeling, every emotion, every sound and smell until everything else clicked into place, piece by piece.

Lucian Sebastian Spence, the Marquis of Canderlay.

A river of memories flooded his thoughts, washing away the remaining mental barriers.

He bolted upright. "I am not a traitor. I was born in England. My mother's name is...." Grief swelled inside his chest. "My mother was Celeste de la Rue Canderlay."

Lucian closed his eyes, and every excruciating detail of her death came into focus. She'd held his hand for hours, her soft voice filled with pain. Just before dawn on a beautiful spring day, she drew her last breath.

He calculated the time in his head. Almost seven years ago. She insisted on calling him Lucian after her uncle. His father never cared for the name and preferred Sebastian.

Without his bidding, a different set of memories invaded his thoughts. He'd served two years as a young lieutenant aboard the British schooner, *Margaretta*, but the death of his father in 1768 cut short his time at sea.

A few years into the war with America, King George became convinced Dragon's Breath harbored a group of smugglers running gunpowder and weapons to the colonies. He insisted the traitorous Ethan Macgregor be captured and hauled back to England in chains.

"Suspicion feeds rumors, and rumors feed suspicion."

His father had voiced this opinion once. The one time they agreed on anything.

Lucian massaged the ache in his temple. Whispers of insanity surrounded England's monarch. A dangerous pastime for those who could not keep their mouths shut. The war may well be over, but the Macgregor's troubles were about to begin.

Ethan Macgregor. Quick witted with an easy grin and infectious laugh. The Scotsman stood tall and imposing aboard his dragon ship, his trim beard the same color as his reddish brown hair. His piercing blue eyes sized a man up in an instant, a fact Lucian became very aware of during their first meeting. Ethan's

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broad shoulders held erect a massive frame, but he hadn't grown soft in the middle like most men his age.

Did the Macgregor live?

Lucian arose from the bed. His duty lay before him, clear and uncluttered in his mind. The rare obstacle standing in his way? The enormous debt he owed the Macgregor's daughter.

Chapter Twelve

By the time the *Sea Mistress* reached Cherbourg, night had fallen, and the weather changed in drastic fashion.

Lucian hurried topside and waited for the frigate to dock alongside a trim navy sloop. Snow swirled about him, and his borrowed coat of lamb's wool offered an inadequate barrier against the frigid blast of wind at his back.

The last time he'd seen this place was only a few months ago. Back then, fair winds accompanied the warm weather. Now the cold seeped into his bones along with his soul, reminding him of the difficult task ahead.

"Has your sight returned to normal?" Reed asked behind him.

"Completely." Lucian kept his attention on the distant lights of several waterfront establishments.

"Well, that's one problem solved. Perhaps your memory will soon follow."

It already has.

"Here," Reed added.

Lucian turned.

Reed offered a small coin pouch. "It's not much, but I figure adding this to the other coins might keep you from starving for a few months."

The unexpected act of kindness left a lump in Lucian's throat. "*Merci*, but I'll be fine. I've leaned on your generosity too much as it is."

Reed pocketed the coins. "If you require clothing—"

"I'll make do with what's on my back. You must be eager to begin your search for the *Dragon Master*."

"Yes, I am." Reed raised the collar of his coat close about his neck and stuck his hands inside his pockets. "I hope to meet up with the second dragon ship at some point."

"That might take several weeks."

"At least the war is over and won't cause any delay. Still...this ship does not belong to me, and I'm sure the crew wishes to return to their families in Philadelphia. If I bend toward the unreasonable in my search for the Macgregor, before long there will be talk of mutiny."

Lucian's attention strayed. If Ethan Macgregor were alive, he wouldn't stay that way. The English would hunt him down like a vicious animal. Justice would be swift and the verdict simple. If the Scotsman were fortunate, he wouldn't be drawn and quartered.

"Well then, *au revoir*, Captain Reed, and the best of luck in your search."

"So long, my corsair friend. Perhaps we'll meet again."

Unlikely.

"If the Macgregor does not return...." Emotion churned in Lucian's gut like a nasty swirl of sour whiskey. "Be kind to *mademoiselle*. She'll need a friend. Or...whatever you are to her."

Reed sighed, his breath visible for a second before it disappeared into the cold night air. "Dreya should've told you."

"Told me what?"

"The truth."

Lucian clenched his jaw. He despised lies, yet it didn't escape his attention

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he'd surrounded himself with little else these past three years. "I've known the truth for quite some time, Captain Reed. *Mademoiselle's* heart belongs to you."

An odd quirk lifted one corner of Reed's mouth. "You know, Captain Adams, for a man who denies any sentiment for Dreya, the very tone of your voice contradicts your words."

"There's no contradiction. However, if you'd care to enlighten me on what she should've told me...."

"Obviously more than she did."

"Is this about Dreya's illegitimacy?"

"She told you about that?"

"Not exactly, but I see she had no trouble confiding in you, Captain Reed."

"I'm sorry, Lucian, but it's not my place to speak for Dreya. If her father does not return, rest assured I'll care for her."

Clear and to the point.

Since Lucian's duty to England carried him in the opposite direction, he could ill afford to waste time with thoughts of a woman who toyed with emotions. Perhaps Dreya Macgregor and Derek Reed were well suited for one another after all.

Lucian turned and hurried down the gangplank. He pushed his way through the crowd milling about the docks. The familiar smell of horses hung in the air. The distinct sound of crewmen going about their duties encroached upon his senses, reminding him again of the *Falcon*.

The afternoon the gunpowder exploded in the ship's hold, he'd escaped the direct force of the blast because of his position halfway up the main mast. After endless hours in an unforgiving sea, he'd found himself wishing he'd perished along with his crew.

Hope of a rescue had all but vanished, and he'd resigned himself to accept his fate. In the blackest moment he could've ever imagined, Dreya found him. She'd yanked him back from the clutches of certain death, and now he would repay her kindness with a great deal of grief.

Bloody hell! Can I not rid my thoughts of the woman?

Lucian set his jaw with renewed determination and pushed on. His growing reluctance to do what must be done had become a nuisance. Sentiment opened the door for poor judgment. And in a dangerous profession, poor judgment could result in a man's untimely demise.

"Emotions are valueless," his father had often proclaimed. "A weakness to be exploited by one's enemy."

Lucian never once considered himself weak.

Until now.

Until Dreya.

He passed the entrance to a well-known tavern. Bawdy laughter erupted from inside followed by a stream of foul curses. Over the last three years he'd become well acquainted with the kind of men who frequented such places. Most were hard working souls who sought a few drinks at the end of the day along with a willing female to ease the pain of loneliness.

Lucian understood those needs, but his loyalty belonged to England. Not France. Not even for the memory of his cherished mother.

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The biting wind slipped beneath the collar of his coat. He tucked his chin down and continued on. Several minutes later, he rounded the corner and halted in front of a blacksmith's shop. He tugged the coin pouch from his pocket but after staring at the green lettering on the sign proclaiming the name of the establishment, he realized he wouldn't need coin. He knew the owner...a soft-spoken Frenchman who owed him a favor.

Lucian stuck the pouch back inside his pocket and strode toward the entrance to the stables. Inside, a lantern glowed. He passed a stout workhorse who perked up his ears, but the other horses ignored him. If he hadn't taken a wrong turn near the back of the stables, he would've missed the white Arabian mare with the soft brown eyes.

* * * *

"Trouble's a brewin', lass."

Dreya allowed the curtain to fall back into place before she turned from the window.

Edwina stood in the doorway of the drawing room, the frown upon her face as frozen as the grounds outside.

"What kind of trouble?"

With her wrinkled hand, the healer motioned to someone unseen before she stepped aside. A young woman appeared, her fair head hung so low her chin almost touched her chest.

"Sarah?"

"Aye, mistress."

"Come sit by the fire. We've not had a chance to talk in such a long time. I remember how you used to follow your father along the parapets lighting the torches."

"Aye, whin Ah wis but a child."

In other words, the carefree days of her youth were gone, replaced by boring yet necessary female chores. But why had the girl left the warmth of her home and trudged out after dark and in the middle of a snowstorm?

"Sarah, please come warm yourself by the fire."

The girl crossed the room to the sofa. She sat on the edge, her fingers entwined in her lap.

"Edwina, would you please ring for a pot of warm tea?"

"We've nae th' time tae be drinkin' social lik'." The old woman hobbled toward the fire. "Best set oot th' whiskey, lass."

"Are you unwell?"

"Na, but oan a nicht such as this, Ah cuid use a guid snort o' th' Devil's brew tae warm mah auld bones."

Edwina must be in extreme pain. Or something had caused her great concern.

Dreya hurried to the cabinet where her father stored his spirits. She pushed aside two bottles of brandy and reached in back for a half-empty bottle of whiskey. She uncorked it and poured a glass. After handing it to Edwina, she turned to Fulke's daughter. "All right, Sarah, what's wrong?"

"Aye, dinnae be shy, child. Tell th' lass whit ye tellt me earlier."

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"Ah dinnae wish tae bother ye, mistress." Sarah's head remained in a lowered position, her fingers twisting and untwisting around the white handkerchief she held. "Mibbie Ah wis wrong tae come 'ere."

"Heavens, child," Edwina declared, the whiskey sloshing about in her glass. "Dinnae ye ken th' mistress 'ere is yer best ally. She's o' yer age an' kin weel sympathize wi' ye. "Tae be sure, she haes na difficulty speakin' her mind."

Compliment or insult?

Dreya couldn't decide. "Something has indeed upset you, Sarah," she said, hoping her calm voice might offer some reassurance. "And I'd like to help."

A tear slid down the girl's cheek.

"Come now. It cannot be that bad." Dreya placed her arm around her shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"Ah....Ah am tae....tae...."

"Och, lass." Edwina downed half her whiskey. "Ye'd best let me huv a go at it, ur we'll be sittin' 'ere till neist spring."

Sarah wiped her tears then nodded.

"How can I help?" Dreya asked Edwina.

The healer sighed. "A pledge is nae an easy matter tae undae. Tradition cannae be broken wi' neither wants nor wishes. Ur mere words."

Dreya placed her hand over Sarah's. "To whom have you been promised?"

"Mister...Finnegan."

The last word ended on a sob. A definite cry for help.

Dreya stared at Edwina.

No, not Captain Horace...pudgy around the middle, bald head and shifty blue eyes...Finnegan!

Edwina nodded.

"But...he has to be at least...."

"Fifty an' three years," the healer finished. She downed the rest of her whiskey and set the glass aside. "This be Finney's last year at sea, sae he's in desperate need o' a lass tae care fur him."

"You mean a nursemaid. 'Tis most unfair."

"Wis thare e'er such a book written whit says life haes tae be fair an' jist?"

"You're missing the point, Edwina. It's justice we must seek for this poor girl."

"If 'tis justice ye seek, lass, ye've come tae th' wrong place in time. 'Tis a mon's world we live in ur huv ye nae noticed?"

"That doesn't mean every woman should accept a man's word or wishes without question! How dare that pompous old windbag ask for Sarah's hand? He needs to hire a servant instead of requesting a wife."

"'Tis far beyond a request, child. Fulke gave his consent o'er a year ago."

Dreya checked her anger. "Oh, I had no idea."

She should have expected this. Most Scotsmen chose their daughters' husbands far in advance and had done so for centuries. She couldn't change that. Still, her heart sympathized with the young woman beside her.

"Is my father aware of this agreement?"

"Aye, an' he's given his approval."

"Well he obviously did not consult Sarah before he condoned this arrangement. Is there anything we can do?"

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"Short o' snatchin' Finney in th' middle o' th' nicht an' tossin' him intae th' sea, Ah dinnae believe sae. Unless...." Edwina sighed. "Weel, unless ye'r willin' tae speak tae Fulke."

"Why would he listen to the Macgregor's illegitimate daughter?" Dreya turned to Sarah. "You must see my position here. Should you decide to speak to your father, I will stand by your side, but it is your place to inform him you cannot go through with this marriage."

Sarah shook her head. "He wid despise me if Ah asked him tae break his word tae Mister Finnegan. Forgie me, mistress, but mah future cannae be changed. Ah came tae Edwina tae confess th' wrongs Ah've committed."

"What wrongs?"

"It doesnae matter."

"Of course it matters. Sarah, every woman has the absolute right to choose the gentleman with whom she'll spend the rest of her life. Do you not wish to have a say in your own future?"

"Aye, but 'tis nae mah place."

"Think o' th' babe, lass," Edwina advised.

Dreya stared at the healer.

"Aye, she's wi' child."

"Colin's?"

The old woman nodded.

"Does he know?"

"Na," Sarah replied. "Mah problems ur mah ain. Ah love Colin an' this child, but Ah am tae become Mister Finnegan's wife, an' that Ah'll dae."

A familiar situation. An understandable predicament. Had her own mother suffered this sort of anguish the moment she suspected she carried the child of a man who'd already sworn to wed another?

Dreya's throat tightened with remorse, but now wasn't the time to dwell on something she could not change. "Sarah, do you not think news of this child will convince your father that you cannot wed Captain Finnegan?"

"Ah will nae go against his wishes."

"But surely you realize you cannot keep this hidden for long." Frustrated, Dreya threw Edwina a pleading glance. "Please convince her to speak to her father before it's too late."

"'Tis nae mah place tae interfere in such matters."

"What?" Shock smacked Dreya between the eyes. "Edwina, dearest, you've harbored no reluctance to interfere when it came to my life."

"'Tis different, lass."

"How? No, never mind." Dreya stood. She paced in front of the fire, hoping some sensible solution would present itself before she wore the carpet thin.

"Her burden cannae be carried alone," the healer declared in a low voice. "Twill end in th' wirst wey possible."

Dreya whirled around. "You don't mean...?"

Death?

"Trust me, child. In this matter, yer hauns ur mair capable than mine."

"I doubt that, Edwina, but before you pass on to the next life, I insist you teach me how to read others' thoughts. You do it with such expertise I find it

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astonishing your gift cannot improve this situation.”

“Fulke Mortimer is a guid mon but lik’ most wha live oan this island, his beliefs lean toward th’ simple. He will nae place his faith in somethin’ he kin neither titch nor see, an’ ’tis fur certain he doesnae trust me.”

“But my opinion carries little weight, if any.”

“Ye’r mistaken, child. Ye stood up tae Quinn an’ fur whit Fulke witnessed that very nicht, his respect fur ye grew. If ye ordered him tae leap frae th’ bell tower, Ah expect he’d dae sae wi’oot askin’ ye why.” Her eyes twinkled when she smiled. “’Tis blind faith, an’ ye’ve weel earned it.”

Dreya’s reluctance wavered.

“If Ah speak oot against his daughter’s mairriage, ’twould cause Fulke tae become mair obstinate than he awready is.”

“Faith can overcome many obstacles, Edwina, but it cannot bend a stubborn Scotsman’s will nor change his mind.”

“Aye, but it kin, lass.”

“I disagree. You think to parade me as this girl’s salvation, but I am not up to the task. Believe me, losing my temper with Fulke would not be to his daughter’s advantage. In fact, it may add to her problems.”

“Ah dinnae wish ye tae speak fur me, mistress. Ah will dae whit mah faither bids.”

“You see,” Dreya said to Edwina. “Even if I could help Sarah, she won’t allow it.”

“Na, ye’ll interfere.”

“This argument is pointless. Sarah adamantly refuses to go against her father’s wishes so what’s to be done? Nothing.”

“Listen tae me, child. Whin dealin’ wi’ a mon, a mere thimbleful o’ commonsense is a braw weapon an’ twill serve ye weel fur a guid many years. If ye’ve plenty o’ patience an’ yer words ur placed in a proper manner, ye kin coax any mon tae change his mind.”

Sarah raised her head and for the first time since she’d entered the room, a glimmer of hope broke through the sadness in her eyes.

Dreya sighed. “Very well, Edwina. How do I go about changing a stubborn Scotsman’s mind?”

The healer chuckled low. “By makin’ him believe ’twas his ain idea.”

Chapter Thirteen

Lucian reached Le Havre around midnight. Snow blanketed the streets and continued to fall. After boarding the Arabian in a nearby stable, he entered the Piermont Inn and requested the same room he'd rented for the last five years. Fortunately, it was available.

Once inside, Lucian propped a chair against the door and lit a candle. He knelt at the foot of the bed and slid his hand along the floor. Once he found the loose board, he pried it up and retrieved the thick stash of currency he'd hidden months earlier.

Before going to bed, Lucian shaved his face clean. His long hair would have to wait until another time. He undressed and kicked off his boots. In the morning he'd pack his modest belongings and travel back to Cherbourg to book passage across the channel to England. Once he offered proof of Ethan Macgregor's treason, King George would restore his lands and title as promised.

"And so ends my service to a lunatic king."

He would find a suitable wife, an English lady of gentle breeding, and settle into a normal life.

That's what he wanted. A gently bred wife to oversee his manor and give him children. He didn't need a Scottish hellfire in his bed.

"No, not you, *Mademoiselle* Macgregor."

Lucian slipped into bed and pulled the cover up to his chin. He wouldn't have to argue with his conscience much longer.

* * * *

"Ye wish mah daughter tae be whit?" Fulke inquired.

"My lady's maid," Dreya repeated. "I'm in need of one."

"Ye've ne'er needed a lady's maid afore, lass."

"Mind yer manners," Edwina snapped. "'Tis nae yer place tae question th' laird's daughter ur her needs."

He shot her a pointed glare before he nodded an apology to Dreya. "Beggin' yer pardon, mistress. Ah meant na disrespect, but mah Sarah cannae be yer maid."

"But, Fulke, this is a very good position."

"Weel, normally mah answer tae ye wid be a definite aye. But Sarah is promised tae Horace Finnegan an' upon his return, she'll become his wife."

"Captain Finnegan?" Dreya tempered her next words. "He's rather ancient, is he not?"

"An' grawin' aulder as we speak," Edwina mumbled.

Fulke grabbed a poker. "Th' mon's a wee bit long in years, tae be sure." He knelt by the fire and poked at the coals. "But he haes a fair amount o' coin tucked awa'. A fact that made mah decision an easy one." He stared at Dreya. "Mah Sarah will be ten an' seven years come spring. 'Tis likely th' best offer she'll receive."

"What? Seventeen years is a far cry from spinsterhood."

"Aye," the healer agreed. "Look at th' lass 'ere. She'll be twenty an' four by

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neist summer.”

Dreya frowned.

Edwina smiled then offered a faint shrug.

“Mistress, Ah ken ye mean weel, but Ah’m a mon wi’ four daughters.” He stood and replaced the poker in its stand. “’Tis mah duty an’ mine alone tae arrange a guid mairriage fur each o’ ’em.”

“I appreciate your reluctance, Fulke, but my offer of employment will afford Sarah the luxury of making her own choices in life.”

“Why wid she wish tae dae that?”

Dreya bit back a retort.

“Then thir’s th’ schuil mistress. Mah Sarah helps her wi’ th’ village bairns. Th’ lass looves ’em dearly, an’ Ah expect she’ll want aboot ten ur twelve o’ her ain. Bein’ yer fancy maid, she’ll ne’er git th’ chance.”

“If ’tis babes th’ lass yearns fur,” Edwina said with a lusty chuckle, “thay’ll l nae come frae Finney.”

Dreya’s attention shot to the healer.

“Ye’v hud a vision o’ this, huv ye, madam?”

“Ah’ve seen an’ forgotten mair misery an’ disease than ye ur any mon oan this island. Doubt mah word if ye must, Fulke Mortimer, but Finney’s condition is neither a vision nor a suspicion. He cannae sire a child, an’ ’tis th’ truth Ah speak.”

“He tellt ye this?”

Edwina raised a brow.

“Then how wid ye ken such a delicate matter?”

“That Ah’ll keep tae mah-sel, but Ah’ll say this an’ lea it be. Horace Finnegan is weel known by they wha earn thair coin lvin’ oan thair backsides, an’ thay’ll tell ye whin asked. Th’ mon cannae rise tae th’ occasion.”

Dreya turned her back on the conversation, the heat of embarrassment creeping into her cheeks.

“’Tis rumor,” Fulke mumbled.

“Did Ah nae tell ye that Grace wid gie ye four daughters? Huv Ah nae cared fur every livin’ creature oan this island long afore ye wur born?”

Fulke opened his mouth, but he never got the chance to respond.

“Huv Ah nae looked efter th’ villagers an’ this castle wi’ ne’er a care fur mah ain health?” Edwina spat into the fire and pointed her finger at him. “Yet noo yer tongue mocks me an’ th’ guid Ah’ve done.”

“Ah’d na mair mock ye than Ah wid th’ Macgregor,” Fulke insisted. “Ur th’ mistress ’ere. But ’tis a grave accusation ye’v made, an’ Finney is nae ’ere tae defend his-sel.”

Edwina arose from the rocker and crossed the room in her usual slow manner. At the door she turned, and the expression in her eyes softened. “Aye, Fulke. Ye’r correct. Ah spoke oot o’ turn. But listen weel. As a faither, ye huv th’ power tae gie yer daughters misery ur happiness. ’Tis yer choice, an’ Ah pray ye’ll study long about it.”

Once the healer departed the room, Fulke muttered, “That woman will be th’ death o’ me. But Ah ken, mistress, why ye dinnae care much fur Finney.”

“Well, he is rather opinionated.” Dreya exhaled a deep sigh. “Fulke, I realize

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you love your daughters more than your own life, and I daresay you want what's best for them. Still, such devotion can be blinding."

"Mah Sarah...she wishes tae be yer maid, daes she?"

Keep to the truth.

"I'm not sure, but I do know she's devoted to her father. And she would do anything to please him."

Fulke nodded. "Finney is nae a young mon, but he'll provide a guid home fur Sarah."

"Can you promise she'll be loved? Or will she become nursemaid to an irritable old man who thinks little of a woman's opinion?"

"Mah Sarah is a guid lass, mistress, but she is nae a fine lady such as yersel'. Her lot in life will be far different frae yers."

"Perhaps." Dreya stood on tiptoe and kissed Fulke's cheek. His scent of fresh air and pipe tobacco reminded her of her father. "But every woman, no matter who she is, has the right to pursue happiness with the man she chooses."

Her throat ached with unshed tears, and Dreya hurried to the door. She had no right to speak of happiness when she'd squandered her chance by offering her heart to a deceitful Englishman.

* * * *

Early evening faded into dusk, and a cold chill replaced the slight warmth of the winter sun.

Lucian entered the palace, and a stoic, white-wigged servant ushered him inside one of the staterooms. He passed a gold-rimmed mirror and caught sight of his reflection. The worried expression in his eyes added a great deal to his haggard appearance. A stranger might suspect he'd spent the last several days in an intoxicated state, but he'd consumed nothing stronger than tea since leaving Dragon's Breath.

"Lord Canderlay?"

Lucian turned.

Another white-wigged servant stood at the door. "His majesty is pleased by your safe return, my lord, but at the moment he speaks with his physician and asks if you'd mind waiting."

"The king is ill?"

"No, my lord. His majesty is quite well." The servant cleared his throat in a loud manner. "He merely seeks assurance regarding the health of his younger children."

"Yes, of course."

The servant bowed low and retreated.

Lucian studied the stateroom's expensive furnishings. George III hadn't spared any coin with the décor. Paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and Vermeer hung upon the walls. A blue and gold Sévres porcelain diverse sat upon a finely carved French table, and several small sculptures rested upon others. Midway in the room sat a stylish French sofa flanked by two matching chairs. A fire glowed in the fireplace, the marble tile augmented with specks of gold.

He strolled to the window. The busy, lamp-lit courtyard below held a growing

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number of costumed lords and their ladies. They lined the palace steps waiting to enter the grand ballroom.

"Another masquerade ball."

A carefree evening of dancing and flirting where old lords sought out young wives, and naïve girls desired to be swept away by dashing young men of promise. After his father's death, Lucian had attended more than his share of such events but mostly to please his mother.

Beyond the courtyard and along the wide street, a never-ending stream of extravagant carriages waited to reach the palace gates. Once the passengers alighted, each conveyance moved on and out of sight.

Lucian considered the last masquerade ball he'd attended here some five years ago. That evening he'd sought to correct a mistake.

The wrongful imprisonment of Anadreya Richardson.

Most ladies in her situation would've cried or begged for mercy. Miss Richardson had done neither. Instead, she faced King George with her head high. She looked him square in the eye and denied the accusations hurled against her. The king hadn't believed in her innocence. Nor had Lucian. Until a conversation with her uncle later on that week convinced him otherwise.

The evening of the masquerade ball he'd stood waiting for a chance to speak to the king when a mysterious beauty diverted his attention. She worked her way around the crowded ballroom but declined each offer to dance and didn't socialize with other guests. Curious as to her identity, he decided to approach her, but she slipped outside.

Intrigued, Lucian followed her. It wasn't until she shoved a pistol beneath his chin and dropped the English accent that he'd recognized her. He could've foiled Miss Richardson's plans had he tried, he harbored no doubt about that, but for some strange reason he'd let her go.

Lucian had played the role she expected and after she rode away, he'd stood in the palace garden wondering how much time should pass before he alerted the guards. Seconds turned into minutes, minutes into a full hour. At length, he walked back into the ballroom and asked a servant to call for his carriage. He departed the palace without uttering one word of her escape.

"God's teeth, my lord, I thought you were dead."

Lucian turned from the window. "No, I'm very much alive, although there was a time several months ago when I suspected I had died."

"Interesting." William Pitt hobbled toward him, leaning the right side of his body on a fancy silver and black walking cane.

"Care to explain the details?"

"It's a long story." Lucian reached for his friend's hand. "Hello, Will."

"It's good to see you, Lucian."

"Why the cane?"

"I suffered a slight sprain."

"It looks serious."

"Hobbling about on this thing is frustrating and painful, especially in this bloody weather, but the doctor assures me I'll have no use for it in a few weeks."

"I thought perhaps the cane was part of your costume."

"I never liked masquerades. Where's your costume?"

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"Gathering dust in a Devonshire attic."

"At least we are in agreement about these distasteful events."

The stateroom door swung open and in walked King George III sporting an elaborate Henry VIII costume. "Good God, Canderlay, you look a sight."

"Good evening, your majesty." Lucian bowed low. "Thank you for seeing me. Since you've a masquerade ball to attend, I'll not keep you long."

George, his white wig hanging askew, motioned to the two guards who'd accompanied him to take up their usual position outside the door. After that, he turned to Pitt. "I might have guessed you'd be here."

"Shall I leave, sire?"

"Do as you please." The king turned to Lucian, impatience clouding his expression. "I'd begun to think you were dead, Canderlay. Have you spent the entire war befriending Ethan Macgregor and his band of smugglers?"

"Not at all, your majesty. I have survived these last three years on the sea, parading myself as a French corsair. If Jonas Quinn hadn't gotten in my way—"

"That bloody pirate? What has he to do with this?"

"He sank my ship and slaughtered my crew because England granted him a letter of marque."

The king's ire diminished, yet he offered no apology. He cared little for loss of life or ship. After all, most of Lucian's crew were French and therefore worthless in his majesty's opinion.

"Don't just stand there, Pitt. Pour his lordship a brandy."

"Certainly."

"Thank you, your majesty," Lucian said. "But I must decline."

"Suit yourself." The king turned his back. "The war is over, Canderlay, and those who died loyal to England will never return home. How I grieve for those fine men and their families, yet I can do nothing to lessen their pain."

"War is such a waste of youth," Pitt agreed.

"You speak as your father did, sir. Thank God my stubborn friend passed on to a better life. It would sadden him to see England in such a state."

Lucian regretted he missed the debate Pitt's father gave on the issues of war in the House of Commons in September 1777. He had, however, read the details of the gentleman's speech in a French newspaper later that year, and one paragraph stood out above all others.

If I were an American, as I am an Englishman, while a foreign troop was landed in my country I never would lay down my arms. Never! Never! Never!

King George cleared his throat. "Well, Canderlay, it's obvious you've not come here to attend the masquerade ball nor to discuss the dreadful topic of war. What news have you regarding the smugglers?"

A moment of regret seized Lucian's soul. "I believe there were several islands off Scotland's western and northern coasts who harbored their own privateers or hired ones to ship weapons to the colonies." He hesitated until honor dictated he continue. "I spent most of my time gaining the trust of a mere handful of those men."

"I realize the difficulty you no doubt encountered, my lord, and I appreciate how you've sacrificed for England, but what of the Macgregor?" The king's eyes flared with hatred. "Tell me you've proof of his treason, and by God he'll hang for

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his crimes before the year ends. He and every last heathen on that island.”

Lucian's gut heaved from the turmoil of sudden indecision. He wished he were somewhere else, any other place but this moment in time, for he could no longer postpone the inevitable.

* * * *

Fierce winds whistled and hummed outside Dreya's bedroom window, hurling ice and snow against the glass. She pulled the heavy covers up to her chin. A cold dread settled inside her chest, and no amount of tea could dispel it.

“Th' devil's up tae na guid,” Edwina warned earlier. “Ah'm feelin' it in mah bones.”

Dreya meant to question her further, but the old woman disappeared before she got the chance.

Alone in her bedroom with nothing but the wind outside to keep her company, her fear intensified. She slipped the pillow from beneath her head and rolled onto her stomach. No longer could she deny the emptiness residing inside her. Tears gathered behind her eyes, and her chest tightened with a familiar ache.

Even though he'd mocked her, lied to her, and left her tied up in the dungeon, she loved Lucian Adams. She longed for his touch, to hear the passion in his voice or glimpse his rogue smile. Every waking moment, every breath she drew, reminded her of him.

Bloody hell, she missed Lucian, but she despised the Marquis of Canderlay. And nothing would ever change that.

* * * *

“The Macgregor?” Lucian shook his head. “No, I tried to enlist the Scotsman's aid in smuggling weapons to the colonies, but he refused. He made it quite clear he wasn't interested in committing treason.”

“Lies,” the king snapped. “Smuggling is a long-standing tradition at Dragon's Breath.”

“Perhaps he's reformed, your majesty.”

“Nonsense.”

“I must say I'm relieved,” Pitt declared.

“Are you telling me, Canderlay, you uncovered nothing? No traitor? No treasonous act?”

“Not by the Macgregor or his clan,” Lucian lied. “However, there was a rogue privateer from Aberdeen who perished in a battle at sea last June—”

“What do I care about another dead pirate? You have failed, my lord. Failed miserably.” The king shook his head, his wig sliding further out of place. “And I am forced to strip you of your title. You realize I have the authority to sell your lands as well as your Devonshire estate?”

“Yes, your majesty, I understand.”

“Your father would be quite disappointed by your incompetence.”

“My father?” Lucian echoed. “If it were not for his reckless behavior at the gaming tables—”

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"What man in good faith can say England had the right to rage a war with the colonies?" Pitt cut in, his remark sounding rather odd and out of place. "Your majesty, if we asked an American soldier, what do you suppose his opinion would be?"

"Tread carefully, Mister Pitt. My friendship with your father allowed him this unpopular opinion. I have no such loyalty to you." His majesty's attention returned to Lucian. "Our business has concluded, sir, and I bid you good evening."

Lucian bowed low and departed the room. His freedom had come at a stiff price, but no longer would he be burdened by his father's sins. A huge weight lifted from his shoulders. Once outside the palace gates, he stuck his hands in his pockets and headed down the street whistling a French tune. A few minutes later, a black carriage rolled to a stop beside him.

Pitt stuck his head out the window. "Where are you staying?"

"Whytes."

"That's on my way." He opened the door. "I'll drop you off."

Lucian settled into the seat across from his friend, and the conveyance jerked forward. "I appreciate your interference with the king," he said after a few moments. "If you hadn't steered the conversation in a different direction—"

"You'd be on your way to Newgate by now."

"I never learned to hold my tongue, Will."

"Yes, I remember."

"I was saddened by the news of your father's death. I admired Lord Chatham a great deal."

"He and I shared the same views about most things, yet he never managed to convey his beliefs to others in an acceptable manner. Especially regarding the war with the colonies."

"I believe I understand. For years I considered myself a loyal Englishman who held himself to a strict code of honor, yet this very night I almost sentenced a decent man to death because his loyalties differ from mine."

Pitt stared at him. "You speak of Ethan Macgregor?"

"Yes."

"You've changed, my friend."

"Perhaps I no longer live by the high standards my English father set for everyone but himself." Lucian stared out the window as the carriage rumbled past lamp lit streets and imposing townhouses. "Or perhaps I'm simply living up to the disreputable qualities customary to the French."

"Your mother was the finest lady I ever met. You do her memory an injustice by insulting her countrymen." They rode in silence for several minutes before Pitt offered to share his thoughts again. "There's something you should know about the king, Lucian."

"Yes, he's quite mad."

"Indeed, but there's more."

"What is it, Will?"

"The Macgregor is in grave danger."

"How do you know this? No one's seen him for months."

"A British frigate spotted the *Dragon Master* several days ago heading for the

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Scottish coast. You should know...his majesty has no intention of allowing the Scotsman to live."

"What can the king do? He has no proof of treason."

"No, but he has Jonas Quinn."

"Quinn?"

"When you departed the stateroom, King George entertained another visitor...a dark-skinned man who claims to be a member of Quinn's crew. The king asked me to leave, but I slipped into an adjoining room."

"What did this man want?"

"He came with an offer and said Quinn would do away with the Scotsman any way the king wished. For a price, of course." Pitt hesitated. "Dragon's Breath."

Fear gnawed at Lucian's gut. If anything happened to Dreya....

"Did the king agree?"

"Most eagerly, and this appalling bargain is added proof his majesty's mental capability is deteriorating rapidly."

"Can you send a ship to protect the island?"

"Not without the king's permission."

"Will, I must warn Dragon's Breath."

"I agree." The carriage came to a halt outside Whytes. "Ethan Macgregor may be a smuggler, but I'll not be associated with the slaughter of his people." Pitt's hand rested on Lucian's arm. "If you intend to warn that island, you'd better not delay."

Chapter Fourteen

Jonas Quinn squinted into the darkness surrounding his cabin. Unsure what had disturbed his sleep, he held his breath, his fingers tightening around the handle of the dagger hidden beneath his pillow. A few seconds passed before he understood the reason for his anxiety.

Over the last thirty years he'd grown accustomed to the normal creaks and groans of the *Predator*. Now the ship sat as silent as a decaying hull beneath the sea, anchored far beyond the watchful tower of Dragon's Breath Castle.

Jonas slung the covers aside and swung his feet to the floor. He lit the oil lamp and turned up the wick. The flame grew until darkness faded into familiar surroundings. He tugged on his boots and stood. After a brief stretch, he strode to the window, picking up a half-empty bottle of rum.

Already the chill inside his cabin was enough to shrivel a man's sex a good two inches. Still, he unlatched the window and pushed it outward. An icy blast rushed past him, cutting through his shirt with the precision of a fine cutlass. He took a swig of rum from the bottle. The liquid sent a touch of warmth to his bones before it settled into his gut.

Jonas leaned beside the window and stared across the water. The eastern sky had already lightened to a dismal gray, signaling the approach of dawn. He picked up the long glass and pointed it south in the direction of Dragon's Breath. Raw anticipation coursed through his blood, the same heart-pounding exhilaration he experienced before a battle at sea.

He knew for certain that neither of the dragon ships sat anchored in the secluded village harbor. One was missing, feared to be at the bottom of the sea. The other, searching for proof. Both the island and castle stood as vulnerable as a motherless babe, and he waited with eagerness to take advantage of them. So far, the weather hadn't cooperated with his plans.

A few days earlier the *Predator* had docked in Portsmouth, and rumors swirled regarding British surrender to the Americans at Yorktown. Suspecting his letter of marque would soon be rescinded, Jonas sent Gypsy to King George, offering to continue the search for Ethan Macgregor. When Gypsy learned the Macgregor was alive, the offer changed somewhat. Jonas hadn't counted on Mad George agreeing to his terms.

"Good thing the bloody Scotsman isn't dead." Jonas drank another swig of rum. "But what to do about the girl?"

How could he determine her worth with her identity in question? Was she in fact the Macgregor's daughter? Or an American spy who'd aligned herself with a Scottish accomplice?

"I did not mention the girl to King George," Gypsy had informed him. .

"Good. Whether accomplice or beloved child, she will be the very noose around Ethan Macgregor's neck."

Jonas finished the last of the rum and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "The girl is the key."

* * * *

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"I don't understand your reasoning here," Dreya said.

"Whit's tae ken, lass?" Edwina slowed the cart to allow stray sheep to cross the icy path in front of them. "Ye've offered tae hulp me run a few errands this morn."

"I did no such thing. You volunteered me." The cold wind stung Dreya's cheeks and eyes, and she raised the hood of her cloak before glancing around at the man who rode in the rear of the cart. "And why bring Colin along?"

"Th' lad haes a strong back, an' Fulke needs someone tae hulp him patch his roof afore th' waither grows worse."

"We're headed to Fulke's cottage?"

"Aye."

"But....isn't putting those two together tempting fate?"

"Na."

"You're right," Dreya said, keeping her voice low. "It's more like dropping a lit candle into a keg of gunpowder. Only with gunpowder, you know exactly what's about to occur."

"Och, whit a worrier ye've become. Ah'm merely attemptin' tae stir th' pot a bit."

"Your pot is about to boil over, Edwina, and I'm not sure I wish to witness the damage."

A faint smirk touched the healer's lips, but her attention never strayed from the uneven road.

"Of course, you realize," Dreya added in a clipped whisper, "we'll have to wield a weapon more fierce than a wooden spoon over Fulke's head to get him to agree with us."

"Ye'r a witty lass."

"Don't patronize me, Edwina. I know you too well. This is just part of some sneaky plan you've conjured up to throw certain young lovers together."

"Seems tae me those two didnae need mah hulp."

"You know very well what I mean." Dreya pushed a strand of hair from her eyes. "Don't misunderstand me. I agree with whatever it is you've plotted, but last evening you stated you couldn't interfere in this situation."

"Aye, 'twould be a mistake fur me tae speak tae Fulke."

"So I'm to perform that underhanded task alone?"

The healer shrugged.

"Edwina, I warn you. I am not good at this sort of thing."

"Ye'r better than ye ken. Most Scotsmen ur easy enough tae handle. If ye point 'em in th' richt direction an' gie 'em a gentle shove, thay generally dae whit's expected."

"I applaud your insight, but what happens when they do the unexpected?"

Edwina uttered a sarcastic grunt.

Dreya frowned. "If you think Fulke doesn't possess the ability to see right through this obvious scheme of yours, you're sadly mistaken." She pulled her cloak tight about her body. "But I do wish Colin and Sarah to be happy."

"Ye'd best be thinkin' o' yer ain hert."

It shattered the moment I discovered Lucian's true identity.

"You needn't be concerned with me," Dreya said. The cart's left wheel rolled into a wide rut, bouncing her sideways in the seat. "I'll be fine."

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"Will ye noo? Weel then, Ah'd wager ye ken whit's best." But Edwina's skeptic tone hinted she had doubts. "Mak' na mistake, lass. Ye've nae seen th' last o' him."

"Who?"

"Captain Adams."

"His name is...." A jolt of fear stabbed Dreyra's insides, and she stared at the old woman. "Because of Father? Is Canderlay returning to arrest him? Of course he is. Why else would he return to Dragon's Breath?"

"Why dae ye think?"

"If you're suggesting his intentions have anything to do with me...." Dreyra's throat closed with emotion. "He bloody well locked me in the dungeon, did he not?"

The healer offered no response.

Dreyra entwined her fingers to keep her cold hands from trembling. "Are you certain he will return?"

"Aye, as sure as th' sun will disappear beyond th' horizon at th' end o' th' day."

Dreyra shivered. If Canderlay returned, her past would soon collide with his. And the moment it did, the very instant she witnessed contempt in his remarkable green eyes, his fate would be sealed.

Derek, what have you done?

But she couldn't fault her cousin for coming to the aid of a man he considered a friend. She should've informed Derek of Canderlay's true identity, but she'd remained silent.

Because Edwina insisted?

No.

Although Canderlay could write a thick book on the necessities of becoming a pompous cad, Dreyra harbored no real desire to place his life in danger. But if he returned....

"Yer fate an' his ur entwined," Edwina whispered. "Lik' th' tangled roots o' two trees planted side by side."

"It's not fate we share. It's misfortune. Besides, roots can be severed with a sharp enough blade."

"Aye, 'tis th' truth." Edwina pulled back on the horse's reins, and the cart rolled to a stop in front of a whitewashed cottage. "If severed, both will continue thair journey tae th' end o' th' path thay chose, but thay will ne'er come t'gither again." She set the brake then glanced at Dreyra. "Nae in this life."

* * * *

How much time do I have before Quinn and his crew descend upon Dragon's Breath? They intend to capture the Macgregor, but what will happen to Dreyra?

She and the rest of the island would not remain safe or untouched.

Lucian drew the curtain against the morning sun and leaned back against the carriage seat. "King George wants Ethan Macgregor, dead or alive. Quinn hopes to attain Dragon's Breath in return. Both will do whatever necessary to obtain their goal." He drew a tight breath. "Including murder."

I must reach Dreyra!

He closed his eyes. Even traveling by night, he wouldn't reach Glasgow for

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another three days. The snow covering the roads made the journey excruciating and perilous. Each passing moment brought Dreya closer to danger.

Derek Reed wouldn't likely sail into Glasgow for weeks yet, and Lucian couldn't afford to wait. He'd find a ship to carry him to Dragon's Breath. He owed Dreya his life and if need be, he'd row back to the island in a permeable longboat.

Of course, Dreya's pride might compel her to settle a score of her own, but he'd risk it.

The steady side-to-side motion of the conveyance allowed Lucian to drift off. He awoke a few hours later when the carriage stopped in Leicester.

"We need to change the horses, my lord," the driver stated.

"Very well. I'll stretch my legs."

Lucian alighted and headed toward an inn down the street. After the proprietor's wife packed a lunch of ale, roast duck and baked bread, he walked back to the carriage with the small basket hanging on his arm.

"Shall we share lunch?" he asked the driver.

"Thank you, my lord. It sure smells good, but I've a bit of unpleasant news for you."

"Oh?"

The driver jerked his head toward the carriage. "We had some trouble changing the horses. One of 'em got spooked by a dog and before we could calm him, he backed the carriage into the side of the blacksmith shop over there."

"Was the horse injured?"

"No, sir. Just frightened. It's the carriage what might need to be put out of its misery."

Lucian strode toward the conveyance. It leaned in an awkward manner to one side. He knelt and looked underneath. "It appears the foundation is knocked off its center beam." He turned to the driver. "Can it be repaired?"

"Blacksmith says there's a fair amount of damage, but he's done the job afore. Should take him no more than a week."

Lucian stood. "I cannot wait one day and certainly not a week."

"I figured as much so I inquired if he knew where you might be able to hire another carriage. About the best he can do is provide you with a suitable horse. Of course, I'll return half of what you paid me."

"No. Keep it."

"That's generous of you, my lord, but I cannot—"

"I insist."

The driver relented with a sigh. "Thank you, sir."

Lucian snatched a biscuit for himself before he handed over the food basket. "Don't forget to eat."

"God's speed, my lord."

Lucian retrieved his valise from inside the carriage and headed across the street. At the entrance to the stable he halted. The place appeared empty.

"You the gent needing a horse?" a disembodied male voice inquired.

"Yes. I'm in a hurry to reach Glasgow, and I require a fresh mount that's sure-footed."

A large man carrying a heavy anvil in one hand emerged from a stall about midway of the stables. "Don't have but one horse to spare. I imagine she's sure-

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footed enough but somewhat skittish." He tugged at his long black beard. "A brisk pace should settle her down though if you're interested."

"How much do you want for her?"

"Fifty pounds."

"That's a bit steep, isn't it?"

"Not for this little mare."

Lucian withdrew the money from his pocket. "I only have forty."

The man sighed. "If I sell her to you, you'll treat her good?"

"I give you my word."

The blacksmith pocketed the money then turned and shouted, "Bring her around, lad!"

A loud commotion sounded in a stall near the back before a nervous young man led a beautiful white Arabian out. They drew near, and the mare snorted. Her ears perked up, and a definite spark of mischief illuminated her large, brown eyes. This horse looked identical to the one he'd rented in Cherbourg.

"We call her Belle cause she sure is a beauty, ain't you, love?" The blacksmith reached for the horse's reins, and his young assistant hurried off. "Only had her a few days." He stroked the mare's neck. "Course I'll have to charge you extra for the saddle."

"Fair enough. May I inquire where you purchased her?"

"My wife's brother won her in a game of chance, and he sold her to me. Not much use bringing her to Leicester though. Most folk around here want a stout critter suitable for farming, but I'll not hook this little darlin' to a plow."

Lucian scratched the stubble on his chin. "Does your brother-in-law own a blacksmith's shop in Cherbourg?"

"Tommy?" The man shook his head. "No, he's a gunner's mate aboard an Irish frigate. He's the sort that don't stay in one place too long." He hesitated, and his bushy brows drew together. "How'd you know he brung this mare from Cherbourg?"

Lucian reached for the reins. "Just a guess, my friend."

* * * *

Dreya sank into a tub of hot water and closed her eyes. From dawn to dusk, she'd accompanied Edwina about her usual duties. They must have visited over two dozen villagers, all with different ailments or complaints. The island depended on Edwina, even with their animals. Too much work for a woman of advanced years. When her father returned, she'd speak to him about hiring a doctor from the mainland.

After she finished her bath, she dressed for dinner and hurried downstairs.

Edwina waited in the dining room. "Ye've a rosy color tae yer cheeks, lass."

"That's because they're frostbitten."

Fulke entered a few seconds later. On the nights he stood guard along the parapets, he ate supper at the castle. "Evenin', Edwina. Mistress."

"Good evening, Fulke."

"Thare's a terrible cold wind blowin' outside." He pulled up a chair and sat down at the table. "Ah brung th' tower guard hot food an' fresh water. Ah will

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send him a warm brick fur his feet later oan."

"I've no doubt you'll take care of him."

"Did ye settle th' matter we discussed earlier?" Edwina inquired.

"Aye. Ah took care o' it mah-sel."

Dreya frowned. "What matter?"

"One o' th' villagers tried tae sneak a bottle o' whiskey up tae his brother in th' tower, but Edwina warned me o' his intentions, an' Ah intercepted th' swill."

"It is rather cold this evening. Perhaps just this once—"

"Na, lass. We cannae risk any weakness. Th' first Macgregor ordered na strong drink in th' tower, an' that's th' way it's been e'er since. A sharp mind is mair important than a mon's comfort."

"The first laird had a reason to be cautious," Dreya stated. "Pirates sailed the seas in those days."

"Aye, an' quite a few noo, although thay ca' themselves mercenaries." Fulke reached for the baked bread. "Ah'm as tuckered as a sow birthin' ten piglets. Ah thank ye, mistress, fur bringin' young Colin tae me this morn."

Dreya sipped her tea. "Your roof is repaired?"

"Aye, we finished th' task afore dusk." He loaded his plate with stew and boiled turnips. "Colin's a hard worker, an' Ah've still plenty fur him tae dae, but 'tis nae mah place tae keep him frae his chores ur his widowed mama."

"I'm sure she doesn't mind."

Fulke downed half a glass of milk. "Mah work is mah ain, but it'll huv tae wait fur a warmer day. Ah've nae th' strength nor th' time."

"Bein' a mon wi' four daughters," Edwina said in a careful manner, "Ah expect it be a true blessin' tae huv such a strong lad around."

"It wur a blessin' indeed, madam."

"'Tis a shame ye didnae sire a son, Fulke, but perhaps yer second child will wed a mon wi' able hauns an' a strong back."

He ate his stew in silence.

"Course," she added in a matter of fact tone, "th' lass is still but ten an' four. A few years will pass afore she's auld enough tae dae whit's expected o' her."

"Ah ken whit ye'r a thinkin', madam, an' Ah'm oan tae yer sly weys."

Dreya held her breath.

"If ye've someone in mind fur mah—"

"Na, Fulke. Ah'm na matchmaker nor dae Ah wish tae be. Whit wi' a' th' sick folk tae look efter oan this island, Ah dinnae huv th' time tae interfere in such matters o' th' hert."

"'Tis guid, fur Ah cannae abide a woman whit sticks her nose in a mon's business." Fulke winked at Dreya. "Beggin' yer pardon, mistress."

Heat rushed up Dreya's neck and into her face. Did he imply...?

"Ye ken it's a faither's place tae see tae his daughter's weel bein'." Fulke reached for another slice of bread. "Ah aeem tae dae jist that fur each o' mine."

"Whit a fine faither ye urr. Yer daughters loove ye wi' each breath thay draw. 'Tis as clear as th' smile oan thair lovely faces ye've kept thair best interest in mind." Edwina sipped her tea. "Ah'm sure Finney will be a guid son-in-law." She took another sip of tea. "Course, ye cannae ask th' mon tae patch a hole in yer roof nor hulp sheer th' sheep ur feed an' water th' livestock."

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"Aye, that wid be a fine waste o' breath indeed."

"Ye've a great deal tae dae between yer duty 'ere at th' castle an' yer chores at home," Edwina said, her tone sympathetic. "'Tis a pity ye've na hulp but th' womenfolk."

He pushed his plate aside, his expression thoughtful.

"Ye'r nae a young mon, Fulke. Mibbie if ye'r stranded in th' middle o' th' ocean, ur if ye'r in need o' a mon wha enjoys bein' in charge o' others, Finney wid be o' some use then."

God bless this old woman! She took the roundabout way of placing things in a proper perspective, but her words were arrows of wisdom aimed straight at the target.

Fulke's face screwed into a tight frown. He probably didn't relish adding Horace Finnegan to the family. Perhaps he hadn't thought the matter through.

"Is Sarah pleased regarding her betrothal?" Dreya inquired.

"Th' lass is obedient. She'll dae whit's expected o' her."

"'Twas nae whit th' mistress asked."

"Sarah doesnae speak much o' Finney. How th' devil wid Ah ken whit she feels?"

"You could ask," Dreya replied.

"Na, lass. Fulke is th' head o' th' household. 'Twould be beneath him tae ask fur somethin' he didnae want nor need."

"Aye, madam." He leaned back in his chair. "We cannae a' be healers wi' th' gift o' seein' intae others' affairs."

Dreya dipped her spoon into the stew. "I imagine your wife is rather pleased."

Fulke sighed. "If mah Grace an' me cuid afford tae gie oor daughters a respectable dowry, 'twould be different."

"If Sarah's promise to Captain Finnegan hinges on the lack of an adequate dowry, perhaps I—"

"Lass," Edwina interrupted in a sharp tone. "Wid ye pass th' buttered peas?"

"Allow me," Fulke said. Afterward he pushed away from the table. "If ye'll excuse me, mistress, Ah'll be seein' tae mah duties noo."

Dreya waited until he'd departed the room before she released a pent-up breath. "Thank you, Edwina."

"Fur whit, child?"

"For stopping me from committing an unforgivable blunder."

The healer dunked a chunk of bread into her stew. "Men ur such a fiercely proud lot. Especially Scots. Ne'er wid thay accept charity frae another if thare be a wey around it. Hud ye voiced th' offer...."

"I would've insulted Fulke."

"Aye."

Dreya arose from the table. "You are indeed a rare find, Edwina." She placed her arms around the woman's frail shoulders and kissed her cheek. "And I adore you."

Edwina's eyes misted. "Dae ye expect me tae believe ye've learned a valuable lesson this nicht?"

"Oh, but I have," Dreya replied with a grin. "From now on I'll hold my tongue in the company of delicate Scotsmen."

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“Ye may hold yer tongue a’ ye lik’, lass, but twill nae keep yer opinions frae slippin’ past yer teeth.”

“I didn’t realize I’d become so overbearing.”

“Na, ’tis yer faither wha’s a micht haughty. Tae me, ye’r a breath o’ fresh air in a room filled wi’ sickness an’ disease.”

“That’s the nicest compliment I’ve ever received.”

The bell tower’s sudden warning reverberated off the walls of the dining room.

“Go, child,” Edwina whispered. “’Tis news o’ yer faither.”

Chapter Fifteen

Dreya pushed her way through the excited crowd gathered at on the pier. After the *Dragonfly's* crew secured the ship to the dock, Horace Finnegan appeared on deck.

"Captain Finnegan! Is there news of my father?"

"Aye, but it'll huv tae wait, lass. Ah cannae carry oan a conversation in th' midst o' a' this clamor."

Dreya bit back a curse and waited until the crew lowered the gangplank. At last Finnegan departed ship, and she rushed up to him. "The Macgregor and his crew? Are they well?"

"Thay ur."

She sighed in relief. "You spoke with my father?"

"Aye."

"Well where the devil has he been, and where is he now?"

"This be na matter fur a tender lass such as yersel'," Finnegan stated in condescending tone. "'Tis weel past mah supper, an' a've nae hud a moment tae wet mah lips."

Dreya doubted the truth of that last statement for already he reeked of whiskey. "Captain Finnegan, I'll not be a prisoner to your convenience." He tried to push past her, but she stood her ground. "You will tell me everything that concerns my father, and you'll do so this very instant."

His hawkish eyes narrowed. Nevertheless he turned to the villagers. "Mah guid friends," he shouted, his tone pompous. "While ye'r waitin' fur yer men folk tae depart ship, Ah wid ask yer attention."

A hush traveled through the crowd.

"Ah ken ye'r concerned aboot th' Macgregor an' his crew, but Ah swear tae ye thay ur weel an' in guid health."

An uplifting roar arose from the gatherers. The men slapped one another on the back, and some of the women hugged their children close.

"Why did the *Dragon Master* not return with you?" Dreya inquired.

"Eh? Whit's that, lass?"

"Where is the *Dragon Master*?"

"Oan her wey home, Ah expect, but she made berth in Rotterdam fur a short spell."

"What business has Father in the Netherlands?"

"A mon's business, lass. Whit else? But wait till ye see th' *Dragon Master*. She's undergone major revisions tae her deck an' gun ports."

"For what reason?"

Finnegan sighed with impatience.

Dreya checked her anger. "Why did Father feel the need for such revisions?"

"Fur added protection. Seems th' Macgregor got a bit spooked whin Quinn attacked th' *Falcon*. Tellt me it didnae sit weel tae lea that Frenchie oan his ain."

"Did you inform him that Captain Adams washed ashore on this island?"

Finnegan frowned. "Th' mon ye rescued wis Adams?"

Dreya hesitated. "Yes."

"Weel, noo." His pensive gaze returned to the tavern behind her. "Whit a

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coincidence.”

She steered him away from the noise of the crowd. “When will my father return?”

“It’ll nae be long. Ethan said tae tell ye dinnae fret.”

“When?” she repeated through clenched teeth.

“Let’s see noo.” Finnegan scratched his head. “Th’ *Dragon Master* was tae set sail a few days behind us. If she doesnae encounter any mishaps, she’ll reach Glasgow within th’ week.”

“Glasgow?”

“Aye.” He snapped his fingers. “Ah forgot tae mention Ethan said he’d be stoppin’ fur supplies afore headin’ home.”

A week. Or more.

Tears of relief flooded Dreya’s eyes, and she turned away. She wouldn’t allow Horace Finnegan the opportunity to label her a weak female.

“Noo, if ye dinnae mind....” Finnegan pushed past her. “Ah’d lik’ tae eat a bite afore Ah speak tae Fulke Mortimer.” He marched toward the tavern, his steps hurried.

Dreya sighed. Her father would return home within a week, but Sarah Mortimer’s worst fears would soon be realized.

* * * *

The next morning gave way to a chilly afternoon, and Dreya still searched for a solution to Sarah’s dilemma. In need of a quiet place to think, she headed for the solitude of the stone garden. As she neared the wall, the sharp winds stung her eyes and cheeks. In a little over an hour, the sun would disappear, and a bitter, cold darkness would again blanket the island.

“Father, please hurry home.”

She gathered the cloak’s warmth about her body and scanned the northern horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of the familiar sails of the *Dragon Master*. After several long minutes passed, she expelled a hopeless sigh.

“What the devil am I doing? The tower guard with his long glass is in a better position to spot a ship than me.”

She strolled to a bench and sat down. Without her approval, her thoughts soon returned to Canderlay. Edwina had proven herself a grand predictor concerning the Macgregor and his crew, yet this morning when Dreya broached the subject of Canderlay’s imminent return, the healer skillfully avoided sharing her thoughts.

This bothered Dreya more than she cared to admit.

“Mistress Macgregor?”

Dreya turned. Fulke’s eldest daughter stood a few feet away, a tearful expression in her eyes. “What is it, Sarah?”

“Mister Finnegan came tae oor cottage aboot half an hour ago, an’ he wis most unpleasant. He an’ mah mither exchanged words, an’ she threw a pot at him.”

Dreya could well envision the scene and under any other circumstances, she might have cracked a smile. “What caused the argument?”

“Somethin’ tae dae wi’ mah dowry. Ah didnae hear a’ o’ whit thay said, but

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Mister Finnegan rode away tae fin' mah faither."

Dreya stood. "What can I do?"

"Edwina sent me tae fetch ye tae th' village square. She said she'd be waitin' in th' courtyard."

A gathering of clan elders...witnesses. That would be the main reason Edwina waited in the town center. Perhaps Sarah's future had just taken a turn for the better.

"Sarah, where is your father?"

"He took Bastian huntin' fur game around noon."

Dreya frowned. Fulke carrying a rifle wouldn't do at all. Especially if he met up with Horace Finnegan. "Did your mother inform Captain Finnegan of his whereabouts?"

"Ah dinnae believe sae, mistress."

"Good, but I suspect you'd better find your father before trouble finds him."

"Shuid we bring him tae th' village square?"

"We? Is Colin with you?"

Sarah nodded.

"Yes, bring Fulke to the village." Dreya hurried toward the castle's rear entrance. "But give me at least an hour," she added over her shoulder.

* * * *

Around dusk, Dreya slid from the saddle and looped Pegasus' reins over a hitching post outside the village square. Once inside the compound, she glanced about. Several of the elders had already arrived, and they gathered around an open fire talking among themselves. When they noticed her, all conversation ceased.

Word of a possible confrontation between Fulke and Captain Finnegan must have traveled with the speed of a lightning bolt.

Dreya prayed she could avert the disaster that lurked ahead. She wandered through the crowd, nodding once to each clan elder and making eye contact as she'd seen her father do on several occasions. Some of the men bowed to her. Others tipped their hats. Several minutes later, she reached the small platform where Edwina stood.

"Why am I here?" she whispered to the healer.

"Tae sit in yer faither's steid."

"What? You cannot be serious."

"This be na time fur humor, child."

"I am a mere woman. None of these men will listen to me, nor will they care for my opinions."

The old woman motioned toward the throne-like chair. "If it's respect ye seek frae these folk, noo is th' time tae earn it."

Dreya swallowed hard. "I am not my father."

"Aye, but ye'r his blood, an' blood cannae be taken awa' nor overlooked."

Dreya walked around the platform and up the three steps. She sat on the edge of the huge chair, and a trickle of unease slid into her stomach.

Good Father, please help me!

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"Any words of advice, Edwina?"

The healer hobbled close. "In th' laird's absence, his eldest sits in his steid. That wid be ye, child. If ye'r asked tae settle a dispute, ye cannae show favoritism. Each grievance must be listened tae carefully. Whin ye reach a decision, 'tis law, an' both parties must abide by it ur lea this island."

"What if I say the wrong thing? What if—"

"Ye've a strong mind. Na mon doubts that but listen weel." Edwina placed her hand on Dreya's shoulder. "Whit e'er th' decision, it must be fair. If it be anythin' less, ye'll forfeit th' elders' trust."

"Will you stand as my adviser?"

"Ah'm allowed tae explain oor weys, but Ah cannae interfere. 'Tis strictly forbidden."

"But, Edwina, I've no wish to appear ignorant in these matters."

"Och, child, ye fret whin thare be na cause. Ah tell ye true, ye'r wise beyond yer years."

"Thank you, but I fear your faith in me is stronger than mine. I've only attended this sort of thing once, and my father settled the simple misunderstanding within minutes. The matter between Fulke and Captain Finnegan is far more complicated, and I'm not sure I'm up to the task."

"Keep yer wits about ye. Dinnae allow emotion tae rule yer head nor hert, an' twill be a simple matter."

"I pray you're right."

Several of the elders turned their attention toward the entrance to the compound, and right on cue Horace Finnegan appeared, a deep frown etched upon his face.

"He looks to be in a foul mood," Dreya remarked under her breath.

"Aye," Edwina agreed. "He's spewin' enough steam tae curl th' hairs in his snout."

Finnegan walked toward the platform, and a hushed murmur drifted through the crowd. "Mistress Macgregor, Ah'd huv a word wi' ye."

"He'll huv mair than a word," Edwina mumbled.

"Ah'm at th' wrong end o' a sore disagreement, lass." He halted in front of the platform. "An' Ah aeem tae richt th' matter."

"Calm down, Captain Finnegan."

"Ah tell ye, Fulke Mortimer cheated me, an' Ah'll nae —"

"Captain Finnegan," Dreya interrupted. "You will hold your tongue until I say, or I'll ask one of the elders to stuff a sock in your mouth. Do you understand?"

Finnegan offered a curt nod.

Dreya cleared her throat. "Now then, when Fulke arrives, and I'm given the details—"

"He's 'ere, mistress," someone shouted.

The crowd of elders parted.

Fulke hurried through the gatherers, his expression unreadable. "Finney, Ah heard yer silly blusterin' halfway across th' island." He halted beside the captain. "Whit th' devil's got ye in such an uproar?"

"A fine starting point, Fulke," Dreya said. "Let's begin with the problem." She hauled in a quick breath. "Now, Captain Finnegan, you may speak."

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"Aye, an' speak Ah will, mistress." He pointed a finger at Fulke. "This mon promised me a dowry along wi' his eldest daughter's haun in mairrage. 'Twas a meager pittance, but Ah agreed tae it cause Ah figured th' lass wid be an adequate wife. Upon mah return an' at mah request, Ah nicht add, Ah wis given possession o' said dowry. Only it wisnae whit Ah expected."

"I do not understand."

"Ah received a cow, two goats, six hens an' a rooster. 'Tis whit Fulke an' Ah agreed upon, but Ah didnae agree tae th' unexpected problems that come wi' it."

"What problems?"

"Fur three days noo that cow's gie me nothin' but sair milk. Th' hens huv ne'er laid one egg, th' fool rooster dropped dead th' same evenin' Ah took him, an' th' goats disappeared this morn." Finnegan sucked in a ragged breath. "Ah took it upon mah-sel tae visit Fulke's cottage this efternoon tae voice mah complaint in a civil manner, but that bluidy woman o' his threw a pot at me fur mah trouble."

Dreya curbed her amusement. It wouldn't do to laugh. She shifted her attention. "Fulke, do you wish to add to Captain Finnegan's remarks?"

"Mistress," Fulke said, "Ah realize Finney is a bit unfamiliar wi' a' manner o' livestock, an' Ah shuid huv explained whit's necessary in that respect. Wi' yer permission, Ah'll dae sae noo."

Dreya nodded.

"Finney, Ah'll replace th' rooster. 'Tis only fair. But those hens will nae lay eggs until efter thay git used tae th' new coop. As fur th' goats...Ah warned ye thay'd run awa' if ye didnae house 'em proper lik'."

"Ah gie 'em a fence, but th' bluidy devils ate th' wood frae th' gate."

"Ah'll hulp ye round 'em up come morn. Noo about th' cow...." Fulke turned, and Sarah hurried to his side. He took the pail she carried and set it upon the platform. "This come straight frae ole Maggie hersel', an' it tastes as guid as th' day Ah bought her."

"Mibbie ye'r used tae sair milk," Finnegan snarled.

Fulke's jaw tightened. "Ah expect th' milk curled whin it glimpsed yer ugly puss."

"Gentleman, please." Dreya arose from the chair. "I'll entertain no more insults." She walked over to the pail and knelt beside it.

Fulke handed her a long-handled ladle.

She gathered a small amount of milk and raised it to her lips. "There's nothing sour about this."

"Is that sae?" Finnegan smarted. "Weel, mayhap it didnae come frae th' same cow."

"Ah expected ye'd claim as much." Fulke turned and whistled. A few seconds later, Colin walked through the compound leading a docile, reddish brown cow on a rope.

"Whit's this?" Finnegan inquired.

"Yer cow," Fulke snapped. He tossed the contents of the ladle on the ground then placed the pail beneath the cow's heavy teats. After a few loud squirts, he handed the ladle back to Dreya.

She sipped again. "It's the same." She passed the ladle to Finnegan. "Taste it yourself, captain."

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A murmur of approval echoed through the elders.

Finnegan's expression bore a look of distrust. Nevertheless he lifted the ladle to his lips. He managed one sip before spitting out the milk. "Och, lass, how kin ye drink this? 'Tis mair bitter than yesterday's."

Dreya whirled around. "Edwina," she whispered. "Did you give Captain Finnegan something to distort his sense of taste?"

An expression of guilt settled in the healer's eyes, but a faint smile graced her lips.

"And the goats?"

The old woman offered a faint shrug.

"What about the rooster? Surely you didn't...?"

Edwina's raised brow along with her critical expression revealed her disapproval of the very idea.

"Mistress Macgregor spoke th' truth, Finney," declared one of the elders. He replaced the ladle inside the pail. "Thare be nothin' spoiled about this milk."

Several elders sipped from the ladle.

"A mon shuid ne'er sully another's guid name wi'oot proper cause," the blacksmith remarked. "Finney's done sae cause he doesnae care fur th' taste o' cow's milk."

"Mayhap ye shuid nae drunk yer supper," the tavern owner taunted.

"Aye, we've suffered enough o' this nonsense," an old fisherman snapped. "Finney wid be disgruntled if given a queen's dowry."

A chuckle echoed through the men. The elders did not care for trivial matters. Especially coming from Horace Finnegan's mouth, but for the moment he suffered their verbal abuse.

Dreya stood. "Gentleman, there is still an issue to be settled here."

"Thare be na unsettled issues," the blacksmith declared. "Finney is a disagreeable auld mon wi' nothin' better tae dae than cause discontent."

"Let th' mistress speak," Finnegan retorted.

Dreya raised her hands, as she'd seen her father do, and the grumbling settled to a low murmur. "The purpose of this meeting is not to amuse ourselves at Captain Finnegan's expense nor to pass judgment upon his character. He has lodged a complaint, and he has every right to expect me to settle this in an appropriate and timely manner."

"Th' matter's settled, mistress," the tavern owner insisted. "Finney 'ere haes wasted oor time."

"That's your opinion, sir, and be thankful you're allowed to voice it," Dreya snapped. "But I am the Macgregor's daughter and make no mistake...." A hush fell over the crowd. "I will be heard."

"Nicely done, child," Edwina whispered with a chuckle.

Dreya calmed her tone. "Captain Finnegan, I realize you are upset, and I understand your concerns. Rest assured, your situation has merit. So, I've decided the only conclusion that would benefit everyone...." She clasped her fingers together to keep them from trembling. "Indeed, the most practical solution here is to...."

The elders stared at her.

Finnegan leaned forward.

The Macgregor's Daughter

Fulke crossed his arms over his chest.

“Gentlemen,” Dreya said at last. “My solution to this problem is quite simple. Captain Finnegan, in light of your discontent, I hereby rescind your betrothal to Sarah Mortimer.”

Chapter Sixteen

"Rescind?" Finnegan's eyes narrowed to spiteful slits. "Ye cannae break this betrothal. Ye huv nae th' authority."

Dreya turned to Edwina. "I am within tradition, am I not?"

"Aye."

Her attention shifted back to Finnegan. "'Tis done then."

"'Tis done?" His face turned two shades of red. "Is this how ye settle a dispute? Wave yer delicate haun aboot an' declare 'tis done?"

"I'm sorry, Captain Finnegan."

"It's a wee bit late fur an apology, lass. Ye wur handed a simple task, but ye made matters worse cause ye cannae see whit's in front o' yer nose."

What I see is a useless, self-absorbed, self-centered, old Scotsman who harbors not one ounce of concern for anyone other than himself.

"I regret you're offended by my resolution," Dreya said instead. "But I believe it's fair to both parties. Therefore my decision stands."

"An' Ah agree wi' it," Fulke declared, and amusement danced in his eyes.

Sarah's anxious expression changed to relief, and her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. Colin stood beside her. His bold grin betrayed his enthusiasm.

"Aye, ye wid agree, Fulke," Finnegan spat in a bitter tone. "But th' Macgregor will huv somethin' tae say aboot this nonsense." His glare shot to Dreya. "Be warned, lass. Th' very second yer faither steps off th' *Dragon Master*, Ah'll be pullin' him aside tae hear mah complaint."

"Auld mon," Fulke admonished. "Ye'll speak tae th' lass wi' respect, ur ye'll nae speak tae her at a'. Unless ye wish that tongue o' yers shoved sae far doon yer throat it comes oot yer wide arse." He threw Dreya an apologetic grimace. "Beggin' yer pardon, mistress."

Dreya nodded once.

Edwina stepped forward. "Finney, ye cantankerous auld sea dog. Wur it nae ye wha asked fur this dispute tae be settled?"

"Ye weel ken Ah did, but Ah didnae—"

"Consider th' consequences? Aye, men such as yersel' ur nae sae quick-witted tae consider anythin' other than thair ain wishes an' wants."

"How wid ye ken whit a mon wants, auld woman? Even whin ye wur a fine lookin' lass, nae a mon wid come near ye fur fear his hert wid end up in yer black pot."

"That's enough, Captain Finnegan," Dreya snapped.

"Edwina is nae a member o' th' laird's family, sae Ah'm free tae speak mah mind in that regard."

"You are mistaken. Edwina is a member of this clan and therefore *my* family. But even if she were a beggar on the street, I'd not allow you to speak to her in such a crude manner."

"Nor wid Ah," Fulke stated.

Finnegan turned his back on them. "Th' healer claims tae be a doctor," he said to the elders in an obvious attempt to implore their sympathy. "But Ah've lived wi' this burnin' ache in mah belly fur six years, an' th' medicine she gie me does nothin' but cause me tae toss mah supper."

The Macgregor's Daughter

"Aye, we've noticed how ye'r wastin' awa', Finney," someone taunted.

"Mibbie he'd obtain some relief if he stayed awa' frae th' whiskey keg," another teased.

Both remarks drew snide comments from the elders, but Dreya suspected that over the past few days Edwina had added a little something extra to Horace Finnegan's medicine chest. She wasn't about to ask what.

Finnegan's hostile glare returned to Edwina. "Mayhap this witch shuid keep her nose whaur it belongs. Brewin' up a pot o' spells fur th' feeble-minded."

"Captain Finnegan, you will treat Edwina with respect and cease your verbal attack on her this very instant, or I'll—"

"Ye'll whit? Hang me by mah feet an' beat me about th' head till Ah'm senseless?"

"Whit guid wid that dae, Finney?" Fulke quipped. "Ye'v na mind tae speak o'."

"Lea th' mon rant till his hert's content," Edwina said in a calm voice. "Finney, whit say Ah cook up a spell fur ye, eh? One whit wid mak' ye mair agreeable tae some other unfortunate lass?" She chuckled low. "Course efter a few days wi' an overbearin' boor such as yersel', she'll likely demand Ah concoct a potion tae rid herself o' her troublesome burden." Mischief lit her brown eyes. "An' Ah've th' perfect brew fur th' occasion."

The group of elders backed away. The good captain had just committed a serious blunder, and they wanted no part in this particular disagreement.

"If ye think tae frighten me, woman," Finnegan growled, "ye'v sorely missed th' mark." Nevertheless he backed away from the platform too. "Ah'll inform th' Macgregor o' th' wey ye'v treated me, mistress." He stomped away. "An' he'll nae care fur it, ye kin be sure."

Dreya's father would receive an earful from this wretched old sailor, but she vowed she'd be present when he did.

"Mistress?"

Her attention shifted. "Yes, Colin?"

He cleared his throat. "Thare be somethin' o' great concern that Ah...." He grabbed Sarah's hand and pulled her along beside him. "That we...."

Dreya raised a brow. "Yes?"

"Weel, since th' betrothal between Finney an' Miss Sarah haes been...." He hesitated. "Whit's th' word ye used?"

"Rescinded?"

"Aye, that be th' one." Colin's voice trailed off, and again he cleared his throat. "Ah expect Miss Sarah is free tae...that is, her faither is free tae...." He sighed, and the expression in his eyes reflected uncertainty.

"Ye'r among friends, Colin," Fulke urged in low voice. "Speak up."

The ensuing silence grew strained.

"Weel spit it oot, lad," the blacksmith urged. "Dinnae keep us waitin' a' evenin'."

"Aye," the tavern owner agreed. "Mah missus will huv supper oan th' table."

"Och, gents, but this haes turned intae quite th' social gatherin'," another elder added with impatience. "Mah eyes ur nae as guid as thay used tae be, an' th' cold haes seeped straight intae mah bones. Na disrespect, mistress, but Ah shuid be headin' fur home."

The Macgregor's Daughter

"As shuid Ah," the blacksmith acknowledged. "Ah've plenty o' work waitin' in th' stables fur me, an' it'll be midnicht ur later afore Ah seek mah bed."

"Hold yer tongues, scoundrels," Edwina admonished. "'Tis difficult enough fur young Colin."

"Whit be sae difficult aboot speakin' yer mind?" someone asked. "Jist let th' words slip past yer teeth."

Dreya raised her hand, and the small crowd fell silent. "I realize you all have various chores to finish, but Colin made a request, and I suggest we be considerate and listen." She offered him an encouraging smile. "If you have something to say, now is the time."

Colin blew an extended sigh. "Ah dinnae ken whit ye'll think o' me, mistress, but Ah cannae live wi' mah-sel if Ah dinnae speak up." He turned his back to her. "Fulke, ye weel ken Ah'm a hard worker, but Ah 'm also an honorable mon."

"Aye, ye'll git na argument frae me aboot that."

"Weel then, Ah'd lik' tae ask ye...." Colin thought for a moment. "That is, Sarah's a fine lass. Thare's na finer lass oan this island...an' Ah respectfully ask yer permission fur her an' me tae wed."

An awed silence settled about the compound. The request wasn't unusual but given what had just occurred with Finnegan, it came about in an unexpected manner.

Fearful anticipation blanketed Sarah's expression.

"Weel, lad," Fulke scratched his head, "under normal circumstances, Ah'd nae be opposed tae such a match, but Ah cannae gie ye an aye ur a nay till th' Macgregor returns."

Edwina glanced toward the heavens. "Why, Guid Faither, must a mon alwa's seek another mon's approval?" She shook her head. "Fulke, hasnae th' mistress settled yer trouble wi' Finney in a proper manner?"

"Aye, but—"

"A's weel an' guid then. Mistress, dae ye approve o' th' match between Colin Seaton an' Sarah Mortimer ur nae?"

Dreya nodded. "I do."

"But, mistress, if Finney—"

"Och, Fulke," Edwina admonished. "Ye'r a stubborn, thickheaded mule. Whit dae ye care if that auld windbag o' a buzzard bends th' Macgregor's ear? Young Sarah is yer daughter an' yer ain blood."

"And she's no longer Captain Finnegan's concern," Dreya pointed out.

"Sae it wid seem," Fulke agreed, but he didn't sound convinced. "Still, Ah dinnae wish tae be accused o' any further wrongdoin'."

Edwina mumbled a curse before she turned and addressed the elders. "Whit mon 'ere doesnae mak' th' decisions fur his family?"

Muttering amongst themselves, most of the men nodded in agreement.

"Wid any o' ye allow another tae sit in yer place at th' head o' th' table if ye possessed even th' smallest amount o' guid sense?"

Several shook their heads. The rest whispered among themselves.

Edwina pointed at Fulke. "Haes yer senses departed?"

He frowned, his annoyance quite obvious. "Ah'm neither addlebrained nor simpleminded."

The Macgregor's Daughter

"But ye seek th' laird's consent, dae ye nae?"

"Aye, as does every mon oan this island."

"Did it nae jist come tae ye through th' words o' his daughter? Ur dae ye believe as Finney does? That th' lass 'ere serves na other purpose than tae please her faither?"

Dreya's face burned. Did Fulke believe this? How many of the elders thought the same?

"Ah dinnae wish tae be compared tae an auld fool," Fulke replied. "But it seems Ah'm nae as quick-witted as Ah used tae be." After a brief hesitation, he turned to Colin. "Ah cannae gie her much o' a dowry, lad."

"A' Ah ask is fur Sarah's loove."

Fulke stared, and for a moment Dreya feared he suspected the truth...that Sarah and Colin's relationship had gone well beyond childhood playmates.

"Th' loove o' a guid lass will keep ye warm oan a cold nicht," one of the elders remarked. "But it will nae put food in yer belly."

"Young Colin is an able lad wha's looked efter his mama these past ten years."

"Aye, since his papa's death, an' he's done a proper job."

"Ah expect thay'll dae weel enough livin' wi' th' Widow Seaton," another elder concluded. "She's a gentle an' kind soul."

"Thare still needs tae be a dowry," someone insisted.

"Whit about Maggie?"

"Aye, th' cow," the tavern owner agreed. "Finney haes na use fur th' animal."

"We'll send 'em other gifts, as weel."

"Na," the blacksmith argued. "We cannae insult Fulke."

"Ah dinnae wish tae insult th' mon. Ah'm thinking o' his daughter. Her mairrage shuid be celebrated an' whit better wey than tae offer gifts?"

"That's whit we done whin Widow Sinclair lost her husband an' gave birth tae twin sons a month later," said a man with one arm who'd remained silent until now. "We each brung somethin' fur th' babes."

"After th' weddin' ceremony, Colin an' Sarah kin use mah banquet hall," the tavern owner said. "Ah'll even provide th' wine an' ale."

This remark drew loud cheers of approval.

"Mah missus bakes th' finest shortbread in a' o' Scotland," bragged the blacksmith. "We'll gather enough food an' drink tae celebrate an entire week."

Another round of cheers traveled through the men, and most volunteered to add to Sarah's meager dowry.

"Noo hold oan," Fulke commanded, silencing the noisy chatter. "Ah'm grateful ye think sae kindly o' mah Sarah, but Ah cannae accept yer charity."

"'Tis na handout thay ur offerin'," Edwina chided. "But respect an' sincere guid wishes. Wid ye offend these fine folk an' send 'em awa' thinkin' ye'r a hertless faither wha places mair importance oan his pride raither than his daughter's happiness?"

"We're all family here," Dreya said. "There's no shame in family bestowing gifts upon those they care about."

Fulke set his mouth in a grim line. "Weel, mibbie one ur two gifts." He turned to the elders. "But na mair."

Good-hearted laughter arose from the men, and several rushed forward to

The Macgregor's Daughter

offer congratulations to the newly betrothed couple.

Dreya envied Colin and Sarah. If only Lucian Adams was who he claimed to be....

"It seems tae me we've forgotten somethin' o' great importance 'ere," Fulke declared above the noise, steering Dreya away from a quagmire of self-pity. He winked at her before turning to his daughter. "Ye'r a guid lass, Sarah. Ye've ne'er given me ur yer mama mair than a day's trouble in a' yer sixteen years. Ah neglected tae ask yer opinion regardin' th' mairrage contract wi' Finney." He touched her cheek. "Mah apologies."

Tears glistened in Sarah's eyes.

"Whit say ye, lass?" Fulke asked. "Will th' Widow Seaton's fine son dae fur a husband?"

With a startled cry of relief, she threw herself into her father's arms. "Aye," she replied for all to hear. "Ah wid be honored tae be Colin's wife."

* * * *

Lucian reached Glasgow around two o'clock on the third day and rode straight to the docks. Several small frigates sat in the harbor. One Scottish, the other two Swedish. A larger vessel flying a Turkish banner sat beyond them.

With a little luck and a few bottles of port, he might convince one of the captains to grant him passage back to Dragon's Breath.

He decided to approach the Turkish ship first. After dismounting, he worked his way toward the gangplank, leading Belle behind him. Another vessel lay hidden off the larger one's starboard side. He spied her Scottish colors, and his attention darted toward the ship's bow where a fierce beast snarled.

The Dragon Master!

Lucian rushed toward it. He whistled, catching the crew's attention. "Is the Macgregor aboard?"

"Whit's th' laird's business tae ye?" one of the men smarted.

"Tell him Lucian Adams requests his company."

"Adams?" another piped in. "Na, he wur lost at sea."

"Well now I'm found."

"God's teeth," a third crewman declared before he crossed himself. "It is Adams, an' he's clean shaven."

An older gentleman sporting a captain's uniform leaned against the ship's rail. "We gie ye up fur dead, lad. Whit brings ye tae Glasgow?"

"The Macgregor. Where might I find him?"

"Noo whaur th' devil dae ye think?"

"What tavern?" Lucian inquired.

"King James," came the unanimous reply from several crewmembers.

"*Merci*. Captain, I have a request." Lucian drew Belle forward. "This mare is a gift for the Macgregor's daughter. Would you bring her aboard and see that she's well cared for?"

"It'll be done, but Ah expect a favor in return. If ye fin' th' laird still standin', inform him th' supplies ur loaded, an' we're ready tae mak' sail."

Lucian nodded.

The Macgregor's Daughter

The captain turned to his crew. "McDougle! Git yer lazy arse o'er 'ere an' go fetch that horse."

"Do not cause these men trouble, *mon amour*." Lucian stroked her face and neck. "I'll return shortly."

The mare snorted.

After handing her over, Lucian hurried down the dock to the King James Inn. Once inside the tavern, he stared through the haze of stale smoke. Should he inquire about the Macgregor?

A burst of rambunctious laughter erupted from one corner of the room. Curious, he headed over to the group of men standing around a small table.

"Ah tell ye true, friends. It wur a frightful turn o' events. Thare we wur, stranded in th' middle o' th' ocean wi' a damaged rudder. Aye, helpless, we wur, wi' another storm fast approachin'." Ethan Macgregor leaned forward and lowered his voice. "We feart th' *Dragon Master* wid nae remain afloat an' if she did, th' *Predator* wid overtake us afore th' nicht yielded tae th' dawn."

"Interesting tale." Lucian pushed his way through the listeners. "And I'd enjoy hearing the rest of it, my lord, but unfortunately time will not permit it."

"Whit th' devil...?" The laird's blue eyes widened with disbelief. "Lucian Adams?" He chuckled lightly. "Weel, whit a fine kettle o' fish whit wafts beneath mah nose. Ah heard ye wur dead. Is this yer ghost Ah be lookin' at?"

"No, I'm here in the flesh. My lord, do you realize how many people are searching for you? Your daughter is frantic with worry."

His eyes narrowed. "Whit dae ye ken o' Dreya?"

Lucian hesitated. These men seemed friendly enough toward the Macgregor, but would they approve of the laird consorting with a French corsair?

Or worse, an English spy?

Ethan Macgregor waved his hand in the air. "Lea us, gents." They wandered off toward the bar, and the laird motioned for Lucian to take the chair across from him. "Ye look a micht troubled, Adams."

"That's because I've an urgent matter to discuss with you."

"Sae ye said, an' we'll dae it proper lik'." The Scotsman grabbed a near-empty bottle of port and drained the contents in three swallows. Afterwards, he motioned to the barmaid.

"My lord..." Lucian sat down and leaned close. "We must return to Dragon's Breath immediately."

"Whit's yer hurry?"

"I do not care to discuss the matter where others might overhear."

"Very weel then, but Ah've a better question, an' one Ah've asked afore. Whit dae ye ken o' mah daughter?"

"We met due to Jonas Quinn sinking the *Falcon*."

His expression grew serious. "Aye, 'twas a shame aboot yer crew. A blasted shame indeed. But since ye'r standin' 'ere in th' flesh an' drawin' breath, Ah've na cause tae be concerned fur yer health. However, Ah'm still a micht curious as tae yer association wi' Dreya."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to explain. You see, I washed ashore at Dragon's Breath, near death and temporarily blind."

"Dreya found ye?"

The Macgregor's Daughter

Lucian nodded. "I'll relate every detail, if it pleases you, but now is not the time." The barmaid placed a bottle of port on the table then moved away. "I've reason to believe *mademoiselle* and the rest of the island are in danger."

Alarm surfaced in the Macgregor's eyes, and he pushed away from the table. "Whit th' bluidy devil dae ye mean?"

Curious bystanders halted their conversations.

"My lord, it would be best to speak of this matter in private."

The Macgregor stuck his hand inside his coat pocket. He withdrew several coins and tossed them onto the table.

Once they walked outside, Lucian headed for the docks, and the laird fell into step beside him.

"Urr ye waitin' fur mah permission tae speak, lad?"

"The King of England has accused you of treason, and he aims to see your neck in a tight noose."

"Aye, 'tis auld news."

"You don't seem disturbed."

"Why shuid Ah be? This is nae th' first time Mad George thought up such a ruse."

"Except now his majesty has employed Jonas Quinn to bring you back to England, and he'll likely begin his search at Dragon's Breath."

"He kin watch th' island a' he lik's, but he'll ne'er git close tae shore."

Lucian halted. "Are you willing to chance that?"

The Macgregor stopped beside him. "Ye've done whit ye came tae dae, Adams, an' Ah'll heed yer warnin'. Ah ken ye've a score tae settle wi' Quinn, but this battle is nae yers tae claim."

"I disagree. And with all due respect, my lord, nothing you say will persuade me otherwise. So unless you plan to tie me to a nearby hitching post, I'll be returning to Dragon's Breath with you."

Chapter Seventeen

Dreya thanked her partner for the dance and returned to her seat beside Edwina. "Sarah is a beautiful bride," she said between sips of ale. "She and Colin are quite happy, do you not agree?"

The healer grunted. "Aye, thay ur weel suited fur one another, but look thare at Finney. This union doesnae sit weel in his gut."

"I'm surprised he attended the celebration. Do you suppose he's still angry with me?"

"Och, let th' mon bend every ear wha will listen. Th' only harm he'll dae is tae his-sel."

Dreya finished her ale and set the glass aside. "The food is delicious. Did you sample the sweet meats?"

"Ah've na appetite this eve, child."

"Are you ill?"

Edwina shook her head. "Whit e'er ails me, twill pass. Look thare." She pointed at Colin and Sarah. "Bear witness tae thair happiness then tell me ye'd dae different."

Colin held his wife close and whispered something in her ear. She blushed, but her smile broadened.

"No," Dreya said at last. "I'm rather pleased with the way things turned out."

"Th' elders ur satisfied as weel."

"Do you suppose my father will be upset?"

"Whin th' laird looks at his daughter, Ah see loove an' devotion an' nae an ounce o' displeasure."

"Thank you, Edwina."

The musicians called for another jig.

"Come, lass," called the blacksmith from across the room. "Ah'd wager ye've caught yer breath by noo."

She stood. "I have indeed, sir."

They met in the center of the dance floor. He bowed, and she curtsied. The music picked up the pace, and Dreya concentrated on keeping up. A breathless five minutes later, she thanked the blacksmith and headed back to her seat.

"I've not danced this much since...." Tears gathered in Dreya's eyes, and she released a long breath. "Since my mother's last birthday celebration."

"She wur a decent an' fine lady."

"You met her?"

Edwina shook her head. "Ah ne'er laid eyes oan her. But Ah see th' exceptional lass she raised, an' that tells me plenty."

Dreya smiled. "Thank you."

"Dinnae thank me, child. Send praise tae th' Guid Faither that He kept ye safe until ye came home whaur ye belong."

Home. Where I belong.

"I am grateful to the Good Father, but more so because He sent a wise and kind healer to guide me."

The old woman's lips quivered. "Careful, lass. Ye'll cause mah head tae swell."

"Well then...we cannot have that, can we?"

The Macgregor's Daughter

"Listen up, friends!" Fulke jumped upon a chair near the tables. His shrill whistle echoed through room, and the noise died down. "Ah've much tae thank th' Guid Faither fur, but mostly..." He downed his whiskey and handed the glass to his wife. "Ah noo huv a son tae hulp wi' th' chores."

Amused laughter echoed through the crowd, and some of the men offered humorous congratulations.

"Ah admit at first Ah wis a wee bit unsettled aboot this union," Fulke remarked. "But that wis afore mah missus pointed oot that Ah'm a mon wha thinks mair often than he shuid."

"Ye also talk mair than ye shuid!" someone shouted from the back of the room.

"Especially whin th' rest o' us wish tae continue celebratin'," another piped in close to Dreya.

"Och, friends," Fulke said with a forced frown. "Ye've cut me tae th' quick, an' that's th' truth." The amusement in his voice belied his words. "But if ye insist, an' Ah see some o' ye strongly dae, Ah'll speak mah mind wi' haste sae th' celebration kin continue."

The entire room applauded with enthusiasm.

Fulke waited until the laughter and light-hearted humor died down before going on. "Grace an' me wur given four daughters an' whin thay wur born, we prayed tae th' Guid Faither tae bless each one. As Ah look intae mah Sarah's eyes," he smiled at her, "Ah couldnae be mair pleased fur th' lass." He hopped down from the chair and opened his arms to Colin. "Welcome tae th' family, lad."

The two men embraced.

The healer grunted. "How simple it be fur a mon tae believe whit he wishes."

Dreya laughed. "Oh, you're merely upset because Fulke isn't aware it's you he should thank."

Fulke kissed his wife and daughter and then turned to the musicians. "Hear noo, Ah didnae pay ye lads tae be as silent as th' grave. Play these fine guests a fancy jig an' dinnae spare th' fiddle this time around."

Once again music and laughter filled the air, and the floor shook with fervent stomping and clapping.

"I wish my father could see this," Dreya said. She turned to the healer, but the woman's solemn expression appeared carved in stone. "Edwina, you are ill."

"Ill wi' fear, fur somethin' be amiss."

"What do you mean?"

"Th' devil...he's set foot upon this island."

Unease slid down Dreya's spine, and for a split second her heart caught in her throat. "Canderlay?"

"Na." Edwina trembled. "He's come fur..." Her attention darted about the room, but she didn't focus on any particular person. "Oh, Guid Faither." Her frail body shook. "This cannae be yer doin'."

Dreya touched her brow. "You're burning up with fever. You should've told me."

"Tread careful this nicht, child." She clutched Dreya's arm, and her expression bordered on insanity. "Promise me ye'll return tae th' castle."

"Edwina—"

The Macgregor's Daughter

"Promise, me, lass." The healer's hands trembled, but her grip turned painful.

"Very well, love. You and I will return to the castle."

"Dinnae concern yersel' fur me."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Ye must." Edwina released her but remained visibly shaken. "Go, child. Go noo afore it's too late."

Dreya arose. She scanned the room, and her gaze met Finnegan's cold glare. He turned away first. Her decision regarding Colin and Sarah probably wounded the captain's delicate pride, but not enough that he'd refuse free food and drink.

The musicians played a fast jig, and a throng of eager dancers packed the middle of the floor. Somehow she caught Fulke's attention, and he hurried over.

"Ah spied that frown o' yers frae across th' room, lass," he stated. "Whit be th' trouble?"

"Edwina is ill."

"Ah'll bring th' buckboard around."

"Lea me be, Fulke," Edwina insisted in a weak voice. "See tae th' laird's daughter."

"Cease yer rantin', madam," he ordered in a firm but gentle tone. "Na harm will come tae th' mistress."

"Perhaps it would be better if she spent the night here," Dreya told him. "Ask the tavern owner's wife if she can spare a room?"

He hurried off to do her bidding.

Edwina drew a labored breath. "Return tae th' castle."

"I will, dearest. As soon as I tuck you into a warm bed."

"Och...this nicht brings...evil upon us. Ye cannae trust a soul. He thinks tae fool ye...aye, he's set his mind tae it. He'll fin' nothing but a blade fur his trouble."

"Who? Canderlay?"

"Selfish, selfish mon....na match fur a crafty pirate."

"Edwina, who are you—"

"Listen up, child." The old woman held Dreya's hands. "Receive this blessin' frae yer ancestors." She closed her eyes and mumbled a few words of ancient Gaelic before she switched back to English. "Guid Faither, Ah beg ye. Watch o'er th' lass until English comes. He *must* come soon, Guid Faither."

* * * *

"Ah wasted plenty o' coin oan this bluidy ship," the Macgregor bellowed, breaking his silence for most of the voyage. "She's a metal-plated hull armed tae th' teeth, yet she crawls through th' water lik' a wounded whale."

Lucian agreed but held his tongue.

"Bluidy hell an' God's teeth." The laird glanced at his pocket watch. "This vessel moves at a snail's pace."

"We should arrive at the island by midnight."

"Aye, but it'll nae be soon enough fur me."

Lucian understood the Scotsman's impatience, for his own had long reached its limit. His gut churned with nervous agitation, and the closer they came to Dragon's Breath, the more his discomfort increased.

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"Ah cannae stomach much mair o' this waitin'."

"The island is well-guarded, and Fulke would give his life before he'd allow anyone to harm your daughter."

"Aye." The Macgregor paced back and forth. "Ah've na doubt aboot that."

Lucian briefly considered confessing his true identity, but he figured it would accomplish little at this point except get him thrown overboard. And he wasn't about to leave this world without knowing for certain Dreya was safe.

"Och, but Ah'm an auld fool, Adams," the Macgregor announced in a defeated voice. "Ah made a fine mess o' it wi' Dreya's mither, but she ne'er tellt me she carried mah child. If Ah hud concerned mah-sel mair wi' losin' her raither than mah birthright..." He shook his head. "Noo oor daughter's life hangs in th' middle o' this. A direct result o' mah hatred fur th' English an' thair hatred o' me."

"I'd say it's your love of smuggling that's endangered her, but perhaps I spoke out of turn."

The Macgregor's jaw tightened, but he didn't disagree.

"My lord," Lucian added in a more amiable tone. "Your daughter is no weakling by any means. In fact, she's rather quick-witted. Then there's the healer—"

"Aye," the Scotsman stated with enthusiasm. "Edwina haes th' gift o' seein' beyond th' day, an' Ah've na doubt she'll warn th' castle if thare be trouble oan th' horizon."

Lucian reached for a bottle of whiskey. If he could talk himself into believing the same, perhaps the intense fear squeezing his chest would lessen.

* * * *

Dreya pulled the blanket up to Edwina's chin and kissed the woman's brow before she exited the bedroom.

Fulke waited in the corridor, his hand on his stomach. "How is she?"

"She's resting, but you don't look well at all."

"It's those bluidy haggis. Mah gut's knotted lik' a hangman's noose."

"I'm sorry, but fortunately I've learned a few secrets from Edwina. If you ground the root of an aloe plant into a cup of hot tea, it will settle your stomach. Shall I search Edwina's bag?"

"Dinnae trouble yersel', mistress." He leaned against the wall for support. "Ah've ne'er seen th' healer this ill. Whit dae ye suspect caused it?"

"I imagine the grueling chores she does each day as well as her age. Combined, both are bound to be a strain on anyone's health. I'm surprised she hasn't succumbed to some form of illness long before now."

"This island needs a doctor. Seein' tae these folks is too much work fur one auld woman."

"I agree, and I intend to speak to my father about that."

The tavern owner's wife approached. "Pardon me, mistress. Th' hour grows late, an' mah husband's aboot tae lock up. He heard ye wish tae return tae th' castle sae he sent fur yer horse."

"Thank you. Are you sure you do not mind sitting with Edwina until

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morning?"

"Th' healer's done mair than enough for me an' mah family, miss. Ah'm happy tae repay her." She studied Fulke's pained expression. "Och, mon. Ye'r as white as a sheet."

"Ah'll be fine wi' a few hours sleep."

"Aye. Tak' th' last room doon th' hall thare. Th' bed's awready turned doon."

"Ah dinnae wish tae impose, madam."

"Fulke Mortimer." The woman's hands settled upon her robust hips. "Either ye tak' yersel' oan tae bed, ur Ah'll send fur Grace."

"Ah'll nae seek mah bed until Ah see th' mistress safely home."

"I do not need an escort, Fulke," Dreya insisted.

"Is th' auld healer still rantin' aboot th' devil?" asked the tavern owner's wife.

"No, she's asleep now."

"Her words brought a chill tae mah backbone, thay did."

"At times Ah've poked fun at Edwina an' her weys," Fulke stated. "But she's a guid woman, an' Ah'm raither fond o' her. Mistress, dae ye believe she'll recover?"

"I hope so. And since she insisted I return to the castle this evening, I intend to keep my promise." Dreya smiled at the older woman. "Would you be kind enough to search Edwina's bag for the root of an aloe plant and bring it to Fulke with a cup of hot tea?"

"Richt awa', miss," she replied and hurried off.

Fulke sucked in a distressed breath. "Th' least Ah kin dae is fetch someone tae ride along wi' ye."

"For what reason?"

"Mistress, Ah weel ken ye kin tak' care o' yersel', but th' fog rolled in sae thick this eve Ah kin sink mah teeth intae it. Ye cuid lose yer wey."

"It's a small island. I'd not be lost for long. Besides, Pegasus knows the way home."

"But...." Fulke doubled over in pain.

Dreya wrapped her arm around his waist and guided him to the room down the hall. "The tea will be here shortly. Do not forget the herb."

He nodded.

She helped him to bed and then removed his boots and placed a blanket over him. "Should I stop by your cottage and inform Grace of your illness?"

"Heavens, dae ye wish tae cause me mair trouble? Ah'd raither mah Grace believed Ah'm still celebratin'."

"Very well then. Goodnight, Fulke."

"Goodnight, lass."

Dreya kissed his brow and slipped from the room. Closing the door behind her, she hurried downstairs.

"Ye'r soused as it is," the tavern owner declared in a loud voice. "Why wid Ah gie ye another bottle?"

"Cause thare's still coin jinglin' in mah pocket," Captain Finnegan retorted.

She crept toward the main door.

"Ah ken whit ye an' th' rest o' this island thinks o' me. Th' Macgregor says mah lips kiss th' bottle mair often than need be. Weel, perhaps he's correct, but th' pain in mah gut causes me tae drink as Ah dae."

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"'Tis auld news, Finney. Go home. Come back tomorrow eve, an' we'll discuss a' yer problems."

Dreya backed into the shadows of the staircase a second before the captain turned and marched across the room. At the front door, he halted, and she suspected he sensed her presence. Finally he turned and staggered outside.

The tavern owner followed. "Finney, ye want me tae drive th' cart?"

He mumbled something unintelligible.

"Suit yersel', auld mon."

"Will he be all right?" Dreya asked.

The tavern owner turned. "That auld stubborn goat? Aye, lass. He'll be fine come morn. How is Edwina?"

"Much better, thank you, but I'm not so sure about Fulke."

"How's that?"

"He's suffered a wee too much celebrating and will be spending the night as well."

He chuckled. "Ah'll send word tae Grace."

"Then please inform Fulke this was your idea. Not mine." She retrieved her cloak and gloves from a nearby chair. "You and your wife have been most kind."

"'Tis whit a clan does, miss. We care fur one another." He glanced outside. "Whit a foul nicht this be."

Dreya shivered. A poor choice of words. Nothing more.

He turned. "Lea Pegasus 'ere, an' Ah'll fetch someone tae drive ye home."

She hesitated, on the verge of accepting.

What's wrong with me? Am I frightened by mere words now?

Edwina's earlier warning came to mind, and an overwhelming need to escape rushed over Dreya. "Thank you for the kind offer, but I'm in too much of a hurry."

"Then be careful, miss. Stay awa' frae th' cliffs."

"I will."

After saying goodnight, she headed outside. Tethered to the nearest hitching post, Pegasus snorted at her approach. Fulke hadn't exaggerated one bit about the thick fog. She could distinguish nothing past a few feet in front of her.

Finnegan's mule and buckboard rounded the corner of the tavern and then disappeared into the hovering, white haze. If he continued at such a brisk pace, he could end up in an accident.

The road to the castle brought her near the captain's cottage. Perhaps she should make certain he arrived home. She untied Pegasus and slipped on her gloves. "We'll be home soon enough, love."

* * * *

The back of the cart appeared out of nowhere.

Dreya quickly reined in her horse. Through the fog, the soft glow of a lantern revealed a man slumped over in the seat.

"Captain Finnegan, are you ill?"

No response.

She dismounted and hurried around to the other side of the cart. "Captain Finnegan, you must wake up."

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He moaned.

Dreya climbed up beside him and pushed him back against the seat. His eyes remained closed. She removed one of her gloves and placed her hand against his cheek.

"I doubt there's much wrong with you. I imagine you're just soused."

Should she drive him back to his cottage? Help him to bed? The very thought sickened her.

She surveyed her surroundings. The fog blanketed everything in an eerie white mass. Not even the wind stirred, and a strange silence hung in the air.

Something be amiss. Th' Devil his-sel haes set foot upon this island.

Acute fear snaked up Dreya's backbone, and she couldn't explain her sudden terror. If she tied Pegasus to the back of the cart....

"Sit doon," Finnegan growled.

Startled, she glanced down. "You don't appear soused at all."

"Such a foolish chit." His expression turned cruel. "Stupid an' predictable."

The Scotsman's loathing didn't bother Dreya. The pistol leveled at her heart did. "If your intention is to frighten me, you've succeeded in grand style."

Satisfaction rounded out Finnegan's smug expression. "Ah dinnae wish tae frighten ye, but...." He snatched the lantern, held it high, and swung it back and forth several times. "This be th' end o' yer interferin'."

"I don't understand."

"Ye shuid huv stayed in th' colonies. Ye hud na business comin' 'ere, stickin' yer nose intae somethin' whit didnae concern ye."

"Everything on this island concerns me."

"Ye believe ye'r important?" Finnegan leaned forward, and his eyes gleamed with malice. "Ye'r nothin' but th' Macgregor's by-blow. A shameful obligation. Th' direct result o' his ruttin' wi' an English whore."

Dreya's cheeks flamed. "How dare you speak ill of my mother. You know nothing about her."

"Ah ken she spread her legs fur th' laird even efter he tellt her he wur promised tae another."

She slapped him hard. "Captain Finnegan, you are a rude, vulgar, and obnoxious drunk. I doubt you've ever cared for anyone but yourself." She balled her fists. "Do not ever speak poorly of my mother again, or you'll regret it."

"Is that sae?" He pulled her down beside him and waved the pistol beneath her nose. "Weel Ah kin name a dozen ur mair o' yer traits Ah ne'er cared fur. At th' top o' that list be yer sharp tongue."

"Take your filthy hands off me."

"Oh, Ah'll nae keep ye 'ere long."

Dreya calmed her anger. "It's agreed we've a genuine dislike of one another, captain, and I'd rather not sit here with you at all. So...where does that leave us?"

A smirk appeared in one corner of his mouth. "Wi' me holdin' a pistol, that's whaur."

"For what purpose?"

"Ye'r a clever lass. Dae Ah need explain th' situation tae ye?"

"Apparently so."

He glared at her.

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She stole a glance at the pistol. "For what reason are you pointing a weapon at me?"

"Ye gie me plenty o' reason. Ye an' yer lofty wey o' lookin' doon yer nose at others."

"If I gave you that impression, it might have something to do with your obvious dislike for women."

"Distrust, ye mean."

"If that's what you wish to call it," Dreyra said through clenched teeth. "Now, either explain what you want with me or let me go."

"Ah'll nae be lettin' ye go, mistress, an' if ye've a concern fur yer maidenhood, dinnae trouble yersel'. Ah'd nae lay a finger oan an illegitimate chit such as yersel'." However," Finnegan glanced over her head, "Ah dinnae believe these gentlemen embrace such high standards."

Dreyra turned. Four men emerged from beyond the trees, ghosts materializing straight from the bowels of the thick fog. She recognized the leader, and a solid mass of fear paralyzed her body.

The devil has indeed set foot upon this island!

Chapter Eighteen

"Good evening, Mistress Macgregor," Jonas Quinn said in a pleasant tone of voice.

Dreya controlled her fear. "I see you decided not to heed my warning."

"And I see you've lost your Scottish brogue."

She muttered a silent curse. How could she be so careless?

"If I'm cowed by the words of a mere girl, my crew would soon mutiny."

Two men approached Pegasus, but the horse backed away. His nostrils flared and his eyes widened with terror.

"Grab that devil horse," Quinn shouted.

One of the men moved closer.

Pegasus reared, pawing the air.

"Gut the beast," Quinn ordered.

"No!" Dreya screamed.

Pegasus reared again then bolted back down the road toward the village.

"He's headed straight fur th' inn," Finnegan mumbled in a sour tone.

"No matter," Quinn remarked. "This won't take long."

Finnegan gripped her arm. "Whit say ye tae this turn o' events, lass? Show these men yer ill-bred temper. Haes th' cat finally snatched yer barbed tongue?"

Dreya turned her anger on the captain. "What the bloody hell have you done?"

"Ah made a simple bargain, that's whit."

"If you call betraying my father and the people of this island a simple bargain, you're more of a fool than I gave you credit."

Finnegan raised the pistol to her head. "Ye'r guid at cuttin' a mon tae th' quick, mistress, but whin it comes tae smarts, ye'v none tae speak o'."

Dreya's breath caught. Responding to Finnegan's latest insult would do more harm than good. The man despised her. She focused her attention on Quinn. "What do you want?"

He offered a peculiar smile.

It sickened Dreya. She turned her attention back to Finnegan. "How long have you associated with these pirates?"

"That's none o' yer concern, lass, but dinnae ye go blamin' me fur yer troubles. A' that occurs this nicht kin be laid squarely at yer feet."

"What do you mean?"

"Ye'll see." The Scotsman aimed the pistol between her eyes. "Ur mibbie ye'll miss a' th' excitement."

"Lower your weapon, captain," Quinn ordered calmly.

"Aye, but Ah'll receive an apology frae this one afore Ah dae."

Those words ended up being his last.

Death came with quiet precision. In the blink of an eye, Finnegan's smug expression changed from surprise to shock and finally...disbelief. He dropped the pistol and slumped forward. A long, thin arrow jutted out of his back.

A horrified scream rose in Dreya's throat. She reached out to him, but the captain tumbled out of the buckboard and hit the ground with a sickening thud.

"Well," Quinn declared with amusement. "That's one problem out of the way." He stared at Dreya. "Now for the other."

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She scrambled across the seat and snatched the pistol.

Three of the men halted.

Dreya stood, but her knees threatened to buckle.

Quinn walked toward the cart. "You plan to fire that weapon, girl?"

"What do you think?"

"I think that would be poor judgment on your part."

"Look how her hand shakes," said the man who approached from her left. "I'd wager she's never held a pistol before."

"Stand back," Dreya ordered. "Or one of you will find out."

"You're bluffing, girl," said the man who approached from her right. He carried a bow strung across his right shoulder, and a satchel of arrows rested against his back. "You might injure one of us, if you keep your eyes open." His companions snickered. "But what will you do about the rest of us?"

"Perhaps she's hidden another pistol beneath her skirts," suggested a third man. "Let's have a look see."

Dreya aimed the weapon at him and squeezed the trigger. The discharge left an echo, and a thin line of acrid, gray smoke rose in the air.

The wounded man clutched his throat. His shocked gaze stared through her, and blood oozed from between his fingers. He fell to his knees and plopped face down onto the road.

"Bloody good shot," someone remarked.

Quinn muttered a foul curse. "One of you gents better get a hold of her before she rouses the entire island."

Dreya squeezed the trigger again. It clicked, but the pistol did not fire.

"You're out of shot, girl," Quinn said. "What now?"

She hurled the pistol at his head.

He caught the weapon just inches from his face.

One of the pirates lunged for her, and Dreya kicked out. The toe of her boot caught him in the face.

"Gawd." He jumped back from the cart, his hands covering his nose. "She broke it," he bellowed. "The stupid chit broke my nose!"

"Quiet," Quinn snapped.

Sensing she held a slim upper hand, Dreya reached for the mule's reins. Before she managed to release the brake, one of the pirates grabbed her around the waist.

"Let go of me!"

He dragged her backward and off the cart, but she kicked the lantern over, sending it tumbling over the edge. The glass hit the frozen ground and shattered, dousing the flame.

The man grabbed her hair, displacing several pins. "Hold your tongue, girl," he ordered in her ear, his breath a nauseating mixture of stale rum and rotted fish. He placed a cold blade to her throat. "Or you'll not live to witness another dawn."

Panic squeezed the breath from Dreya's lungs. "Someone likely heard that shot," she said to Quinn's shadow. "If you leave now, your lives will be spared."

"Oh, we'll leave. But not before I'm satisfied my men did what they were sent to do."

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"What...?" She bit her lip, afraid to ask but knew she must. "What did you send them to do?"

"I'll let you figure that out." He stood over her, his imposing height more menacing in the darkness. "Your bravado astounds me, Mistress Macgregor. Indeed, I've seen grown men fall to their knees and weep like babes at the sight of my crew. You've done neither."

"That doesn't say very much for your character, does it, Captain Quinn?"

"On the contrary, girl. It says a great deal."

Dreya controlled the trembling in her voice. "What do you want with me?"

"Captain Finnegan spoke of our bargain—"

"If it was my life for his, you've obviously broken your word. But knowing your merciless reputation, this comes as no surprise."

The blade inched deeper into her throat.

Dreya winced, tears gathering behind her eyes.

"I made no such agreement," Quinn insisted. "Finnegan was to bring me the Macgregor's daughter, and I'd pluck a certain thorn from his arse. You."

His companions chuckled among themselves.

"There was no mention of me letting Finnegan live. So I didn't."

"I noticed."

"Now that we're in agreement, so to speak, I've an accord to strike with you."

"I do not bargain with pirates."

"The Scotsman did not exaggerate," her captor remarked in a matter-of-fact tone. "This one's got a wicked tongue." His blade slid lower before it inched across her neck.

The fresh wound burned, and tears stung her eyes.

"Shall I silence her tongue for good, captain?"

"Not just yet."

"Do you think me an addle-brained female?" Dreya snapped. "If your intention is to murder me, as you did Captain Finnegan, you would've done so already."

"Clever girl."

"Get on with it then. What's this grand bargain you and I are to strike?"

A shadow stepped in front of her, and she smelled the burlap. Her captor removed the blade from her throat seconds before the sack slipped over her head.

"Captain Finnegan swore you were the Macgregor's daughter," Quinn said. "So here it is in a nice little bundle. You cooperate with us, and you live. It's that simple."

"You ask me to trust you after what you did to Finnegan?"

"You should thank me that drunken leech no longer draws breath. His loyalty was to himself and no other."

"His life may not have mattered to you, but it wasn't your place to end it." Dreya slowed her breathing, praying the burlap wouldn't suffocate her. "I ask you again, Captain Quinn. What sort of fool do you take me for?"

"I admit I once misjudged your character, lass. You're no useless female. You've a clever mind, and that's exactly why you'll do as I say."

She swallowed with difficulty. "And if I do not?"

"Then the villagers will pay for your mistake," Quinn replied, and his next

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words fell close to her ear. "As well as the mistakes of your treasonous father."

* * * *

Half an hour after midnight, the *Dragon Master* entered the narrow inlet, and cannon fire erupted from the castle. Everyone on deck took cover, but the shots went wide and off the starboard side.

"Whit th' bluidy hell?" shouted the Macgregor.

Lucian tensed. Had Quinn seized the castle?

But the cannons did not fire a second round.

"One of the guards must've recognized the ship."

The Macgregor nodded.

Lucian leaned against the ship's railing. "Please be safe, Dreya."

They sailed opposite the castle, and the Macgregor shouted up to one of his men, "Whit th' devil goes oan 'ere?"

"We wur attacked in th' nicht, laird."

"By Jonas Quinn?"

"Aye, Captain Adams."

"Whaur be mah daughter?"

The guard hesitated. "Ah cannae say."

"How can you not know where your mistress is?" Lucian snapped.

"She wisnae at th' castle whin Ah arrived."

The laird muttered a curse. "Whaur be Fulke?"

"In th' village. Explosives took several buildin's near th' pier, but th' *Dragonfly* suffered th' most damage."

The Macgregor cursed. He turned and issued a command to the ship's captain, and they continued down the inlet toward the small harbor. "Dreya is a kind-hearted lass. Ah suspect she's offerin' whit hulp she kin tae th' villagers."

The fear inside Lucian's gut told him otherwise.

"Ah hear ye brought her a gift. A white Arabian mare."

"Belle is for Pegasus. A possible mate."

"A match, is it? Ye certain that be th' courtship ye hud in mind?"

Lucian faced the Scotsman. "If you're implying I might have designs on your daughter, you'd be mistaken. *Mademoiselle* saved my life. I owe her a debt. That's the extent of our strange relationship."

"A debt, is it? That be why ye insisted oan comin' back tae this island?"

"No, I thought to be of some help as well."

"Did ye noo?"

"My lord, I am a lowly corsair. I have no title, no lands, and at the moment, very little coin. Why would a penniless man entertain thoughts of courting the laird's daughter?"

"Ye may've lived th' life o' a privateer, Adams, but someone taught ye th' mannerisms o' a gent. Still, it eases mah mind that ye dinnae plan oan pursuin' somethin' Ah've no intention o' grantin'."

And what of an English spy? How far would that profession get me?

No doubt to an early grave.

Lucian eyed the dark, swirling waters below. "Then we understand one

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another, my lord.”

“Indeed.”

At last the village harbor came into view. So did the full extent of the damage.

“God’s teeth,” whispered the Macgregor.

The *Dragonfly*, though still afloat, listed at an awkward angle. Fires smoldered below her main deck and in the remains of several nearby buildings. Half a dozen men ran about the pier in a fever pitch. Others shouted orders.

Unwilling to risk docking beside the damaged ship, the *Dragon Master’s* captain ordered his men to drop anchor a safe distance away. Afterwards, the crew lowered two longboats over the side.

“Dreya, lass. Whaur ur ye?”

Lucian stared into the small crowd. Would he recognize her? “Perhaps she’s busy caring for the wounded.”

“Aye, but she’d fin’ time tae greet her faither. If those pirates dared harm her....”

Panic closed Lucian’s throat and choked the very air from his lungs. “Do not linger on such thoughts, my lord.” He waited for the crew to secure a rope ladder over the ship’s side. “Your daughter is protected by an entire island of fearless Scots. She’s safe. She *must* be safe.”

Ethan Macgregor drew a long breath. “Then whaur th’ devil is she?”

* * * *

Dreya huddled in the dark. The rough seas pounded the ship’s hull. Her small cell, a third the size of the one in the castle dungeon, stank of urine and feces. Her captors neglected to provide her with a blanket, but a thin, dirty mattress lay in one corner. It smelled of sweat and other bodily odors no polite lady should be forced to think about.

Justice for what I did to Canderlay?

“At least I gave him food and water.”

She blew warmth into her palms. Her feet had grown numb as well. Her cloak, though fur-lined, offered an inadequate barrier against the invading dampness.

Unable to remain in such filth a moment longer, Dreya stood. She paced inside the cell, and the feeling returned to her toes, but the intense dread buried deep inside her heart continued to gain momentum.

How long will they keep me in this awful place?

“You despicable crew of pirates!” she yelled, her teeth chattering against the cold.

Though the angry remark gave her courage, it received nothing but silence.

“Quinn?” Frustrated, Dreya gripped the iron bars of the door and shook them. “I demand to know what you’ve done to the villagers!”

She’d posed this question a number of times since he’d brought her aboard ship, but he ignored her pleas. What she learned came from fragments of conversation, and unfortunately her imagination filled in the gaps.

Before they shoved her into their longboat, several explosions sounded from the direction of the village. Moments later, the bell tower rang out in warning. With the burlap still covering her head, she spent an anxious hour or more in the

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small boat until someone hauled her aboard ship.

"What of the *Dragonfly*?" Quinn inquired of someone.

"She'll not be comin' after us any time soon," a gritty voice replied. "That ship's a pile of charred rubble by now."

"How fortunate for the Scottish crew. I assume you encountered no problems?"

"Not a one. The fog hid our approach. Most of the Scots were either drunk or passed out by the time we reached the harbor."

"I saw no fearless Scotsman this night," another added with a low chuckle.

One of the men removed the burlap sack, and Dreya waited until her vision adjusted to the torch lights before she glanced around. She wished they'd kept her in the dark. The crew ogled her, some licking their lips.

"Stare all you want, lads," Quinn bellowed. "But she's not to be touched until I say so."

Then he'd tossed her into this tiny cell.

Dreya placed her forehead against the cold bars. Her throat ached with unshed tears. No doubt the villagers were caught still celebrating Colin and Sarah's wedding. How many men lay dead or wounded? Were the women molested? And what of the innocent children?

Lord, but this is my fault!

Exhausted from lack of sleep and from the cold, she sank to the floor to await the dawn. The surrounding filth no longer bothered her. On the contrary, it seemed an appropriate place for someone whose inaction and inability may have caused harm to the people she loved.

She drew her cloak about her body and rested her head on her knees. Hot tears trickled down her cheeks. Then a river of pent-up emotion escaped.

Dreya cried for a long time. She wept for her dead mother and the man she'd called father for so many years. She sobbed for the Macgregor and the time they'd lost. And at last, she wept for Lucian. She loved him, but that love was doomed from the very beginning...defeated by two countries at war and drowned by a vast ocean of lies between them.

Could it be a mere coincidence that one week after Lucian escaped Dragon's Breath, Quinn invaded the island looking to capture her father?

Lucian Adams no longer existed, for the despicable Marquis of Canderlay had taken his place. No doubt his lordship couldn't wait to bend the king's noble ear concerning the Macgregor's misdeeds.

Her thoughts shifted to her father. If he were standing beside her, his eyes would no longer shine with pride. He had every right to be disappointed in the way she'd allowed herself to be captured. She should've paid more attention to Edwina's warning.

Another unforgivable error.

At length, she raised her head. The early morning dawn colored her black surroundings in a dismal gray. She wiped her eyes. Quinn intended to swap her for the Macgregor, but....

"I cannot allow it."

Dreya glanced up. Several wooden beams ran across the top of her cell.

"And therein lies the solution."

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She eyed each beam, chose the smallest one, and removed the sash from around her waist. Methodically, she calculated the distance and width of the beam to the length of her sash. It might be long enough.

Dreya removed her cloak and set about converting the sash into a rope. If she couldn't escape this situation, at least she could leave this ship with her dignity still intact.

Chapter Nineteen

By midmorning, the fog had dissipated, but the sun remained hidden behind a vague blanket of gray. Exhausted and frustrated from long hours of searching for Dreya, Lucian prodded Belle up a steep incline and headed toward the castle. His thoughts drifted into a backward slid.

"We've searched aw nicht, milord," Fulke Mortimer informed the Macgregor a few hours earlier. "It's unlikely th' lass is 'ere."

"How did those bluidy devils come ashore an' abduct her in th' first place?" the laird bellowed.

"'Twas mah fault, an' Ah'll accept whit e'er punishment ye haun me."

"Punishment? Ye listen tae me, Fulke. If mah daughter is nae returned tae me safe an' unharmed, this entire island will suffer."

Lucian had reminded both men that their arguing wasted breath as well as time. Throughout the night and early morning, the Macgregor paced back and forth in his study, waiting for the noontide and a chance to sail after his daughter.

Lucian longed to do the same, to hunt Quinn down and put an end to his miserable existence, but every instinct warned him to be patient, and Quinn would contact them. In the end, the Macgregor had promised to wait one day, and one day only, before taking action.

Dreya at the mercy of ruthless pirates frightened Lucian. He didn't care much for the brutal visions running through his head. Throughout the longest night imaginable, her fate lay foremost in his thoughts. In everyone's thoughts. Now, in the chilled silence, it cornered his attention more than ever.

"Captain Adams!"

He reined in Belle.

Fulke rode toward him. He reined in and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Ye'd best head doon tae th' village. Th' *Dragon Master* prepares tae set sail wi' th' noon tide, an' th' Macgregor is awready aboard ship."

"His lordship agreed to wait a day."

"Aye, but he's hud a few hours tae ponder his daughter's fate, an' it be tearin' at his soul. He will nae sit upon his hauns while those pirates—"

"And you think I'm not tormented by the same thoughts?" Lucian cursed beneath his breath. "The *Predator* could be anywhere on the open seas. Quinn was looking specifically for Dreya. He knows she's the Macgregor's one true weakness, and he expects to exploit that weakness."

"Seems tae me ye'r merely guessin' whit's oan his mind."

Lucian sighed. There was no point in arguing.

"If ye expect tae change th' laird's mind, ye'd better speak tae him afore th' tide comes in."

Lucian turned Belle in the direction they'd come, and Fulke's horse fell into step beside him. "How is the old healer?"

"She's better, but th' Macgregor cannae mak' sense o' her latest rantin'."

"What do you mean?"

"She speaks o' an English lord wha haes lost his wey. Whit haes this tae dae wi' th' lass, Ah ask ye?"

A trickle of suspicion slid down Lucian's spine. "Did she give the laird a

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name?"

"Ah dinnae believe sae, but ye ken Edwina's antics same as everyone else oan this island. Speakin' in senseless riddles be th' woman's nature."

"She was right about Quinn."

"Aye, but she cuid huv used proper English tae warn us instead o' Celtic gibberish."

Several months back, Edwina had also warned Derek Reed of a Frenchman who wasn't who he claimed to be.

She meant me.

"Does she really possess the gift of seeing into the future?"

"Mibbie, mibbie nae," Fulke replied. "Ah ne'er used tae believe in her visions, but some o' 'em ...weel, Ah cannae explain 'em. Most folk ur afraid o' her, yet thay ur quick tae seek her advice, th' current laird included."

"His lordship is a wise man."

"Dae ye believe Quinn thinks tae trade th' mistress fur her faither?"

Lucian nodded.

Fulke muttered a curse. "Ah suspect Mad George is behind this."

"Your suspicions are well-grounded."

"Then th' king will huv whit he's wanted a' along. Fur th' laird will dae whit e'er it takes tae save his daughter."

"Even surrendering his own life?"

"Aye, even that."

"Whatever Quinn's plan, he set it in motion long before he or any of his men rowed ashore."

Fulke grunted with disgust. "If th' fog hud nae rolled in sae thick last eve, those thievin' pirates wid huv ne'er stepped foot oan this island." He removed his hat and slapped it against his thigh, dust particles rising in the crisp air. "An' us wi'oot sae much as firin' a shot in thair direction."

"You did not abandon your duties, Fulke, nor can the blame be placed squarely upon your shoulders."

"Ah disagree, Captain Adams, an' th' lass' safe return be th' only request Ah'm askin' o' th' Guid Faither."

Lucian guided Belle along the wide path, and his mind retraced the facts as he knew them. "Dragon's Breath is an impenetrable fortress on three sides. Since the castle guard positioned at the gate swears *mademoiselle* did not return last evening, we must conclude that Quinn abducted her after she left the tavern."

"He may've watched her ride off."

"Where did you find Pegasus?"

"Wanderin' around th' blacksmith's stables."

"Perhaps Quinn enlisted one of the villagers to spy on Dreya."

"Mibbie. Every mon oan this island swears his loyalty tae th' Macgregor. That goes fur his offspring as weel. But th' origin o' this fine clan kin be traced back tae a group o' thieves, murderers an' ungodly misfits."

"Tell me about the captain of the *Dragonfly*."

"Horace Finnegan, but most folk ca' him Finney. Whit aboot him?"

"His ship is attacked and catches fire. The vessel is in danger of sinking where she sits, yet her captain doesn't bother to ride down to the dock?"

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"Hard work, nor work o' any kind, doesnae suit oor Finney. 'Tis th' bottle he yearns fur."

"Still, do you not find it strange he wouldn't wish to view the damage for himself?"

"Mibbie 'twas because he's na longer captain o' th' *Dragonfly*."

"What do you mean?"

"Finney's poor health haes alwa's been an issue, an' he's noo a bit long in th' tooth, if ye ken mah meanin'. Last spring th' Macgregor tellt Finney he expected him tae retire frae th' sea afore year's end. A few days ago, he did jist that."

Lucian stared off into the distance. "Has anyone seen the man recently?"

"Aye, last evening at mah daughter Sarah's weddin' celebration. Finney wur bendin' th' ear o' everyone wha wid listen. He's still angry wi' th' mistress fur interferin'." Fulke sighed, guilt clinging to his next words. "Ah ne'er shuid huv let th' lass talk me intae allowin' her tae ride back tae th' castle alone."

"You did as *mademoiselle* requested. Take my word for it, your mistress has learned the fine art of persuasion, and she uses it to...." Lucian reined in his horse and stared at the Scotsman. "Interfering? In what?"

Fulke halted and turned his mount to face Belle. "Finney grumbles aboot his lot in life. Either he's asked tae dae too much ur he's paid too little fur his trouble. His complaints grew louder whin th' mistress ended th' mairrage contract between him an' mah Sarah."

"For what reason did she do this?"

"It be a long story, Captain Adams, an' one Ah'm none too sure whit happened mah-sel, but thare wis a dispute between Finney an' me o'er a dead rooster, several missin' goats, an' a milk cow. Noo Finney called upon th' mistress tae settle th' matter, an' she did in unexpected fashion."

"Let me guess. She rescinded the marriage contract?"

"Aye, those wur her exact words, an' Finney bellyached an' moaned o'er it. His sore temper rivaled that o' a rotted tooth. Ah'm surprised he didnae cause trouble last eve."

Either Sarah had pleaded with Dreya for help, or Dreya had taken it upon herself to interfere on the young girl's behalf.

"Fulke, would Captain Finnegan be foolish enough to form an alliance with dangerous pirates in order to extract revenge?"

"Ah cannae say fur certain, Captain Adams, but he very weel micht huv."

"Well I intend to find out. I think you'd better escort me to the man's cottage."

Fulke turned his horse. "It sits aboot half a mile back."

Something on the uneven road caught Lucian's eye. "One moment." He dismounted. "What's this?"

"It looks lik' glass."

"It is glass." Lucian knelt. "From a broken lantern. I can smell the oil." A slender hairpin lay nearby. "She put up a fight."

"Whit's that, Captain Adams?"

Lucian shook his head, unable to speak.

A mule's distinct bray cut the silence.

"Look thare." Fulke pointed toward a patch of trees. "By devil, that be Finney's mule, an' she's wandered off th' path."

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Lucian marched through the scattered underbrush and approached the animal. "Someone tethered her to a tree branch."

Fulke came up behind him.

"I've never met your Captain Finnegan, but someone should take a whip to his backside for leaving this poor old girl out in the cold."

"He probably dismounted tae relieve his-sel an' passed oot." Fulke drew a sharp breath. "Finney, ye bluidy idiot! Ye wait till Ah set eyes oan ye!" He stroked the mule's nose and patted her neck. "Weel, dinnae ye fret none, loove. Ah'll tak' ye home wi' me."

Lucian freed the mule without much trouble. "Take a look at these reins."

The Scotsman leaned close. "Whit th' bluidy hell...?" He raised his head, and his eyes narrowed. "Thay wur cut wi' a sharp blade." He glanced around. "Whaur be Finney's cart? Th' wey he doons his whiskey, mayhap he's hud an accident. He nicht huv cut th' reins tae free th' ole girl frae th' cart."

Lucian left him holding the mule to follow a trail of trampled underbrush. About fifty yards away, he came upon a small buckboard, the tongue pointed toward the woods. Though hidden from the main pathway, the cart appeared intact and undamaged.

He walked toward the contraption. A man lay upon the straw floor, his eyes fixed with a blank stare and a gaping hole in the side of his neck. Blood caked the wound, and a dried smear traveled downward to pool on the collar of his filthy, brown shirt.

Lucian doubted he'd discovered Captain Finnegan. This unfortunate man carried the scars of a seasoned pirate upon his face and hands.

"Ye ole drunk!" Fulke ranted from a distance. "Wait till Ah git mah haunds oan ye!"

Lucian edged closer to the passenger side of the cart. A lady's white glove lay on the floor. He picked it up and held it beneath his nose. The faint scent of lilac stirred an undeniable pain inside his heart.

He maneuvered around the vehicle and stumbled over a second body. This man lay on his side with an arrow through his back. From Fulke's earlier description, this must be Horace Finnegan.

Lucian knelt and rolled the man onto his back. Stuck to his chest and held in place by the blade of a dagger, hung a yellowed piece of paper addressed to the Macgregor. He withdrew the knife and unfolded the parchment.

No list of demands. No request for a trade. No threats or ultimatums. It simply read:

Latitude 54, 50N. Longitude 20, 10W.

* * * *

Could she really go through with this? Dreya wasn't sure.

She jerked on the sash and once again, it fell at her feet. How did one go about tying a bloody noose tight enough to hold one's weight? She'd given up on using any of the thick wooden beams and decided instead on the higher iron bars situated near the back of her cell.

She steeled her nerves and climbed upward. The faint light shining into her

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damp prison helped guide her hands, and after much manipulation she looped the sash between the two highest bars. That left plenty of room to tie a proper knot. But then, she really wasn't good at tying knots, proper or otherwise.

Before she could test her handy work, a door opened above the stairs. She jumped down and yanked hard on the sash. This time it held firm.

"Bloody hell," Dreya muttered in disbelief.

A heavy footstep thudded on the steps, and light flickered on the opposite wall.

Dreya swung on the sash, hoping her weight would untie the knot. It didn't, and she had no choice but to leave it dangling behind her, for within a matter of seconds a man appeared carrying a lantern and food tray.

"Hello, little bird," he said in a pleasant voice. "Did you sleep well?"

She stared at the strange markings spiraling up both sides of his neck. "Not particularly."

"My apologies, my lady." He set the lantern down and held out the tray. "Look what I brung you. Breakfast."

Dreya eyed a large chunk of bread. To her surprise, it showed no signs of mold or roaches. Near the plate of poached eggs and some type of meat she didn't recognize sat a steaming cup of tea. On the other side, a container of butter.

She forced a smile. "Could I have a bowl of water to wash up?"

"We don't waste water on this ship."

She eyed his dirty clothes. "Yes, I see."

He frowned. "Eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Come now, girl. I hear your stomach rumbling."

"How do you expect me to even consider food while sitting in the middle of such filth?"

"You'll get used to it." He produced a long key from a ring containing several at his belt. "Captain says you must eat." He placed the key in the lock. "You eat, you suffer no harm."

"Until he has no further use for me."

"Gawd, but you're a clever girl, aren't you?" His eyes narrowed. "Perhaps a bit too clever."

The iron door swung open, and Dreya stepped back. The huge man filled the entire opening. She swallowed hard, all too aware of her vulnerability. "You'd do well to keep your distance, sir. Quinn will be displeased if I'm harmed."

"Don't worry, little bird. Are you aware you did me a favor by ending my younger brother's miserable life?"

The callous remark surprised Dreya. "If you're referring to the man I shot, I'm sorry for his death, but I thought only to protect myself."

"Some swore it was murder, for he carried no weapon."

True, Dreya did not remember seeing a dagger or pistol in the man's hand, but his very presence threatened her.

"I did what I had to," she defended.

"Call it whatever you like, little bird in a cage. We both know what you did." He shoved the tray of food into her hands, spilling most of the tea. "But as I said...."

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His attention focused on a spot behind Dreya. Had he spied the dangling sash?

"Seems you've been busy." The man's huge mass descended upon her, forcing her to the back of the cell. "Fortunately, I know how to tame a wild bird."

* * * *

Lucian raced up the gangplank and headed straight for the captain's cabin. With Fulke close on his heels, he barged through the door.

The Macgregor turned from the window, disappointment in his eyes. "Mah mind is set, Adams. Ah'm goin' efter mah daughter, an' ye'll nae talk me oot o' it this time."

"I don't intend to." Lucian hurried across the room to the large desk. He yanked open the top drawer, tossed the contents on the floor, and moved down to the next one.

"Whit th' devil ur ye searchin' fur?"

"A map." Lucian withdrew the note from his pocket and handed it over.

"Whit be this?"

"A message frae that devil Quinn," Fulke replied.

The Macgregor scanned the note. "Where did ye fin' this?"

"Pinned tae Finney's lifeless body, milord."

"Finney's dead?"

"Aye, we discovered his cart in th' woods. Finney wis lyin' beside it with an arrow stickin' oot o' his back. Thare be evidence th' lass rode wi' him."

"Whit evidence?"

Lucian dumped the contents of a third drawer. "I found one of her gloves on the floor of the cart."

"Finney often spends his coin oan female company. Whit leads th' two o' ye tae believe that glove belongs tae Dreya?"

"The smell of lilac," Lucian replied.

The Macgregor's eyes narrowed. "Whin this matter is o'er, lad, remind me tae ask how close ye stood tae mah daughter in order tae recognize her scent." He kicked the side of the desk, and a hidden compartment popped open above the toe of his boot, revealing a long key hanging on a metal hook. "Thare's a reliable map locked inside that bureau o'er thare."

Lucian snatched the key and headed across the room. He knelt in front of the bureau. After pushing aside several charts and papers, he removed the map from its protective case. He hurried back to the desk, raked everything aside, and spread it across the top.

"Fulke, I want you to bring me twenty of your best men. Have them dress in warm, dark clothing."

"Aye, sir."

"And they should arm themselves with as many weapons as they can carry."

Fulke nodded once and hurried away.

"I discovered a dead pirate in the back of Finnegan's buckboard," Lucian informed the Macgregor. "Someone got off a fine shot. The ball of lead caught him in the neck."

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The laird rubbed his eyes. "Bravery doesnae often crawl up a weak mon's spine. Especially Finney's. But even a coward will fight whin cornered." He sighed, lines of deep worry ingrained upon his face. "Ah, Dreya. Whit huv mah smugglin' weys done tae ye, girl?"

"Quinn won't harm her. He needs her alive in order to seek a trade for you. Let's just hope I can figure out a way to keep you both safe."

"Na, Adams. If it's a trade Quinn wants, a trade he'll receive, an' ye'll nae interfere."

Lucian thought of the men who'd crewed the *Falcon*. As their captain, he'd chosen a battle they were destined to lose. He couldn't afford that kind of mistake this time. "How many men did you lose from the *Dragonfly*?"

"Nine." The Macgregor sucked in a deep breath. "Damn yer worthless hide, Finney. If ye caused this mess, it's bluidy fortunate ye've departed this world, fur Ah'd snap yer neck wi' mah bare hauns."

"I would've already carried out that task for you, my lord."

They stared at one another for several seconds.

Lucian's concentration returned to the map. He focused on the spot representing Dragon's Breath Island and from that point, traced his finger north and west, calculating the latitude and longitude listed in the note. After pinpointing the area and marking it, he straightened, his attention drawn toward the window and the direction of the open seas.

"By devil, that be Trouag Isle," the Macgregor muttered over his shoulder. "It's been deserted fur o'er a century an' wi' guid reason. Na captain but Jonas Quinn wid dare tak' his ship that close tae such treacherous an' shallow waters."

"There is another."

"Another fool? Whaur wid we fin' this mon?"

Lucian faced the laird. "As a French corsair often forced to hide from the English Navy, I became all too familiar with the waters surrounding Trouag Island."

"Och, lad, listen tae ye. Eager tae set sail efter a ship crewed by bottom feeders an' wi' na plan tae speak o'. How does a corsair become a loyal defender o' th' laird's daughter?"

Because I love her!

Dreya Macgregor had slipped inside Lucian's heart when he least expected it. Now he might lose her, and he couldn't face that possibility.

"This ship is armed with many useful weapons, my lord, so I fail to see your point."

"Aye, an' why wid ye? But Edwina, she believes in ye. 'Listen tae Adams,' she says tae me. 'He's an honorable mon wi' a clever mind.' Edwina's approval o' yer character be th' only reason th' *Dragon Master* still sits anchored. Dinnae cause me tae regret that decision."

"I don't intend to."

"Then we're in agreement oan th' matter." Ethan Macgregor headed for the door. "Ah'll inform th' elders o' oor plans in case Ah dinnae return tae this island alive."

"You will return, my lord," Lucian declared. "And I'll do my very best to make certain you're still breathing."

Chapter Twenty

Dreya shifted positions on the mattress and drew her legs and feet beneath the cloak. No matter what she did, she couldn't get comfortable. Or warm.

Quinn, having been informed of her feeble attempt to hang herself, had ordered her wrists shackled and chained to the iron bars of her cell. This painful and humiliating restriction left her hands bare, and her fingers had grown numb with cold.

She blew a warm breath into her palms. This must be a horrible nightmare, and she would soon awaken. Or perhaps, like Edwina, Dreya suffered from the fever as well. Had she fallen victim to the worst hallucination imaginable?

She doubted it.

Dreya huddled into her cloak and closed her eyes. A few hours earlier, the ship had rocked and creaked with such violence she almost tossed up what little supper she'd managed to force down. If not chained, she would've rolled about the cell like a ball of yarn.

But the ship sat still now. No rocking, no motion, and not a sound from the crew above deck.

"Father," she whispered in the semi-darkness. "Please, please do not risk your life for me."

But she knew he would, and that knowledge pained her more than she could bear. The very best possible outcome, in her tormented state of mind, would be for the Macgregor to turn his back on his illegitimate daughter.

Her thoughts willed him to do just that, but her heart cried out that he might very well consider it.

Exhausted from the fear and cold, Dreya drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

Gypsy paced about the deck. "Why must we sit anchored near this retched isle waiting for a ghost ship that will never appear on our horizon?"

The remark burned Jonas' gut. "If you doubt my ability—"

"Not at all, captain."

"Then hold your tongue. The Macgregor will come for his daughter. Mark my words."

Gypsy stuck his hands inside the pockets of his jacket, and his attention shifted toward the last rays of the sun. "I do not profess to be a military man, captain, but even I can see this plan has faults."

"Such as?"

"Are we not vulnerable sitting with our backs to the island? If we keep our eyes to the north, might we not miss a ship sailing in from the south?"

Jonas arched a brow. "You're now a man of strategy, are you?"

"What is strategy but a game of intellect between men of the same mind?"

"You think me a fool?"

"I would never refer to you as such. I merely seek comprehension."

"You search for something you will never understand."

"I admit to a preference for standing on dry land, captain, but I have spent the

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last fifteen years in service aboard this vessel. I have become familiar, if only from a distance, with life at sea.”

Jonas glimpsed the Arab's manicured fingers and smirked.

Gypsy knew little about the difficulties of life at sea. Because of his unique talents, he'd achieved elite status aboard the *Predator*. No backbreaking day-to-day work with the rigging. No swabbing the decks. No repairing the rudder or sails after a storm.

Jonas sighed. “No captain worth his sea legs would aim his bow toward the south of Trouag Island. The water is too shallow and treacherous. And when the light of day fades, the sea swirls in every direction. It can shatter a ship into a thousand pieces within minutes.”

Gypsy pulled the collar of his coat about his neck and paced a few feet toward the stern. “Why do you suppose the girl tried to hang herself?”

“Isn't it obvious? She thinks she can save her father.”

“The Scotsman will not forfeit his life in order to save her. She is, after all, an illegitimate mistake.”

“The Macgregor is a fiercely loyal man, and that loyalty will become the noose around his neck.”

“The *Dragon Master* is heavily armed.”

“I am well aware of the improvements to her deck and gun ports.”

“My apologies, captain.”

“I've no fear of Ethan Macgregor or his crew. He will not confront us as long as he's certain his daughter still draws breath.” Jonas grunted with amusement. “A dragon might sit upon the laird's shoulder, but it will take more than a Scottish myth to defeat this ship.”

Gypsy bowed low. “May Allah be with you, captain.”

The Arab feared the coming confrontation, and if that fear were allowed to spread to the rest of the crew....

Jonas slid his right hand to the dagger sheaved at his belt. It would be a simple matter to rid himself of the man and toss his body overboard. A few of the crew might object, but none would dare voice their opinions.

“Toward the east!” the lookout shouted from the crow's nest.

Jonas snatched a long glass and raised the lens to his eye. Waves of churning white foam obstructed his view. He adjusted the direction of his aim and spotted the tall sails of an advancing ship.

“The *Dragon Master*?” Gypsy inquired.

“Too much distance between us to know for certain, but no other ship has any business sailing anywhere near this island.”

“How long before she reaches this cove?”

“Well after dusk.” Jonas spun around. “Man the lanterns!” he shouted to his crew. “I want this ship alight from stern to bow. When complete darkness sits behind us, send the longboats ashore.”

“Aye, captain.”

Gypsy frowned. “I do not understand. Will this not be a simple trade?”

“I never intended it to be.”

“Why keep the girl?”

“Why send her away to claim something that will soon belong to me?”

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"You plan to hand both father and daughter over to the English king?"

"No." Jonas smiled before he turned away. "Just their rotting corpses."

After issuing last minute orders to the crew, Jonas headed for his cabin. He dined on pheasant, baked bread and boiled turnips before he swilled half a bottle of rum. The prospect of battle always gave him a ravenous appetite, but afterward he couldn't stomach food of any kind. Perhaps it had to do with the carnage he witnessed.

"Bloody hell and damnation, I've grown soft like the Arab."

A sharp knock sounded on the cabin door.

"Come."

The door opened, revealing the man he'd ordered to guard the Macgregor chit.

"Shall I bring her topside, captain?"

Jonas nodded. "Make her visible."

"Aye, sir."

"One more thing." Jonas pushed away from the table. "Our Arab friend has become a nuisance."

"Shall I feed him to the sharks?"

"Aye, but cut out his tongue and bring it to me first."

The man grinned. "With pleasure, captain."

* * * *

Dreya jerked awake. The crew ran about the deck above her.

The door at the top of the stairs opened, and two men hurried down the steps. One halted near the opposite wall, the barrel of a pistol pointed in her direction.

The second man walked through the open cell door. He knelt and unlocked her shackles. "On your feet, woman."

She rubbed her chafed wrists. "Where am I going?"

"No questions." He grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. "But if you decide not to heed my advice...." His finger moved across his throat in a slicing motion.

Dreya quelled the impulse to touch the cut at her neck.

He thrust her through the door, and the man who held the pistol motioned her toward the stairs.

She stumbled up them, her heart in her throat. Her knees wobbled with each step, and she feared she would trip. At last, she reached the upper deck, and a fierce wind forced her backward. It caught her unpinned hair and whipped it across her face.

Dreya braced herself against the cold. Her teeth chattered so hard she almost bit her tongue. She'd sat in the dark so long the glaring torches burned her eyes.

Had this happened to Lucian?

A blade of regret twisted inside her heart, and she blinked back the tears. Why must her thoughts return to that pretender? No doubt he'd been the one who betrayed her father.

She pushed forward. The *Predator* sat anchored beyond the cove of an unfamiliar island. Scattered fir trees, their foundations choked by tangled underbrush, lined both sides of the cove. Treetops swayed in the wind, leaning

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toward the last rays of the setting sun, but not one cottage or building adorned the stark landscape. Tangled vines and undergrowth sprang up around large rocks where a castle must have once stood. Long since deserted, this island belonged to no one.

The perfect trap for her father?

Dreya hesitated and received a prompt nudge in the back. She continued across the deck and passed the tattooed man who normally brought her food. He paid her no mind, for he and several others stood gathered at the starboard side, their attention fixated on the water below.

"What a disappointment," he remarked in a casual tone. "The bloody Arab couldn't swim."

"If you hadn't cut out his tongue," one of the crew pointed out, "we might've cherished his high-pitched screams as he thrashed about."

Their cruel laughter turned her stomach. How did anyone find amusement in murder? She averted her gaze, but the sight of the rest of the crew sharpening their cutlasses or loading their pistols merely added to the quaking sensation curling inside her stomach.

I must maintain my composure in order to brandish the only weapon I possess.

Commonsense.

Turning her attention toward the open sea, she glimpsed the tall sails of an approaching ship. Mixed emotions squeezed her chest. With the familiar figurehead of a dragon resting on its bow, its jagged teeth frozen in a fierce snarl and its painted red eyes staring straight ahead, the formidable *Dragon Master* headed for the *Predator*.

Dreya almost burst into tears. The last time she looked upon this beloved ship had been months ago, when her father sailed away. Now it carried him to certain death.

Quinn stepped in front of her. "I'm pleased you could join us, Mistress Macgregor." His gaze rested on her hands, and his false smile vanished. "Why is she not shackled as I instructed?"

"Apologies, captain," said the man behind her. He yanked her around before he grabbed both her wrists. After binding her wrists, he spun her back around.

Quinn grabbed her chin. "Smile, my dear," he said in an indifferent tone. "Show your father I've treated you well, and you'll sleep in your own bed this night."

"Please...." Dreya swallowed, choking on a knot of pure anger. "My father doesn't deserve this. He's a good man."

"To be honest, I have no quarrel with Ethan Macgregor. Unfortunately, the King of England does."

"King George is insane. If it's riches you seek—"

"It is, girl, but one that's far beyond your paltry means. Save your pitiful begging. It carries no weight with me."

"Captain," interrupted one of the crew. "You'd better see this for yourself."

Quinn snatched the long glass and raised it to his eye. "Well, lads, it appears we've an opportunity to add to our coffers." After a few moments, he lowered the glass then turned to Dreya, his expression intrigued. "So, you've never met

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Lucian Adams, eh?"

Why did he ask?

"What are you implying, Captain Quinn?"

"Implications are worthless." He strolled around behind her. "You and I struck a bargain, my dear, but it seems you've not been completely honest. I don't appreciate that."

"You dare speak to me of honesty? Surely you of all people must see the irony of such a remark. You thought to trick me regarding Captain Adams' description. He has no scar down his cheek and no skull and crossbones branded on his chest. That's the mark of your crew. A few weeks after our meeting, a villager found your first mate on the other side of the island."

"Dead?"

"Very," Dreya replied. "It occurs to me, captain, that you are the one most familiar with all manner of deception, so I doubt the truth concerns you. In fact, I suspect every word formed by your rum-soaked tongue is nothing but a lie."

"Here's what I see, girl." Quinn grabbed the back of her neck and squeezed.

Dreya clenched her teeth to keep from crying out.

"Look there at the *Dragon Master*." He pushed her forward until they stood at the ship's rail. "Do you see who stands beside your devoted father?"

She refused to cower before this man. "At this distance, I see nothing."

"You don't recognize Adams?"

"Lucian?" She balled her fists, realizing her foolish emotions had just betrayed her.

Quinn released her then walked around beside her. He shoved the long glass into her hands. "See for yourself."

Dreya wet her lips. "No."

"What's that?"

She handed the long glass back. "I said no."

Quinn studied her. "What a strange, unpredictable chit." He walked around her and halted on the other side. "Why do you suppose the laird brought Captain Adams along?"

"I've no idea."

"Is that a fact?" His sarcastic laugh rang out in the night. "Well, imagine my disappointment to discover Adams isn't rotting at the bottom of the sea."

She tuned out the rest of his words. If Canderlay's memory had returned, he must've rushed back to Dragon's Breath to arrest her father. Did he expect to accomplish such a feat alone, or did the British fleet await a few miles at sea? Why would they take the time to rescue her before apprehending her father?

Her mind swirled around every possibility until one stray thought cut through the haze.

If Quinn possesses a long glass, Canderlay does as well. No doubt he's recognized me by now!

What would she say to him?

'Hello, my lord. Remember me? You should. You had me arrested.'

Tears closed Dreya's throat. Her heart aching and crippled by hopeless emotion, she shut her eyes.

Please, Good Father, allow me to die now!

The Macgregor's Daughter

"Your sweet face betrays a secret, lass," Quinn stated in a smug tone. "Tell me again you've no knowledge of the Frenchman," he whispered in her ear. "And I'll cut out your tongue myself."

* * * *

The sun dipped below the horizon, and the *Dragon Master's* crew dropped the ship's anchor about two hundred yards from the *Predator*.

Lucian shoved the barrel end of a pistol inside the waist of his trousers.

"Listen weel, Adams. Dinnae concern yersel' wi' me but fur Dreya."

"I understand, my lord."

"Ah expect Fulke an' th' others ur awready ashore."

"They should be. They've had about fifteen hours." Lucian sheaved a dagger inside a special slit in one of his boots and another at the left side of his belt before he faced the Scotsman. "She will not wish to leave you."

"Aye, but that be yer problem, lad. It matters nae tae me if she's conked oan th' head an' tossed o'er yer shoulder sae long as mah lass is safe."

"My first priority is Dreya, but you are worth a great deal to King George. In fact, he probably prefers you to be brought back dead."

"Aye, that wey thare'll be na objection frae th' fine English nobility." The Macgregor shook his head and sighed, his warm breath rising like mist. "Most o' mah time oan this earth Ah spent in careless fashion. Smugglin' wis mah wey o' thumbin' mah nose at th' English, an' Ah did it wi' delight. But that wis afore Ah discovered Ah hud a daughter."

Lucian exhaled a slow breath. "We've all done things we're not proud of, my lord."

The laird stared across the water toward the *Predator*, his attitude detached. "Ah'll nae waste precious breath moanin' fur mah troubles. Mah daughter's safe return is a' Ah ask."

"She saved my life twice. If need be, I'll give it back to save hers."

The Scotsman's chin trembled, and his eyes misted. At length, he nodded.

"Laird Macgregor!" one of the crew shouted. "Thay huv brought her topside."

Lucian searched the deck of the *Predator*. At this distance, he couldn't see Dreya. He called for a long glass, but empathy for her father took precedence, and he handed it over.

The Macgregor wiped his eyes and raised the long glass. "Bless th' Guid Faither," he said, his voice cracking with emotion. "Thare be mah lass."

"Is she all right?"

"Aye, it appears sae."

Lucian released a pent-up breath.

"Jonas Quinn stands by her side." A vile curse spewed through the Macgregor's clenched teeth. "Th' bluidy devil shackled her wrists."

"If I know *mademoiselle*, she gave him more of a fight than he bargained for."

"I kin bluidy weel guarantee it."

"Captain Adams!" the lookout shouted. "Thay ur sendin' o'er a rowboat, sir."

"How many men?"

"One."

The Macgregor's Daughter

"A messenger," muttered the Macgregor.

Lucian paced about the deck, more anxious than ever, and the next half hour passed at a snail's pace. Finally, the small boat, its sole occupant illuminated by the light of a single lantern, came within shouting distance.

"I bargain with Captain Quinn only!" Lucian yelled.

"You don't give the orders, Frenchie," the pirate snapped. "You and the Macgregor are to come ashore with me."

"We'll come ashore, but in our own longboat."

"Quinn says you'll come in this boat or not at all."

Lucian turned to the laird.

The Scotsman nodded.

After ordering the crew to drop a rope ladder, Lucian climbed down first. Standing inside the small boat, the rough current jostled him about, keeping him off balance.

"Careful, Frenchie, or you'll end up in the water." A crooked smirk formed on the pirate's thin lips. "Again."

Glancing up, Lucian braced his feet apart and steadied the rope for the Macgregor.

Once the laird stood inside the boat, the pirate said, "You row, Adams. The Scotsman sits between us. And one more thing, gents," he added, the hatred in his black eyes poised like two deadly scorpions, "remove all daggers, along with your pistols, and toss them."

"Ah carry na pistol." The Macgregor sat down in the center of the vessel. "As for mah blade, ye'll huv tae tak' it frae me."

"Since I'm an unarmed bloke who's simply following orders, I'll not grapple with you, my lord. Once you row ashore, however, Quinn will insist you forfeit all weapons."

"Unarmed, are you?" Lucian withdrew his pistol. "Then what's to stop me from shooting you and commandeering this vessel?"

"Aye, you could do that, but shooting me won't get the girl back, now will it?"

"No, but perhaps his lordship and I might avoid a shot to the back."

"Amusing, Frenchie, but we both know you won't shoot me."

Lucian raised the weapon. "You have two choices, *mon ami*. Leave this boat willingly, and I'll allow your miserable life to continue."

The pirate's eyes narrowed.

"Protest, and I'll throw your corpse overboard as food for the sharks."

"I'll not last two minutes in these frigid waters."

"Then ye'd best swim fast," the Macgregor quipped.

"Quinn will slit my throat if I don't do as he ordered."

"And this matters to me...." Lucian shrugged. "How?"

The pirate spewed a vulgar curse before he stood. "You'll get what's coming to you this time, Frenchie," he snapped, his broken and rotted teeth clenched in dreaded expectation of what lay ahead. He sucked in a quick breath before slipping over the side of the boat. He resurfaced and yelled, "You'll both die long before the dawn!"

The Macgregor slid to the other end of the boat.

Lucian placed the pistol on the seat between them then pushed away from the

The Macgregor's Daughter

Dragon Master.

The laird grabbed an oar. "That put a smile in mah hert."

"I rather enjoyed it as well." Lucian doused the lantern before picking up the other oar.

"Thay ken we're comin', lad. Ah doubt rowin' ashore under th' cover o' darkness will deceive 'em."

"No, but I tire of playing by Quinn's rules."

"As huv Ah, but dinnae ye go placin' yer ain intentions above mah Dreyas's safety."

"I assure you, my lord, *mademoiselle* is my sole purpose and the only reason I'm here." Lucian dug his oar into the water, raw emotion eating away at his insides. "If you do not trust me, you should've said so long before now."

"Thare ur many levels o' trust, an' a Scot measures trust different frae other men. An' whin it comes tae his daughter's hert, a faither likes tae ken whit he's up against."

"Understandable, but I have no say in the matter."

"Ye huv mair than ye did a few hours ago."

Was he suggesting...?

Lucian clenched his jaw. No doubt his heart misinterpreted the laird's words to fit what it wanted most of all.

Dreya.

"*Mademoiselle* and I are like fire and water." He thrust his oar into the water, venting part of his frustration. "Either she burns me or I drown her."

The Macgregor grunted.

"We are not well-suited for one another, my lord."

"How's that?"

"Your daughter and I."

"Urr ye tryin' tae convince me?" his lordship inquired, his voice strained with exertion. "Ur yersel'?"

"Just stating the obvious." Lucian picked the pistol up by the barrel end. "Quinn expects you to carry a weapon." He slid it along the floor. "Let's not disappoint him."

The Macgregor shoved the weapon inside his coat pocket, and they rowed on in silence.

Lucian kept his attention focused on the dark shore. When the *Falcon* sank, he swore if he ever faced Jonas Quinn again, he'd extract some form of revenge. He never imagined the woman he loved might stand in the way.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dreya waited in darkness, hidden amidst a copse of trees. Her cloak billowed in the cold wind, reminding her of a bird ready to take flight. Under normal circumstances, the sound of the waves crashing against the shore would've calmed her.

Tonight it accentuated her rising anxiety.

Two men dragged a small boat ashore several yards away from the other two longboats, and the pirate standing at her side jabbed his pistol into her ribs.

"Not a sound," he ordered.

One of the men walked beneath the light of the torches.

"Father," Dreya whispered.

She'd like nothing better than to run into his warm embrace and be comforted, but she doubted her companion would comply with such a request.

"Ah've come fur mah daughter, Quinn!"

"In good time, my lord." Quinn leveled his pistol. "Where is the crewman I ordered to accompany you?"

"If you're referring to the man you sent to relieve us of our weapons," Canderlay stated, "I convinced him he wasn't needed."

Quinn's sardonic laugh echoed around the cove. "Well, look who it is, lads. Captain Lucian Adams, straight from a watery grave." He waited until the grumbling from his men died down. "To what do we owe the honor, Captain Adams?"

"Save the pretense, Quinn. Your lookout no doubt spotted me standing on the *Dragon Master's* deck long before she dropped anchor. As for honor, let's not mince words. You have none." Canderlay glanced around. "Where's the girl?"

"She's safe." Quinn offered a noticeable hesitation. "For now. Care to explain why you're here?"

"Ah hired him," the Macgregor stated. "His expertise in navigatin' these waters is unsurpassed."

"And you'd know about that, wouldn't you, my lord? I imagine you and this French corsair became quite familiar with one another during the war. Would it surprise you to learn King George is fully aware the two of you carried on a rather profitable business together?"

"Mad George is a useless dandy wi' na backbone. Tell him tae pucker his soft English lips an' kiss mah fine Scoottish arse."

"I'd rather you told him yourself."

"Whoever gave the king such information is mistaken," Canderlay intervened. "My business dealings were strictly with the Americans. I never met his lordship until last night."

Dreya sucked in an uneven breath. Why did he lie?

"Why should I believe such a yarn?" Quinn inquired.

"Ah dinnae care whit ye choose tae believe. Whit e'er Ah've done, whit e'er curse Ah've brought upon mah-sel, haes nothing tae dae wi' mah daughter. Ye'll fetch her tae me noo, ur Ah'll wrap mah hauns around yer bluidy throat until Ah've squeezed th' life oot o' yer worthless body."

Dreya inched forward.

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Her companion yanked her hair. "Keep still, girl," he warned. "Thoughts of fleeing might get your papa shot where he stands."

"We've done what you asked," Canderlay said. "Release the laird's daughter."

Quinn cocked his head. "What does she matter to you?"

"Nothing."

A dull ache gripped Dreya's heart.

"But unlike you," Canderlay added, "I intend to earn what I've been paid."

The silence grew more strained with each second.

"Keep your weapons at your side, Captain Adams," Quinn said at last. "Raise them, and you die. Of course, I cannot afford to be quite so generous with his lordship."

The Macgregor withdrew a pistol hidden inside his coat and a dagger sheaved at his belt. He tossed them both to the sand.

"Move," snapped her surly companion.

Dreya emerged from the shadows.

Quinn turned. "Ah, here be your bonnie lass now."

She halted a few feet from him, but he grabbed her arm and hauled her around in front. Afraid she'd witness disappointment in her father's eyes and hatred in Canderlay's, she focused on the lights from the two ships anchored beyond the cove.

"You see, my lord?" Quinn's hands rested on her shoulders. "Not one stone of harm did she suffer."

"Except for the wound at her neck," Canderlay stated. .

"A mere scratch," Quinn defended. "She tried to hang herself."

"That be th' reason ye've shackled her wrists?" the Macgregor asked.

"'Twas done for her own protection," Quinn retorted, his breath ruffling the hair on top of Dreya's head. He leaned closed and whispered in her ear, "The decision lies with your Captain Adams." He forced a thin key into her mouth and pushed her forward. "The Frenchman can either free you," he said for all to hear, "or leave you shackled. I'd suggest the latter."

His men snickered.

Dreya expelled the key into her palms, the taste of iron fresh on her tongue. She encountered some difficulty but managed to insert the key into the lock. She freed both wrists and slung the shackles toward the water. The chains clanged against each other as they landed upon the sand a short distance away.

Quinn's laughter mocked her false bravado.

Dreya straightened her backbone and gathered enough courage to face her father. His tired expression bore a fair amount of apprehension, and certain defeat glistened in his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Father."

"Urr ye aw richt, lass?"

She nodded. "Please don't do this."

"'Tis done awready."

Dreya choked back the tears, unwilling to cause him any further pain. She could no longer avoid the Marquis of Canderlay. Her attention shifted.

He'd shaved his face.

Her gaze rose higher.

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His eyes flashed with sudden awareness.

He's recognized me.

"Let's finish this," Quinn declared. He nodded to the Macgregor. "You walk forward, and the lass does the same. You stop. She stops. Clear enough?"

"Aye, ye bluidy bastard."

They headed toward one another.

When Dreya drew close, she whispered, "There's still time to escape, Father."

He halted. "Ah cannae run frae mah ain past, child."

"Keep moving, my lord," Quinn ordered.

"Micht a Scot wha's tae be sent tae th' English gallows huv one last embrace frae his cherished daughter?"

Quinn shrugged. "I've no objection, but make your parting words hasty ones."

The Macgregor nodded to Dreya, and she moved into the circle of his arms. His familiar scent released a dam of emotions, but she managed to keep them in check. Shaking with fear and exhaustion, she clutched his shirt, unable to let go.

At length, he pushed her away and lifted her chin. "Tell me true, lass. Did thay harm ye in any wey?"

"No."

He smiled. "Go oan then. Ye'll be safe wi' Adams."

"Father, I cannot."

"Ye'll dae as Ah bid, daughter," he snapped. "An' ye'll dae it this instant."

Hurt swelled in Dreya's chest. Her father never used such a harsh tone before. At least not with her. But she understood the fear shining in his tender blue eyes. Fear for her.

She nodded and walked past him. Before she reached Canderlay, a sharp cry pierced the tense silence. She whirled around, expecting to find her father face down, his blood soaking into the sand.

Instead, Fulke Mortimer and several of his men emerged from the shadows with their rifles drawn. They formed a circle around Quinn and his crew.

Canderlay pushed Dreya behind him.

"Consider this a warnin', Quinn," the Macgregor declared. "Either ye lea while ye still draw breath...ur we'll bury ye 'ere."

"I rather expected a treasonous Scotsman wouldn't keep his word." Quinn kept his pistol aimed at the Macgregor. "You believe a handful of pampered castle guards who've rarely seen battle can successfully defeat eleven men who live for nothing else? I rather like those odds."

"Make haste to the longboat, *cherie*," Canderlay muttered over his shoulder. "And do not look back."

"You may discontinue the French endearments, my lord. If I recall, you're English."

"My mother was French."

"Really? Then I suppose you're not entirely useless."

"Let's discuss my character at a more convenient place and time."

"I believe you mean lack of character, and I'll not be leaving my father."

"Whit's it tae be, Quinn?" the Macgregor bellowed.

"Since my pistol is aimed at your heart, my lord, I'd not be so quick to begin the battle."

The Macgregor's Daughter

"Whaur dae ye suspect oor rifles be aimed?" Fulke piped in. "Ah'll tell ye whaur. Thay be pointed toward yer ugly, bald head. One ur two micht miss th' mark, but not a'."

"Dreya," Canderlay whispered, his voice more strained than ever. "This situation is rapidly deteriorating."

"I have eyes."

"Then get the bloody hell out of here," he snapped, using his body as a shield. "Or I'll throw you in the water myself."

"Oh, you'd enjoy that."

"Go!"

This time Dreya turned and ran. She reached the longboat almost the same instance a flash of light at sea cut through the night. Seconds later a whistling sound sailed through the air.

"Cannon fire!" someone shouted seconds before a violent explosion rocked the *Predator's* deck.

"A third ship approaches!"

"Frenchie set a trap for us!"

All at once, shots exploded in the cove, pistols and rifles joined the booming sound of cannons in the distance.

Dreya hesitated, unsure what to do. She couldn't row out to the *Dragon Master* while it sat engaged in battle. And the unknown vessel remained invisible except for the flashes from her cannons. Thank God whoever crewed her intended to aid the Scottish ship.

At length, the clanging sounds of cutlass against cutlass replaced the pistols and rifles. The Macgregor tripped over a dead man, and he fell. A pirate straddled him, his blade intended for the laird's throat. Before she could shout a warning, Canderlay's dagger found the man's throat. The Macgregor rolled away, and another man lunged for Canderlay.

Fury raged inside Dreya, blinding her to danger. She surged forward and grabbed an abandoned cutlass. She swung it with all the force she could muster. The blade caught Canderlay's opponent in the side. The wounded man turned to defend himself, and Canderlay finished the job.

"You shouldn't be here," he admonished.

"Where would I go?"

"To your lover," he retorted. "That's Captain Reed's ship coming to rescue you."

Dreya turned. The *Sea Mistress* and *Dragon Master* had trapped the *Predator* between them, shelling the latter ship with relentless cannon fire.

"Derek is not my lover."

He grabbed her arm and turned her to face him. "Then who the devil is he?"

She didn't get the chance to reply, for a second pirate rushed toward them with his cutlass raised. Canderlay disposed of the man with one slice to the gut.

"Go!" he ordered Dreya.

"Where?"

He turned his back. "Anywhere but here."

"Ungrateful imposter."

But Dreya intended to do as he'd requested--until she spotted Colin Seaton

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defending himself against two men. She ran to his aid and jumped on one man's back. He slung her to the ground, but she kicked his shin. He stumbled and turned on her. Fulke's quick blade ended his intentions.

The dying man fell to his knees, and Dreya rolled out of his way. She seized his cutlass and scrambled to her feet, swinging the blade at any pirate who came near.

"Na mercy fur th' black-hearted devils!" shouted the Macgregor.

Dreya turned. Across the sand, her father battled Quinn. Before she could run to his aid, an arm wrapped around her from behind and at the same time, a hand gripped her wrist, the one holding the sword.

"Release your weapon, *cherie*," Canderlay whispered against her ear, his voice sending shivers through her body. "This fight belongs to your father."

"I must help him."

"No, you'll only get in his way."

She held her breath, her heart pounding. Their battle lasted an eternity. One moment her father held the upper hand. The next, Quinn. Back and forth they jabbed at one another, their blades slicing through the air in near misses.

She feared the Macgregor would falter, but he shouted a ferocious battle cry just before his long blade found his opponent's chest.

Quinn fell to his knees, his eyes dazed and confused.

The Macgregor tossed his sword aside, and removed his coat. Blood stained the left arm of his white shirt.

Canderlay released Dreya, and she ran to her father.

"You're injured."

"Ah will survive." He hugged her tight then pushed her at arms length. "Ah thought Ah'd lost ye, lass."

"My knees are threatening to buckle, and I cannot stop trembling, but otherwise I'm fine."

"Thank th' Guid Faither." His attention shifted toward the dead littering the sand. "Whit o' oor men, Fulke?"

"We lost three, milord, but nae a one o' Quinn's crew still breathes."

"Listen," Colin said, excitement in his tone. "Th' cannons huv ceased."

Dreya whirled around.

"It appears the *Dragon Master* is still afloat," Canderlay remarked.

"Aye, but see how th' *Predator* lists tae starboard? She'll sink whaur she sits within th' hour."

"Guid riddance," Fulke said and spat on the ground.

"What about the survivors?" Dreya inquired.

"If any o' Quinn's crew still lives," her father replied in a somber tone, "thay kin mak' thair home oan this island."

Fulke stepped forward. "Bless th' Guid Faither. Is that Captain Derek?"

Canderlay nodded. "I believe so, and he's late as usual."

"By devil, Ah owe th' lad a keg o' whiskey." Her father turned and with a sour expression asked, "Captain Adams, did Ah nae instruct ye wi' th' duty o' seein' tae mah daughter's safety?"

"You did."

"Then why wisnae she in th' longboat instead o' fightin' along side ye?"

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"As you well know, my lord...." He stared at Dreya, his expression unreadable. "She does not take orders."

"Weel defended, lad." He motioned to Fulke. "Bury these pirates whaur ye see fit, but oor men ur tae be brought back tae th' ship an' buried at sea."

"It'll be done, milord."

He winked at Dreya. "Come, lass. Time tae go home."

"That sounds delightful, Father, but there is something I must do first." She kissed his cheek then marched up to Canderlay. "I'm sorry I locked you in the dungeon."

His expression remained guarded. "Under the circumstances, I cannot blame you."

The laird pushed between them. "Whit circumstances?"

"Father, would you please give us moment of privacy."

He glared at Canderlay then stomped off.

Dreya inhaled a slow breath. "My lord, if our first meeting had gone differently...if I had been truly a guest at the king's masquerade ball...."

"But you weren't, were you?"

"No, I wasn't." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Thank you for saving my father's life."

He nodded once. "Our debt to one another is now paid."

"Does that mean my father is safe?"

"If he ceases all smuggling activities, he will not suffer the English gallows because of me. And neither will you."

The heat of anger rose up her neck and into her cheeks, but she gained control of her tongue. "Your identity will remain safe, as well."

He arched a brow.

"I realize trust is a sharp thorn resting between us, but no matter what you think of me, I've no wish to see you harmed. Now...or in the near future."

Bitterness flickered in his eyes. "You're too late."

Canderlay turned on his heels and stormed away, placing their differences between them again.

I love you, Lucian! No matter who you are, English lord, French corsair, or pirate imposter, my heart belongs to you!

Why couldn't she speak those words?

Her father placed his hand upon her shoulder. "Whit's this, child? Ye've an interest in Lucian Adams?"

"That would be foolish indeed."

"Then whit's between ye?"

"Nothing." She sighed. "I merely offered my gratitude to an unreasonable gentleman."

"Gratitude? Is that whit ye ca' it? Seems tae me it wur mair o' a disagreement, an' Adams got th' last word."

"Not yet," she mumbled. "Captain Adams?"

He halted and turned.

"I wasn't quite finished."

"Is that so, *mademoiselle*? Well, whatever else you wish to say will have to wait. In case you haven't noticed, there are several dead men who need a proper

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burial.”

She clamped her mouth shut and turned in the opposite direction. Guilt mixed with shame squeezed her chest. Did he have to speak to her in such a harsh manner? If the man possessed a heart, he would've forgiven her.

He'll never forgive me.

Dreya wiped her eyes. Without meaning to, her attention settled upon Quinn's body. He now lay on his side. Blood oozed from his nose and mouth. A pistol lay in his hand.

Her attention slid to his face, and their eyes locked. He offered a cruel smirk before he shifted the direction of his aim toward Canderlay.

“No!” Dreya screamed, racing toward the man she loved.

She didn't make it. The bullet burrowed into her back almost the same instant the weapon discharged. She fell to her knees, an intense fire spreading throughout her left shoulder and radiating downward. Voices shouted in anger, but the distorted words reached her through a deafening roar.

Then someone cradled her head in his arms.

Dreya blinked, trying to focus on eyes the deep color of a summer forest. She managed a weak smile before her surroundings faded into darkness.

* * * *

Lucian kicked in the door of the captain's cabin and carried Dreya to the bed. “Laird Macgregor, is there a doctor aboard this ship?”

“Nae one Ah wid allow tae titch mah daughter. Ah'd raither Edwina see tae her.”

“This wound cannot wait until we reach the island.” Lucian rolled her onto her stomach. She remained unconscious. He retrieved the knife inside his boot and cut away the fabric of her gown.

“How bad is it, lad?”

“The shot pierced the skin beneath her left shoulder.”

“Deep?”

“I'm not sure, but that slug must be dug out at once, or it will fester.”

“Huv ye experience?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Lucian glanced around the small cabin. “Fill that washbasin with water and bring it to me.”

“What can I do to help?” Derek Reed asked. He stood at the door, his face pale.

“Have you a decent doctor aboard your ship?”

“Decent? No. Adequate? Barely.”

“It's settled then.” The Macgregor set the washbasin on a small table beside the bed. “Her fate be in yer hauns, Adams.”

“Very well, my lord. Do you think you might find a needle and thread?”

“Aye. Ah'll be richt back.”

“Captain Reed? I'll need several towels and a washcloth.”

“Should I boil a kettle of water?”

“No, it'll take too long. We'll use whiskey to sterilize her wound.”

“I'm sure Ethan has plenty aboard ship.”

The Macgregor's Daughter

Lucian's attention shifted to Dreya.

No, it's not the same woman!

He pushed her long hair from her face. His heart still refused to acknowledge her true identity.

Dreya Macgregor...the American spy arrested five years earlier...the woman who'd fooled everyone by masquerading as the king's guest...the enticing female he'd followed into the palace gardens...the shrewd, pistol-wielding vixen he'd sympathized with and allowed to escape....

The air left his lungs in one long sigh.

Dreya, the woman his heart yearned for, the woman his body responded to with more passion than he could've ever imagined, was Anadreya Richardson.

Anadreya...Dreya.

* * * *

"Can you hear me, *cherie*?"

Dreya moaned. Why did her shoulder burn?

"Reed, hand me your belt."

"Good thinking."

"Did you fetch the whiskey?"

"Yes. Several bottles."

"I doubt she'll need *that* much."

"The rest is for us."

The voices sounded familiar but distant. She tried to roll onto her back, but the scorching pain left her lightheaded and unable to move.

"Keep still, *mon amour*."

"Dreya, can you hear me?"

She managed a faint moan.

"You've a ball of lead lodged in your shoulder."

"Is...?" She wet her lips. "Is Lucian all right?"

A gentle hand brushed the hair from her brow. "I'm right here."

She opened her eyes. "Where am I?"

"Aboard the *Dragon Master*."

"Lucian?"

"Yes?"

"My father...?"

"Ere, lass. That devil Quinn shot ye afore Ah cuid gut him, but dinnae ye fret. Captain Adams will fix ye up."

"Did I hear Derek's voice?"

He knelt beside the bed. "I'm here."

Dreya focused on her cousin's face. "There's something...." A cold, wet cloth brushed across her wound, and she cringed. "Derek...." Pain radiated down her back. "There's something you must explain to Lucian."

"It can wait until you're better."

"No, it cannot."

He smiled. "I understand."

Dreya's throat ached, but she did her best to hold back the tears. "Father?"

The Macgregor's Daughter

"Whit is it, lass?"

"The villagers?"

He sighed. "We lost a few men."

"It was my fault."

"Listen tae me, daughter. Yer weel bein' is mah only concern at th' moment."

Derek cupped her chin. "What the devil were you trying to do? Save this Frenchman or get yourself shot?"

"How did you...?"

"Know? I possess a very handy long glass."

Something probed her wound, and she flinched.

"Laird Macgregor, pour some whiskey on this then give the bottle to Reed."

Liquid sloshed onto her skin, and her wound burned with a new fire.

"Here." Derek lifted her head. "Have a sip."

"No, I do not care for the taste."

"You will in a few moments, cousin."

"*Cousin?*"

Derek grinned at her. "Pay no attention to Captain Adams. At the moment he's turned a nice shade of red, so I suppose he feels rather foolish."

"Not half as foolish as you'll look with two black eyes, and a broken—"

"Gents, settle yer differences later."

"Oh, we'll settle them, my lord." A brief silence then, "Grab her feet."

Dreya panicked. "My feet?"

"Ah huv 'em. Derek, shove th' belt strap between her teeth."

"Really, Father. There is no need to...ouch! Lucian, what the devil are you doing?"

"Digging the lead out of your back."

"Isn't there a less painful way?"

"No."

Dreya snatched the bottle from Derek and gulped down a long swig. Now her throat and stomach burned as well. The more pain she suffered, the more she drank.

"The area around the wound is swollen."

Dreya swallowed several more times. "Heavens, it's hot in this cabin." Hiccup. "Father, open a window, please."

"Nae, daughter. Ye'll catch a chill, an' Edwina will put a curse oan me lik' one she's ne'er conjured afore."

"Edwina. Oh, dear." Hiccup. "She's ill."

"Ah dare say she's oan th' mend an' as ornery as e'er."

"This might sting, *cherie*. Bite down hard on the belt."

"Derek, if you stuff that..." Hiccup. "That ridiculous thing in my mouth, I'll...bloody hell!"

"Keep still, *mon amour*."

"Lucian...wait." Hiccup. "I want you to know...I'm terribly sorry I locked you in the dungeon."

"You've already apologized."

"Aye," the Macgregor stated. "But she neglected tae tell us why ye wur thare in th' first place."

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"No, I didn't forget."

"Lucian was blind at the time," Derek remarked. "He'd lost his memory as well. Which I now assume he's found."

"I have."

"Dreya, ye locked a blind an' daft mon in th' dungeon? Whit th' devil did he dae tae ye?"

"Nothing, my lord," Lucian put in. "And I was not daft."

"Oh...you bloody half English...ouch!" Hiccup. "It's a long story, Father."

"Weel, Ah've plenty o' time, daughter, sae one o' ye better gie me an explanation, an' Ah warn ye, Adams, her reason better nae be whit Ah'm thinkin' it tae be."

"Dreya locked me away because she recognized me."

"Lucian...." Pain sliced through Dreya's wound so intense tears rolled down her cheeks. "You do not have to explain what happened this very moment."

"Aye, he daes."

"You're English?" Derek asked, his question a few minutes out of place.

"My father. My mother, however, was French."

"Lucian...ooouuuchh! Are you bloody digging for gold?"

"No, just lead. I'm sorry for hurting you, Dreya."

"Well, you could've fooled me. I think you enjoy tormenting me, and once again you have me at your mercy." Hiccup. "And you, Derek." She turned the bottle up again. "I cannot believe...." Burp. "Oh, dear. Pardon me." Hiccup. "I cannot believe you helped him escape."

"Someone had to. He couldn't do it on his own."

"He left me tied to a chair in the dungeon."

"Lucian, you said Dreya agreed to let you leave the island."

"My apologies, but I would've told you anything to get out of that filthy hole."

"Ye tied mah daughter tae a chair an' left her in th' dungeon?"

"Father, will you please...." Hiccup. "Stay out of this?" She closed her eyes and cradled the bottle against her chest. The room spun even more. "Lucian, why must you be...." Hiccup. "An imposter?"

"She's soused."

"Here....that's the last of it. Wipe that clean, my lord."

They talked around her, but Dreya didn't mind. The pain from her wound no longer bothered her. "Lucian, if you were indeed a lowly corset—"

"A what?"

"I believe she means corsair."

"Corsair, yes, that's the word. But you're not, and you never were. You're an Engal...." Her tongue turned into a thick obstruction lodged in her mouth. "Eng...." Hiccup. "Oh, what does it matter? The Macgregor would never approve. It would break his...." Hiccup. "Heart."

"Listen to me, Dreya. I must stitch your wound now, so please remain very still."

"Couldn't you just...." Hiccup. "Heavens, you're not patching a hole in a stiff pair of stockings!"

"Will someone please keep her still?"

A crushing, solid weight settled onto Dreya's lower body, pinning her to the

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mattress. "If I die, you and I will remain enemies until the next life."

"You're not going to die, *mon amour*, and we are no longer enemies."

"But....you threatened to turn me over your knee." Hiccup. "Twice."

"And I still may. Here, my lord, cut the thread. Trust me, *cherie*, the very moment you shoved a pistol beneath my chin, you captured my attention like no other woman."

Good heavens, I do believe he loves me!

Incredible warmth flowed through Dreyra, and she floated into sweet oblivion riding a soft cloud of contentment.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Whit's this aboot mah daughter shovin' a pistol beneath yer chin?" The Macgregor walked around in front of Lucian. "Thare be somethin' ye wish tae say tae me, Adams?"

"There is, my lord, and I suppose it begins with a confession."

"Aye, ye loove th' lass. 'Tis auld news."

"I do love her, but there's more. It's not something you'll wish to hear. Nevertheless, I need to say it."

Reed pulled the blanket over Dreya's back. "What could be worse than you being half English?"

Lucian ignored the insult. "Laird Macgregor, King George suspected you were smuggling gunpowder to the colonies, so I intentionally placed myself in a position where you and I would meet."

The Scotsman's eyes narrowed to small slits. "Urr ye a bluidy English spy?"

"Not anymore. My name is Lucian Sebastian Spence, formerly the Marquis of Canderlay, but I recently lost that title."

Reed stared at him. "The same Canderlay who arrested Dreya five years ago?"

Lucian nodded.

"No wonder she threw you in the dungeon," Reed declared.

"She shuid huv hanged ye," the Macgregor joined in. "Ah wid huv."

"Being blind, I had no idea as to her identity when she rescued me. I recognized her only this evening, after you and I rowed ashore. Believe me, my lord, the shock lasted several hours."

"Whit Dreya said earlier, Ah thought it wis th' whiskey, but noo it makes perfect sense."

"I returned to England and stood before the king with the sole purpose of handing over the name of his Scottish traitor. But when I thought of how my actions would affect the villagers and Dreya, I couldn't go through with it."

Reed plopped down into a chair. "Why didn't she tell me?"

"You'd have to ask her," Lucian replied.

Ethan Macgregor walked around him. "Ye tellt auld George nothin' aboot mah treasonous conduct, did ye?"

"You have my word. The king can produce no evidence against you, but you must never again place your daughter or your clan in such jeopardy."

"Listen tae English. He thinks he's givin' th' orders noo."

"My lord, if his majesty sends other mercenaries after you, one of them is bound to succeed where Quinn failed. I'm simply looking out for Dreya's safety."

The laird's nostrils flared. "That be mah responsibility."

"He's right, Ethan. If Quinn thought to use Dreya, so could others."

The Macgregor's attention shifted to the bed. After a brief hesitation, he crossed the cabin to the window.

"I understand the rules of war better than most men, Lucian," Reed stated. "But hell, you and I were allies. I trusted you with my life. Your English ancestry is one thing, but a spy for King George?" He shook his head. "That's difficult to overlook."

"I'm sorry, Derek. You were indeed an unexpected friend. I realize I have a

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great deal to atone for, but at the time my misguided loyalty stood with England, and I did whatever necessary in service to her."

"A country o' dandies run by a mad king," the laird stated with disgust. "Ah appreciate ye savin' mah lass, English, an' fur riskin' yer neck tae save mine." He turned from the window. "But Derek argies a fine point. Whit ye've done an' wha ye urr is difficult tae forgit."

"I understand, my lord."

Reed snatched a cigar from the pocket of his jacket. "I never expected this of Dreya." He struck a match and puffed. "What's happened to her, Ethan?"

"She grew intae a woman, lad."

Lucian's attention shifted from one man to the other. A flicker of amusement danced in Reed's brown eyes, but the Macgregor's angry expression hadn't changed at all.

"Well," Derek Reed said at last. "Seems you've a difficult decision, my lord. Do we toss this imposter overboard or wait until we reach Dragon's Breath to string him up?"

The laird's intense blue eyes pierced Lucian with a cold glare. He half expected the Scotsman to produce a sword and run him through.

"Na, Ah've a mair fittin end fur this English spy."

* * * *

Dreya awoke to a single candle burning on the night table beside her bed. She glanced around the room. *Her* room.

She tried to sit up, but her bandaged shoulder objected, and her head pounded with the slightest movement. Neither ailment compared to the fierce volcano about to erupt inside her stomach.

"Ye dinnae look sae guid, lass."

Her father sat in a chair by the balcony door, his clothes disheveled.

She pulled herself up in bed, and a wave of dizziness washed over her.

The Macgregor stood. "Why, lass?" He approached the bed. "Why wid ye dae somethin' sae foolish as tae leap in front o' a pirate's aeem?"

She shrugged, and a dull pain radiated down her back. "Lucian Adams saved my life. And yours. I simply felt the need to repay him."

"Tae honor a debt, is that it?"

She nodded.

"Come, daughter." He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Ye've mair courage than this."

She cleared her throat and almost emptied the contents of her roiling stomach. "Could I have a drink of water, please?"

He poured a glass and handed it to her.

She drank most of it. "Where is Edwina?"

"Ah hud tae threaten tae exile th' auld woman tae England if she didnae allow me tae sit wi' ye."

"Father, we should find a suitable doctor for this island."

"Edwina's stubborn. She will nae hear o' a mon takin' her place."

"But she's much too old to bear the burden. A few days ago she fell seriously

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ill.”

“Ye didnae allow me tae finish, lass. She’d ne’er allow a mon tae tak’ her place, but a woman be different. Especially if she’s a member o’ this clan.”

Dreya raised a brow. “You’ve someone in mind?”

“Me? Na, but Derek, he thought o’er whit ye said aboot his mama bein’ alone, an’ he’s decided tae ask her tae come tae Dragon’s Breath.”

“To live?”

“If she wishes. Noo, Ah’d nae ask a fine lady tae dae chores, but Derek seems tae believe followin’ Edwina around th’ island wid satisfy his mama’s urge tae nurture an’ coddle.”

“Aunt Katherine would be delighted. She’s always loved nursing. Oh, this is perfect.” Dreya sipped the water then set the glass aside. “Father, about Captain Finnegan....”

“Thare’s talk among th’ villagers that Finney might huv aided Quinn in abductin’ ye.”

She nodded. “His anger resulted from my rescinding the marriage contract between he and Sarah Mortimer, but I had to, Father. Sarah is carrying Colin’s child. I broke no rules. I did everything the way you would have.”

“Sae that be th’ cause o’ a’ th’ ruckus. Weel, th’ elders seem tae think ye did a fine job. Thay tellt me frae noo oan thay’d raither ye settle thair disputes.”

“Please thank them for me, but I respectfully decline. Such emotional decisions tug way too much upon my heart.”

“Speakin’ o’....” His eyes twinkled. “Urr ye afraid o’ yer papa, Dreya?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then tell him th’ truth.”

“About what?”

“Ah’ve seen how ye look at him.”

She leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes. If her head would cease its constant pounding, perhaps her stomach would settle as well. “There are many obstacles standing between us, Father.”

“Nae as many as ye seem tae believe.”

“You do not understand.”

“But Ah dae, lass. He’s awready confessed.”

Her eyes flew open. “Is he...you didn’t...”

“English still draws breath, if that’s whit worries ye, an’ he’s in na immediate danger frae me. Efter he admitted who he wis an’ whit he’d intended tae dae fur King George, Ah wisnae fond o’ th’ mon, Ah admit. But, lass, he didnae betrayed us, an’ that means a great deal tae this Scot.”

“Lucian confessed?”

“He did. Ye dinnae fool me, daughter. Ah heard th’ ache in yer voice whin ye spoke tae him. Th’ wey he looks at ye reminds me o’ mah ain youth an’ how Ah looved yer mither.” He placed his hand over hers, and his expression turned sad. “Dinnae mak’ mah mistake, Dreya. Dae as yer hert bids, ur ye’ll regret it th’ rest o’ yer life.”

Tears gathered in her eyes, but Dreya couldn’t respond to her father’s plea., mostly because the contents of her stomach decided to rise in her throat. She swung her head over the side of the bed and threw up.

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* * * *

Sebastian lay at Lucian's feet, and Lucian stroked the dog's ears. His attention soon strayed to the darkness outside the drawing room windows. Had Dreya awakened? Did she ask for him?

Anadreya...Dreya.

Never mind his eyesight, if his common sense hadn't deserted him, he would've put those two names together long before he saw her face.

"What about it, Lord Corsair?"

Lucian's attention shifted to the present. "What about what?"

Reed held a bottle of whiskey in one hand and an empty glass in the other. "Are you sure you're fit to be the next captain of the *Dragonfly*?"

"That's not the question you wish to ask, is it?"

"No, but the other one is practically settled, I suppose, and I'm rather glad of it. Even though you are English."

"Half."

"Yes, well, try not to forget I could easily run a sword through the English half at any time."

"You and I both know I'm much better with a sword."

"You've had more practice, I'll grant you that, but better? I doubt it."

Lucian smiled. "By the way, Derek, how did you happen upon Trouag Island when you did?"

"I'd heard the *Dragon Master* had been spotted heading for home, so I sailed back to the island expecting to find Ethan. The castle guards informed me Quinn had abducted Dreya, and he'd taken her to Trouag Island with the purpose of swapping her for the Macgregor. I figured you and the laird might need my help. From the looks of things, I showed up just in time."

"I had the situation well under control."

Reed filled his glass and turned to Edwina. "Isn't it strange how a man's recollection becomes foggy when's he's dangling by the strings of his tender heart?"

"Aye, but that wid ne'er happen tae ye, wid it, Captain Derek?" the healer teased. "Ye'r a clever one. A true wit."

"Only half," Lucian muttered.

Reed raised his glass in mocking salute before he finished the contents. "So tell me, love," he said to Edwina. "Does this imposter rate your approval as well?"

Her stern gaze raked Lucian from head to boot. "Aye, he'll dae. An' Ah'm grateful ye informed him th' lass an' ye urr cousins afore ye come tae blows o'er her."

"I'm still not sure I understand how you're related."

"My Uncle John married Dreya's mother. You know, Lucian, you did her a favor. Dreya and the Macgregor may have never met if you hadn't arrested her. Which reminds me. I still owe you for that."

"Let me know the moment you feel capable of settling that debt," Lucian retorted.

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* * * *

Dreya halted at the drawing room door. "I cannot do this."

The Macgregor turned her to face him. "Whit urr ye afraid o', lass?"

"What if you misunderstood?"

"Ah made na mistake."

"But...what if he—"

"He come richt oot an' said he looved ye, daughter. Ah heard it wi' mah ain ears. As did Derek. Still...." He placed her hand beneath the crook of his arm. "Th' mon tied ye tae a chair an' left ye in th' dungeon. Urr ye certain he'll mak' a worthy husband?"

"Are you trying to cause trouble?"

"Me? Why wid Ah be doin' that?"

Dreya frowned at her father. "I forgave him for that short stay in the dungeon."

"Guid enough then." He reached for the doorknob.

"Wait. How do I look?"

He shook his head. "Terrible. Ah've ne'er seen such an ugly sicht."

"Father, this is not the time for teasing."

The Macgregor chuckled low before he gave in and studied her appearance with a keen eye. "Weel, yer hair's coifed in a tidy bun, an' yer gown matches th' color o' yer beautiful blue eyes. If English doesnae fall at yer feet, he's a bluidy fool."

Dreya kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

"Ye'r welcome." He raised a brow. "Noo ur ye ready?"

She sucked in a calm breath and nodded.

He opened the door and escorted her inside.

Across the room stood the handsome Lord Canderlay dressed in an older but still elegant black dinner jacket he must've borrowed from her father. He'd tied his long, dark hair at the nape, and his green eyes reflected caution. A piece of her tender heart broke off.

Bastian whined at her feet. "Hello, scoundrel." She knelt and hugged the dog. "I've missed you too."

"You look flushed," Derek commented.

"It's the ill effects of the whiskey."

He laughed. "How's the shoulder?"

Dreya ruffled Bastian's head then arose. "Stiff."

"The soreness will pass." Derek leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Lord Corsair awaits," he whispered with amusement.

The Macgregor cleared his throat. "Derek, lad, Ah've grown a wee bit thirsty this eve. How about th' two o' us ridin' doon tae th' village tavern tae swill a few bottles o' ale?"

"My lord, you've read my mind."

"Come along, Bastian. Ye kin ride up front wi' me, an' we'll toss Captain Derek in th' back o' th' cart."

"You're too good to me, Laird Macgregor."

After they departed, Edwina arose from her rocker. "Ah'll seek mah bed as

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weel." She hobbled up to Dreya. "Welcome home, dear child."

"Thank you." Dreya hugged the woman close. "I'm so glad you're well."

"Aye, an' ye'r safe. Th' Guid Faither answered mah most cherished prayer first."

"There were others?"

The healer smiled. "A few." She turned to Lucian. "Captain Adams."

He bowed. "Madam Edwina."

The last of her clan abandoned Dreya, and her confidence disappeared as well. She hurried toward the roaring fire. "I miss the mustache and beard, but I'm glad you left your hair long."

"I'm pleased you approve. Have you truly recovered from your wound?"

"Yes, thanks to you."

"The ball of lead wasn't deep." Several seconds passed. "Much stands between us, *cherie*."

"Too much, I fear." Dreya turned. "Beginning with the fact that you've obviously regained your memory."

"Yes, but my situation has changed since that night in the palace gardens." He kept his distance, but the strange emotion in his eyes pinned her to the spot. "I am no longer the Marquis of Canderlay."

The remark caught her off guard. "What do you mean?"

"Several years before the war, I discovered my father owed George III a huge gambling debt. When my father died, that debt passed on to me, and I became, as you once put it, the king's favorite lackey."

"I apologize for the rude remark. At the time, I was merely concerned with leaving England."

"Apology accepted."

"You were sent to spy on my father, were you not?"

"Yes."

"And your memory loss...was that just a ploy to gain my trust?"

"No, I never lied about that. My memory returned only after I boarded Reed's ship."

"My father says you did not betray us. Is that true?"

"Yes. I left Dragon's Breath and returned to England with the sole purpose of carrying out my sworn duty. I stood before the king but found I didn't possess the heart to betray the people who'd rescued me. Or you. I failed to bring his majesty the Macgregor, so my lands and title were revoked."

She looked away. "I'm sorry for your misfortune."

"Don't be, *ma cherie*. You saved my life in more ways than you could ever imagine."

The softness in his voice lifted some of the heaviness in Dreya's heart. "The letter I wrote to Derek...I merely wished to protect my family."

"I know. I shouldn't have had you arrested."

"What about leaving me tied up in the dungeon?"

"You imprisoned me there first."

She almost smiled. "Forgive my poor judgment, but I wasn't sure what to do with you."

"I understand." He moved toward the darkened windows. "The night of the

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masquerade ball, I intended to ask the king to set you free, but an enticing female dressed in a Saint Magdalene costume caught my attention. By the way...how did you escape the tower?"

"Uncle Charles paid a servant to steal the key and to provide me with a costume." She hesitated. "My father told me he knows who you are."

"It's true. I confessed everything to his lordship. At first he suggested hanging me from the bell tower by my ears, but fortunately he never carried out that threat. Captain Reed knows as well. I find it odd you never mentioned you and he are cousins."

"Why would I?"

He closed the distance between them. "I think you know why."

Her pulse raced.

"When did you recognize me?" he inquired.

"The afternoon you saved Sebastian."

"After we took shelter in the lean-to?"

"Yes." The memory brought warmth to Dreya's cheeks, and she turned away. "With the sun shining upon your face, it finally dawned on me where we'd met, and I suffered quite the shock."

"Hence my visit to your dungeon. How ironic. Did you find it amusing you'd rescued the very Englishman who accused you of spying?"

"Unbelievable would be a better description." She faced him. "You said you'd intended to speak to the king that night. What changed your mind?"

"Your escape," he replied. "I feared his majesty might behead me if I even spoke your name. Did you not find it odd not one guard pursued you?"

"Yes, I was curious about that."

"Surely you didn't think I'd forget to search the ships along the waterfront?"

"Perhaps you were embarrassed a woman had out-witted you."

"You thought so little of Canderlay's character, did you?"

He came so close Dreya couldn't breathe, and his intense scrutiny unnerved her. She backed away, tripped, and would've landed in the fire had he not wrapped his arm around her waist.

"What do we do now, Dreya? Pretend we do not share a strange past?"

His touch sent flames of desire coursing through her body, and she longed for things she had no right to.

"It's not the past I'm concerned with," she said and slid out of his embrace.

"If the Macgregor's safety still troubles you—"

"No. The night you rescued me from Quinn you gave me your word my father would be safe. I believe you and ask that you extend the same courtesy to someone else. Uncle Charles. He's all alone, and if the king ever discovered he aided in my escape—"

"I admire Lord Hawthorne. He championed your cause and argued quite well. His involvement will never be known. At least not from me."

"Thank you."

His gaze rested on her mouth. "Are you aware your father asked me to assume command of the *Dragonfly* once it's restored?"

"Why would he do such a thing?"

"Perhaps to keep a former enemy close at hand."

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"Then...you've decided to accept the position?"

"No."

A cold loneliness crept inside her chest.

"Unless...."

Dreya's heart fluttered. "Unless?"

Again he closed the distance. "Do you know how much you mean to me?" He brushed her cheek, and his fingers lingered on her skin. "Can you imagine my horror when I thought I'd lost you? If you had died as a result of trying to save me—"

"Save you? Heavens, I merely thought to warn you."

"By receiving a mortal wound?"

"That was not my intention."

"I should hope not." His eyes twinkled. "There is something else though. Why did you keep my true identity from your father and Reed?"

"It was best."

"For whom?"

"For both of us," Dreya replied. "By the way, thank you for Belle. I'm told she's quite beautiful, and I'm sure Pegasus will adore her."

"You're trying to change the subject."

"I believe I liked you better when I thought you a lowly pirate."

"I don't doubt that since that's the sort of men you are accustomed to meeting."

Dreya lifted the poker from its stand and playfully pointed the sharp end at him. "Hurling insults at my character is a waste of breath. You see...I am the illegitimate daughter of a Scottish smuggler."

There. She'd said it, and she couldn't take it back.

"I know, Dreya."

"You...well who the devil told you?"

"Does it matter?" He stepped forward, the tip of the poker touching his chest. "You have two choices, *ma cherie*. Either kill me now, or do me the honor of becoming my wife."

Her hand shook. "Your wife?"

"Whichever option you choose, at least I'll be out of my misery." He seized the poker and tossed it to the floor. "I love you, Dreya Macgregor, and I have no idea how it happened."

"Did you hear what I said? I'm illegitimate."

"Ah, sweet vixen." He pulled her into his arms, avoiding the wound at her back. "You and I know exactly who we are."

Dreya placed her head against his chest, secure in the strong beat of his heart. Had Quinn's aim hit the mark after all, and she lay near death, fantasizing about a life with this man? If so, she didn't wish to awaken.

"You're shivering, *cherie*. Are you cold?"

"On the contrary. I'm delightfully warm." She lifted her head. "I do love you, and I will marry you, but I've come across an unusual dilemma."

"Oh?"

"Since the wicked Marquis of Canderlay no longer exists—"

He pushed her at arm's length. "Wicked?"

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"Stop interrupting. I'm trying to decide how to address you."

He lifted her chin. "You may address me as husband."

"In good time, sir, but what about the rest of my clan?"

"They can refer to me as Captain or Lucian or whatever they wish. But not...."

His lips lingered on hers, branding her his woman. "Sebastian."

Dreya arched a brow.

He nodded once. "Lucian Sebastian Spence at your service, Mistress Macgregor."

"How interesting."

"That's how you saved me that night on the beach. You called me by the name my father used. Your soft voice drifted on the wind, providing me with a lighthouse beacon in the middle of a dark storm."

She caressed the scar at his temple. "You know, Lucian, now that I think of it, you're no imposter after all. You really are a pirate."

"And I thought we were past such crude remarks."

"Did you not steal my heart, *monsieur*?"

"Did I, *mademoiselle*?"

Dreya entered the circle of his arms. "Absolutely."

"Then be warned." He offered up that familiar devilish grin. "This pirate doesn't intend to give it back."

Excerpt from
Embers

by
Ric Wasley

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Embers

Winter 1196.

Wind lashes the gray walls of a stone and wooden fortress that clings to the top of an outcropping of a low range of rolling hills. Parts of the fortress castle look raw and new as if pulled from the earth and forest yesterday, and parts of it have been.

But deep within the fortress walls is a keep which dates back to Roman times.

This is not unusual. In the one hundred and thirty years since Duke William, now remembered as “The Conqueror”, began the building of a chain of Norman forts to hold his spoils, his warlords have made liberal use of legacies of other conquerors from earlier ages. Thus the castle’s keep in the heart of Yorkshire, England, is no different than a dozen others, except in one respect—its lord.

A cold, bone-chilling rain drips from the keep’s narrow windows.

A lone figure sits in the great hall before a fire that has burned down to glowing red embers. The figure sits brooding in a large carved walnut chair. He slumps forward, each gnarled hand resting on the arms of the chair.

An ember flares up for a moment and illuminates his face. He stares at his reflection in a silver goblet that rests on a small table next to the chair.

The face that stares back at him is that of an old man—but he is only thirty-five.

White scars crisscross his face. One long, vicious looking scar stands out from the rest. It runs from his hairline down to his jaw, crossing his left eye. Or what remains of where his left eye used to be. It is now a vacant socket, the legacy of a slashing backhanded cut left by a curved blade of Damascus steel. Though almost three years old, the deep scar still pains him. Especially on cold damp nights—like tonight.

As the pain becomes unbearable, he reaches for the goblet next to him. But his fingers are crippled and clumsy. They will not close around the cup, and it slips from his fingers. A strangled oath of frustration escapes his lips.

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