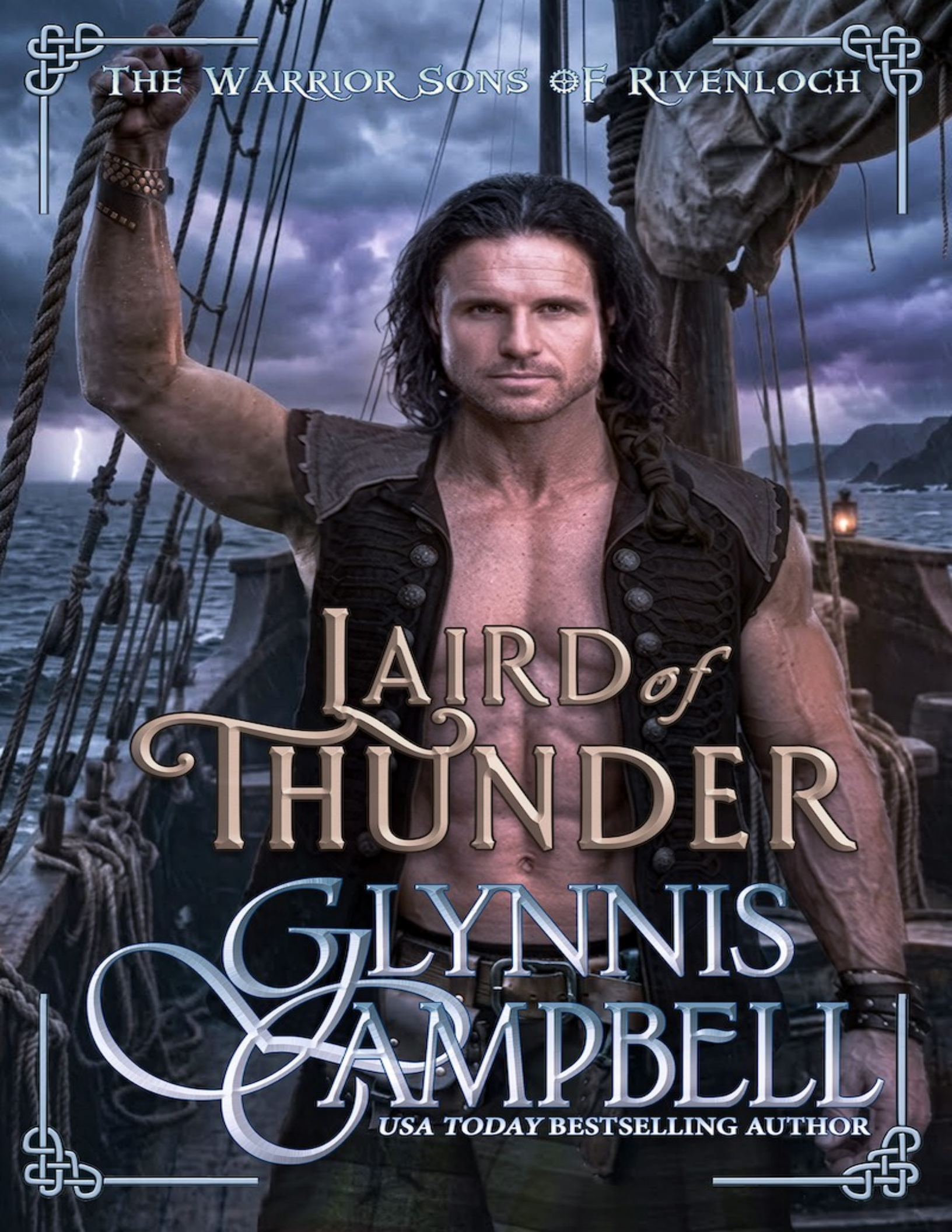

THE WARRIOR SONS OF RIVENLOCH
LAIRD of THUNDER
GLYNNIS CAMPBELL
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAIRD OF THUNDER

The Warrior Sons of Rivenloch

Book 1

by



When bold warrior Brand Cameliard of Rivenloch is sent to the Holy Lands by the Scottish king to retrieve a laird's runaway daughter, he discovers the lady is a captive in a Saracen's harem and sees his chance to be a hero.

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LAIRD OF THUNDER

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Chapter 1



South Berwick, Scotland

Midwinter 1161

“There ’tis, sir!”

At his man’s excited cry, Brand—Sir Brand Cameliard of the Rivenloch clan, now Keeper of Berwick Castle—straightened in the saddle. He peered through the trees at the distant rooftops of his new home.

South Berwick was an important burgh. A busy port. The most critical border stronghold against the English. And the keep where King Malcolm of Scotland retained prisoners of the crown.

That the king had entrusted Brand with its command—and with the transport of such a significant captive—said more about the reputation of Brand’s clan than his personal history. After all, he’d been a knight for just two years.

Brand never doubted his skill with a sword. He was part of a powerful clan descended from Vikings. The son of a formidable warrior maid and an illustrious Norman knight.

But when it came to the ways of politics, he was inexperienced.

The king had handed him an enormous responsibility. One for which he wasn't sure he was qualified.

Still, he meant to keep his doubts to himself.

To never show weakness.

Never waver.

And—as his warrior mother, Laird Deirdre, had taught him—to always keep one hand resting upon the pommel of his sword.

So he rode boldly at the fore of his small company as they emerged from the forest under the midwinter gloom. The damp salt air of the sea sighed over the frozen land, sweeping across his stubbled face, ruffling his unkempt hair.

His four men-at-arms rode close behind him. The prisoner was quiet, shackled and bound face-down over his horse's saddle.

Ahead, the castle rose high above the town on a mound of earth. Surrounded by a thick stone wall, flanked by the North Sea and the River Tweed, it would function well as a secure royal prison.

That satisfied Brand. For his first royal assignment, he needed things to go smoothly. True, his prisoner, Uchtred of Galloway, wasn't particularly dangerous. Indeed, the fellow seemed resigned to his fate. But he was valuable. Brand could afford no mistakes.

Brand had been commanded by the king to hold Laird Fergus's grown son Uchtred as a hostage. Uchtred's imprisonment would serve two purposes. Punishing his mutinous father for challenging the crown. And guaranteeing no further rebellion from Fergus's clan.

To Brand’s mind, the laird was damned lucky the king hadn’t had Fergus drawn and quartered for treason. But King Malcolm was a devout and chivalrous young man. He preferred as little bloodshed as possible.

Brand smirked. Young man? The king was the same age as Brand. Yet he projected an air of childlike innocence that had earned him the title, The Maiden. And in the murmured opinion of most of the Rivenloch clan—despite their unwavering, centuries-old loyalty to the Scottish crown—the young king didn’t always exercise the best judgment.

Brand’s cousin Adam knew that firsthand. Adam, with his penchant for disguises, had served as a spy, secretly preventing the king from starting what could have been a reckless clan war.

Brand’s current mission was secret as well, one he’d kept even from Adam and Adam’s scheming wife, Eve. They knew Brand was bound for Berwick. But they knew nothing about his royal side quest. The last thing Brand needed was his clansfolk meddling in his affairs and undermining his authority.

A few cottages spaced along the road gradually became the village of Berwick proper. Soon Brand and his men were riding past rows of shops hawking spices and cloth, candles and jewelry, wooden boxes and metal tools.

Fragrant pottages bubbling over alehouse fires spilled their scent from open doors to tempt passersby. The air was filled with the creak of cart wheels, the calls of merchants, and the bleating of livestock.

As their retinue passed, bystanders stopped to stare, intrigued by the sight of a royal knight parading a disgraced prisoner through their streets.

Brand sat tall. First impressions were important. This was where his authority would be established. Where he would prove he was qualified to defend the keep.

As he continued proudly along the roadway, a brazen old hunchbacked woman emerged suddenly from the crowd.

“Who’ve ye got there, sir?” she demanded, pointing at the prisoner.

Brand frowned. He was there on the king’s business. His prisoner was none of her affair.

A gray-bearded man came up beside the old woman and jabbed at Brand’s horse with his walking stick. “What’re ye doin’, lad, wearin’ the king’s colors?”

Brand’s scowl deepened. Lad? He was sorely tempted to give the impertinent arse the back of his hand, even if the man was old and lame. God’s eyes! How dared he question a royal knight?

But Brand had to control his anger. He knew that. From the time he was a lad, he’d been cursed with a fierce temper, prone to thunderous rage.

No more. He had to remember his mission. This was serious business. He was about to command the king’s castle in one of the most important towns in Scotland.

So he forced his gaze away from the hecklers and willed his ire to subside.

Once his prisoner was safely installed in the keep, once Brand established his rank among the castle folk, then he’d make himself known to his subjects.

Until then, he’d keep his eyes on the road.

His mind to his purpose.

And one hand resting on the pommel of his sword.



After his initial rude welcome, Brand's first fortnight at Berwick went smoothly. At first, he maintained an authoritative distance. Then he acquainted himself with the villagers. Memorized the names of the merchants who supplied the keep. Learned who the troublemakers were and who he could trust.

He nodded to blushing maids when he rode through the streets. And cocked a brow of rebuke at unruly children who strayed too close.

Uchtred of Galloway he lodged in a secure cell. The prisoner was treated humanely. Given a straw pallet and clothing. Fed well.

Brand even managed to persuade the meddlesome Campbells—the hunchbacked old woman and her hobbling husband who'd harassed him upon his arrival—that he deserved their respect as Keeper of the Castle.

He hadn't lost his temper. And he hadn't needed to draw his weapon once. At least not in the course of enforcement.

Of course, he'd unsheathed his sword multiple times. After all, as Keeper of the Castle he was expected to test the mettle of his new company of knights. To do less would have been irresponsible. And he was in his element on the practice field.

The king's armory was impressive. There was much opportunity to ride in the tiltyard and spar in the lists. And considering Brand's reputation as a

Rivenloch, the men were eager to improve their skills under his expert instruction.

Thus he found himself one misty winter morn, sword in hand, facing a pair of enthusiastic young warriors on Berwick's practice field.

"Keep your guard up!" Brand called out, thumping one young knight on his unprotected shoulder with the flat of his blade.

"And you!" he shouted, wheeling toward his second opponent, who took a wide swing at his head that collided with Brand's shield. "Too slow. I saw that blow coming from the next shire."

The first knight, humiliated, whirled with a vengeance and stabbed forward at Brand. But Brand dodged aside and whacked the lad on the back of his helm with his shield.

"Temper, Odo," he warned. "'Twill be your undoing."

Brand knew whereof he spoke. He'd fallen victim to his own volatility more times than he could count. It had taken discipline to rein in his youthful rage.

"M'laird?" someone called out from across the field.

Sliding back his mail coif, Brand looked closer. It appeared to be a messenger bearing the royal coat of arms.

He lowered his shield and sheathed his sword. "Go on," he said to the two knights, "Rest your arms."

No doubt the messenger had been sent by the king to check on Brand's progress.

Brand had been expecting this. He was prepared. He welcomed the king's scrutiny.

Today—between sparring with a pair of challenging opponents, feeling confident in his leadership, and settling in to his responsibilities—Brand was sure he would give an impressive report to the king.

Then he read the words of the missive the messenger handed him.

He felt his temper rise. The blood began to boil in his veins. He bit back a snarl of rage.

This wasn't a request for a report.

It was an urgent missive, sending Brand away.

The parchment crinkled as he tightened it between his gauntleted fingers. He longed to lash out, to bellow, to cast down the missive and grind it under his heel until it crumbled to dust.

But he reminded himself he was no longer a hotheaded youth, quick to draw his weapon.

He was the king's man. An example to the men gathered around him.

If Malcolm the Maiden wanted to send Brand—one of his best knights, a warrior of Rivenloch, the Keeper of the Castle—thousands of miles away on a fool's errand, who was Brand to question his overlord?

He ground his teeth. Bloody hell. It niggled at his pride to be used for such a witless task. A task that would cost him nigh a year of his precious life.

He reread the missive, hoping he'd misunderstood.

According to the note, one of the king's allies, Laird Robert of Baird, had suffered the loss of his daughter.

Not loss, as in died. Apparently he'd *misplaced* the lass and needed

help finding her.

Worse, it wasn't as if this misplaced daughter was a toddling child who'd wandered off into the woods.

Anabella was a grown woman last seen following her husband, Sir John of Drummond, on his journey to join the king's forces in battle.

That wasn't so unusual. Many a faithful wife accompanied her husband to war.

But Laird Robert wanted her back. So he'd made the request of the king.

The king, however, had informed the laird that he was mistaken. Neither Anabella nor Sir John were with him. Rumor was they'd instead embarked on a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands.

At that point, Brand paused in reading the letter. If *he'd* been Lady Anabella's father, he would have let the damned lass go. She was a grown woman, after all, and married. She was her husband's to command, was she not? Brand would have admired her loyalty and wished her well.

But now Brand remembered the story of the Laird of Baird's wife. She'd died early in the marriage, some said from melancholy. The laird had never remarried, so Anabella was his sole heir. No doubt he didn't want his only daughter in a foreign land, but rather under his protection. And since Laird Robert had the ear of the king, Malcolm had agreed to fetch the lass back to Scotland.

Unfortunately, the king had chosen Brand for the task.

Brand had no interest in embarking on a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands. The Rivenloch clanfolk, bred of Picts and Vikings, weren't even

particularly religious. They celebrated their ancient rites and only observed Christian holidays because it was expected. Even the Normans in his father's Cameliard branch had never been all that pious.

Traveling to some holy site a half a world away seemed to Brand like a waste of resources, time, and talent.

Indeed, traveling there to wage war on the land and claim it for Christianity, as some had done, was even more ludicrous. Wasn't God everywhere? Besides, what kind of a god wanted followers that had been forced to worship him at the point of a sword?

Brand sighed. He supposed he didn't have a choice. The king had delivered enough gold with the missive to ensure it was an offer he couldn't refuse.

"You have a reply, sir?" asked the royal servant who'd brought the missive.

Brand had a hundred replies. None of them were safe for a loyal vassal of the king to utter. And Brand's loyalty, more than anything, was what would earn him a place in the world. Such loyalty had served his clan for generations. Brand wouldn't be the one to break that bond.

"Tell the king I'll leave within the sennight."

He'd have to act quickly.

He needed to find a trustworthy replacement to cover for him as Keeper of the Castle.

He had to organize the household to run smoothly in his absence.

And he had to acquire supplies to sustain him on his voyage. A voyage he expected would be long and agonizing.

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Chapter 2



Port of Acre, The Holy Lands

Early Spring 1161

Lady Anabella of Drummond stood on tiptoe at the bow of the ship and peered out from under her oversized cap. Her heart beat fast, like the pounding of her palfrey's hooves when she rode across the fields of her home in Scotland. Not with fear. But with anticipation.

Seven long months of travel were finally at an end.

The first weeks had been mostly over land.

The last six had been on this creaky, leaky, stinking wreck of a vessel.

The final month had been without her husband John, God rest his soul.

She absently made the sign of the cross.

John hadn't wanted her to come at all. Making a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands was a challenging endeavor. Indeed, Anabella knew the only reason John had undertaken the journey was because her father, Laird Robert, had berated him mercilessly for his lack of courage.

Going to Jerusalem had seemed to John like the perfect undertaking to prove his mettle to her father. And, she supposed, a good way to get away

from Laird Robert’s harping for a year or more.

Her father the laird could be a harsh judge. Demanding in his expectations. Cruel with his criticism.

In this instance, he wasn’t altogether wrong about John. John had never been the keenest sword in the armory. For a naive man like him, going alone on pilgrimage to a foreign land was fraught with danger.

Which was why Anabella had made up her mind to go with him. That and the fact that it sounded like an irresistible adventure.

She’d heard the Holy Lands were the birthplace of new ideas in anatomy and natural philosophy. And the idea she might learn something novel made her heart beat faster. It didn’t hurt that she too could escape her domineering father, who would never have willingly given his consent for her to go. Or permission to learn something novel.

In the end, she’d donned lad’s clothing, stolen out of her father’s keep, and secretly followed John.

But now, it was she who was alone.

Tragically, only weeks away from reaching the Holy Lands, several passengers had contracted a wasting disease, among them John. He’d suffered with unquenchable fever and a racking cough.

Knowing he wasn’t long for this earth, he’d given Anabella a dire warning. He’d cautioned her she’d be a woman alone in a strange country. Though Christians had claimed the Holy Lands, men of other faiths lingered. Men who didn’t answer to God. Men who might wish to do her harm.

And then he’d breathed his last.

As with the other unfortunate dead, he'd been bound in sailcloth and cast into the sea.

She'd wept over him, of course. After all, he'd been her companion for two years.

But somehow she couldn't summon up the deep despair most wives expressed on the death of their spouses. She certainly didn't think she could grieve for twelve months like a proper widow.

It wasn't that John of Drummond had been a bad husband. To her mind, he was the best of the prospects her father had selected.

The others had been dominating and cold, much like her father, who believed Anabella's wild, headstrong ways needed to be crushed into submission.

John had been different. He'd been respectful and kind. Patient and undemanding. Instead of laying down the law to her as her father did, he'd always expressed his wishes as a matter of concern for her safety.

But to a woman of lusty appetites like Anabella, John had always been a bit too cautious. He preferred to keep her safe, close, dormant. Like a cloth doll upon a shelf.

So when he made silly rules for her, she broke them in secret.

Since a woman doing rigorous activity frightened him, she galloped her palfrey before he awoke in the morn.

Since he was terrified she might drown, she waited till he was away to swim in the loch.

Since he fretted she might harm her delicate brain with too much learning, she read his codices by candlelight while he slept.

She never ventured too near the fire or the rain or the hounds or the coos, lest he grow agitated with worry over her.

Consequently, she'd never truly loved him. Not in the way she'd heard about in romantic verse…with abandon and passion and her whole heart. But then she supposed very few noblewomen could say they loved the men their fathers chose for them.

Still, she'd liked John well enough. They'd always supped happily together. He'd listened to her ideas. She'd shared his bed.

And though they'd never been blessed with a bairn, he'd always grinned with joy after trying to make one, like a lucky hound that had been thrown a savory bone.

She'd always smiled sweetly in return and then turned over to dream of a handsome knight sweeping her off her feet. Or a bold Viking come to steal her away. Or a honey-tongued Gancanagh enchanting her into his bed.

Of course, that was only fantasy. As willful as Anabella was, the last thing she wanted in the real world was to be forced to do anything by a man. Not anymore.

Which was why, despite the warmth of the day, she tightened the wool cloak around her shoulders and pulled down her cap to hide her feminine features. As overly nervous as John had always been, he was right about a woman alone in a strange country. And from what she could see of the shore from the ship, there were very few women at all here.

But now she was free. This new world was hers to explore. She was ready to stand on solid land again.

And what a magnificent land it appeared to be. Pale stone walls surrounded a vast city. Two great defensive towers dominated the harbor. Along the shoreline, between clusters of pines, curious trees sprang from the sand like giant jester's scepters with frills of dark green. A number of camels—the enormous beasts she'd read about in John's codex about the Holy Lands—ambled along the street, transporting goods and passengers. Between them, people milled about like bright beetles in too many colors to name.

Anabella felt drab in comparison. But she had to maintain her disguise as a lad until she could find safe passage home again.

Passage home.

She caught her lip beneath her teeth, feeling a pang of regret. Now that John was gone, she would return, wouldn't she? Going on pilgrimage had never been her dream, and a woman alone surely couldn't survive here.

She'd return to Scotland straightaway.

In a day or two.

Or maybe a sennight.

To be honest, she wasn't exactly in a hurry to get back on a ship. Not when the promise of adventure gleamed before her.

Nor was she excited about returning to her controlling father. He'd doubtless marry her off to a new prospect as soon as she set foot in Scotland.

Accustomed to the motion of the sea, once they docked, she easily negotiated the wobbling plank off the ship with her heavy satchel of belongings.

She made her way through the tightly packed crowd of jostling travelers, burdened beasts, and shouting tradesmen. Then she ducked into an arched passageway where one could get out of the sun. Inside was a busy vaulted marketplace that stretched along the length of the road as far as she could see.

The people here wore a rainbow of exotic robes and jabbered in different languages. The air was scented with unfamiliar spices and unusual oils, the pungent odor of sheep and goats, and delicious smells that made her stomach grumble with hunger.

Caught up in new sensations, overwhelmed by the magnificent arches and fragrant breezes, the brush of silky fabric and the jangle of coins and bells, she was swept along in the mass of humanity.

Ornate rugs hung from the ceiling. Incense coiled through the air. Beautiful doves cooed from cages. Merchants peddled everything from jewels to jars, scarves to saddles, cutlery to crosses.

Before she knew it, she was far from the ship. Everyone she'd sailed with had faded from sight.

But Anabella didn't need them. She could purchase whatever she required with John's silver, tucked safely into the bottom of her satchel.

With so many unique offerings in the market, it was tempting to spend the next several days purchasing oils and veils and tools. Jars. And soaps. And codices. Things to remind her of her grand adventure to the Holy Lands when she returned to Scotland.

So distracted was she by all the beautiful objects and loud solicitations, she didn't notice a trio of young lads were shadowing her until it was too

late.

Suddenly, one of them jostled her from behind. The satchel slipped off her shoulder, and she quickly pulled it back up.

“Hey!” someone said, shoving her in the back.

She stumbled forward.

One of them laughed. “What have you got in the sack, Frank?”

According to the ship’s crew, *Frank* was what the natives called all the Christians who came to the Holy Lands, even those who hadn’t come from France.

“Let us see,” another one said, yanking on the satchel.

She wrenched it away and turned to face them.

They were about her height, gangly, not yet men. They wore long robes in the brown shades of the desert. Their skin was the color of sand, and faint black fuzz was only beginning to sprout above their wide grins. Their gleaming white teeth matched the white scarves draped around their heads.

“Come on, Frank,” one of them said in curiously accented tones. “Does your god not say, give and it will be given to you?”

They all laughed.

She ducked her head to be sure they wouldn’t see she was a woman. As long as they believed she was a lad and were only interested in pestering her, she wasn’t afraid of them. She’d dealt with half-arsed knaves before.

She grumbled, “What do ye want?”

“What have you got?”

“He has gold,” the second replied, his dark eyes gleaming.

“They all have gold, right off the ship,” the third agreed.

“I have no gold,” she growled. It wasn’t a lie. Her coins were silver.

“You are alone?” the first asked.

“Nay, my da is with me.” That was a lie.

The second lad giggled, not understanding the word. “Your ‘da’?”

“He means *Abuhu,”* the first said.

The third raised an astute brow. “You lie. You were alone when you got off the ship.”

Damn. They must have been watching her from the moment she landed. “He’ll be along any moment.”

The first clucked his tongue. “I do not believe you, Frank.”

“Come on, Frank, while you wait for your ‘da,’ we will look in your sack.”

The first one grabbed the satchel again. She clenched her teeth and dragged it back toward her. They began tugging it back and forth while the other two cheered.

None of the merchants or passersby seemed to care that she was being accosted. Perhaps this was a daily occurrence in the marketplace—local lads robbing the fresh arrivals. She supposed she was on her own.

Finally the satchel slipped out of her grip and fell on the rocky ground between them. Clothing and oatcakes and vials scattered. Her jar of lavender broke, flowering into a cloud of strong scent that made one of the lads sneeze.

Now she was angry.

It didn’t matter that she was outnumbered. Or that they were lads and she was a lass. Or that none of the merchants were going to help her. She refused to allow a wayward pack of pups to take her things.

She clenched her fists and reared back, preparing to punch out the lad’s shiny front teeth.

Suddenly a bellow of *“Ya Awlad!”* pierced the air.

The lads started.

She turned toward the voice. Towering over them was a splendidly dressed man in robes of blue. His snowy head scarf was secured by a dark blue cord wound with gold thread. His skin was the color of bronze. His thick black beard was grayed at the edges. He had a beakish nose, piercing black eyes, and sharp features. He wasn’t handsome. But he was striking.

He bit out a string of what sounded like scolding, waving his hand dismissively at them and then pointing at her fallen satchel.

One foolhardy lad crossed his arms over his chest in silent challenge. He quickly regretted his decision when the man gave him a sharp backhand that sent him staggering.

The other two scrambled to assemble the dropped contents of her satchel.

One of them handed the satchel back to her and asked the man something, gesturing at Anabella with a nod of his head.

The man clamped a possessive hand on her shoulder. *“Huwa ’abdi,”*

They gaped at Anabella in wonder.

“A Christian?” the bold one asked.

The man sniffed haughtily and raised his bearded chin. He bit out another string of words, and their eyes widened.

Whatever he'd said made the lads disperse instantly and hasten out of the passage and into the street.

When they were gone, Anabella eased out from under his grip and gave him a nod of thanks. Then she wondered aloud, "What did ye say to them?"

She didn't expect an answer. She assumed he didn't speak her language.

"I told them you were my servant."

"What?" she yelped. Then she lowered her voice to a lad's pitch. "What?"

She stiffened. His servant? Did he really mean that? From what she'd heard about the Holy Lands, there was little difference between being a servant and a slave.

"Go on now," he said, dispelling her fears. But his next words, muttered under his breath, ruffled her feathers. "You need to go back to your kind."

"What do ye mean, *my kind?*"

He spoke quietly, as if cautious of those who might hear him. "You are a Frank. A Christian. Yes?"

His voice was distracting. His mastery of her language was good, but there was a curious melody to his voice and a flicked "R" that caught her ear.

Still, she'd never liked being told what to do. She bristled when her father did it. She certainly wasn't going to let a stranger order her around.

“I’m not goin’ back to my kind,” she said. “I can manage on my own.”

He raised a skeptical black brow and bit out, “Go find your father or your uncle or whoever you came with, or I *will* make you my servant.”

She raised her chin in challenge. “I came alone.”

His brows collided in disapproval. “This is true?”

She nodded.

He tugged at his beard in annoyance. “Where are you staying?”

She hesitated, chewing at her lip. “I’m…I’ll…find a place.”

His brows descended even farther. “You have no place to stay?”

Before she could answer, he glanced quickly right and left, wary of witnesses, and then seized her by the arm.

She tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip.

He bent close, and she caught the faint scent of a not unpleasant oil on his beard. He muttered under his breath, “We will be in serious trouble if we are caught together. We must get out of the marketplace. You will come with me now. My servants will see you fed, bathed, and dressed. You will stay in my home tonight.”

All of Anabella’s instincts told her to fight him. To wrench her arm out of his grip. To kick him in the ballocks. To scream for help.

But then she realized he was offering her lodging. She had nowhere else to stay, aside from spending another night in the hold of the ship. And that was the last place she wanted to sleep.

“Ye don’t mean to make me your servant, do ye?” she asked.

He scoffed. “I do not need another servant.”

“Another?” Before she could stop herself, curiosity got the best of her. She blurted, “How many servants do ye have?”

He shrugged. “Three for me. Two for each wife.”

“Each wife?” she exclaimed. “How many wives do ye have?”

“You ask too many questions.”

He wasn’t the first man to say that.

He tugged at her arm.

She stood fast.

Then his eyes crinkled in a combination of annoyance and amusement as he answered her. “Only three. So far.”

Her brows shot up. John had told her the people who lived here followed different religious customs. It seemed having multiple wives was one of those customs.

Then she realized if he was a family man, perhaps she could trust him. Anyone with three wives and a collection of children was probably not the sort of man to compromise a woman’s virtue if he discovered she was a lass.

If things did turn perilous, Anabella possessed considerable skill when it came to defending herself. She wasn’t afraid to blacken an eye or bruise a shin.

“Fine,” she said, nodding her head politely. “I’m grateful for your hospitality, sir.”

“Stay close behind me,” he told her. “And keep your eyes down.”

She didn’t mind. Walking behind him was not unlike sailing across the sea on her journey. His robes of azure and sapphire waved and flapped before her like the gentle churning of the water she’d seen from the bow of the ship.

The marketplace ended, and they turned out onto the road. It had narrowed considerably and had much less traffic. The buildings grew closer and closer together as they gradually ascended the slope away from the port. He turned one corner, then another, and another, until she felt like they navigated a coney warren.

It suddenly occurred to her, even if she wanted to return to the ship, she wasn’t sure she could find her way back.

Soon she was struggling to keep up with him, weighted down by the heavy satchel and her wool cloak and wearied by the oppressive heat reflected off the plastered walls.

He must have felt her flagging. He stopped and turned to her, unclipping a leather bag in the shape of a teardrop from his belt. Pulling out the stopper, he offered it to her. “Drink.”

She dropped the satchel and took the bag.

She expected wine or ale or perhaps the milk of one of the exotic beasts she’d seen on the street.

It was only water. But it was wet and cold. And welcome.

“How much farther?” she asked, handing back the bag.

He shrugged. “Perhaps a thousand steps.” Then he raised a brow, and a glimmer of amusement brightened his eyes. “For a small mouse like you, three thousand.”

She took that as a challenge. The drink revived her spirits and her strength.

But when she tried to shoulder the satchel again, he took it away. Glancing about to ensure none of his neighbors saw him giving relief to a servant, he slung it across his own shoulder and continued up the slope.

She was out of breath by the time they arrived at a walled property adjoining several others. He opened a wooden gate and led her through a stone arch into a small entryway flanked by a pair of gigantic, elaborately decorated ceramic vessels painted in vivid shades of orange, blue, green, and yellow.

More arches opened into chambers to the left and right. But what caught Anabella's eye was the beautiful courtyard straight ahead.

Without waiting for permission, she rushed toward the stone archway, which featured an intricately carved panel below the keystone, as delicate and remarkable as fine embroidery.

"Wait," the man commanded.

She stopped, and he passed by her, glancing about the garden as if searching for wild animals that might attack her. John had warned her there were lions in the Holy Lands.

Apparently satisfied it was safe, he waved her forward.

In the midst of the open-aired garden was a sprawling gray-limbed tree with enormous leaves like giant hands. At its base was a large stone fountain with trickling water that spilled and pooled onto terraces below. Stone benches and painted ceramic pots containing small flowering plants she didn't recognize surrounded the tree.

A pair of fragrant laurels stood guard over the stone path. Beyond them grew ancient trees with gnarled trunks and coin-sized leaves. On each side, several bushes brightened the green garden with strange and vivid red blossoms.

“What are tho-…?” she started to ask.

She was interrupted by a woman’s voice. The words were foreign, rapid, and beautiful, like an echo of the fountain whispering and gurgling over the rocks. The happy sound belonged to a black-robed figure rushing gracefully toward them. The light fabric of her gown flapped outward like the wings of a raven, revealing loose black trews beneath.

“Fatima!” the man called out in alarm.

The woman’s eyes widened at the sight of Anabella. She stopped suddenly, reaching up to pull her scarf across her face.

Then she said something to the man in a tone that sounded half apologetic and half scolding.

He gave her a respectful nod. “I am sorry, *Zawjati.*”

Her dark eyes, the only visible part of her face, narrowed. “Why do you speak in this tongue?”

Placing his hand on Anabella’s shoulder, he said, “So our guest can understand.”

“Our guest?”

“I found this lad in the market,” he explained. “He had just arrived by ship.” He frowned and shook his head. “Three young thieves wished to relieve him of his belongings.”

“It was very kind of you to rescue him, *Qalbi,*” she said, softening her gaze. Then her brows furrowed. “But he should go back with his own.”

“He has no one.”

“Surely he did not come alone?” The woman’s eyes flattened with disgust.

Anabella was beginning to think it must be a grave sin to be alone in this country.

“He did,” the man replied.

“We cannot keep him here, *Habibati,*” she said. “Not a Frank.”

“I know. He will stay for one night. We will feed and bathe him. On the morrow, I will deliver him to the church.”

Anabella frowned. The church? She didn’t particularly relish staying in a monk’s cell.

The woman didn’t reply. She was studying Anabella. With enough intensity to make Anabella gulp with unease.

Then suspicion twisted the woman’s brows. Suddenly she let her veil drop, revealing a mouth pursed in anger. She marched toward Anabella so aggressively that the man’s hand tightened protectively on her shoulder.

Before Anabella could protest, the woman wrenched off Anabella’s cap. Anabella gasped. Her long sable tresses spilled free, framing her unmistakably feminine face.

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Chapter 3



The woman smirked in triumph.

The man was mortified. Immediately withdrawing his hand, he could only stare at Anabella. His mouth gaped, making him look like a fish just pulled from the river, and he quickly averted his gaze. When he was finally able to talk, it was in his own language, fast enough to make his beard quiver, so she wasn't sure what he was telling his wife.

The woman clucked her tongue and shook her head. Then, snagging Anabella's sleeve in her fist, she hauled her out of the garden toward another chamber.

Before he was completely out of hearing, Anabella remembered her satchel. "My things!"

Still sputtering, the man replied, "I'll…leave them…here." Then he turned stiffly on his heel and went back the way he had come.

Anabella was on the verge of yanking her arm out of the woman's determined grip and telling her she could walk on her own—thank you very much. But in the next moment, they ducked under an arch and around a finely carved wooden screen, emerging into a chamber so lush and inviting, she was left speechless.

Sunlight filtered in through tall windows of clear panes covered by sheer rose curtains. In the soft light, numerous women and children read and played and ate and laughed. Some of them chatted in groups around the grand chamber. Some of them lounged on great pillows embroidered in vivid colors.

Several servants in plain pale shifts tended to the children and carried trays of food. One poured drinks from a long-spouted pitcher for a pair of elegant ladies dressed in black robes and adorned with copious jewels. His spare wives, no doubt.

The air was perfumed with a musky, spicy scent. The soft plucking of a stringed instrument carried over the sound of light conversation.

When the woman with Anabella cleared her throat, everyone in the room froze. The musicians stopped. The only sound was the cry of an unhappy infant. A servant jiggled the bairn in her arms, trying to calm it, to no avail.

The woman then made a long announcement in their language. Whatever she said induced gasps and stares and whispering.

Then she waved her hand, directing them to get back to whatever they were doing.

Finally, the woman turned to Anabella. Her eyes were grave and full of threat. Her lips were smug.

“You are not to leave this chamber,” she said.

The way she said it sounded like a dire warning, and Anabella was tempted to defy her. But she couldn’t blame the woman. Having to share

her husband with two other wives probably made her perceive any woman as a threat.

Besides, Anabella wasn't even slightly tempted to leave the chamber. It was beautiful and welcoming, sun-drenched yet cool. The cushions dispersed around the room looked as fluffy as goose down pallets.

Best of all? There were more than a dozen bound manuscripts just lying about.

The music resumed, its tone gentle and soothing.

Then Anabella remembered. She turned to the woman. "My things?"

The woman waved over two servants—or maybe they were slaves—Anabella wasn't sure. The woman sent one lass to fetch her satchel. To the other, she gave a long set of instructions, ending with a look of disgust as she perused Anabella from head to toe and shuddered.

Anabella didn't have to speak the language to know what the woman had said.

She was filthy. Six months on board a ship had left her with grimy skin, matted hair, and an unpleasant odor. But while that had been an advantage for disguising the fact she was a lass, in this enchanting chamber full of lovely women with glowing skin, snowy teeth, and clean garments, Anabella felt like a garderobe rat.

The man had promised her a bath. Apparently that was why the servant was beckoning her behind a set of screens.

Rather than a wooden tub, there was a raised tiled pool already filled with water. Anabella removed her boots. Then the servant undressed her quickly, tossing her clothing rather unceremoniously upon the floor. To

Anabella’s surprise, the water was warm. So fascinated was she, trying to figure out how the water had been heated, she hardly minded when the servant began scrubbing a curious square-shaped bar vigorously over her skin.

Having her hair washed was particularly pleasant. The soap the servant used was scented with some exotic spice that eliminated the smoke lingering in her tresses. Afterward, she combed Anabella’s wet hair until it was sleek and straight. Then she bid her come out of the water and dried and wrapped her in a large white cloth.

While Anabella watched, the servant dug through her satchel, pulling articles of clothing out one by one, shaking her head, and tossing them aside.

Muttering under her breath, the servant gestured with her upraised palm, indicating for Anabella to stay here. Then she left.

Anabella studied the bath again. It must have been built on the Roman model she’d heard about, with conduits for heat underneath the elevated pool.

When the servant returned, she was carrying a set of black clothing like that of the wives, but the cloth was faded to gray and a bit frayed at the edges.

Though Anabella had worn trews for the last several months, the loose breeches felt odd. A long tunic went over them, followed by a robe that was open in the front. The fabric was cotton, quite rare in Scotland. It was soft and fine, no thicker than her linen shifts at home, but the multiple layers afforded her modesty.

Over her damp hair, the servant draped more gray cloth, wrapping it behind her neck and under her chin, leaving long ends so Anabella could cover her face if she wished.

The stockings were not much different from her own, and the slippers were similar, though these were embroidered with intricate designs. They were a bit snug, but she could endure them for one day until she could don her boots again.

The bath had made her drowsy, but she was too excited to sleep. If she was to leave on the morrow, she wanted to absorb everything she could.

The servant motioned her to one of the empty pillows near the musician. Anabella smiled and seated herself, marveling over the facility with which the woman plucked the strings.

Another servant rushed forward with a tray of food. Anabella recognized none of it. But she was starving. She picked up a sticky brown object that looked like a large bug. Praying it was not, she closed her eyes and popped it into her mouth. It was sweet and chewy, with a pit in the middle, not unpleasant at all.

She sampled another pit-filled green berry that tasted salty and slightly bitter, as if seasoned with seawater. There was a bread as flat as an oatcake, but it was soft and flavored with garlic. There was a sprinkling of green nuts with a rosy flavor. And there was a small pastry that reminded her of a lamb coffyn. The sharp taste of the soft white cheese was complemented by the sweetness of a ball of bread drizzled with honey.

The lass with the pitcher brought her a cup and poured a warm drink into it. She recognized the fragrance as mint. In Scotland, they drank an

infusion of mint to calm the stomach. Considering how quickly she was gobbling down the fare, perhaps that was a wise precaution.

She nibbled a few more bites of the pastry. Then her gaze wandered, landing enviously on the codices casually strewn about the chamber.

One of the wives was reading. But she kept looking up to glance at Anabella. Finally the woman closed the codex and picked up another, tucking it under her arm. Then she rose from her cushion and approached. Anabella hoped she wasn't going to scold her for staring.

The woman had a sweet face with wide brown eyes and full pink lips. "You like to read?"

"Aye."

She held out the codex to Anabella. "This has pictures."

Anabella took it and carefully opened the leather-bound wooden cover. She ran a light fingertip over the curious letters written with artistic precision on the page, which was thinner than parchment. Tiny scrolls of red and gold and blue decorated the margins. When she turned the page, there was a detailed drawing of a plant with leaves, roots, and purple berries. The next page featured a green plant with a feathery top. The tree with red blossoms on the third page looked familiar.

"This is growing in your garden," she said.

"Yes," the woman said. "*Rumaan.*"

"*Rumaan,*" she repeated.

"You see," she said, pointing at the illustration. "The flowers become fruit with red seeds. The juice is…" She furrowed her brows, trying to remember the word.

“Sweet?” Anabella guessed.

“No.” She looked at Anabella and squinched her face into an expression so perfectly descriptive it made Anabella giggle.

“Tart,” Anabella guessed.

“Tart,” the woman repeated. “But good.”

Anabella smiled. She liked this woman. “My name is Anabella.”

“Anabella,” she carefully repeated, stealing a piece of brown fruit from the platter. “I am Aisha. Wife two of Hasan.” She took a bite of the fruit and nodded toward the woman in black with a wee lass on her lap. “That is Ghazalah. She is wife four of Hasan.”

“Four?” Hasan had claimed he only had three wives.

Aisha shook her head. “No. Three. Wife three. I do not speak good your language.”

It was far better than Anabella’s grasp of whatever language they spoke here. “And wife one?”

“That is Fatima.” Aisha’s eyes flattened a little at the mention of her name. She clearly was not fond of wife one.

“I don’t think she likes me,” Anabella confided.

“She does not like me also.” Then she leaned in closer. “I will tell you a secret?”

Anabella nodded.

She lowered her voice to a whisper. “Fatima has not made a child for Hasan. I think she cannot.”

Anabella was glad she'd already finished her mint water, for Aisha's comment might have made her choke on it. She gave the woman a weak smile and nodded, unsure how to respond.

Fortunately, Aisha changed the subject. "I wish you will stay," she said, plucking a handful of the small green nuts from the platter and popping one into her mouth, "and be friends."

Anabella smiled politely. Then she blinked. Stay?

She returned her gaze to the codex and continued turning the pages, but she was no longer paying attention to the drawings.

Why shouldn't she stay? At least for a little while? No one was expecting her back in Scotland. This seemed like a lovely place to live for a bit. And Aisha did seem like she could become a good friend.

Still she supposed it would be an imposition.

"I think that would not please Fatima," she admitted.

"It is for Hasan to decide," Aisha said. Then she brightened. "I will tell him you will help with my language."

Anabella chewed at her lip, thinking it over.

Aisha gave her a sly, coaxing grin and wiggled her black brows. "You can read as much as you wish." She pressed a nut between Anabella's lips.

Anabella crunched it in her teeth and then grinned back.

Womanly wiles were the same everywhere, it seemed. Why Aisha was only Hasan's *second* wife, she didn't know. The woman already had Anabella eating out of her hand.



Brand tightened his cloak against the chill of the choppy sea and looked up at the stars salting the sky.

It was too late to turn back now. He was halfway to the Holy Lands.

That was the only fact keeping Brand on the ship. Now, even if he decided to hold the captain at swordpoint and demand he turn the vessel around, it would be just as long a voyage home.

Of course, there was also his honor. If he turned back now, he'd incur the wrath of king and clan and destroy his reputation forever.

But why a man would willingly choose to embark on such a miserable journey—elbow to elbow with filthy fellow pilgrims, supping on rock-hard oatcakes and sour ale, enduring the endless roll of the sea and the stench of those who couldn't stomach it—he would never know.

The cool midnight breeze was at least fresh. And he'd been able to make himself useful, keeping the night watch, mostly to get away from the stench of the deck below.

He'd also relieved the boredom by taking shifts at the oars. It wasn't as invigorating as working out in the lists, but at least he wouldn't lose his strength.

For the voyage home, he vowed he'd spare no expense and obtain the best accommodations silver could buy. It was the least Lady Anabella deserved.

How a noblewoman could have gone on such a pilgrimage was beyond his understanding. He supposed she must be wholly devoted to her husband.

But he couldn’t imagine any of the women in the Rivenloch clan subjecting themselves to such punishment. They would more likely bind and gag their husbands to keep them from going on such a foolish journey in the first place.

All of them except perhaps his cousin’s wife, Eve. The silly woman was every bit as fond of risk and hardship and adventure as his cousin Adam.

Just as Brand had suspected, his meddlesome cousin and his wife had come to Berwick, in disguise, to see what Brand was up to. What Brand hadn’t realized was that the mischievous pair of them had been there from the moment he’d ridden into the town.

He still couldn’t believe he hadn’t recognized Eve and Adam as the Campbell couple, the hunchbacked old woman and the limping old man who’d given him such a hostile welcome.

Indeed, he might never have discovered who they were, except Adam had intentionally revealed himself. He’d overheard Brand saying he needed a man to be Keeper of the Castle in his place while he was away on the king’s business. Adam had straightened, tossed away his walking stick, thrown off his cap, and volunteered on the spot.

If Brand hadn’t been so relieved to see a competent knight at his right hand, he would have picked up the stick, chased after his annoying cousin, and beat him witless for his devilish deceit.

He was even more mortified that he hadn’t recognized Eve. But when she tossed back her hood and peeled away the layers of wrinkled linen pasted to her face, she seemed completely transformed from an old woman to her beautiful self.

He couldn’t be angry for long at their deception. They’d meant no harm. And it was more than convenient to have them able and willing to manage the keep. With Rivenlochs in charge, Brand could rest easy and devote his energies to accomplishing this mission as quickly and efficiently as possible.

He’d made one side excursion before leaving. He’d gone to visit the man who’d made the request, Laird Robert of Baird. It would be useful to learn what he could about the missing lass before he set out on his hunt. The Holy Lands were vast. And while he had their destination—the port of Acre, and their names—John and Anabella of Drummond, it would help to get their description.

Laird Robert’s castle was sufficiently sturdy and well maintained, though the stark furnishings lacked a woman’s touch. The laird seemed in no hurry to replace either his wife or the bright tapestries and flower-strewn rushes that would have softened the great hall.

As for the laird himself, he had the kind of face that seemed in want of a fist, with an excess of flesh and a lack of empathy. He carried his nose aloft. His eyes were dull, small like a pig’s, and he peered down on those around him. His jowls were red and mottled. His sparse white brows arched in harsh judgment, and his mouth turned down as if everything displeased him.

It was little wonder his wife had suffered from melancholy.

Once the laird learned Brand was a Rivenloch, of course, his face contorted into an obsequious grin. Then he was effusive in his praise, and he grew as friendly and fawning as an Edinburgh harlot.

As it turned out, Laird Robert was of little use. His descriptions were vague. He said his daughter had dark hair, but he couldn't say whether she was tall or short, fat or thin, nor could he recall the color of her eyes. He seemed rather affronted that she'd left without his permission, and yet he didn't seem surprised, saying she'd always been a wayward, ungovernable wench.

All he could say about her husband John was that he was fainthearted, weak-kneed, and worthless. He said it had probably been Anabella who had convinced the milksop to go on pilgrimage.

Brand thought that was unlikely. No woman in her right mind would undertake a harrowing venture like this. And any man who would elect to embark on such a journey must have a heart of steel.

Moreover, he began to wonder, as he watched the sails drift slowly back and forth across the field of stars, if the couple had escaped to the Holy Lands to be away from her loathsome father.

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Chapter 4



The *harem* proved surprisingly pleasant for Anabella.

For weeks now, she'd been living a life of leisure. Aside from helping Hasan's three wives improve their language skills, she had few responsibilities. Servants and slaves saw to her needs. She dined on delicious foods. Enjoyed lavish baths. Wore comfortable clothing. Listened to exotic music. And learned more from openly perusing the women's vast collection of codices than she'd managed in years of sneaking into her father's library.

Hasan kept his promise. He didn't turn her into a slave.

Indeed, she developed a great deal of affection for him. He was kind, generous, and respectful. He treated his wives well and loved his children, even those who belonged to servants. Apparently, bastard children were not unexpected in his culture.

When Hasan wasn't seeing to his thriving pottery business—creating new designs, overseeing production, and sending his wares by camel and ship far and wide—he spent time in the *harem*, the women's quarters, speaking and listening with rapt attention, providing comfort and entertainment. He even made a special effort to bring Anabella a few codices in Latin, which she could read.

After three months, Anabella had made up her mind. She wouldn't return to Scotland. She would remain here.

Here she wasn't forced to live under the stifling thumb of her father.

Here she could quench her thirst for knowledge without criticism.

Here no one expected her to take a husband.

Of course, not everything was perfect in this Paradise.

Because Anabella was a woman, she was not allowed to leave the *harem* to go into other rooms without being fully concealed, head to toe, for fear another man might glimpse an inch of her flesh.

Because she was a Frank, she was not allowed to leave Hasan's household at all.

The wives, the children, the servants, even the slaves were permitted to visit the marketplace with Hasan to shop, watch the ships arrive, and chat with friends on the street.

But not Anabella. It was too dangerous.

"You are unhappy," second wife Aisha announced, interrupting her thoughts and sitting beside her in the shade of the fig tree.

Anabella arched a brow. "Why do I bother teachin' ye to read my language when ye can read my mind?"

Aisha grinned and leaned her head fondly against Anabella's shoulder. "We are good friends now, aye?"

Anabella nodded. Aisha *was* a good friend. Anabella had been the first one to whom Aisha had confided that she was with child. Now everyone

knew by Aisha's large belly. But she'd entrusted the happy news to Anabella before anyone else.

Likewise, Anabella felt she could tell Aisha anything. But here in such luxury, complaining about her plight felt like looking in the mouth of a gift horse.

"You must tell me what is wrong," Aisha chided.

Anabella didn't intend to. But when Aisha looked at her with those wide eyes the color of dates and stuck out her lips in a coaxing pout, she couldn't stop herself.

She let out a reluctant sigh. "This is a beautiful place."

Aisha's brows furrowed in concern. "But you want to go home?" she guessed.

"Nay, not really. There's nothin' for me in Scotland."

"Then what is wrong?"

"I'm… I'm like a prisoner."

Aisha blinked, not understanding.

Anabella continued. "Don't mistake me. I like it here. The garden. The *harem.* The ladies. The children. The food. The baths. The music."

"The codices."

"I *love* the codices." She lowered her gaze to her hands in her lap. "'Tis a beautiful prison. But 'tis still a prison. I'm confined here."

"Where do you wish to go?"

"Somewhere else. Anywhere. To the market. To the docks. To Hasan's pottery shop."

“Hmm.”

For a long while, Aisha stared at her, rubbing her finger thoughtfully across her lips. It was what she did when she was scheming.

“There is something I have been thinking about,” Aisha murmured, eyeing Anabella as if deciding whether to say more.

“What?”

Perhaps Aisha had thought of a clever way to sneak out of the house. Or a brilliant disguise Anabella could wear to hide her Scottishness. Or a way to convince Hasan to bend the rules now and then.

Aisha visually inspected the garden, checking for interlopers. There was a great deal of spying and gossip conducted in the household. One had to be careful.

Finally she leaned close to whisper, “You like Hasan, yes?”

Though it felt strange to say so to one of Hasan’s wives, she said, “Aye. He’s a good man.”

“You find him beautiful?”

That wasn’t the word Anabella would use. “He is…comely.”

“Comely,” Aisha repeated. “And kind.”

“Aye.”

“He has much coin.”

“Does he?” Judging by the opulence of his house, that was likely.

“And he is strong.”

Anabella narrowed her eyes. Where was Aisha going with this?

“He is good at…” She couldn’t think of the word. Frustrated, she took Anabella’s hand, formed it into a loose fist, and began plunging her finger in and out.

Anabella gasped, pulling back her hand in horror. Her face went hot. Then, seeing the baffled expression on Aisha’s face, she began to giggle, covering her mouth with her hand.

Aisha, not quite understanding what was so hilarious, smiled and shook her head in confusion. “He *is* good at it. This is what put the child in my belly.”

Mortified, Anabella put her palm across Aisha’s mouth. A noblewoman didn’t discuss such private subjects. “Shh.”

Aisha frowned and pried Anabella’s hand away. “Do you want to hear my plan or not?”

Anabella hesitated. She wasn’t sure she did now. “Fine. Tell me.”

“You will be wife number four.”

“What?” she burst out.

“Shh.”

“I…I…I can’t do that. I can’t just…”

“Why not?”

“Because…” Anabella was appalled. Wasn’t she? “Because…”

“Why not?” Aisha repeated.

Anabella chewed at her lip. Why not indeed?

“I’m…a grievin’ widow,” she decided. It was a flimsy excuse, and Aisha knew it.

Aisha arched a brow. “You do not seem to be grieving so much.”

“Even so… I’m…I’m a foreigner. And a Christian.” Surely Hasan’s wives needed to share his race and religion.

Aisha shrugged. “It is not forbidden.”

“But…but what about ye? Ye can’t want to share Hasan with another wife?”

Aisha gave her a sweet smile. “If wife number four is you, I will be happy.” Her eyes sparkled as she linked her arm through Anabella’s. “Then we can go together to shop at the market and watch the ships and visit with friends.”

That did sound tempting. Lovely. Exhilarating. And Hasan would actually make a fine husband.

Still, she wasn’t sure how wives number one and three would feel about Anabella joining their ranks. Surely, his first wife would disapprove.

“What about Fatima?” she asked.

“Pfff! She will have nothing to say. It is Hasan’s choice to make.”

That might be true. But Anabella knew Fatima could make life miserable for her when Hasan wasn’t around.

“Besides,” Aisha added in a soft voice, “Fatima has had three years. She is not giving Hasan a child. And Ghazalah has made only daughters.” She rubbed her own swelling belly. “You and I can give him sons.”

Anabella gulped. Sons? She wasn’t sure of that. She’d lain with John for two years without conceiving. She might well be barren.

But she understood now that Aisha had an ulterior motive. Though it was an unspoken competition, the wives were constantly vying for the spot

of first wife. If Fatima gave Hasan no children, Aisha could easily usurp her place. It wasn't a particularly honorable thing to aspire to. But it would achieve what was best for Aisha and her children.

The observed limit for wives in Hasan's religion was four. Filling the position of fourth wife with a Frank guaranteed no Saracen suitable for the position of first wife would ever come into the circle of Hasan's *dar*, his household. Thus Aisha would be assured of her high ranking among Hasan's wives. Aisha would become first wife, and it would be *her* son who would inherit Hasan's wealth and property.

That kind of manipulation dizzied Anabella. She had no interest in the hierarchy of the *harem*. All she longed for was a bit of freedom. But if becoming Hasan's fourth wife was a way to gain that freedom, and if Aisha would help her do it, it seemed a small price to pay.

"What do you think?" Aisha asked.

She gulped again. There were so many dangers in wooing a man with three wives. Jealousy could be a vindictive mistress.

On the other hand, if she meant to stay in the Holy Lands, she could not endure being imprisoned behind walls any longer. This daring scheme sounded like her only way out.

"All right," she said. "What do we do?"



It was a relief to finally be on solid land again, though Brand knew, if all went to plan, he'd be here at the port of Acre for only a matter of days.

Within a sennight, a merchant ship would be fitted and ready to sail homeward. And he planned to be on it with Lady Anabella of Drummond in tow.

Unwilling to subject a lady to the filth of a ship full of pilgrims, he'd used his Rivenloch name to secure a decent cabin on board a Genovan merchant ship. Not only would the quarters be more amenable to a woman of delicate sensibilities. It would be a faster journey without all the stopping at every holy site between Acre and Berwick that pilgrims seemed to demand.

Meanwhile, he needed to use all the resources available to locate her.

Now that he'd confirmed the return trip, he raced past the other disembarking passengers to secure lodging. No doubt the good rooms at the inns went quickly.

Trying to resist the distraction of the wondrous camels, the array of foreigners, and the smells of delicious fare coming from the marketplace, he wound his way along the dusty street.

A door opened beneath an arched entrance, spitting out a drunken pilgrim. Inside, he saw more Franks drinking around tables.

This was the place.

He offered the proprietor a generous amount of silver to secure private quarters for a sennight.

The bedchamber looked like a monastery cell with its arched windows and carved wooden screens. But it was hardly the spare quarters of a monk. The bed was low to the ground, topped by a brightly patterned coverlet. A woven tapestry was spread on the floor, and three large stuffed pillows were

strewn about, presumably for seating. Beeswax candles and a clay basin with a pitcher of water stood on a dark wooden table. Beside that were a stack of cotton cloths and a square cake of light brown soap that smelled like cinnamon.

He tossed his satchel into one corner and returned to the common room.

The fragrance of spiced meat hit his nostrils, enveloping him in sudden irresistible hunger. He had no idea what the concoction was when the servant set it in front of him with a circle of soft, flat bread. But it was rich and warm, enhanced with chewy grains and exotic seasonings, and the bread was so tender and full of flavor, it needed no butter. The beer, milder than he was used to, served to quench his thirst after his arrival under the relentless summer sun.

The proprietor gave him directions to the bathhouse. The experience turned out not unlike the communal dips the Rivenloch lads took in the lochs of home. The pool was a large square made out of stone blocks. But unlike the chill of the lochs, the water was warm. Men soaked and chatted while they bathed. Brand used the hard soap he was given to wash the grime and salt of months of sea travel out of his skin. He paid a servant to shave his overgrown beard and trim his shaggy hair.

Then he dried off, dressed, and returned to the inn. It was probably the best place to start gathering news.

By the end of the day, after visiting several alehouses, questioning merchants, inquiring about residents, he was sadly disappointed by the dearth of information. No one had heard of John of Drummond. And no one

remembered a noblewoman at all, which was odd, considering there were not many Frankish women in the village.

Returning to the inn, it began to occur to Brand that if John had lied to Laird Robert about joining the king's forces, perhaps he'd lied to the king about going on pilgrimage. The blood began to simmer in his veins as he entertained the possibility that John had never come here at all, that Brand had made this voyage for nothing.

Still, the next day he went to the docks to question the ships' crews. There he had better luck. Two shipmen on board a vessel that had arrived three months ago remembered a Scotsman named Drummond. He'd come with a young lad, they said, and the two had kept to themselves. The man had died on the journey. Neither could recall what had become of the lad.

Brand suspected they might be mistaken about the lad. His aunt Helena had once successfully disguised herself as a young man. Perhaps Anabella had done the same thing. In any event, if John of Drummond was indeed dead, it was even more critical to find his missing wife.

She could be anywhere.

She might have continued on to Jerusalem.

Or boarded the next ship back to Scotland. Or France. Or the Orient.

She might have sought out a new husband for protection.

Or retreated to a nunnery or hospital.

For that matter, she might have been murdered for her silver.

There was no way of knowing. Which made him want to stab something.

When he returned to the inn after a fruitless search, he thought again about what Laird Robert had told him. That his daughter Anabella was wayward and ungovernable. That the pilgrimage may have been her idea.

If so, Brand had to assume she was independent, daring, fearless, not unlike his warrior maid kin. He doubted such a woman would rush into the arms of another man for security. Nor would she return home to her iron-handed father. And she was probably clever enough not to be robbed.

That left either sheltering in a nunnery or voyaging to parts unknown.

The following day, he visited three nearby nunneries and four hospitals that served women. Even if she'd traveled on, it was possible she'd gone to a convent for temporary lodging. It was also possible she'd decided to prove her faith by joining an order or working as a nurse in a leper hospital. Or she could have landed *herself* in a hospital, contracting the same disease that had killed her husband.

But after a long day of interrogating nuns in convents and asking at hospitals if any of the nurses were Scottish, Brand had to surrender to the idea she'd gone somewhere else.

He wasted another day questioning other ships' captains about their destinations. He asked them where they'd sailed in springtime and whether they remembered any female passengers.

All of them had had a few female passengers on trips to Italy, France, and Spain, but they'd been accompanied by men. None of them had the name of Drummond. Brand supposed Anabella could have traveled under a new name, but this felt like another fruitless pursuit.

He was halfway through his sennight here, and he didn't have a scrap of evidence. He would leave in another three days, and if he couldn't find

some sign of the woman, his quest would be a catastrophe.

The next day, he went to a money changer to convert his coin into dinars and headed to the market. Most women he knew couldn't resist purchasing gewgaws. Markets were notoriously full of gossip and news. Maybe he could pick up a useful piece of information there.

He inquired at shops selling gems, perfumes, leather goods, pottery. He asked fishmongers, butchers, bakers, wine sellers. He questioned woodcarvers, goldmiths, even fletchers and armorers.

No one recalled a Scottish noblewoman visiting their shop. They told him most of the women who frequented the market were either Saracen wives shrouded so heavily you couldn't recognize them or the servants of the nobles.

Disappointed, he spent the rest of the day shopping. He bought a small engraved shield for his cousin Feiyan, who collected exotic weaponry, a leather bracer for his cousin Jenefer, the expert archer, and an ice blue crystal pendant that matched his sister Hallie's eyes. For his cousins Hew and Adam and his brother Gellir, he bought curved daggers called *jambiyas.* His sister Isabel would squeal over the wee stuffed camel he purchased for her. And his brother Ian would be fascinated by the brass astrolabe.

If he didn't bring back the Scotswoman he was supposed to collect, at least he wouldn't come home empty-handed.

Since the market seemed to be where everyone gathered, he returned the next few days as well. He didn't know what he expected to find. But it seemed as good a place as any to look.

On the day before his ship was set to sail, fortune finally favored him.

He was conversing with a Spanish purveyor of honey when a distinguished Saracen gentleman with a small entourage ambled past. The man was clad in vivid blue robes with gold detailing and a white head scarf that contrasted with his dark skin and graying black beard. He looked like a regal peacock next to his simply dressed servants and his black-shrouded wife.

Turning back to the merchant, Brand continued his conversation. “She would have arrived three months ago.”

The merchant scratched his ruddy beard and then shook his head. He didn’t remember a Scotswoman.

The resplendent gentleman passed Brand in a breeze of spicy incense and began looking at blades in the next shop. But his wife lingered to examine a jar of honey.

Brand prodded the merchant. “Her name is Anabella. Anabella of Drummond.”

Beside him, the Saracen woman fumbled with the jar, rattling the lid as she abruptly set it down.

“Sorry,” she murmured.

“Anabella you say?” the honey merchant repeated. “No. No Anabella.”

Brand sighed.

The woman exchanged a fleeting glance with him. The dark spark in her eyes quickly extinguished when she lowered her gaze.

He addressed the merchant again. “How much for this?” He pointed to a small jar.

The merchant held up two fingers.

“That is too much,” the woman interrupted in his language. “*One* dinar.”

The merchant looked disgruntled, but he wouldn’t contradict the woman, not with her husband nearby. “Fine. One dinar.”

Brand plopped a dinar on the counter and picked up the honey.

“Thank you.” He acknowledged the woman with a nod.

Keeping her eyes averted, she spoke so softly, he almost didn’t hear the word. “Anabella?”

His eyes widened. “You’ve seen her?”

She glanced nervously at her husband, then picked up another jar of honey, pretending to inspect it.

Brand understood. Her husband probably wouldn’t appreciate her speaking to a stranger.

His heart was racing. “If you know where she is…”

“My husband Hasan keeps her,” she said under her breath.

Brand stiffened. Keeps her? Was Anabella a slave? Had this Saracen peacock dared to enslave a Scots noblewoman?

Bloody hell. Before he could lose his temper and strangle the man in his own headscarf, Brand bit out, “Where?”

From the knife shop, her husband called out, “Fatima!” Then he asked her something in his own language.

She shook her head and replaced the honey.

She hastily whispered, “Come to the house of Hasan. Tonight. Midnight.”

Then she was gone, trailing after her husband.

Brand could hardly believe his luck. But he had no idea where the house of Hasan was. Even if someone could tell him the location, he doubted he could follow the directions, knowing the twists and turns the roads took in this village.

He had no choice but to follow the woman and her husband and hope that was where they were headed.

Stealth wasn't easy. A warrior son of Vikings in a village of merchants, seafarers, and pilgrims stood a head above most men. He had to keep a safe distance. And when he could no longer hide in the crowd, he made use of the shadows.

Finally the Saracen turned in at a break in the wall. He and his wife and servants disappeared through a carved gate.

Brand narrowed his eyes. This must be it. The house of Hasan. And somewhere within its walls was a damsel in distress.

The strong current of purpose filled his veins. Suddenly this mission didn't seem so trivial.

This was what Brand was made for.

Challenging villains and rescuing maidens.

All he had to do now was wait for dark, find a way in, and escape with the lady.



Anabella had wanted to go to the market today with Hasan. He'd invited her. And she'd happily accepted. Not only because she was enjoying her newfound freedom and shopping for her own things. But because she wanted to be alone with him when she gave him the happy news.

Lying in the dark with patterned moonlight filtering down through the screened windows, she rubbed a hand across her belly.

She wouldn't show for a while yet, but she had already missed her monthly courses, and her breasts had begun to feel fuller.

She hadn't told anyone. Not even Aisha, whose idea it had been.

She felt it was only right to let Hasan know first. It was his child, after all.

Unfortunately, Fatima had announced she wanted to go to the market as well.

Anabella could read between Fatima's simpering smile and glittering eyes. The first wife wasn't actually interested in shopping. She just didn't want Anabella to be alone with Hasan.

In the end, Anabella had pleaded a headache and stayed in the *harem*. She planned to confide in Hasan later.

But later hadn't come. Fatima chose to work her wifely wiles upon Hasan. She visited his bed and didn't return to the *harem*.

Anabella wasn't jealous. Not really. She liked Hasan. Better than she'd liked John. But she didn't love him.

She knew that when she agreed to the marriage.

Aisha's plan had worked perfectly. She'd advised Anabella to entice Hasan, but to withhold her body, not to tryst with him until he agreed to

make her his fourth wife.

To her surprise, Hasan had been amenable to her seduction. After just three days of Anabella's enticements, he'd granted her that title. Then he'd swived her.

It had been much more pleasant than her swift couplings with John. Hasan had been gentle and measured. He had used a light touch and taken his time. She had felt appreciated, even adored, as they snuggled together afterwards.

Still, it was not quite the explosion of sparks she'd hoped to discover. Perhaps that kind of thrill didn't exist. Or perhaps it only existed when two people were singularly devoted to each other, not diluted among four wives.

Anabella was aware she would never be Hasan's one and only. But she didn't feel cheated. She'd already had that kind of marriage. It didn't bother her to share a husband.

It did, however, bother Fatima. When she found out a Frank had become Hasan's fourth wife, her jealousy had been piqued to rage.

Aisha, the second wife, found her rage amusing. But that was because her future relied on Fatima's unhappiness and on the first wife falling in rank.

For Anabella, Fatima's silent fury was uncomfortable. And soon, when her pregnancy began to show, it would be unbearable.

She wanted to give Hasan the news before Fatima could begin her attacks.

The shadows shifted subtly as a cloud passed over the moon. Anabella closed her eyes. She was just beginning to drift off when she heard a soft

whisper.

“Anabella.”

“Hmm?” she said, only half awake.

“I need to speak with you.”

Her eyes flew open. It was Fatima. What did she want? Suddenly, all the stories about Saracen wives poisoning their rivals and drowning their bairns raced through her brain.

“Now?” she asked, her heart pounding.

“Yes,” she hissed.

“Can it wait till morn?” By the light of day, there would be witnesses.

“No. I cannot sleep. Let us go to the garden.”

God’s hooks. This couldn’t be good. Anabella imagined Hasan waking up to discover his fourth wife had been hacked to pieces and left at the foot of the fig tree.

Then she shook the foolish image from her head.

Anabella was no coward. And Fatima was no fighter. The first wife might resort to slipping tansy in Anabella’s tea. But she didn’t have the temperament or the ballocks to stab or strangle her.

Anabella slept in her cotton shift, so she draped a scarf around her shoulders and donned her slippers. She followed Fatima through the quiet *harem* to the courtyard. None of Hasan’s kinsmen would be about at this time of night, so there was no need to cover herself.

Open to the sky, the courtyard was drenched in milky moonlight. At night, the garden was a spooky setting with its silvery olive leaves and the

deep black shadows beneath the fig. The eeriness was only slightly tempered by the friendly gurgle of the fountain.

"What do ye want?" she asked Fatima.

"I want to tell you I wish you no harm."

That was a surprise. "Aye?"

"I have been…jealous. That is the right word? Jealous?"

"Jealous of…?"

"Of you. Of your closeness with Hasan."

Anabella lifted her brows. Was Fatima trying to make peace?

If so, she supposed it wouldn't hurt to reach out as well.

"There's no need to be jealous, Fatima. Ye are his *first* wife. He spent the evenin' with *ye.*"

"I fear you may wish to change that."

On impulse, she reached out and took Fatima's hand in reassurance. "Nay. 'Tis not my desire to upset the *dar* in any way." She didn't mention that was Aisha's goal. The two wives could settle that on their own. "I only wished to gain my freedom."

"Your freedom?" Fatima snatched her hand away. "You do not *love* Hasan?"

Anabella faltered then. She realized she'd said exactly the wrong thing.

Fatima herself repaired the damage. "It is no matter. It is not my concern. I only wish to apologize. I have brought you something. A gift to make peace between us."

Anabella’s heart softened. Why she’d let Aisha convince her Fatima should be ousted, she didn’t know. For all Fatima’s stern, proud demeanor, she wasn’t a bad person. She was strong and brilliant, magnificent in her own way. And she obviously pleased Hasan.

“Come,” Fatima beckoned, reaching out for her hand again to lead her toward the entrance of the house.

She wondered what the gift of peace was. Perhaps it was something Fatima had found while shopping today. Anabella had mentioned once how much she loved the beautiful doves she’d seen that first day at the market. And doves were a symbol of peace—at least in Scotland.

They had just stepped under the arch leading to the entryway when a dark figure suddenly emerged from behind one of the gigantic vessels from Hasan’s pottery shop.

Anabella’s heart leaped into her throat. Her hand tightened in Fatima’s as she prepared to pull the first wife out of harm’s way from whatever intruder had entered the house.

But Fatima shook her hand loose, pulled her scarf across her face, and took a step backward.

The man, a tall stranger with broad shoulders, stepped toward Anabella.

He whispered, “Good eve, my lady. Fear not. I’ve come for you.”

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Chapter 5



“What?” Anabella exclaimed, astonished.

“Hurry!” Fatima hissed. “Take her before Hasan comes.”

What the devil was going on? Did Fatima know this man?

“Who are ye?” Anabella demanded, raising her voice. “What are ye doin’—”

“Shh!” Fatima spat, yanking hard at Anabella’s hair.

“Ow!” she yelped. This was completely out of line. Something underhanded was brewing. She took a deep breath to yell for Hasan.

Before she could make a sound, her head was captured by the man’s large hands in a vise-like grip. One hand caught the back of her head. The other clamped over her face, muting her cry to a powerless squeal.

Fighting for air, she struggled against the brute, clawing at his hand and thrashing against his hold.

“Go! Go!” Fatima urged under her breath, rushing to open the front door.

Shite. Now Anabella understood. Fatima was having her forcibly removed. The first wife wasn’t remorseful at all. It had been a ruse to get rid of her.

Anabella wouldn’t go peacefully. Aiming for the vulnerable place between his ribs, she punched the man as hard as she could.

He let out a satisfying grunt of pain, but didn’t loosen his grip.

She thrashed against him, lifting her leg to try to kick him.

In the next instant, he slid his hand from the back of her head down to her waist and picked her up, holding her tightly against him. She flailed and kicked at empty air, losing her slippers.

Then he turned and packed her off toward the open door as if she were no more trouble than a bundle of kindling.

As she was carried past Fatima, she glimpsed an uncertain look in the first wife’s eyes, as if she wondered whether she was doing the right thing.

Then the man lugged her outside, and the door closed behind them.

As he tromped with her toward the gate, he tried to mollify her.

“I mean you no harm, my lady. Cease your struggles.”

No harm? How could that be? The knave was abducting her from her home against her will.

She bit down hard into the meat of his palm.

He yelped and drew his hand back.

But before she could scream for help, he stuffed a great wad of her cotton scarf into her mouth. All that came out was a muffled screech of rage.

He wound the rest of the scarf around her head to hold the gag in place. Then, trapping her arms and hefting her higher on his hip as if carrying a sheep to slaughter, he nudged the gate open with his knee.

Outside the gate, he picked up a satchel and hung it over his shoulder. Then he proceeded down the street toward the port. He walked with such a long and purposeful stride, she could get no leverage to resist his hold on her without risking a fall on the hard stone. Her arms were pinned so that the most she could do was bat ineffectually at his thigh. She couldn't find any target for her kicks. Nor could she spit the cotton from her mouth to cry out.

As they descended the hill, she wondered what Fatima had told him to do with her. Enslave her? Beat her? Kill her?

She didn't believe he meant her no harm. He'd only said that in an attempt to subdue her.

But she wouldn't be subdued. She hadn't come halfway across the world, found a new home and a new life, just to die at the hands of a savage Scotsman.

It did surprise her that he was Scots. Why would Fatima have hired a foreigner to do her evil bidding? Did she think that would make her less culpable? If Anabella suffered or died at the hands of her *own kind*, was that less blood on Fatima's hands?

Despite the hour, the streets near the port were far from deserted. But much to Anabella's chagrin and dismay, the men who worked before sunrise at the docks, preparing the ships for travel—loading provisions, caulking seams, rigging sails—were too busy to notice an innocent woman being carried off by a craven devil.

The few who noticed quickly looked away, once they saw Anabella's *harem* garments. It was not their affair what happened to a Saracen woman

in the clutches of one of their countrymen. For all they knew, she might be his runaway slave.

She had no allies. John was dead. Hasan was asleep. Fatima was the enemy. None of the men in the port were going to help. It would be hours before Aisha and the other members of the *dar* even noticed she was missing.

She had to help herself.

Before, Anabella had gotten out of trouble by using her fists.

But even if she managed to do damage to this ox of a man, she feared she would only find herself at the mercy of worse men. Men who thought of Saracens as less than human. Men who wouldn't bother even *promising* to do her no harm.

She'd have to use different tactics.

Perhaps she could reason with him.

Or engender his pity with wide, wet eyes.

Or pay him more coin to let her go than Fatima had paid him to capture her.

Shite! Her coin. She'd forgotten. All her silver was in Hasan's *dar*. Everything she owned was there.

The man carried her past the ships and farther along the road, out of sight of the port.

Whatever he intended, he didn't want witnesses. She had to be prepared to fight for her life at the first opportunity.

He stopped at an inn with a guard posted at the door.

“Welcome, sir,” the guard said politely, as if the man wasn’t lugging an entire woman on his hip. “I hope you had a good day.”

The man grunted.

She squealed in frustration as the guard opened the door.

The floor of the common room was littered with sleeping men, but he managed to pick his way through them and down the hall to a locked door lit by a sconce.

He let the satchel slip off his shoulder and freed his hand to retrieve a key on a leather tie from around his neck.

Bloody hell. If he took her into a locked room, she feared no one would ever see her again.

Now was her only chance.

As he tried to open the door, she pummeled his arm with her fists so he couldn’t fit the key properly into the lock.

“Cease!” he hissed.

She only increased her punching, moving his arm wildly off course.

“Curse you, wench,” he bit out.

His anger only fueled her determination. She began to buck against him, using her whole body to push him off-balance.

“God’s eyes,” he muttered, struggling to hold onto her.

Then he let the leather tie with the key drop back onto his chest. With a grunt of effort, using both arms, he clutched her about the waist and flipped her upside down so suddenly, she gasped, nearly inhaling the cotton gag.

Her arms shot out reflexively to prevent her from landing head-first on the floor.

But that wasn’t the worst of it.

She was clad in only her nightclothes, so when he inverted her, her shift slipped, leaving everything from her waist down exposed.

So mortified was she, she lost her advantage. While she fought to cover herself, he unlocked the door and pushed his way in. He grabbed the sconce with one hand, slid the satchel in with his foot, and slammed the door behind him.

Then he set her down, head first, on something soft on the floor.

She sprang up immediately, shoving her shift down as if haste could erase what he’d seen.

Despite the flush heating her face, she had to focus on escape.

While he was distracted, setting the sconce into a holder on the wall, she unwrapped her scarf and pulled out the gag. Then she wound the ends of the scarf around her hands. She didn’t know if she could strangle him with it. But she wanted to be prepared.

He turned back toward her, standing between her and the door. He seemed astonished that she’d managed to take out the gag while his back was turned. But he seemed more amazed to see her clearly for the first time.

They both hesitated.

She too was surprised. If it weren’t for the dark scowl on his face, his down-turned mouth, and the disappointment flattening his eyes, he might have been handsome.

He had a strong jaw and broad cheekbones, a noble nose, and a small cleft in his chin. His hair was dark and wavy. His neck was broad. Everything about him was imposing, as if the air around him was charged with his essence.

She obviously could never match his strength.

Perhaps she'd try reasoning with him.

The gag had dried her mouth to a desert. She licked her lips and tossed the hair back out of her eyes.

"What is it ye want?" she demanded.

Brand was momentarily stunned by the question. What did he *want?*

He bit his tongue as a dozen improper replies flooded his brain.

Damn his eyes, he'd never seen such an alluring woman.

Her skin was as fair as cream. Her tresses were as black as the night. Her jaw was perfectly carved as if out of marble, and a pink blush touched her cheeks. Black brows angled over snapping green eyes. And her lips looked ripe and full and kissable.

He didn't even want to think about what he'd seen when he'd turned her wrong side up and her skirts had fallen over her face. He hadn't expected her to be bare-bottomed. Now he couldn't get the image out of his head.

What did he want?

At the moment, he wanted *her*.

But by the expression on her face, that response would be unwise.

Besides, as frustrated as he was with this woman her father had rightly called “wayward” and “ungovernable,” Brand was a man of chivalry.

Nonetheless, before he could reiterate that he’d come to rescue her, she chattered on.

“What did Fatima ask ye to do with me? How much did she pay ye? Fifty dinars? A hundred? I don’t have my silver at the moment, but—”

“M’lady,” he interjected.

“I can get it.”

“M’lady,” he tried again.

“I can make it worth your while. Just let me go and—”

“M’lady!” he barked, losing his patience.

“What!” she fired back, gripping the scarf tightly and raising it before her, as if were a shield made of steel. “What do ye intend, ye loathsome knave?”

He flinched. Loathsome knave?

This was not at all what he’d expected. Or deserved. She should be grateful. He’d come nearly three thousand miles to return her home.

Instead, she was behaving like a shrew.

When he didn’t reply, she suddenly shrieked, “Help!” She dropped the scarf to cup her hands around her mouth for maximum volume. “Help!”

His eyes went round. He couldn’t have that. She’d awaken the other patrons.

Before she could cry out a third time, he covered her face with his palm and pushed her quickly but carefully backwards, placing one foot behind

her leg to make her fall gently onto one of the large pillows.

She landed with an “oof.” But she immediately snatched a new breath, no doubt intending to rouse the entire inn with even louder screaming.

He had to silence her.

With a wince of regret, he swept up the scarf, dropped to his knees on the pillow, straddling her, and secured the gag in place again. Then he held her down by her wrists, making her startled green eyes widen in panic.

He couldn’t blame her. In this position—his scowling face inches from hers and his groin pressed against her thinly clad body—he must seem like an attacker bent on availing himself of her charms.

Nothing could be further from the truth. But he doubted he could get her to believe that.

Especially if she continued writhing against him like that in her attempts to get away.

Brand clenched his jaw. Sometimes when reason and a cool head failed, a man had to resort to swift, bold action.

There would be time later to explain.

For now, he had to do everything in his power to get her under control.

He couldn’t stay here tonight. Not now. The host had catered to Brand’s every whim so far. But he didn’t think his hospitality extended to barring the door if the esteemed gentleman who lived at the house of Hasan should come looking for his runaway slave.

Holding the struggling lass down by the wrists, he glanced around the chamber. There wasn’t much left to pack for the journey home. But if he let her loose, she could wreak havoc in the blink of an eye.

He’d made the foolish assumption the lady would come willingly. Peacefully. Grateful for his rescue.

He was wrong.

So though it went against all his knightly ethics, he had to tie her up.

“I don’t want to do this, m’lady,” he explained, “but you leave me no choice.”

She froze for one instant, trying to discern the meaning in his eyes. Then she renewed her struggles with even more ferocity.

He bit out a foul curse.

He joined her wrists together above her head, securing them in one hand. With the fingers of his other hand, he fumbled atop the table for the sheer veil he’d purchased for his mother. He’d never be able to give it to her now, not after this.

Clamping one end in his teeth, he twisted the other, making the fabric it into a strong cord. Then he bound the lady’s wrists tightly enough so she couldn’t free herself.

Now he had to work quickly.

No sooner did he ease his weight off of her than she slid off the pillow and began hitching awkwardly across the floor on her bound hands and knees, heading for the door.

He swept his forearm across the table, gathering his comb, his mirror, his shears, his razor, and the Aleppo soap he’d bought at the market and dumping them into his satchel.

He frowned at her. The clever minx wasn’t heading for the door. She was heading toward his sword.

“God’s eyes, wench,” he muttered, bolting past her to seize the swordbelt, buckling it around his hips.

She made a strangled sound of frustration, then rolled into a seated position, surveying the room for other options.

He yanked his woolen cloak from the hook on the wall. It was balmy outside, but it would be easier wearing the thing than carrying it. He swirled it about his shoulders, wishing it could shield him against the cold glare she sent his way. A glare that was half rage and half fear.

He hung the satchel across his chest.

His guilt was going to be a heavier burden than everything else combined.

Nonetheless, ignoring the woman’s squeals of protest, he heaved her up over his shoulder, like one of his Viking ancestors abducting a Pictish lass, and carried her off into the night.

Anabella beat at the brute’s back with her bound hands. It was about as effective as pounding on an oak.

His forearm anchored her buttocks to keep her from sliding off his shoulder. But the hard bones of that shoulder bounced into her with each step he took.

They were headed back toward the port again. And since he’d bound her, she wondered if he meant to dump her into the sea.

If so, he’d have to find a deserted place at the dock to do the deed.

Meanwhile, she mentally practiced her escape. He’d neglected to bind her ankles. Fortunately, from all her secret excursions to enjoy the loch, she

was a strong swimmer. With her legs free, she could kick her way to the surface of the water, sever her bonds on the sharp edge of a ship's barnacles, and swim to the shadows of the dock to wait until he was gone.

He wouldn't look for her. He'd assume she would drown. And once he was gone, she'd find her way back to Hasan. After she told Hasan the harrowing story, perhaps he would get rid of conniving Fatima and make *Anabella* his first wife.

Preparing herself for a fight for her life, she was surprised when the man made no secret of his actions. In fact, he strode boldly across the dock in full view of witnesses.

Finally he stopped. As he shifted his weight to dig in his satchel, she was tempted to buck herself off of his shoulder. But she was both afraid to land on her head and curious about what he was doing.

"Two, sir?" someone asked him.

"I've reserved a cabin."

"Still have to pay for passage. Two?"

Her captor sighed. "One."

"One? Who's that?"

"*That* is a slave."

Anabella stiffened. A slave? Was he talking about *her?*

The man grunted. "Fine. Fifty."

Her captor growled in his throat. "I paid only forty before."

"You didn't have a slave before, did you?"

Her captor sighed. "Fine."

What were they discussing?

Before she could riddle it out, he started forward again.

When he turned to walk up an incline, she suddenly realized they were boarding a ship. He'd called her a slave. Did he mean to sell her in a foreign country?

She began to thrash atop his shoulder in earnest. Never mind that she might land on her head. It was better than sailing off to parts unknown as a slave.

"Cease, damn you!" he hissed, gripping her more tightly. "We're o'er water. You'll get us both killed."

Perhaps *he* would be killed. But she could swim. She'd already worked out her escape.

But before she could wriggle free, they were on the ship. Striding across the deck as if he owned the thing, he headed toward an open hatch.

Did he intend to toss her into the hold like a bale of cloth?

"Watch your head," he said as he descended the steep steps with her.

Her first instinct was to defy his command. Resistance was the way to foil a kidnapper.

She immediately knocked her brow on the wood frame of the narrow hatch, hard enough to leave a mark.

He let out another exasperated sigh as he took the last step into the hold.

A wave of familiar dread enveloped her as she recalled the last voyage. John had died in the hold of a ship similar to this one. It was where they put

those who fell ill. That hold had been a dark, dank place that smelled of bilge water and sweat, spilled ale and mouse droppings.

She couldn't stay here. She couldn't.

Despite her efforts to be brave, a thin moan escaped her.

His shoulder relaxed in response.

"You won't be here long, m'lady," he assured her. "Just until we sail. But I can't have the Saracen finding you."

The Saracen? Did he mean Hasan? Had Fatima arranged to have her sold into slavery right under Hasan's nose?

She slumped as the reality of her situation sank in.

The man deposited her gently atop something soft, perhaps a sack of milled grain. She could see nothing in the darkness.

"I'll be back," he told her.

A wee frightened part of her wanted to clutch at his clothing and beg him not to leave her alone in this miserable place.

But she refused to show any fear. Besides, her chances of escaping were better if he left her here alone.

She listened to him climb the steps out of the hold.

There was no time to waste.

Shaking off her trepidation and ignoring the scuttling in the corner that was absolutely a rat, she gradually maneuvered herself into a sitting position.

Though her wrists were bound, she could reach her mouth. He'd never actually knotted the gag, so it was easy enough to unwind the scarf and

remove the wad he'd stuffed there.

Just as she began to breathe freely, she heard a sound on the steps. Someone was coming into the hold.

Surely it wasn't her captor returning already.

She wavered in indecision.

Should she cry out for help? Or would that only make things worse?

Would the intruder come to her aid and sever her bonds? Or would he decide to take advantage of the fact a female slave was bound and helpless, trussed up for his pleasure?

Doubt made her remain silent.

Whoever it was left before she could decide if he was friend or foe.

She had to hurry. She didn't know how much time she had before they sailed.

She used her teeth to work at the cord binding her hands together. It took longer than she expected. Struggling had tightened the knot, and the twisted silk was strong.

But eventually she teased the fabric loose, untangling it. She rubbed her wrists, restoring the flow of blood.

She was free now.

But she wasn't yet safe.

She had to find her way to the steps.

Barefoot, she tried not to think about what offal might be strewn across the floor as she picked her way toward where she thought the steps were.

Waving her hands out to guide herself past oak barrels and bundles of cotton cloth, she finally laid hands on the wooden steps.

She climbed up and pushed open the hatch the merest bit, just enough to see that the night would shortly yield to dawn. Peering out through the crack, she scanned for witnesses. The men seemed to have finished loading goods and were chatting with friends across the gap between the ship and the torch-lit dock.

She opened the hatch wide enough to slip through. Then she crouched carefully on the deck, lowering the hatch without a sound.

Staying low, she crept through the dim light along the length of the ship until she reached the stern.

The water below was dark. But she wasn't afraid. If it was deep enough for a ship, it was deep enough for her.

She felt a thrill of triumph as she hiked up her shift and levered herself over the edge. Hesitating just an instant, she took a deep breath, let go, and dropped into the sea.

Brand had been leaning against the forecastle in the shadows. It was a good vantage point for remaining unseen while watching for anyone who might arrive from the house of Hasan to search for Lady Anabella. The woman, Fatima, obviously wouldn't say a word to her husband. But if *he* were Hasan, he'd tear the port apart looking for a slave as beautiful as Anabella.

He sighed and crossed his arms. Sometimes men did foolish things for women.

The sky had begun to lighten with still no sign of pursuit when Brand's eye was caught by a slight movement of the hatch.

He frowned. While he watched, it slowly opened. To his stunned amazement, Anabella slipped out like a butterfly emerging from her chrysalis. Her wrists were free. Her gag was gone. And she was on the move.

How had she wriggled out of her bonds? Where was she going? They were on a ship. There was nowhere to escape. The only route back to land was by the loading plank.

Curious, he unfolded his arms, pushed off the wall, and followed her.

When she stopped, he held back. She was looking over the edge of the vessel. Surely she didn't mean to leap. The drop was the height of two men. And there was naught but dark water below. If the fall didn't kill her, she'd drown. Or be eaten by sea dogs, which hunted in the waters near the port before dawn.

Then he realized that must be what she intended.

After all, she'd refused to believe he was there to rescue her. Maybe she believed, as he'd claimed to the quartermaster, that Brand intended to make her his slave.

And she'd decided she'd rather die.

He was still gawking in disbelief when she climbed over the edge and disappeared.

"Shite."

He bolted forward, unbuckling his sword as he went. Peering over the edge, he could just make out the circle of lighter water where she'd plunged

beneath the waves.

He quickly clambered over the side and dove into the sea after her.

The water was warm. But his heart was as cold as ice.

Where was she?

He swiveled in the waves, looking frantically for any sign of her.

Then something brushed his leg.

He dove back under and reached out, contacting warm flesh.

Anabella.

Her shift floated like kelp around her, but he managed to wrap his arm around her middle. Then he swam up to the surface, towing her up with him.

When they broke the surface, she sputtered and gasped for air.

He exhaled in relief.

But she wasn't grateful for his rescue. Not at all.

"Ye!" she snarled in recognition. "Let me go!"

He was forced to cover her mouth with his hand again. The last thing he wanted was to draw the attention of the crew.

"And let you kill yourself?" he demanded. "Nay, m'lady, not on my watch."

She said something to him, but he couldn't understand it. She tried prying his hand away to repeat her words, but he didn't dare let her.

He had to figure out how to get back on board the ship.

Fortunately, the rope ladder the deckhands had used earlier was still unfurled and hanging over the side.

With one hand still covering her mouth, he swam, pulling her backwards toward the ladder. But what should have taken a moment took several. The woman was as fierce as a wildcat and as slippery as an eel.

He finally reached the ladder. He might be able to climb it with one hand around the woman and one hand on the wooden rungs. But if he let go of her mouth, she was sure to start howling again.

How could he keep her quiet?

If she were a man, he'd knock her out with a calculated punch to the chin. But he couldn't imagine bruising that lovely face.

"Listen," he whispered, forcing her head back against his chest.

She ceased struggling for a moment.

"I don't intend to hurt you," he murmured into her ear. "But we're going to board this ship."

She twisted in his grip, and he tightened his arm.

"We can do it one of two ways," he said. "One, swear by all that's holy you won't cry out, and I'll help you up this ladder and get you dried off and dressed."

He let her think about that.

"Or two, I'll drag you, wet, half-naked, and screaming, up the boarding ramp in front of all the deckhands. Mind you, no one will help a slave, so your caterwauling will be for naught, and all the men will get an eyeful of your…goods and chattels."

He hated giving her that ultimatum. It went completely against his sense of chivalry. Ladies were to be protected and defended, not threatened.

But the next moments were critical. She was precious cargo. And he refused to lose her. Not after the trouble he'd gone to to find her.

Once they were under way, then he'd apologize for his rough manner and coarse words. He'd make amends for his knavish behavior and beg her forgiveness.

Until then, they had to remain inconspicuous. And he only had so many tools at his disposal.

After weighing her choices, she calmed in his arms.

"Will you be silent?" he asked.

She nodded.

She kept her word. Which was a good thing. He didn't know if he truly had the ballocks to parade her in front of a crew of drooling men who wouldn't be seeing another woman again until they reached Kýpros.

But when he tried to gather her around the waist to carry her up the ladder, she slapped his hand away.

"I'll do it myself," she said, clearly disgruntled.

He let her climb in front of him. He didn't want her to change her mind and dive back into the water. Too late, he realized the position gave him a clear view of her long, luscious legs where they peeped out from the clinging cotton of her drenched shift.

Swallowing back his unruly lust, he climbed up after her. Once on deck, she retreated into the shadows of the forecastle. The sky had lightened. A furtive glance told him the cotton of her shift was as diaphanous as mist on a loch.

Distracting himself by buckling his sword back on over his wet clothes, he managed to choke out a promise. “Stay close behind me. I’ll shield you from their gaze.”

He glanced up at her. She looked amenable. But he didn’t trust her not to flee again.

His gaze flitted downward, just for an instant. But it was enough to make her aware of the thinness of her clothing.

She clutched one arm across her breasts and covered her nether parts with the other.

He averted his gaze and extended his hand. “Give me your hand.”

Her fingers made him feel like a giant. But there was strength in her wee grip.

He moved forward slowly, keeping her close behind him. When he reached the hatch, he opened it with his free hand. Then he stood guard while she slipped past and climbed down into the hold.

He’d promised her dry clothing. But all he had was a spare leine and a plaid she could wrap around herself.

When they got to Kýpros, he’d find her proper attire at the market.

The king and the woman’s father had given him plenty of gold for the voyage. Brand had been thrifty on the way to the Holy Lands, bunking with the other pilgrims in the hold. For the return trip, he’d secured lodging in the forecastle, next to the captain’s cabin, for her comfort.

But he couldn’t move her there until they were safely away from Acre, out of reach of the Saracen who might try to reclaim her.

Brand rarely turned down a battle. But he had no desire to fight that one. Especially because he wasn't entirely sure he could win it. Who knew what the laws were in this foreign land? It might be that the woman had been purchased honestly by Hasan.

All Brand knew was the king had entrusted him with the responsibility for returning Lady Anabella to Scotland. He had no interest in starting yet another war in the Holy Lands.

Once she was down the steep stairs, he followed her. In the hold, the faint light of dawn was beginning to seep through tiny cracks of the ceiling, where the wood planks had weathered and shrunk. He could just make out the silhouette of his satchel where he'd left it.

Suddenly something banged against his head. The darkness was shattered by blinding light and a brilliant flash of stars that faded as his head began to swim. For a moment, he staggered to his knees and thought he might faint. But the throbbing in his temple brought him back to awareness.

Anabella stood over him, brandishing a wooden mallet and wearing a curious expression of shock and worry.

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Chapter 6



Hell. Anabella had hoped the blow would knock him out.

She didn't mean to kill him, even if he was a slave trader. She only meant to incapacitate him so she could escape.

He *had* dived into the sea to save her life, after all. He'd spared her the indignity of appearing in an embarrassing state of undress before the deckhands. And he'd promised her dry clothing.

But this was a very bad outcome.

Though he looked dazed, he was still aware. And he was looking straight at her.

Should she hit him again?

She bit her lip.

She didn't think she could do it. Not with him looking at her like that. In disbelief and almost hurt.

But what choice did she have? Nothing was more dangerous than a wounded animal. Fate had left a woodcarver's mallet for her to find. The longer she hesitated…

Suddenly his arm shot out. He wrenched the weapon from her grip. And then it *was* too late.

He came shakily to his feet, the mallet clenched in his fist.

With a yip of fear, she staggered backwards.

He advanced with a growl.

She tripped over a parcel, and fell backwards onto a sack of grain. Raising her arms defensively and squinting her eyes shut, she waited for the blow.

It never came.

She heard the wood clatter across the floor. Then, he grabbed her bodily, flipping her over as easily as an oatcake on the griddle and shoving her face-first into the sack.

Her first thought was he meant to suffocate her.

Her second thought was he meant to rape her.

Then he snagged a piece of rope from a hook on the wall, and her third thought was he meant to strangle her.

But he used the rope to bind her wrists behind her.

When she tried to writhe away, he trapped her between his thighs.

When he started ripping at the hem of her shift, she braced herself for the worst.

She might not be able to prevent what was about to happen. She might not be able to stop him from laying claim to her body. But by God, she would not succumb quietly.

She squeezed her eyes tight and emitted a scream into the sack of grain. Tears of rage and determination seeped out.

He lifted her head, stuffing a wet rag that tasted of salt into her mouth. The piece he'd torn from her shift, no doubt. He tied the ends around her head.

Then he let her go.

Confusion and relief battled in her brain.

"Do I need to bind your ankles as well?" he grumbled.

She couldn't answer him, nor did she know what to say.

He reached under her and flipped her over again, this time sitting her up on the grain sack with her arms bound behind her.

Her shift had slipped up to her knees, and he tugged it back down to cover her.

He must not mean to rape her then. But what *did* he intend? She peered up at him uncertainly. It was hard to read his expression in the dim light.

"Satan's claws," he grunted, pressing his palm to his temple. "You've got a wicked cudgel arm. That's going to leave a nasty bruise."

She wasn't sorry. She was only sorry she hadn't hit him just a wee bit harder.

"By the Saints, what's wrong with you, lass?" he said, shaking his head. "I rescued you from a Saracen. I saved you from drowning. And this is the thanks I get?"

Rescued her? He'd stolen her.

And drowning? She hadn't been drowning.

Besides, he was only plucking her out of one *dar* and selling her into another, wasn't he?

Of course, she could tell him none of that, not with a gag in her mouth. The most she could do was stab him with a withering glare.

“Look, m’lady,” he said heavily, “I don’t want to do any of this. I’m a man of honor and chivalry. I’m not the kind of knave who treats women callously. But you’ve forced my hand. Until we leave the port, you’ll have to stay bound and gagged. ’Tis for your own good. Trust me.”

Trust him?

If looks could burn, she would have scorched him with the fire of a hundred suns.

What had he done to make her trust him?

As for his claim of being honorable and chivalrous, nothing could have been further from the truth.

“I’m going to leave you here on your own until we set sail,” he said. “Don’t get up to mischief. When I return, I’ll see you get dry clothing as I promised and something to eat.”

He glanced around the hold and found a large earthen bowl. He set it down beside her. “A chamberpot, should you need it.”

She shuddered. She’d burst before she’d take advantage of that amenity.

He dug in the satchel he’d brought earlier and pulled out a woolen plaid. He tossed it over her, tucking in the edges as if he cared about her comfort.

She wasn’t fooled. He was only protecting his asset. If she fell ill, she’d be worthless to him.

He nodded in satisfaction and climbed out of the hold, taking the mallet with him.

Why he'd bothered, she didn't know. She might be able to make it to her feet, but she couldn't wield a weapon with her arms tied behind her back.

On the other hand…

As long as the ship was still in port, there was hope. She just had to come up with a plan.

If she could find a way to free her arms, she could remove the gag and escape the hold once more. Then what?

It was getting too light to dive overboard again.

But now, since he'd left her his plaid, she might be able to wrap herself in it to hide her face. Crews were usually quite busy just before departure. In the chaos, she'd slip off the ship by the boarding ramp. And then?

Swathed in the plaid, she'd travel the streets of Acre. Perhaps she'd feign to be a leper bound for the hospital in Jerusalem.

From Jerusalem, she'd send word to Hasan to fetch her.

New hope gave her strength.

Dawn had arrived. Now the spears of light coming into the hold allowed her to see well enough to explore her surroundings without the risk of tripping over a parcel or beam.

Surely there was something sharp in the hold. A knife. A fish hook. An axe. Something to sever her bonds.

She managed to struggle to her feet. But even scouring every inch of the hold, after nearly an hour, she could find nothing that would cut through

rope.

Despair pressed on her chest when the ship gave a sudden lurch, knocking the makeshift chamberpot over.

Her heart plunged. They were leaving the dock. It was too late.

The chamberpot rolled across the floor.

Then inspiration struck.

Working her way over to the bowl, she crouched on unsteady legs while the ship gently rocked, and, reaching behind her, picked it up by the rim in her joined hands. Summoning up all her strength, she bashed the bowl against a crate.

There was a satisfying crash. She hardly minded the sting of the splinters in her hand.

Whipping around, she found a large sharp shard. She sat down carefully and picked it up, turning it in her fingers to begin sawing at the rope.

It took a long while to make any progress.

By the time the rope was half frayed, the ship had left the shore and begun to rock steadily on the sea.

She dared to imagine she was still within swimming reach of land.

Her fingers ached, but she sawed harder and faster.

After what felt like an eternity, she finally felt the bonds give. Another few moments, and the ropes would fray apart. Beneath the gag, she smiled with hope.

Then the hold was abruptly flooded with sunlight.

She winced, turning away from the blinding sight.

Her hopes shriveled.

Someone was coming down the steps.

“Good news, m’lady,” Brand announced as he climbed down the stairs. He was in a much better mood, now that the ship was safely away from shore and his head had stopped throbbing. “Before we left the port, I was able to buy fresh baked bread—or something like it.”

He wasn’t sure what it was. It was flat and round, like a great oatcake, but soft, and the savory smell was mouthwatering.

When she didn’t reply, he turned to look at her and froze.

Never had he seen so much guilt written on such an innocent face.

She was blinking from the sunlight. But sweat glistened on her brow as if she’d been working diligently on something. And she was surrounded by shards of pottery.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

He saw her gulp beneath the gag.

He narrowed his eyes. She’d been up to something.

Had she planned to stab him with a shard of the pot? With her hands behind her back?

Nay, he realized. She’d been using the shard’s sharp edge to sever her bonds.

He nodded. It was admittedly quite clever. In retrospect, he should have bound her in chains and affixed her to a beam.

“Go on then,” he said. “You might as well finish. When your hands are free, I’ll give you a piece of this bread.”

She looked at him with a combination of loathing and disappointment. She had given escape a valiant effort. But it was obvious to her by now it was too late.

“Or,” he offered, taking pity on her, “I can cut the bonds with my dagger.”

Her shoulders dropped in reluctant surrender. He heard the pottery shard fall from her fingers to hit the floor.

Still, he was wary as he approached her. She was a wily wench. She could have already freed her hands. She could be about to stab him in the neck with a sharp piece of pottery.

Then she surprised him by grimacing with one final effort and straining at the ropes. It worked. The rope frayed, and her arms broke free.

She didn’t stab him. Unless you counted the daggers of her eyes.

She wasted no time pulling at her gag.

Since she was having trouble—he’d tied a secure knot this time—he helped her. But it was clear from the way she batted at his hands in annoyance, she didn’t appreciate his efforts.

When the gag was out, he offered her a piece of the bread.

She snatched it from him with such anger, tore it with such fury, and stuffed it into her mouth with such rage, she nearly choked on it.

While she was chewing, he hunkered down beside her and tore off a piece of the bread with his teeth. It was as delicious as it smelled.

Now that he could see her by the light of day, he could appreciate what a prize Lady Anabella was. It was no wonder her father wanted her back.

Her creamy skin was framed by wild black hair. Her mouth was generous and supple. Her cheeks were rosy with ire, and her eyes snapped with green fire. She had the kind of looks that made men do foolish things.

Brand was glad he was not one to fall prey to a woman's beauty. Combined with her cunning and determination, that could make Anabella a deadly rival indeed.

Now that they were out of danger, he needed to clarify his intentions. Not that she'd believe him. She seemed to believe nothing he said.

Nonetheless, it might prevent her from casting herself into the sea again.

"You knew I was lying to the quartermaster, aye?"

She skewered him with a look and continued chewing.

"About you being my slave."

She didn't respond.

"I don't keep slaves." Then he admitted, "My ancestors kept slaves. It was customary to make slaves of the defeated in battle. We took their people. They took ours. So of course, the various tribes…"

Why was he blathering on to her? He sounded like his sister, Isabel, who chattered like a sparrow.

"Anyway, that was a long time ago."

She swallowed down a bite of bread and asked bitterly, "If I'm not your slave, then whose slave am I to be?"

“What?” He blinked in disbelief at her question. “No one’s.”

“So ye’re *not* a slave trader?” She arched a dubious brow.

“A slave trader? What the devil?” The accusation sounded so harsh coming from such beautiful lips. “Why would you think that?”

“Ye took me against my will.”

“I didn’t take you.” That wasn’t quite accurate. He had taken her. And it did seem quite against her will. But her father had warned him she was willful. “I *rescued* you.”

“From what?”

He straightened with confidence. This he knew. He’d heard quite a lot from the crew on the way here about the practices of the people in the Holy Lands. How the men had several wives. How they kept them like slaves in a *harem.* Kept them covered from head to toe so other men couldn’t see them. And forbade them from looking at other men.

“From a life of subservience in the household of a Saracen.”

“Subservience? Who said I was subservient?”

Now that she said it, it was hard to believe she could ever be described as subservient. Maybe Hasan would be glad to see her gone.

“Well, you will be no longer,” he announced.

She narrowed her eyes at him, as if in judgment. “So ye’re sayin’ I’m free to go?”

He winced. She wasn’t exactly free to go.

She smirked. “I thought not. So ye haven’t truly rescued me then, have ye?”

He scowled. How the woman had managed to turn his act of heroism into a devilish plot, he didn't know.

"Indeed," she continued, "I suspect ye only did Fatima's biddin', is that right?"

"Fatima?"

"The woman who let ye in to the house. Hasan's wife."

The gears in his brain started turning. Had he been manipulated by the Saracen woman?

Anabella gave a humorless chuckle. "What did she give ye? Silver? Jewels?"

"Nothing," he said, aghast at the notion. A noble knight performed good deeds like rescuing damsels in distress with no thought of compensation.

"Then ye must intend to sell me," she decided.

"What?" he exploded. How had she come to that conclusion?

"Or…keep me as your own."

"Absolutely not."

When he'd first laid eyes on the lady, keeping her might have been an appealing thought. But now that he'd experienced how utterly frustrating and difficult she was, he could honestly say he would be glad to return her to her father.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Then what will ye do with me?"

What indeed? There was still a six-month journey ahead of them. If the lass proved this troublesome at every turn, it would be the longest six

months of his life.

But she meant ultimately—what were his intentions, and where were they going.

Maybe now he could sort things out.

"My lady," he announced in his noblest voice, "I'm taking you home."

"*Your* home?"

"Yours," he said with a smile. She would be happy now. Now she'd be free of her life of slavery. Now she could look forward to returning to her beloved Scotland.

"Not Scotland?" she asked, incredulous.

"Aye," he assured her.

"But 'twill take half a year."

"Unfortunately, aye. But your father will be very glad to see—"

"My *father?*" she exclaimed. "What does he have to do with…?"

"He sent me to fetch you."

"What?" She was upset enough to jump to her feet.

"He was fearful for your safety."

Her eyes flashed with anger. "I came with my husband. 'Tis not my father's affair."

"Well, 'tis a good thing I did come," he said gently, "considering your husband is…no longer here to look after you."

"I'm a grown woman, for shite's sake," she muttered. "I don't need anyone to look after me. And I certainly don't need my da lookin' o'er my

shoulder.” She began to pace. “He ne’er did respect John. And the fact he wasted six months of a mercenary’s time to fetch me home is—”

“A year, counting both ways,” he corrected her. “And I’m not a mercenary.” He supposed he was, in a way. But he didn’t like the connotation of the word. Mercenaries had no sense of loyalty. They simply performed assignments for coin.

“Is that so?” she asked, arching a dubious brow. “So ye’re spendin’ a year out o’ your life to come fetch a Scotswoman from the Holy Lands because…what? Do ye owe my father a debt?”

“Nay.”

“Is he extortin’ ye for a crime?”

“Nay!”

“So I suppose ’tis out o’ the goodness o’ your heart?” Her voice smacked of sarcasm. So much sarcasm, it offended his sense of chivalry and piqued his ire.

He rose to his feet, towering over her. “God’s blood, ’tis by command of the king!” he thundered.

Her eyes widened.

He instantly regretted telling her that. He’d rather she believed that, aye, he *had* done it out of the goodness of his heart. It sounded much more admirable. And less mercenary.

“The king?” she repeated.

“Aye.”

“King Malcolm chose *ye* for the task?”

He didn’t like the way she’d said that. As if he were less than capable of doing it.

“Aye, he chose me,” he sneered. “He needed a man he could trust. A loyal knight. A man of honor. Someone with a strong sword arm. Someone __”

“Good at stealin’ women and trussin’ them up?”

He was too angry for words. Instead, he growled deep in his throat.

This was not going at all as he’d planned.

He’d meant to bring the lady breakfast and give her dry clothing. Then he’d planned to take her to her cabin upstairs, which was suitably furnished for a woman of her status.

Now he wished he’d left her bound and gagged. She was twisting all his good intentions into something criminal. He didn’t deserve such disrespect. Not when he’d sacrificed a year out of his life to rescue her—perhaps not out of the goodness of his heart, but at least in the loyal service of the king.

Anabella could see she’d angered the man with the truth. But he couldn’t deny her accusation.

He might have indeed come at the king’s command. It would be just like her father to ask for Malcolm’s assistance in bringing her home. And he would have directed the king to send his biggest, brawniest knight, because, in her father’s words, Anabella was ungovernable.

She was furious. Even halfway around the world, it seemed her father was able to yank at her reins. Was there no escaping his control?

Still, she supposed she couldn't blame the poor knave, who was now silently fuming as he dug through his satchel. He'd done as he'd been directed. And if what he said was true, he'd been set up by Fatima.

"Did ye truly believe ye were rescuin' me?" she ventured.

He didn't bother to look at her as he pulled out an article of linen clothing. "Wasn't I?"

She thought for a moment. "I was…content where I was."

"In a *harem?"* he asked in amazement.

"'Twasn't so bad."

"I thought you didn't want to be a slave."

"I wasn't a slave." She straightened with pride. "I was Hasan's wife."

"What?" he exploded.

"Aye," she said smugly. "So ye see? Ye didn't rescue me at all. Ye stole another man's wife."

He rattled his head in confusion. "Then who was Fatima?"

"She was…also his wife."

"Satan's ballocks! How many wives does he have?" the man scoffed. "A hundred?"

She scowled at him, offended. "Only four."

"And you were number…"

"Four," she mumbled.

He smirked. "How could you be his wife? You're not even a Saracen."

"He didn't care," she declared. "He…loved me."

She stumbled over the words, lowering her eyes. She wasn't entirely sure that was the truth. Hasan enjoyed her attentions and liked their conversations. But did he love her? Surely not as much as his Saracen wives.

"And did you love *him?*" the man asked.

Her breath caught at his blunt remark. "What kind o' question is that?"

"Did you?"

Did she? She loved the freedom marriage to Hasan afforded her. But Hasan himself?

In the end, she hedged. "As much as a woman loves any man."

His snort of disbelief rattled and enraged her.

"What do ye know o' love and loyalty anyway?" she snapped. "Ye're a damned mercenary."

"I told you before. I am *not* a mercenary."

"So the king isn't payin' ye for your 'rescue'?"

"I'm being…compensated, aye. But—"

"And just how much are ye bein' paid to steal a man's wife and—"

"Not nearly enough!" he roared, whipping a length of linen out of his satchel and shoving it toward her.

She frowned at it. It looked like a leine. "What's this?"

"The dry clothing I promised you," he bit out.

"That is a leine. I need a gown."

His eyes smoldered as he spoke between clenched teeth. "I apologize, m'lady, but between pulling you out of the sea and recovering from the

blows of a woodworker's mallet, I couldn't find time to shop."

That made her blush. She supposed she *had* kept him busy.

He came to his feet, towering over her. She could feel the heat of his rage. And in that moment, she realized he could squash her like a beetle. What had possessed her to try to pummel him with a mallet?

His next words—surprisingly civil—convinced her not to try it again.

"We'll disembark in Kýpros. I've been paid enough to afford a gown or two."

Her heart fluttered. A gown. She knew it was petty, but she'd been limited to the clothing appropriate to a Saracen woman for months now. The cotton was comfortable. The trews were convenient. But nearly every inch of skin had to be covered, and the colors were as dull as dirt. Since she'd wed Hasan, she'd worn nothing but black.

"Once you've changed," he said, "I'll return to take you to your quarters."

With those words, he wheeled and departed for the upper deck, leaving her to wonder what he meant by her "quarters."

The leine was overlong. It brushed the floor, and she had to roll up the sleeves. But she managed to fashion the woolen plaid into a garment of sorts, though she had to admit it looked more like a Roman toga than a proper gown.

When he returned, he summoned her to the deck.

The breeze was fresh. The day was clear. The winds were favorable.

The ship was larger than the one she'd taken from Scotland. It sailed, not by the power of oarsmen, but by square sails hung on two great masts.

By her calculation, the hold she'd been in represented only a fourth of the ship's storage capacity. It was clearly a merchant vessel, not normally used to transport pilgrims.

As they strode toward the stern, a few crewmen cast sidelong glances at her in her strange attire. Then her abductor opened the door to a cabin adjoining the captain's quarters and gestured her inside.

The cabin was tiny. There was hardly enough room for the narrow wooden bed, faldstool, chest, and table. But compared to the hold, it seemed luxurious.

It was dry, for one thing, and a single row of small-paned windows let light spill onto the red-and-gold embroidered coverlet on the bed. Beside the bed, a small table held a pitcher, basin, and cotton cloths. Underneath was a discreetly lidded chamberpot. An oak faldstool with a red-and-gold cushioned seat that matched the coverlet sat beside the table. A sewing basket holding white linen, embroidery thread, and needles was set atop an oak clothing chest.

As if reading her mind, the man said, "There's nothing in the chest yet. But you can fill it when we get to Kýpros."

These were to be her accommodations?

She was thrilled. This was so much better than the dank den of death she'd arrived in.

But she dared not let him know. It didn't match the luxury of the *harem,* after all. And she was still perturbed at him for kidnapping her.

"Does this please m'lady?" he asked.

"'Twill suffice."

Brand certainly hoped so. He’d spent a great deal of coin to secure the cabin. There was only one other as well appointed, and it belonged to the captain. Brand had impulsively purchased the basket of sewing materials this morn, knowing a woman would appreciate some activity to while away the long hours at sea

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Chapter 7



Anabella plopped down on the bed.

She probably shouldn't have piqued the man's ire that way.

Although…

He did look rather magnificent when he was angry. Dark and ominous like a thundercloud. His eyes flashed like bolts of lightning when he bellowed.

She'd never been afraid of storms. As a child, she and her mother loved to steal outdoors to watch the fast dance of jagged white ink across the sky, to shiver under the thunderous rumble and breathe in the sweet, earthy scent of rain.

This man was wild like that. A massive, powerful storm. And braving his fury excited her.

Still, she shouldn't have provoked him.

After all, she thought as she bounced to test the suitably soft pallet, he'd secured her a comfortable cabin.

Not that she would be here long.

He'd told her they were stopping in Kýpros, about ten days' sail away. Once on land, she could give him the slip and secure passage on a ship back

to Acre.

There was just one catch. She had no coin.

She eyed the chest. Getting up, she moved the sewing basket aside and opened the lid. He'd told her the chest was empty. It seemed he was right. She sighed in disappointment. She'd hoped there was a horde of silver or jewels inside.

She closed the lid and replaced the basket. Then she flopped full-length onto the bed.

Being stuck in this cabin was no different than being kept in the *harem.* Unless she was accompanied by a man, she wasn't allowed to leave. And roaming the ship on the arm of the man who'd so rudely upended her life was the last thing she wanted to do.

With Hasan there had been a whole marketplace to explore, not the tiny confines of a ship. And the *harem* had been filled with activity—music, animals, art, children, reading. There was nothing to do here.

She could stand at the railing and watch the sea go by, hour after hour. But since she didn't want her abductor's company, she preferred to remain in her cabin.

She glanced at the sewing basket. She knew how to embroider. Her father had insisted her mother teach her what he called the feminine arts, though neither of them had had much patience for it. They preferred wandering among the fields of real flowers than sitting in a solar, stitching their images onto cloth.

She sighed. It was going to be a long way to Kýpros.



Anabella tied the last knot and snipped the thread, setting the embroidery down on her lap with a sigh. She gazed wistfully out the row of salt-stained windows at the morning sun.

It had been a sennight now since she'd confined herself to her cabin, stubbornly refusing to accept her abductor as an escort.

She'd had just four visitors. A lad named Falco who came to empty her chamberpot every eve. The two men who'd carried in a pail with warm water for bathing a day ago. And her abductor, who brought her meals three times a day—mostly, she was sure, to make certain she hadn't jumped overboard.

In the end, she'd *had* to resort to doing embroidery just to keep from languishing in boredom.

She picked up the finished piece and, with a smirk, held it up to the light. Her mother would have appreciated it. Anabella had taken twisted delight in stitching the fabric with an image of her abductor with her brandishing a mallet at his head. But now she was out of thread.

Back in Acre, she would have been learning to play the *oud* or picking ripe figs off the tree or reading one of the beautiful codices they kept in the *harem.* Maybe the one with the illustrations of plants. Or one of the half dozen anatomy texts. Or the volumes recounting ancient history.

She wondered if the captain of the ship owned any codices. After all, living at sea, he must get bored as well. And surely, reading charts to sail a merchant ship, he had to be literate.

She set aside the embroidery, smoothed her hair, and adjusted her plaid. Perhaps it was time she left the confines of her cabin to introduce herself to him.

When she opened her cabin door, she half expected to see her ubiquitous abductor standing outside with his arms crossed and his face set in a frown of disapproval.

But he wasn't there. He must have assumed she'd stay in the cabin as she was told. As she *had* done for the last sennight.

He had a lot to learn.

Taking advantage of his neglect, she carefully closed the door behind her and sidled over to the captain's cabin.

The sailors mid-deck were too busy—adjusting the rigging and coiling ropes, eyeing the horizon and fishing over the side—to notice her.

She knocked softly.

There was no reply.

She knocked a bit harder. Five raps.

Still there was no answer.

Perhaps the captain was belowdecks. Or at the fore of the ship. Or having breakfast with her abductor.

She quickly scanned for witnesses. Then she pushed swiftly through the door and closed it behind her.

The cabin was twice the size of hers and immaculate. In addition to a crisply made bed, a carved chair, a polished chest, and a table with a pitcher, basin, and neatly organized toiletries, it was furnished with an actual bathing tub and a desk with stacks of charts and tools for navigation.

But what made her breath catch was the shelf attached to one wall which held six bound codices.

Emboldened by the thrill of discovery, she rushed forward and plucked one from the middle. She carefully opened the cover and leafed through the pages. Unlike most of the codices in the *harem*, which seemed to be filled with marks resembling the scratching of hens, it was in Latin, which she could read. It was a translation of a manuscript by Aristotle.

She immediately started poring over the contents. So engrossed did she become with the Greek philosopher's statements on nature, change, and infinity, she didn't hear the door opening.

"What are you doing here?"

The demand was accompanied by angry high-pitched barking.

Anabella gasped and almost dropped the codex. When she whipped around, a stout man with curly black hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and a fierce glower faced her. In one of his arms, baring its teeth with a ferocious growl, was a wee white dog.

The man shut the door behind him and clapped a hand over his dagger.

"Forgive me…Captain?" she guessed.

He grunted.

His dog growled again.

"I…lost my way." It was a weak excuse. But men expected weakness from women.

He perused her briefly. "Lady Anabella."

She was mildly surprised he knew she was a lady. She assumed her abductor had told everyone she was a slave.

“Aye, Captain.”

She wanted to put the codex back. But she was afraid that might draw more attention to her trespass and agitate his dog.

“This is *my* cabin, my lady.” He gave his dog a gentle shake, and it calmed at once. “You are in the cabin next door,” he said, nodding his head toward her door.

“O’ course, sir. Foolish me.” Then she lowered her gaze to his dog. Sometimes the way to a man’s heart was through his pet. It was a rather adorable beast with liquid black eyes and a wee button of a nose, snowy pert ears and a tail that curled up. “What a lovely wee whelp.”

The captain only grunted, cradling the dog protectively against his side.

She bit her lip as a reckless idea rushed into her head. If the captain liked protecting wee, helpless things, perhaps she should ask for his assistance.

He apparently knew she was a lady. Perhaps she could confide in him that the Scotsman who’d brought her on board had kidnapped her. Maybe then he would turn the ship around and return her.

“Oh, Captain, I wonder if—”

“Go now, please, my lady,” he said. “I am a busy man.” He frowned at the codex. “You will put that back where it was, yes?”

She blinked. How abrupt the captain was. Perhaps he wouldn’t make a good ally after all. “O’ course.”

She was about to return the codex to the shelf when there was an abrupt knock on the door. The dog burst out in rabid barking again.

“Hush, Piccola,” the captain scolded. Irritated at yet another disruption, he turned and opened the door a crack.

From behind the door, she heard, “Captain.” She froze. It was him. Her abductor.

“Sir Brand,” replied the captain.

Brand. So the devil had a name.

“Captain, the woman I brought on board…” he began.

Before he could finish, the captain swung the door wide.

Anger narrowed the man’s eyes when he saw her.

“Ah, there she is. Forgive me, Captain,” he said with a nod. Then he turned to her, speaking in a voice that was tight with feigned patience. “M’lady, as I said, you must not wander the ship without my accompaniment.”

But she saw the sparks of ire in his eyes.

“I wasn’t wanderin’, *Brand,*” she said pointedly. Then, suddenly inspired, she said, “I came to ask the captain if he had anythin’ to read.”

The captain knew she’d done nothing of the sort. She’d told him she was lost.

She could also tell the idea of loaning her the codex annoyed him. He seemed the type of man to want everything in order. To have a codex missing from his shelf was likely upsetting.

But her father had probably paid a small fortune for a cabin next to the captain’s. So the man had to be polite to her.

He replied stiffly, “You may borrow the codex, if you like.”

She hugged it to her chest, flush with victory. “Thank ye, Captain.”

As she slipped by, she gave Piccola a friendly head scratch, to the captain’s chagrin.

Then she sidled past her abductor. She headed back to her cabin like an obedient captive, closing her door before the man could follow her in.

Now that she had something to read, she’d be content to stay in the cabin until they reached Kýpros.

Placing the codex on the bolster at the head of the pallet, she stretched out on her stomach, propping herself up on her elbows to read.

She didn’t understand all of Aristotle’s text. It was difficult when she’d never had any formal instruction. She only knew what she’d gleaned from her father’s library.

But the concepts were fascinating, and the idea that someone like Aristotle could make a livelihood out of observing the world and remarking upon it delighted her.

Engrossed in the words, she read until there was no more daylight to read by. Only then did she surrender and close the cover. And only then did she realize she hadn’t eaten since morn.

As she sat up and set the codex aside, her stomach growled.

As if in answer, there was a knock at the door.

It was Sir Brand, bearing food.

“Supper,” he announced, bringing in a tray. “Are you hungry?”

“What is it?” In truth, she was hungry enough, he could have said boiled frogs, and she would have eaten it.

“Some kind of pottage. Spiced beans. Bread.”

He set the tray down on the pallet and turned to go.

“Ye’re not stayin’?” she asked.

He usually stayed long enough to wolf down his food and carry away her used dishes, even if they spoke not a word.

But she’d spent the day in pleasant activity and was in a better mood. Besides, she figured a sennight was long enough to hold a grudge against the man who brought her food.

“I’ll sup with the others,” he said.

“Oh.”

Why she felt the tiniest bit of disappointment, she didn’t know.

He must have seen it in her eyes. He hesitated. “Unless…”

“Oh, nay. I’m fine.” She waved him away. “Ye go on.”

But when he left, she was almost sorry she’d brushed him off. After reading the codex, she longed to have someone with whom to discuss it. Even if it was her kidnapper.



Hours later, Brand stretched out in front of her cabin door, as he had every night, gazing up at the starlit sky while the ship rocked gently to and fro.

Lady Anabella was the most stubborn woman he’d ever met. Even his sister Hallie, who some said had ice in her veins, couldn’t hold a grudge for

so long.

Had she really spent the day reading? Or had she only feigned an interest in the captain's codex because she'd been caught prowling about his cabin? Had the captain invited her there? He seemed an honorable enough man, but when it came to women as tempting as Anabella, Brand trusted no one.

The lass *was* tempting. Not only was she physically beautiful. She had spirit and fire, a quick wit, a bright mind…and a long memory when it came to resentment.

She was unique.

In his experience, unless they were his kin—warrior lasses with Viking blood who could match any man for brains and brawn—most women were soft and sweet, docile and a bit simple-minded. They cringed to hear his bloody stories of battle and wanted to talked about naught but flowers and bairns and the weather.

When Brand was younger, he'd had no patience for such nonsense.

Now he understood the value of appreciating women for who they were, in the same way he appreciated a good horse or a loyal hound. Even if who *most* of them were actually bored him.

Anabella was different. She was anything but boring. She was intriguing.

And if she was intriguing to him, she must be intriguing to every man on the ship.

It was going to be a long six months, guarding her virtue.

Even now, a dozen or so men gathered near the mainsail, drunkenly singing and saluting the moon. How soon would it be before someone staggered toward her cabin with lusty intentions?

It wouldn't happen that night, he promised. Even if it meant stealing only brief naps in the wee hours after the drunkards retired.

He wedged himself so tightly against the lady's door, when she suddenly opened it at dawn, earlier than usual, he wakened roughly, instinctively drawing his dagger.

She gasped to find him there and dropped the heavy codex she was holding.

The sharp wooden corner hit him square on the brow. It hurt worse than when she'd hammered him with the mallet. He bit out a very foul word.

She quickly retrieved the codex, examining it for damage.

Then she demanded, "What are ye doin' here?"

He sat up and rubbed the throbbing spot on his forehead, nettled that the careless lass wasn't examining *him* for damage. "I told you I sleep outside your door."

"Every night?"

"Of course." He sheathed his dagger.

"Oh aye, that's right," she said, her voice tinged with sarcasm. "To make sure I don't escape."

"Nay, to make sure…" He didn't know how to word it. You aren't attacked? You aren't violated? You don't find yourself at the mercy of men

who might, damn the consequences, have their way with you? “To make sure you get a good night’s sleep.”

She gave him a dubious look.

“So did you?” he asked.

“Did I what?”

“Get a good night’s sleep?”

“Aye,” she admitted.

“The captain’s codex, did you enjoy it?” He expected to catch her in a lie.

“Aye.”

“Indeed? And what was the subject?”

“The forces o’ nature,” she said without hesitation.

“The forces of nature?”

She shrugged. “Aye, like the force that attracts everythin’ to the center o’ the earth.” Then she gave him a teasing smirk. “Ye know, the force that made the codex fall on your head.”

Another man would have been angry. But Brand was amused. Forces of nature indeed. The lady was a force of nature.

“Now if ye’ll kindly move aside,” she said, “I mean to return it to the captain.”

“I’ll return it,” he volunteered, coming to his feet. He would prefer she didn’t get accustomed to visiting strange men’s cabins alone.

“But I may wish to borrow another.”

“You really *did* read it,” he realized.

“O’ course. Why else would I have borrowed it?”

He grunted. Then he took the codex from her and opened it. She was right. It was a work by Aristotle. He was almost positive his little brother Ian owned the same one.

No wonder the lass was so headstrong. Women who read were dangerous. True, all the ladies of his clan were taught to read. Laird Deirdre insisted upon it. But it was those provocative ideas circling in their heads that made the women of Rivenloch clever and difficult to master.

That was fine for warrior maids.

But who thought learning to read was a good idea for a gentlewoman?

Leafing through the pages, he murmured, “Did your father teach you to read?”

“Not exactly. But he had a library.”

“And you raided it?”

She ignored the question.

Of course, she’d raided it. The same way she’d raided the captain’s library.

Now she wanted to raid it again.

“I expect the captain has already risen,” he said, closing the cover. “But I’m sure he won’t mind if I return this codex and fetch you another.”

If he’d known how her face would light up, he would have promised her a dozen codices. The warm light of the rising sun accentuated the green of her eyes and gave a golden cast to her cheeks. The morning breeze

stirred the black tendrils of her hair, and there was a slight upward curve to her pink lips.

His breath caught. If he stood here another moment, he feared he would be tempted to bend down and claim those lips with his own.

It was a mad thought. The woman despised him. Didn't she? He'd dragged her away from what she'd apparently considered a halcyon existence. And yet there was something in the sparkle of her gaze, the mischief of her mouth, the way she'd wrapped herself in his plaid, that made him want to enfold her in his arms.

He'd never felt like this before. Never had such a visceral reaction to a woman.

Tamping down his wayward thoughts, he cleared his throat and gave her a nod. "I'll be back anon." Then, remembering her penchant for wandering, he added, "You'll wait for me here." It wasn't a question.

She nodded.

He didn't know whether to believe her. But perhaps the incentive of a new codex was enough to make her stay.

The captain's cabin was deserted. Still, he felt ill at ease entering without permission. But as he slid the codex onto the shelf and pulled out another—this one a translation of a treatise by Ptolemy—he suddenly realized how he could keep Lady Anabella occupied and keep a closer watch on her.

He told himself it was to keep her safe from men who might wish to do her harm. But she might also prove enjoyable company…when she wasn't clubbing him with a mallet or dropping a heavy codex on him.

The lady assumed Brand was a common mercenary. Mercenaries spent their lives training for war. They had no time for, or interest in, learning letters. Naturally, she would presume he was unable to read.

He would simply let her believe that. After all, there was nothing a woman loved more than showing a man how to do a thing.

He grinned as he snapped the codex closed and made his way back to her cabin.

Anabella waited impatiently for Brand's return, shielding her eyes against the bright sun. The ship sliced through the sea, leaving droplets like gold beads sparkling on each wave.

The water was calm today. But calm winds meant slower travel. She hoped to reach Kýpros soon.

She needed to return to Acre before Aisha found someone new to usurp her place as fourth wife.

She also knew the captain's library was limited. At the rate of one codex per day, she'd soon run out of reading material.

Brand emerged from the captain's cabin with a codex bound in sheepskin. She motioned him into her cabin and closed the door behind him.

"What is it?" she asked, reaching for the codex.

He shrugged and handed it to her.

Of course, she thought. He couldn't read. She hoped he hadn't brought her something dull, like a guide to scraping barnacles off ship hulls.

She sat on the pallet and opened the cover.

“Oh!” she said, delighted. “’Tis Ptolemy.”

“What’s Ptolemy?”

“He’s an ancient philosopher.” She leafed carefully through the pages. “This codex is called *Optica.* It must be about light.”

“What does it say?” he asked, sitting brazenly beside her on the bed.

Part of her, the stubborn part, wanted to continue ignoring him. After all, he’d stolen her from her home against her will and hauled her away like a sack of offal without so much as a stitch of proper clothing to wear.

And part of her knew it was reckless to befriend him when she intended to betray him at the next port.

But his interest was irresistible.

Except for the few women of Hasan’s *dar* who could speak her language, she’d had no one with whom to discuss the finer points of science. Her father had always banned her from his library. John had been patient with her musings, but he’d never understood them, nor had he much liked the fact that she took an interest in intellectual pursuits.

There were so many fascinating ideas in texts like these, ideas that were too interesting not to share.

She studied the table on the open page.

“Ye see this?”

He nodded.

“This illustrates the way light behaves, how it refracts when it shines through the air and hits water.”

“Like the sun on the sea.”

“Exactly. And Ptolemy figured out a way to calculate at what angle the light will shine.”

“How?” he asked, leaning close.

She shrugged. “I don’t know enough about the numbers to tell. But Ptolemy did.”

She continued turning the pages.

“What’s that?” he asked, running a finger across the drawing.

She wrinkled her brows, reading quickly for comprehension.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Let’s try this one. We’ll need…” She scanned the cabin for something she could use. “Two objects o’ the same size.”

“My boots?”

“Nay, smaller.” She rummaged in her sewing basket. “Needles,” she decided, withdrawing two of them.

She held one in each hand, between her thumb and first finger. Then she placed one hand a few inches in front of her face and the other farther away. “Line them up evenly. Then…”

Brand had no words to describe the wonder that brightened Anabella’s face as she focused on the needles. But it did something strange to his heart.

“It works!” she cried. “He’s right. *Diplopia.*”

Brand had heard the word before. From his brother Ian. He didn’t remember what it meant. But he was certain he was about to find out.

“Here,” she said, handing him the needles. “Ye try it.”

He held the needles as she had. She touched his hands, gently guiding them into position. Her fingers were soft on his skin.

“There. Now gaze only at the closest needle.”

He did.

“How many do ye see o’ the far needle?”

“Two.”

“Right? And now gaze at the far needle. How many do ye see o’ the nearest?”

“Two.”

“’Tis strange, is it not?”

He smiled. “Amazing.” He now remembered Ian showing him the same phenomenon. But Anabella’s enthusiasm was so charming, it was like discovering it anew.

She was already on to the next page. He no longer listened to her describe Ptolemy’s theories about the elements of optics. He was distracted by the delightful warmth in her voice and the gleam of discovery in her eyes that seemed to fill the cabin with light.

He suddenly had the irrational urge to buy her a thousand volumes just to keep that joy brightening her face.

It was ridiculous, he knew. He was already spending a fortune in time and coin on the lass. And yet there was something deeply satisfying about making her happy.

“Don’t ye think?” she asked, suddenly turning her beautiful green gaze upon him.

He had no idea what she was asking, so he replied with, “Mm.”

She dropped the codex back onto her lap, realizing he was still holding the needles.

“I suppose we should put those away ere ye stab somethin’.”

She reached for the sewing basket and held it toward him. He glanced down. The lass *had* done some needlework after all. Stitched into the cloth in the basket was a figure of a woman wielding a mallet and her unfortunate victim slumped pitifully upon the ground.

He snorted. “Clever stitching.” He stabbed the needles into the margins of the cloth.

She had the grace to blush. “I never much cared for needlework.”

“I see.” He made a mental note of that. He’d purchase no more thread for her then. Instead, he’d buy her codices. Dozens and dozens of codices.

He smiled at the thought. How pleased she would be.

And then his smile dissolved into a baffled frown.

What was he thinking? Why would he do that?

Brand wasn’t some lovesick swain, to swoon over a lass and court her with lavish gifts.

Hell, the lady didn’t even like him.

She’d tried to clobber him with a mallet, for God’s sake. And now she’d even immortalized the attack with stitchery.

“Are ye hungry?” she asked abruptly, closing the codex with a thump. “Let’s join the captain for breakfast.”

He gave her a sideways glance. “Are you sure?”

The woman had hidden in her cabin for so long, he didn't think she'd ever emerge.

Now he wasn't sure he wanted her to.

He suddenly wished she *were* his slave. That she belonged only to him. That he could store her in her cabin under lock and key. And keep her to himself.

The way she made him feel—like he'd fetch the moon for her if it would make her smile—was a dangerous weapon in her hands. What if she used that weapon on the crew? What could she convince them to do on her behalf if they too longed to indulge her every whim?

Anabella saw hesitation in Brand's eyes.

He didn't trust her.

He was right not to.

She had an ulterior motive for befriending them—Sir Brand, the captain, the crew, even Piccola, the captain's wee dog.

Kýpros. And her escape.

At first she'd assumed it was best to remain aloof and unseen on the ship. If no one could accurately identify her, she reasoned, she'd attract less notice when she slipped away into the crowd.

But now she'd reconsidered.

If she got to know the crew, if they grew comfortable with her, they'd pay little heed when she wandered off the ship and into the marketplace. They'd naturally assume she meant to return. When she didn't, they might

waste a bit of time searching for her. But eventually they'd realize they'd been gulled and give up.

Over the next few days, her plan worked well. She expressed interest in the tasks the crew did. They politely inquired about her home in Scotland. The few times the men's gaze lingered too long on her, Brand was there to glare them into retreat.

The fact she meant to deceive them all in Kýpros didn't trouble her too much. The conversations they'd had were meaningless. She'd never see them again. She'd soon forget their names and faces.

Sir Brand, however…

He brought her a new codex each day. They would pore over its contents together. The captain had a codex on medical techniques, one on the history of the kings of Britain, and a copy of the epic poem *La Chanson de Roland.*

Brand took a genuine interest in the words, asked her questions about the text, and even seemed to grasp the philosophies and concepts.

Best of all, he had no opinion about the amount of knowledge she should or should not fill her head with, as both her father and her late husband had.

He was like no warrior she'd ever met.

He was like no *man* she'd ever met.

Betraying him was becoming harder and harder to imagine.

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Chapter 8



Most of the crew were on deck to survey the welcoming coastline of Kýpros as they approached the port of Limassol.

Not Brand.

He only had eyes for the sunlit vision wrapped in a plaid—*his* plaid—leaning against the railing.

The morning breeze lifted Anabella’s ebony tendrils, lightly caressing her cheek. Her face glowed with excitement. Her heart pulsed in the slim column of her neck as she gazed toward the rocky shore dotted with oaks and olives.

Then he lowered his gaze to her hands, clenching the railing.

She was anxious.

Maybe the idea of mingling with a crowd after so many days alone at sea was intimidating.

Maybe she fretted over her appearance, now that they were coming back to fashionable civilization. It couldn’t be easy for a proper lady to be seen wearing an oversized leine and a plaid.

Brand, of course, thought she would look ravishing in a grain sack. And the fact it was *his* clothing she wore next to her skin only added to the

thrill he felt, seeing the way the wind swept the garments against her tempting curves.

On the other hand, maybe it wasn't nerves. Maybe it was merely the excitement of visiting the shops. Though his sisters weren't the sort to coo over gowns, most women he'd met were invigorated by the prospect of a day spent emptying a man's purse.

As contrary to his nature as it was, for the first time in his life, when it came to Anabella, he didn't mind the thought of spoiling a woman. Indeed, he *wanted* to buy her baubles and ribbons and gewgaws, even if it used most of his coin.

In the last few days—sharing meals with her, poring over codices together, exchanging witty conversation—he'd discovered that seeing the lady light up with joy was a treasure beyond price.

He couldn't wait to escort her through the Kýpros markets, which teemed with exotic treasures from China and Egypt and India, as well as fine European goods and a few products unique to Kýpros. From her description of her journey from Scotland, it seemed she'd spent little time ashore, except to visit holy places. He looked forward to introducing her to the tasty *halloumi* cheese and sweet *commandaria* wine of Kýpros.

Favorable winds ensured a smooth entrance into the port. The captain kept a close watch on the dozens of smaller vessels crowding the water, maneuvering past them with practiced ease.

They'd dock for several hours to load and unload goods, plenty of time to purchase decent clothing and sample the wares of Kýpros.

Then they'd depart again. On a merchant vessel, there was no time to waste.

Coming up behind the lady, he murmured, “How much of your father’s coin do you think we should bring?”

It may have been his imagination, but he thought her smile was uneasy for an instant before it bloomed into a brilliant grin. “All of it, o’ course.”

He wasn’t going to bring all his coin. That would have been foolhardy. Thieves abounded at places like this. But his purse was heavier than usual as he guided the lady off the ship and into the bustling marketplace.

She seemed overwhelmed by the noise and the press of bodies as she cast furtive glances everywhere.

Sensing her unease, he placed her hand in the crook of his arm. Then he nodded toward a cobbler’s shop. “Shall we get you proper fitting shoes first?”

“Oh. Aye.”

While she was on the ship, he’d rescued a discarded pair of boots from a crewman for her, but of course they were oversized and worn beyond repair. There wasn’t enough time to have anything made to order for her here. But cobblers usually had a small selection of ready made shoes in various sizes.

He expected her to choose delicate slippers, but she wanted something more sturdy. In the end she chose a pair of short boots in soft brown leather.

When they exited the shop, she was eager to change into her new footwear.

“Wait here,” she said. “I’ll find a secluded place to put them on.”

He frowned. “I’ll come with you.” He didn’t trust men who frequented the docks not to seize the boots and run.

“That’s not necessary,” she said. “’Twill take but a moment.”

“Indulge me.”

Her eyes dimmed. No doubt she hated to be shadowed. But she gave him a sheepish smile. “Fine.”

He followed her to an alley between two shops. He turned his back on her to guard the entrance while she changed into her new shoes.

When she emerged, wearing the new boots, she lifted up the old pair. “What shall I do with these?”

He took them from her. “Give them to the cook to make pottage?”

A giggle escaped her. The sound wound around his head and into his ears, as if tickling his brain awake from a sober slumber. It was troubling the way she could stir him with a laugh. Even more troubling that he didn’t want her to stop.

Anabella didn’t like it when Brand made her laugh. He was doing it all the time now. With his witty remarks. His comical impressions of the crew. And his clumsy but earnest attempts at reading the codices.

Damn his eyes! She wanted to be angry with him. It would make her escape so much easier.

But she knew picking a fight with him would only make him tighten her collar. She needed him to be at ease with her. To laugh with her. To trust her. To loosen the leash so she could run away when he least expected it.

Until then, it was best to stay in his good graces.

Which was almost too easy. And the longer she pretended to be his friend, the more charity he showed her, the harder it was going to be to betray him.

The boots she deserved. It was his fault she'd lost her slippers.

"Of course you'll need a gown to go with these new shoes," he said, offering his arm.

She bit her lip. He *had* promised her a new gown. And her current attire, a baggy leine with a plaid draped like a toga around her, made her too identifiable. She needed something that would allow her to blend into the crowd.

She took his arm with a tight smile. "O' course."

But that was all she meant to take from him. The boots. And one gown.

Then she would give him the slip.

They strolled along the street, past shops selling meats and olives, honey and fruit. To all appearances, the two of them might have been a happy young wedded couple. Her hand fit in the crook of his arm as if it belonged there.

"Wait," he said abruptly.

He stopped where a woman was working over a steaming cauldron atop a blazing fire. Beside her was a platter of small white mounds topped with sprigs of mint. Over a grate of coals, more of the rounds were turning a crisp golden brown.

"You must try these."

She resisted a sigh of frustration. They looked delicious. But this was another distraction. Another delay to her escape.

*“Halloumi. ’*Tis food of the gods,” he promised. “You’ll see.”

He handed over coin and was given one of the toasted rounds, which he then brought up to her lips.

She took a tentative bite. It was some sort of cheese, still warm, crisp on the outside, melting on the inside, with a strong salty taste that was offset by the sweet aroma of mint. It *was* heavenly.

He raised his brows. “Good?”

She nodded, taking another bite. She hadn’t realized how hungry she was for something other than what the ship’s cook could manage with his limited stores.

Brand took a bite as well, and the look of bliss on his face as he closed his eyes and licked his lips did something strange to her. Her heart skipped a beat, and her own bite seemed to stick in her throat.

She looked away quickly, before he could see the change in her face.

What was wrong with her? She wondered.

She dared not think about it too deeply. It would only confound her purpose. She had a mission to complete. And the sooner she focused on it, the better.

“More?” he offered.

She shook her head. One taste of heaven was enough.

He shrugged and shoved the rest of the cheese into his mouth. “Mmm.” Then he had the audacity to lick his fingers, savoring each last taste of *halloumi.*

She wondered for a wayward instant how it would feel if he licked *her*

fingers like that.

Then she clenched her jaw.

She had to get back to Hasan. He was her husband, after all. She couldn't let herself be distracted by her abductor's handsome face. Or his wayward tongue.

"We'll have to find a mercer," she decided. Though she was used to having clothes tailored for her, it had been months since she'd worn her own gowns. Besides, when she returned to Hasan's *dar*, she'd go back to the attire of the Saracens. All she needed was something to wear on the short return trip to Acre.

The clothing at the mercer shops was luxurious, extravagant, breathtaking. Traditional Kýpros gowns were trimmed in gold embroidery, and some even had coins stitched into the edges as a show of wealth. Imported clothing from Italy consisted of fine silks, lush velvet, and heavy brocades fit for a queen. It was hard to resist the allure of the fine craftsmanship and beauty.

But for this mission, she needed to dress humbly and invisibly. So she chose a plain kirtle made of brown linen with a surcoat of woad blue wool to go over the top.

"That?" he asked, blinking in surprise.

She nodded.

"Wouldn't you rather have something more…fitting?"

"Ye mean somethin' more costly?"

"Perhaps, but you *are* a titled lady."

She'd never understood the preoccupation with clothing suited to one's status. She preferred to be comfortable.

Still, she thought as she enviously eyed the deep green velvet gown with twining ivy stitched in silver thread along the sleeves, that one was quite lovely. It looked to be her size, and the rich color reminded her of the Scots forest.

He decided for her. "That one."

"Nay," she countered. "This one is fine."

"Why not both?"

Perhaps he owed her a gown. But he didn't owe her more than one. And the less she had to carry, the better.

Before she could argue, he snatched the garments from her hands, chose another kirtle and surcoat in light and dark shades of madder, added the green velvet, and pulled a fourth—a flowing gown of scarlet silk embroidered at the bottom with white doves—to add to his spoils.

"How much for these?" he asked the shopkeeper.

Anabella frowned at the shopkeeper's reply. Her frown deepened when Sir Brand opened his purse and paid out the coin.

The man was being absurdly generous for a mercenary. He could have bought a suit of armor with what he was paying for the four gowns.

And it would be such a waste. She probably wouldn't take them with her. Once she was gone, he'd be stuck with them. Unless he found another titled lady of her size to abduct.

The thought left a bitter taste in her mouth.

Brand probably *would* find someone to fit into the gowns. A face like his turned heads. Most of the women in the marketplace were gazing at him with something akin to wonder in their eyes. Once she was out of the way, he'd probably attract ladies the way meat drew flies.

The shopkeeper offered her a small curtained area for changing. She chose the simplest kirtle. It fit well. When she emerged, she rolled Brand's discarded plaid and tucked it into his satchel. While she had her hand in his bag, she rummaged around for a single gold coin to palm.

He didn't notice. He was already on to the next quarry.

"Hose?" he inquired.

She supposed she couldn't really continue to wear her new boots without hose. But now she felt she was getting too deep in debt to him. Both in coin and good will.

How was she going to muster enough callousness to desert him after he'd bent over backwards to make up for her losses?

On the other hand, she thought as she chose a pair of soft woolen hose, it was likely her father's coin he was spending, not his own. And the fact he added two more pairs of hose to his purchase only reinforced that notion.

He shielded her with his cloak so she could take off her boots and slip the hose on. Tucking the pilfered coin into the toe of a boot, she pulled them on once more.

"There," she declared with finality.

Now that she was fully clothed, perhaps she could find something to distract him while she escaped. A band of tumblers performing in the street. Or a shop full of daggers.

When he whirled to look at her, his glance of appreciation warmed her to her newly wool-cradled toes.

“Jewels,” he said.

For an instant, the way he was gazing at her, she thought he was commenting on her eyes.

“Jewels?” she breathed.

“Aye. You must have jewels to go with your new attire.”

She blinked, blurting, “Nay, no jewels.” That would be too much.

But her response clearly startled him. What woman didn’t want jewels?

So she amended her reply with a quick smile. “Not yet. I’d like to see more o’ the market.” Just then she spotted a man juggling in the lane, surrounded by spectators. “Look!”

She surged forward, and he followed. This was perfect. If she could get him interested in the juggler’s antics, she could lose him in the crowd.

But though he glanced up at the performer, he didn’t seem particularly impressed. Perhaps he’d seen jugglers before in his travels. They watched for a brief time, and then her gaze wandered beyond the performer.

There was a small shop across the way lined with shelves. On those shelves were scores of codices. Standing at the front counter, poring over an open codex, was the frowning proprietor. Above his head hung a sign that said: MANUSCRIPTA.

The breath caught in Anabella’s throat.

Without even realizing she was moving, pulled as if iron to a lodestone, she edged toward the shop.

“Where are you…” Brand began. Then he must have seen. “Ahh.”

Surging forward with excitement, she didn’t notice the shopkeeper’s smirk of disapproval until he slid the codex out of her reach.

Of course. He wouldn’t expect her to be able to read.

Her heart sank. But she let her eyes do what her fingers longed to do—roam over the spines of dozens of leather-bound codices on his shelves, some as thin as reeds, some as thick as the trunk of a small tree.

Behind her, Brand murmured, “Do you see any you like?”

The shopkeeper’s scowl lessened a bit at the approach of a man, but it was clear he didn’t believe either of them were educated patrons.

It was just as well. As tempting as his collection was—Latin translations of Aristotle, Plato, and Euclid, among others—codices were terribly expensive. Besides, once she returned to Hasan, she could persuade him to purchase manuscripts for her at the Acre market.

“Nay,” she lied.

But her gaze lingered on the codex open on the counter, the one the proprietor had been reading. It seemed to contain illustrations of the planets. Her heart beat faster as she realized it showed the earth at the center and indicated the motions of the planets around it.

When the shopkeeper suddenly closed the codex, as if she’d been prying into some secret knowledge, she glimpsed the letters burned into the leather cover—ALMAGESTUM.

Then she briskly turned away. There was no point in attracting attention. Not when she was hoping to slip away unnoticed.

Besides, she had the name of the codex now. If she wanted it later, she could ask Hasan to find it for her.

Smiling briefly at Brand, she told him, “All this shopping has left me athirst. Do ye think we could find somethin’ to drink?”

“Wine?” He nodded to a shop just down the lane.

“Ahh, aye.”

Wine was more affordable, both in the Holy Lands and in Italy, than in Scotland. She’d developed a taste for it. But she didn’t dare drink too much of it. She had to have a clear mind for the journey ahead.

Brand was acting like a lovesick coo. He could feel it happening. And there was nothing he could do about it.

He was hanging on Anabella’s every word, eager to please. Purchasing expensive gowns for her. Offering to buy her jewels. And now he was planning to procure as many codices as he could fit into his satchel.

He’d seen the men of his clan perform the same foolish behavior. He’d mocked them for their weakness. The way they grew soft. Lost their senses. And laid their tender hearts at the feet of beautiful maidens.

Some of them got trampled underfoot. Crushed. Broken. Abandoned. Left to bleed.

But on a rare occasion, their hearts would be swept up in the hands of a gentle lady with a sweet soul. A lusty woman with whom they might share romantic adventures. A devoted wife to delight and charm and treasure their hearts for the rest of their lives.

Brand sighed. Whichever was his fate, it was irreversible.

He was enchanted by Anabella.

Her smile was ambrosia to a thirsty vagabond.

Her laughter tickled his ears like the song of angels.

Her glance melted his heart with the fierceness of the sun.

And a dozen oxen couldn't steer him from his path.

Was it reckless? Aye.

Was it hopeless? Probably.

There were a dozen reasons to ignore the stirring of his spirit, not the least of which was the fact she belonged to someone else.

But did she? Even if she was "wife number four" in Hasan's household, it sounded more like a slave arrangement than a true marriage. And who could say if a marriage made with a Saracen was even binding?

Of course, that was his smitten heart speaking. That and the beast between his thighs that roused every time she coyly tossed her luscious black tresses over her shoulder.

And he was helpless to resist her.

From the wine shop, he chose a bottle from Gavi, because he remembered his sister Isabel had claimed the wines of Gavi were the best. There were small tables and stools set up beside the shop. They sat, and he poured a measure into her cup, waiting to see her reaction.

She took a sip, and her tongue slipped out to catch a drop, making him catch his breath. How he would have loved to taste the wine upon her lips.

"'Tis quite good," she declared. "Ye should have some."

"My lady," he teased, "are you trying to ply me with drink?"

She gave him a saucy wink that made his heart flutter.

“In a moment,” he assured her. “First I need to find a *foricae*.” At her puzzled frown, he whispered, “Garderobe.”

He didn’t really need to piss. He needed an excuse to leave her for just a moment to return to the manuscript shop.

He meant to buy as many codices as he could afford, starting with the one the proprietor had been jealously guarding. The shopkeeper might be unwilling to share what he considered privileged knowledge with a lesser being like a woman. But Brand had no doubt the man’s reluctance would dissolve at the sight of a man with gold.

“You should be safe enough here,” he told her, hoping he was right. The wine merchant seemed a friendly sort, and Anabella would be just a glance away.

What he hadn’t counted on was the fire-breather who suddenly decided to perform his feats in the road between the wine shop and the *manuscripta*. While Brand haggled with the shopkeeper over his prize codex, a crowd gathered. Soon the lane was filled with yawping shoppers and shrieking children while tongues of roaring orange flame licked at the sky.

He scowled. He could no longer see Anabella.

Instead of his plan to carefully select codices he thought she’d like, he waved at half a dozen random bound manuscripts. The proprietor quickly set them on the table, and Brand spilled out gold coins to pay for them before stuffing them into his satchel.

Then he plowed his way through the crowd, his heart pounding.

As he finally elbowed aside the last stubborn gawker blocking his view, his worst fears were realized.

The table was empty.

Anabella was gone.

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Chapter 9



Anabella had made a critical mistake. She knew that now. She should have fled when Brand first walked away from the table. She should have run like the wind. And never looked back.

But she'd lingered. Watched him. Long enough to know he'd lied to her. He wasn't going to the garderobe. He'd returned to the *manuscripta.* Which meant only one thing.

He meant to buy her a codex.

Her heart had melted. Her will had wavered. Her feet had faltered. Even gulping down the rest of her wine all at once hadn't given her the fortitude to turn her back on him and flee.

It was ludicrous.

The man was a kidnapper. A mercenary. He'd torn her from her home and imprisoned her on a ship.

Her life—her *chosen* life—was waiting for her in Acre. She had only to slip away, and in a moment she'd be free.

She peered from behind the wall of the nearby candle shop, watching him boldly confront the codex seller. Suddenly her breast swelled with admiration and gratitude. She'd been protected before from thieves and

lechers. Her father had defended her virtue. Her husband had defended her honor. No one had ever defended her right to read.

She blinked back the moisture that came to her eyes.

Then she shook her foolish head.

That wasn't true. Not at all. Hasan. Hasan allowed her to read.

Naturally there were other things her Saracen husband didn't allow. She couldn't appear uncovered in public. Or leave the *harem* on her own. Or speak with other men.

She'd never be allowed to swim in a lake. Or gallop on a horse. Or dance in a great hall…

She bit her lip. As she continued the list, she realized she *was* a prisoner in the *harem.* And while she'd been the same sort of prisoner in Scotland, her guardians there had been far easier to manipulate and evade.

A performer in the lane suddenly blew a huge breath of flame into the air, startling the shoppers nearby and immediately attracting a curious crowd.

Now was her chance.

She glanced toward the *manuscripta.*

Brand turned to scowl at the gathering. The crowd clearly made him uneasy. He gave the shopkeeper's shelves a brisk wave and tossed a few coins onto the counter.

She told herself she should go. Now. Run.

But her feet were frozen.

His purchase finished, Brand battled his way through the crowd, frowning in concern. When he noticed she was no longer at the table, he whipped his head around in panic.

Anabella needed to flee. Right this instant.

And yet there was something in his face, some horrible desperation, that kept her fixed to the spot.

He began seizing strangers, asking if they'd seen her. He dropped his satchel and grabbed the wine seller by the throat, demanding to know where she'd gone.

With a fearful gasp, Anabella ducked out of sight, flattening herself against the wall.

Was she doing the right thing?

She dared take another peek. Brand had released the wine seller now and was scouring the crowd. The changing storm in his eyes was terrible to see. First, a dark cloud of betrayal. Then a determined storm of rage. And finally, the bleak downpour of failure, heartbreak, hopelessness.

She shrank back against the wall again.

She couldn't do it.

She couldn't desert him.

It was about more than her freedom.

If she ran away and was never found, Brand would suffer the brunt of her father's ire and the king's castigation. After wasting a year of his life, having failed in his mission, Brand would find only punishment upon his return. And that could mean anything. Disfigurement. Imprisonment. Exile. If it were up to her father, death.

She couldn’t let that happen. Not to a man who had just spent his coin on a codex for her.

So, cursing her weak heart, she lifted her chin, straightened her shoulders, and pushed away from the wall, walking toward him with a nonchalance she didn’t feel.

When he spotted her, the naked relief on his face changed, as quickly as a storm cloud, to focused fury.

“Where were you?” he bellowed, startling the people near him.

He grabbed the satchel and strode toward her.

She blinked, feigning surprise. When he drew close enough, she murmured, “I too had to use the garderobe.”

She saw his mouth work in frustration. He had so much anger and nowhere to put it now.

“I think we should go,” he bit out.

“Fine,” she snipped.

Even though she felt she’d made the right decision in staying, she too was vexed. At herself. She’d just complicated her life in no small measure.

There was something she hadn’t told Brand yet about her circumstances.

Something she hadn’t even had the chance to tell the man who’d made her this way.

And it was going to confound things even more.

Brand hadn’t experienced such a maelstrom of emotions since he was a hotheaded lad. Then they had been tempests born of anger, frustration, and impatience, mixed with a good measure of the confusing lust of youth.

But this particular sort of storm he’d never felt before. It was wild and unpredictable. Roiling clouds of fear and rage coiling with disappointment and heartache. Was he vexed? Humiliated? Hurt? Terrified?

He couldn’t say.

He was definitely relieved. He thought he’d lost her.

But to let her see his relief would show weakness. So he fell back on what served him best. Dark, silent rage.

The codices felt heavy in the satchel. Like ballast on a ship. Useless except to weigh him down until they could be cast away.

Brand felt like a fool. Like his lovesick cousin Hew, he’d set his heart upon his sleeve. Let a woman’s bonnie face and winsome ways bewitch him.

All the way back to the ship, he silently cursed himself for wasting so much coin on a lady who clearly had a dangerous grip on his emotions.

So he thought until they arrived at her cabin and he upended the satchel, spilling out his cache of codices.

Her eyes widened, and she gasped. “How did ye… So many… How could ye afford…”

His every doubt vanished at the look of wonder in her eyes. It *had* been worth it, he decided. The astonishment, the joy, the excitement on her face warmed his heart. He couldn’t prevent the smile of triumph.

Then she narrowed her eyes at him and whispered, “Ye didn’t steal them, did ye?”

His smile drooped. “Nay, I didn’t steal them.”

“But they must have cost a…”

“A fortune?” He shrugged. “The king paid me well.”

That wasn’t exactly true. He’d been adequately compensated. But a half dozen codices hadn’t been figured into the expenses. If he made many more impulsive purchases, he’d be doing the king’s bidding for free.

She ran her fingers reverently over the wood and leather covers. Brand couldn’t help but imagine how her fingers would feel stroking his skin with such reverence.

“They’re all in Latin,” she marveled. “What shall we read first?”

We. She’d said *we.*

“Lady’s choice.”

She picked up the one the shopkeeper had been hoarding. ALMAGESTUM.

“This is another translation o’ Ptolemy,” she breathed.

Brand knew all about the Greek philosopher, but he only nodded.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Anabella read to him, pointing at the illustrations, explaining the concepts of astronomy as she discovered them in the writing.

None of her words stuck with him. He was too busy studying her mannerisms—the way she narrowed her eyes and tapped her chin when she was concentrating, how she tucked her hair behind her ear when she

unearthed something novel. He shared her enthusiasm, basking in beams of her joy.

The ship took on more goods and set sail before sunset. But sitting together on the pallet, poring over their cache of words, they hardly noticed, lighting a candle to read by when it grew too dark.

By the time Anabella yawned and admitted she could stay awake to read no more, it was nearly midnight. They'd missed supper, but she claimed she was too full of ideas to care.

As he stretched out before her cabin door, Brand stared up at the stars in the clear sky and reconsidered his impressions of the Scottish noblewoman.

Anabella wasn't wayward. She was delightful and brilliant. Clever and thoughtful. Enterprising and patient.

She just needed a challenge.

He could see how her father might have interpreted her initiative and thirst for *more* as problematic and willful.

For Brand, it was as intoxicating as *aqua vitae*.

He'd been raised among women who could wage war, read Latin, and manage clans. Naturally he was disappointed by the fawning, frail, empty-headed lasses who threw themselves at his feet, looking for crumbs of his affection.

He'd learned to accept that no bride would ever compare to the women of his clan. He therefore perceived marriage as a duty, not a pleasure.

Now he could see he was wrong.

He could imagine making a life with a woman like Anabella. A life of adventure and passion. Of pitched battles and pleasurable reconciliations.

Yet even as he dreamed of a desirable future, intrusive thoughts intervened, reminding him that she was another man's wife. If not by law, at least in her heart and mind. Despite his generous gift of the codices, she couldn't possibly care for a man she considered a mercenary. A man who'd stolen her from her husband.



Over the next few weeks at sea, Anabella felt inexplicably content.

Her life in Acre faded like a dream at daybreak, as if it had never been. It was hard to remember she'd once been wed to a Saracen, lived in a *harem*, and chosen to remain in the Holy Lands.

Even the tragic death of her mother, her stifled childhood, and her tedious years with John in Scotland were difficult to recall as she enjoyed long hours in Brand's company.

Part of her wished they could stay on the ship forever.

Each morn she was awakened by a soft knock on her cabin door and a smiling Brand bearing her breakfast. After several days at sea, the fare became mostly hard cakes and salted fish. But she hardly noticed. She feasted on his company.

The weather was mild, and between sessions of reading, they made rounds of the deck, looking for the whales they'd seen illustrated in one of

the codices. She befriended Piccola, who loved to play “fetch the bone” and bark at the gulls.

On clear nights, she and Brand scoured the heavens, comparing the stars to Ptolemy’s models. Brand even let her try the astrolabe he’d bought for his brother.

He was a fast learner, and she delighted in his progress with reading. Within a sennight, he could recognize all the letters. By the second sennight, he was reading simple words. His dedication was inspiring, and time spent in his presence seemed to fly by on the wings of a falcon.

If good company was all Brand was to her, she might have been able to discount her affections as mere admiration and fellowship.

But when they weren’t poring over the works of the Arabian astrologer, Albohali, or debating the medical advice in *Liber Pantegni*, the warrior-for-hire excused himself, claiming he was wasting away in confinement and needed to engage in some sort of physical activity to keep up his strength.

Sometimes it was helping to hoist the sails. Sometimes it was hauling in fishing nets. Sometimes it was engaging in bouts of wrestling or quarterstaff with other crew.

At those times, Anabella would sweep up wee Piccola and stare out at the sea, chatting with the dog about the creatures that lived there. But she couldn’t keep her gaze from drifting to the handsome warrior, whose straining muscles and glistening skin warmed her more than the sun glancing off the water. Then her heart would thump, and she’d feel a glow in her cheeks.

She blamed her curious energy on her condition. Aisha had confided in Anabella in a moment of frankness that carrying a babe increased one’s

passions. It might be true. After all, she'd never noticed such longings toward her husband John. Whatever the cause, she found the heat in her face, the breathlessness in her chest, and the tingling between her thighs unsettling.

Unfortunately, there was naught to be done about it. Once she returned to Scotland and her father discovered she was with child, he'd quickly find her a husband. A man with a title to secure her father's legacy and ensure his grandchild wasn't born a bastard. His choice certainly wouldn't be a lowly mercenary who wasted his coin on codices for a woman.

It was that unhappy thought that stirred her from sleep one morn before Brand was awake. That and an uneasy queasiness in her belly. Though the sea was tranquil, the subtle rise and fall of the ship that usually calmed her made her stomach tumble.

She struggled up to her elbows. Sweat broke across her brow. She shivered. When moisture formed in her mouth, she knew with certainty she was beyond preventing a purge.

She threw back the coverlet and sprang to the door. Hauling it open, she nearly tripped on Brand, sleeping in the doorway. Stumbling over him, she rushed forward, lunged for the ship's railing, and cast the contents of her stomach into the sea.

When she stopped heaving, she ran the trembling back of her hand across her lips.

"Are you all right?" came Brand's voice behind her. He placed his fingers lightly upon her back.

She was mortified. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to witness her vomiting. "Fine."

“Stay here. I’ll fetch you water.”

She had no intention of leaving the spot. It was bad enough to spew over the side of a ship. It would be worse to spill her guts on the deck.

To her relief, the nausea passed. Thankfully, no one had paid her much heed. No doubt they were accustomed to sick passengers. Plenty of men on her voyage to The Holy Lands with John had lost their breakfast in rough seas.

But these weren’t rough seas. Which meant it was something else.

Brand pressed a cup of water into her hand. She rinsed the sour taste from her mouth, spat, and then took a soothing sip.

“’Tis seasickness,” he explained. “You’ll get over it.”

“I don’t get seasick,” she said proudly.

As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized she’d made a foolish mistake. She should have let him believe it *was* seasickness. Otherwise, she’d have to explain the real source of her shaky constitution.

“At least ne’er before,” she amended.

“There’s a first time for everything,” he said. “’Tis unusual to be sick when the water’s so calm. But a bit of breakfast should settle your belly.” He gave her a wink. “Maybe later we can consult one of your codices and find a cure.”

Breakfast did sound good. He was right. A few nibbles of the hard cake, and she felt whole again.

But when, morn after morn, she kept feeling nauseous, it was obvious her sickness had naught to do with the sea and everything to do with her advancing condition. Even Piccola seemed to sense the change in her,

developing a penchant for cuddling in her lap when Brand set her faldstool on the deck for her.

There was no cure in the *Liber Pantegni* to address what ailed her.

Only time would do that.



Brand leaned back against Anabella's cabin door in the moonlight, perching the open *Liber Pantegni* on his lap and holding the fluttering candle close so he could read.

He was worried about Anabella. Whatever was wrong with her wasn't seasickness. Which meant it could be something more dire. The codex was full of deadly diseases that might snuff out a person's life if left untreated.

For days now, the poor lass had traversed the deck each morn to rid herself of what sustenance she'd gotten the night before. If she continued, she'd waste away to naught.

And the idea devastated him.

He told himself it was because he couldn't face returning, having failed in his mission. If he let the lady succumb to sickness on the journey, the king would never trust him again. If he lost Laird Robert's only heir, it would reflect badly on the whole Rivenloch clan.

But he knew that wasn't the truth of his fear.

As he scoured the codex, searching for an answer among the copious medical advice, looking for a cure, it was his heart that caused him the most distress.

How he'd come to care so much for the willful lass, he didn't know. Was it only because she was the sole female on the ship? Was she fascinating because she was unattainable? Was he drawn to her because she challenged him to an invigorating battle of wits?

Whatever it was, he couldn't bear the thought of losing her.

At the same time, he was well aware losing her was inevitable. They'd part ways in Scotland.

Her Saracen marriage would never be recognized by the church. Her father would likely keep it a secret. According to Scottish law—and as far as anyone knew—Lady Anabella had been a faithful wife to John and was now a respectable widow.

She would find another husband. A landed noble. Someone her father would choose from among the eligible candidates.

Brand knew a lot of the eligible candidates in Scotland. He'd met them at tournaments and clan gatherings.

To his knowledge, none of them were suitable for Anabella.

There was Sir Patric Bisby, whom most lasses considered a desirable choice. He had a gentle manner and a generous nature. He'd probably allow Anabella to do as she willed. But it was unlikely he'd give her children. He seemed to have a preference for his manservants.

Mermadak Paip was available, and he had a sizable fortune. But he was a surly, growling hound of a man. He'd be a constant cloud obscuring Anabella's sunny disposition.

Young Bernard Gall? The man was obsessed with hunting. Brand had never seen him without a bow on his shoulder and a quiver of arrows at his

back. Anabella would grow lonely, waiting for Bernard to return from the hunt with a slaughtered boar or a bloody deer.

Thomas MacAra was a godly man. Too godly. He spent all his hours in the chapel, probably praying to be spared a wife and granted admission to a holy order. If they married, Anabella would be stuck with a husband who deemed women creatures of sin.

None of the bachelors Brand knew would stand for a wife who made up her own mind, had a thirst for adventure, and—horror of horrors—could read Latin.

Being deprived of her joys would slowly kill Anabella, if whatever disease she had didn't. Indeed, he began to wonder if that was what had happened to Anabella's mother. If the woman had languished to death under the suffocating oppression of the laird.

He sighed as his eyes glazed over the words in the codex, words that gave him no clear answer about Anabella's mystery illness.

His mouth twisted with painful irony. Considering Anabella's bleak future, perhaps it was better she died quickly than follow in her mother's footsteps.

A wayward breeze blew out the candle. He closed the codex and peered ahead into the uncertain dark. In the distance, on the port side, he could barely discern the faint gray glow rising from Mongibello, the great smoking mountain on the island of Sicily. With luck and fair winds, they would reach the port of Messina by tomorrow.

He drew a hopeful breath. Somewhere in Sicily there must be a surgeon who could figure out what was wrong with Anabella.



Anabella couldn’t sleep. Not after what she’d heard at supper.

Going to the Holy Lands with John, the pilgrims had traveled by land through Italy.

For the journey back to Scotland, the vessel would be taking a sea route, heading north through the strait of Messina, which divided Sicily and the mainland.

While they ate, the captain and experienced crewmen had spared no detail about the ordeal of traversing the strait, regaling the novices with dramatic accounts of the treacherous tides through which they were about to pass.

According to legend, there were two monsters living in the sea between Sicily and Italy.

One was Scylla—a sea nymph cursed by Circe and transformed into a man-eating beast with six vicious dogs springing from her thighs. She dwelt along the rocky coast, waiting to snatch seafarers from their vessels.

The other was Charybdis—sent to the bottom of the sea by a thunderbolt from her vengeful uncle Zeus—transformed into a creature who had a voracious thirst for seawater. There she lurked, gulping the tide and threatening to pull ships beneath the waves.

Of course, Anabella knew they were myths.

She didn’t believe in monsters.

But the danger was real.

Anyone passing through the strait had to beware the two serious threats named for Scylla and Charybdis—shallow ground on one side and rabid currents on the other. The captain and crew had to keep a watchful eye for both and navigate carefully through the narrow strait.

The vessel would be unloading in the port of Messina, picking up Sicilian goods, and continuing on to Genova.

If it survived.

If the ship didn't run aground or get dragged to the bottom of the sea.

Those fears circled in her head like the whirlpools of Charybdis until she finally succumbed to slumber. But they continued in her dreams.

When she awoke the next morn in a nauseous sweat, monstrous visions clung to her like cobwebs.

Accustomed to her usual regimen of rushing out her cabin door to the ship's railing to be sick, she was surprised to find her footing unsteady.

The ship was rocking more than usual.

A glance toward the window told her the sky was gray. She wrapped Brand's plaid about her and staggered toward the door in her stocking feet.

When she pulled it open, she saw more than a dozen crewmen busy on deck.

Some adjusted the sails.

Others looked anxiously into the water over the edge of the ship.

A storm brewed on the horizon, but hadn't yet arrived.

She hurried to the railing, but her urge to be sick subsided beneath a frisson of fear when she gazed into the depths of the sea.

The gray-green color of the water had an oily appearance, as if spewed from the bowels of a beast.

The current was strange, rising in unpredictable swells and eddies, cresting with white spittle, like a dog gone mad.

She clung to the rail as the ship jerked once, twice, tugged by an unseen force from beneath the waves.

A barrel tethered to the railing tipped on its edge, straining against its ropes.

Men shouted, clinging to the spar of the sail to hold it steady.

The door to the captain's cabin swung open, banging against the forecastle. Piccola's favorite bone rolled out across the deck toward Anabella.

A young deckhand came up beside her, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

"Do ye see her, m'lady?" he crowed, pointing down at the slowly roiling current below them. "'Tis Charybdis, the sea monster."

She frowned. Why the lad was so delighted, she didn't know. The ship was being rocked like a willow in a windstorm.

"Watch," he said, scooping up Piccola's bone.

He tossed it into the swirling water. As the bone tumbled into the sea and was drawn by the waves into a slow spiral, Anabella heard an eager yip beside her.

Instantly realizing the dog's intent, she screamed, "Nay!"

But it was too late.

In a flash of white fluff, Piccola sailed past her, leaping overboard after the bone.

Anabella acted on instinct.

She threw off the plaid.

Vaulted over the railing.

And dropped into the sea beside the ball of wet fur.

She hit the water with a stinging smack and instantly sank beneath the chaotic waves.

Determined to save the wee beast, she kicked her way to the surface.

Oblivious to the danger, she tossed the wet hair from her face, casting her gaze frantically across the water.

Finally she spotted the white peaks of the panicking dog's tiny ears.

"Here, Piccola!"

Piccola perked up at her voice.

The dog struggled to keep her matted head above the water.

She was clever enough to paddle toward Anabella.

Reaching her human haven, the wee beast latched onto her shoulder, shivering in shock and fear.

Anabella—relieved, but battling to stay afloat—turned toward the ship.

It was no longer close. Like a Siren, the whirlpool had lured her away from it. Widened the gap between them.

And now the powerful Charybdis hauled Anabella toward the watery deep.

A row of crewmen gazed at her from the ship. But they were drifting farther and farther away.

Dread filled her as her safe harbor receded.

A silent scream built in her throat.

She dared not panic. Dared not lose hope.

She was a good swimmer. She knew that.

Yet her best efforts seemed futile against the monster's pull. And now, even if she managed to keep herself from drowning…

"Anabella!" came a thunderous roar from the ship.

The waves closed over her head.

It was all she could do to lift Piccola clear of the water.

She kicked as hard as she could.

Strived toward the surface.

But she was fast running out of air.

In another moment, she'd have to take a breath.

A breath that might be her last.

Her heart pounded in her temples.

Her vision began to dim.

Brand had challenged men twice his size.

He'd faced off against a wild boar, armed with only a dagger.

He'd ridden to war in a violent thunderstorm and missed being lightning-struck by mere yards.

But this was by far the most foolhardy feat he'd ever undertaken.

He took no time to consider whether jumping into a whirlpool—named after a treacherous monster and capable of bringing down entire ships—was wise.

All he knew was Anabella was in danger.

And so he dove into the deadly maw of Charybdis without hesitation.

He heard the captain's warning shout of "No!" as he hit the water.

Summoning the strength and determination from generations of brave Rivenloch ancestors, Brand battled his way toward the sinking angel, who held the wee dog aloft like a beacon of pale flame to guide him.

Grabbing a fistful of her garments, he managed to drag her out of the sea's grasp to the surface.

When she wheezed a desperate, grateful breath, his heart eased with relief.

For one shining moment, he clutched victory in his hands.

Anabella had saved the dog.

He'd saved Anabella.

All would be well.

And then the greedy sea decided to swallow them all.

There was no time to reflect on his naive foolishness.

All he could think was that he'd failed the lady.

He was supposed to save her. And he'd failed.

His chest ached to bursting.

And then his lungs burned as they filled with seawater.

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Chapter 10



As Anabella was hauled up, emerging from the sea to gulp in the welcome breath of air, she glimpsed a rope sailing through the air.

In the next moment, she was sucked under again, along with her rescuer. But not before she wrapped her free fingers around the rope.

To the dog's credit, Piccola instinctively held on for her life.

With one hand, Anabella gripped the lifeline. With the other, she clutched Brand's clothing.

At least she assumed it was Brand.

Who else would be so foolish as to jump in after a foolish woman who had jumped in after a foolish dog?

But now she feared he would pay the price for his heroism.

The rope grew taut as someone from the ship began to reel it in. But try as she might, she didn't have the strength to lift Brand free of the water. He dragged behind her—an anchor of massive muscle and wet wool.

Her throat closed as she feared the worst.

A rope ladder was dropped from the ship, and a pair of crewmen clambered down to lend assistance.

“Help him first,” she insisted, clinging to the ladder and hauling Brand toward the ship.

He slumped, unconscious, as the men heaved him up the ladder.

When he was safely aboard, she handed Piccola to one crewman and climbed up with the assistance of another. Her leine, heavy with seawater, slowed her progress, but she finally levered herself over the railing to collapse on her hands and knees on the deck.

Brand was lying two yards away. Still. Silent.

The crewmen who weren’t tending to the sails stared down at him in pity.

“Nay!” she screamed.

It wasn’t a cry of grief or despair. It was a bellow of anger.

She’d already lost one man at sea.

She wasn’t about to let Fate claim another.

Not when he’d risked his life to save her.

She knew what to do. She’d seen it in one of the codices at the *harem.* The words had been indecipherable, but the drawings were clear enough.

“Away!” she yelled.

The deckhands moved back to make room for her.

She scrambled to Brand’s side and began jostling him, lifting his head and shoving at his shoulders.

“Don’t ye dare leave me, do ye hear?” she bit out. “Ye come back. Right now.”

She shook his frame.

Shook him harder.

And harder.

He didn’t move a muscle.

She hissed at him, “What kind o’ rescuer are ye?” Tears blurred her vision. “Ye’re supposed to watch o’er me.”

She pressed forcefully on his abdomen. Once. Twice. Three times.

He was unresponsive.

“Ye can’t die yet, mercenary,” she threatened, pounding once more. “Ye made a vow to the king.”

She pounded on his chest. Then again. And again.

He sputtered once.

She gasped and quickly turned his head to the side, pressing again on his abdomen.

Water gushed out of his mouth.

Then he began coughing.

He was alive.

Her eyes filled and spilled over. She gave silent thanks to God and Poseidon and whatever other deities had intervened to save her reckless hero.

The crewmen murmured in wonder. Some cheered.

But the danger to the ship wasn’t past. The monsters of the sea were still wreaking havoc on the vessel. The captain gave a shout, and the deckhands quickly returned to their stations to continue the battle.

When Brand finally recovered, sitting up and opening his eyes, Anabella expected a harsh scolding. After all, only a simpleminded lass would try to rescue a dog from the raging sea. And Brand had nearly died correcting her reckless mistake.

But to her surprise, his voice was full of naked, raw relief. “You’re safe.”

Stunned, she didn’t know what to say.

“Thank God you’re safe,” he repeated.

For one astounding moment, he looked at her with such warmth—so much affection and gratitude and passion—it left her breathless. She could see in his desperate eyes that the thought of losing her had completely devastated him.

Against her will, her heart responded—softening, melting, yearning. Her emotions spun like the whirlwind through her mind, leaving her dizzy and disoriented.

For one lovely moment, her spirit sailed on a current of desire, believing he had feelings for her.

Then she remembered.

Of course he was glad she was safe. He was a mercenary. His purse and his honor depended upon him returning with his prize.

That was why he’d jumped in after her. Not because he cared for her. But because he couldn’t return to Scotland empty-handed.

Disillusioned and disappointed in herself for hoping it might be otherwise, she lowered her gaze and gave him a weak smile.

“Thank ye for…” she mumbled, wrapping a self-conscious arm around her drenched breasts and glancing away. “I should change.” She turned to go. Seeing his discarded plaid on the planks, she retrieved it for him. “Ye should warm yourself as well.”

Shivering from the wet and cold, shaken from her close brush with death, and ashamed of her foolish heart, she weaved her way across the rocking ship to her cabin.

There she remained, changing out of her dripping leine, drying off, snuggling under the coverlet, and trying not to think about what might have been.

Somehow in the next hour, the ship made it through the passage with no further incident. The vessel arrived safely in the port of Messina.

When Anabella dressed and emerged on deck, the grumbling captain was clearly suffering from mixed feelings about her. After all, she’d endangered both herself and the crew with her audacious antics. But she’d done it in the service of saving his beloved pet.

In the end, as the captain cradled the still shivering dog inside his surcoat, he chose gratitude.

He beckoned her privately aside to murmur, “I am indebted to you for Piccola’s life. What do you wish? Silver? A codex? Ask, and it shall be yours.”

She didn’t have to think long. “Do ye know a good surgeon in Messina?”

The surgeon was for Brand. He wasn’t out of danger. Despite having cleared the water from his lungs, Anabella knew there were lingering

illnesses that could afflict a person after a near drowning. If Brand was to survive—and collect his reward for her return—he needed to see a proper surgeon.

The captain granted her wish.

To her surprise, Brand was amenable to the visit.

When they docked in Messina, the two of them set out together for the physician's office.

The white-haired surgeon seemed a wise and well-educated man. His collection of medical codices and extensive shelves of herbs and tinctures indicated a wealth of knowledge.

After examining Brand, the man mixed a potion of carefully measured glycyrrhiza, gingiber, and terra merita, saying that drops of it mixed with wine would help clear and strengthen his lungs.

Brand thanked and paid the man.

Then he dropped a few more coins in the surgeon's palm and placed a hand on Anabella's shoulder. "Will you examine my wife as well? I fear she may be gravely ill."

She stiffened. Gravely ill? She wasn't gravely ill. She certainly had no interest in being examined. And had he just called her *my wife?*

"Of course," the surgeon said.

She blinked and ducked out from under Brand's hand. "I'm not ill."

"But darling…"

Darling?

Why was he feigning to be her husband?

Of course, she realized. He couldn't very well say he was her *abductor*.

"I fear there's been a mistake," she told the surgeon.

Brand insisted, "Anabella, I'm concerned. You've been unable to hold anything down for—"

"I feel fine," she said.

The truth was she felt quite rattled. *My wife? Darling?* His endearments—and his genuine worry—were warming her in ways they should not.

"I know you're trying to be brave, dear heart."

Dear heart indeed. "Forsooth, I feel better already, *husband*. There is no need to—"

"She's been sick for days," he explained to the surgeon. "Whatever she eats at dinner, she purges every morn."

She blushed, protesting, "I didn't purge this morn."

He ignored her. "I fear if it continues, she will waste away to naught."

The surgeon addressed her. "Have you fever, *Signora?"*

She bit her lip. Should she lie?

"Nay," Brand answered. "She has no fever. And 'tis only upon waking she feels ill." He furrowed his brow. "'Tis very strange, aye?"

"Ah." The surgeon nodded. *"Si."* Then he narrowed his eyes at both at them in turn. Finally he rubbed thoughtfully at his white beard. "I must examine her more closely…" he said, glancing at Brand for his approval.

"Of course," Brand said.

She was too flustered to speak. Did she have any say over her body?

“You will wait outside, *Signore?”*

Finally, Brand glanced at Anabella for her permission.

She nodded. Of course, she had no intention of letting the surgeon examine her. But until her *husband* left, she wouldn’t be able to get in a word.

Once Brand was gone, she confided in the surgeon, “He worries for naught, sir. I feel fine. ’Twill pass.”

“You do not wish him to know?”

“Know what?”

He lowered his gaze to her belly and raised a brow. The clever surgeon had apparently guessed her condition.

She placed a hand there, as if she could somehow hide it.

“Because it is not his child?” he ventured.

She frowned. She didn’t want to explain to this stranger that she’d been widowed at sea, gotten pregnant by a Saracen, and been kidnapped by the man who was claiming to be her husband. He’d think she had no morals at all.

“O’ course ’tis his child,” she lied. “I simply do not wish to worry him. I will tell him about my condition when we are safely home.”

“I see. In the meantime, I can give you something for the nausea.”

“Good.” If she had a remedy to take, perhaps Brand would stop fretting over her illness.

The surgeon rummaged along his shelves, withdrew two corked vessels marked CAMOMILLA and GINGIBER, and measured a portion of each

into a vial.

“Before you go to sleep at night,” he said, “place beside you a piece of bread and a cup of water with three drops of this. In the morn, drink the water and eat the bread slowly before you get out of bed.”

She nodded.

“You are not far advanced,” the surgeon commented.

“Two months.”

“And all is well otherwise?”

“Aye.”

“Your husband, he will soon know.”

Hearing him call Brand her *husband* was disconcerting. And she didn’t need the reminder that time was not on her side.

After leaving the surgeon’s, she and Brand stopped to buy food from a street vendor—*arancini*, which meant little oranges. The saffron-yellow fried rice balls were stuffed with a savory meat sauce and melted cheese. Brand couldn’t get enough of the crisp, warm treats, and he took several with him on the ship.

As for Anabella, she took only a few nibbles. They were decidedly delicious. But whether it was the sickness of pregnancy, the trauma of nearly drowning, or the dread of Brand eventually discovering her secret, she could only stomach one.

How long could she hide her condition?

What would happen when he found out?

Would he abandon her? Return her to the *harem* in Acre? Take her to Scotland in shame?

What would her father do? Could she make him believe the bairn was John's?

Somehow, while only she was aware of the life growing inside her, it hadn't felt so real. Motherhood had seemed like a distant dream for another time.

Now that the surgeon had detected the bairn, now that Brand had noticed her telltale illness, now that she could calculate the time left before she delivered, she had to face the fact that this bairn was both real and inevitable. There was no turning back now. No changing her mind.

Eager to remain on dry land as long as possible before embarking again to confront the final leg of the treacherous strait, Anabella took her time, sauntering past the shops along the lane. But she could tell Brand was exhausted.

He tried to show an interest in the vendors at the port who sold silk, flax, wine, and olives, and listened to the musicians playing curious metal mouth harps, skin drums, and wooden flutes. But Anabella could hear the wheeze in his voice. His encounter with Charybdis had left him wounded.

So she made the excuse for him. "I fear I grow weary, Brand."

"Shall we return to the ship then?"

"Aye. I'm sure I'll feel much better on the morrow."

Brand hoped she was right.

He was glad he hadn’t needed to drag Anabella to the surgeon. Even more glad the surgeon had recognized what ailed her and given her a potion to treat it.

When they set out on the morrow, they would be at sea for at least another three weeks. And the only person on board qualified to see to her ills was a half-drunk barber.

As for his own ills, he wasn’t concerned. He was a Rivenloch, after all. Aye, his throat stung from saltwater. His lungs were scraped raw. He was fatigued. And it took effort to draw breath. But the Viking blood that had seen his ancestors through harsh Norse winters would see him recover from the sea’s attack.

Still, it was only a matter of moments—after Anabella returned to her cabin and he leaned back against the door to guard her—before he fell into a sleep so deep no dreams could pierce it.

Somehow, the crew toiled around him. By the time he stirred from slumber, it was dusk, and the hold had been emptied.

The ship would linger here a day or two, being refilled with Sicilian goods. But tonight, only a few deckhands remained on the ship. The others were probably ranging the port, seeking entertainment between the thighs of willing Messina maids.

Nothing sounded less tempting. Not only was Brand exhausted. He was well aware that harlots who serviced sailors from all over the world harbored deadly diseases.

He was, however, ravenously hungry. And Lady Anabella must be as well. She’d eaten almost nothing. He was glad he’d bought extra *arancini.*

Rising to his feet, he was suddenly overwhelmed by a spate of coughing as he expelled the last drops of seawater from his lungs.

Before he could raise his hand to knock on her door, Anabella snatched it open.

“Are ye all right?” she asked with a frown of concern.

For an instant, he couldn’t answer. She looked completely disarming in her disheveled garments, with her sleep-mussed hair and a healthy glow in her cheeks. He realized he’d much rather spend the evening gazing at this natural beauty than swiving all the painted whores in Sicily.

“Just a wee cough,” he finally replied. “Are you hungry?”

She yawned behind her hand. “Aye.”

He pulled the sack of *arancini* from his belt. “I’m afraid they’re cold.”

“Fine. I’m starvin’.” Then she looked past his shoulder, and her eyes widened. “Is it nightfall?”

He nodded.

She scanned the deck. “Where is everyone?”

He handed her a rice ball and took one for himself. “Gone ashore.”

She sampled the *arancini.* This time her reaction—closing her eyes and licking her lips—was as he’d expected. “Mmm, these are savory.”

He was glad her appetite and her good mood were back. Perhaps whatever the surgeon had given her was working.

He sampled his own *arancini.* They were better fresh from the vendor, but even cold and smashed, the soft rice, tangy sauce, and melted cheese were appetizing.

She took another bite, stepping out the door to survey their surroundings. “Is the captain gone as well? Did he take Piccola?”

Brand imagined the captain used Piccola to his advantage, attracting the most cordial lasses with his sweet little pet.

“So ’twould seem. It appears we have command of the ship.” He let his eyes twinkle with mischief. “So where shall we sail, my lady? India? Cathay? Off the edge of the world?”

He said that last bit just to goad her. Days ago, they’d engaged in a heated discussion about whether the earth was round or flat, purely for his own amusement.

She frowned and gulped down the last bite, eager to renew the argument.

“Peace, my lady,” he said with a grin. “I believe you. If you say the earth is round, so be it.”

She gave him a chiding glare.

He handed her another *arancini.* Thankfully, she was more hungry for food than debate.

But as he chewed thoughtfully at his portion, he asked her, “Where *would* you go, if you could go anywhere in the world?”

She considered the question for a long while. “I think perhaps the land o’ the Vikings.”

“The Vikings?” His heart flipped at that. It was the home of his ancestors. “Why?”

She shrugged. “’Twould be a grand adventure, seein’ all the blond giants and longboats and great mountains of ice.”

“They’re not all blond giants.” His Norse grandfather Gellir and his mother Deirdre could be considered blond giants. But many of the Rivenlochs, like him, had dark hair. There was even an occasional redhead born among his clan.

“I’ve heard the women are as fierce as the men,” she continued.

“That’s true.” Even his female kin who weren’t inclined to wield swords could wield *words* with power and deadly aim.

“So ye’ve seen Vikings before?” she asked.

“A few.”

“Forsooth?”

She seemed impressed. Perhaps he should have told her from the very beginning he was a son of Vikings. Then she might have come with him willingly.

“What were they like?” she asked.

“Fierce, as you say. Brave. Strong-hearted. Noble. Bold.” His mouth twitched as he resisted a grin. “Handsome. Well-muscled.”

She didn’t seem to notice his jest. She nodded wisely. “I wonder if there are codices written about them.”

He didn’t know. He’d only heard what was passed down in stories told around winter fires at Rivenloch.

“Who needs a codex when we have a ship?” he asked. “We can sail to the land of the Vikings. Where shall it be? Norway? Denmark? Sweden?”

That made her smile. She had a lovely smile. When she smiled like that, it made him wish he *could* sail with her around the world.

“Ye know, for a mercenary who cannot read, ye seem to know a lot about the world.”

“Experience is the best teacher.”

“Have ye sailed to Viking lands before?”

“Nay, but…” He wasn’t sure he wanted to reveal his roots. Not until he successfully completed his mission and was sure not to bring shame to his clan. “I’ve battled Vikings in Scotland before.”

It was true, every time he sparred with a Rivenloch.

“And yet ye survived against such magnificent warriors?” she asked dubiously.

“Aye, I survived,” he said, indignant. “Do you think the king would send a coward to rescue a titled lady from the Holy Lands?”

“I suppose not.” Then she tucked her lip under her teeth and asked, “Were ye e’er wounded in battle?”

“On occasion.” The Rivenlochs never held back when it came to sparring, and he’d earned—and given—plenty of injuries in tournaments. As for battles against enemies not as skilled as Rivenlochs, he’d come away largely unscathed.

“What about that?” she asked, nodding toward the scar on his neck. “Did ye get it from a Viking?”

“This?” He rubbed at the thin raised seam that ran from just below his ear to his collarbone. In truth, he’d come by that as a wee lad, falling off a wattle fence onto a spade. But he wasn’t about to dash her grim expectations. “Oh aye. That came from a Viking axe.”

She gasped. “May I?” She was asking permission to touch it.

He moved his hand away, exposing his neck to her.

She reached out to stroke the scar lightly with a fingertip.

The instant she touched him, her tender contact sent an unexpected bolt of sizzling current through his body. His head began to swim. His throat warmed. His vision grew dim.

“Ye could have lost your head,” she breathed in wonder.

He suddenly felt like he was losing his mind. Why her simple touch should have such an agitating effect on him, he couldn’t fathom. But suddenly he longed to pull her into his arms Rake his fingers through her lush, velvety curls. Claim her soft, breathless mouth with his own. Show the woman who admired Vikings what mighty conquerors they could be.

Anabella read the desire in Brand’s face the instant he lowered his smoky gaze to her lips. It infected her at once, filling her veins with the lovely poison of lust.

How easy it would be to sink into the pools of his eyes. To surrender to the temptation of his embrace. To slake her hunger with sultry kisses.

For days now she’d denied the longings within her. Dismissed the flutter in her heart when he greeted her each morn. Disregarded the blush that rose in her cheeks when he smiled at her. Ignored the thrill that coursed through her when they read together and his thigh touched hers.

She’d told herself it was because she was with child. Or it was melancholy over the loss of her husband. Or she had an imbalance of humors.

After all, it was impossible to feel such things for a mercenary who meant to trade her for coin. Wasn't it?

How could she be charmed by a man who had threatened her at sword point and now lied about being her husband?

Only a fool would flirt with falling under the enchantment of a coldblooded killer who had challenged Viking giants and prevailed.

But now…

Now it was apparent she wasn't the only one who felt a spark kindling between them. A spark that felt forbidden and dangerous and volatile. A spark that could unexpectedly erupt into a blaze of passion.

She couldn't let that happen.

She *couldn't* let that happen.

So she told herself.

She couldn't…

And then she did.

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Chapter 11



Despite Anabella’s best intentions, her impulsive instincts took the reins.

Sliding her palm over his scar and around the back of his neck, she pulled his head down to hers, closed her eyes, and pressed famished lips to his mouth.

His voracious reply fed her own hunger.

His groan sharpened her need.

The sweet pressure of his fingers upon her back played her like a harp until her spirit sang in utter ecstasy.

As the cool night breeze swept through their hair, they kissed again and again, tasting each other’s souls. The stars gazed down upon them, a million spying eyes. Yet there was no room for shame in her. All the space in her body was taken up by bliss and wonder and desire.

She might have continued till dawn, so insatiable was her thirst. And he might have let her.

But the deckhands chose that moment to make their noisy return, clomping drunkenly across the boarding plank.

The two of them split apart, breathless.

Anabella lifted a quavering hand to her lips, as if some telltale residue of arousal might remain there to betray her.

Brand lowered his eyes, cleared his throat, and clasped his hands before him.

The moment was gone.

They didn't speak of it again.

But that night, her dreams were filled with whirlpools that swept her, not to a watery death, but into a vortex of dizzying passion.



The next morn, Brand kept a watchful eye on Anabella's cabin door. But he needed to keep busy. Despite his lingering weakness, he helped the crew load crates of goods onto the ship.

He couldn't face Anabella. Not after what they'd done last night.

Not after what *he'd* done, he corrected.

"Guarda!"

Brand ducked as a roped crate swung over the deck. He helped guide it gently down.

It wasn't Anabella's fault she'd fallen under the influence of desire. It was well-known that women, as daughters of Eve, found it hard to fight off temptation. And according to his liaison-forging sister Isabel, Rivenloch men were notoriously difficult to resist.

Why he'd felt so helpless to resist Anabella, however, was a mystery. He'd never felt so powerfully drawn to a woman before. So completely engaged. So fully immersed.

Like a Siren, she'd summoned him. Like Charybdis, she'd swallowed him. And if the deckhands hadn't returned when they did, he might have drowned in her embrace and lost himself forever to her sorcery.

How? And why? Why Anabella? Why now?

Did it have to do with his close brush with death and gratitude for her rescue?

Was he attracted by her irresistible fascination with Vikings?

Nothing explained why he found himself compelled, not only by her feminine charms—her gentle curves, her bright eyes, her cheerful laughter…but by her more profound qualities—her inquisitive mind, her sparkling charm, her sensitive heart.

It was no wonder she'd already won the affections of not one, but two husbands. A woman like Anabella could have any man she wished. The odds of her wishing to be with someone like him—a man she saw as a nameless mercenary brute who'd forced her into the dank hold of a merchant ship—were very much against him.

"Togliti di mezzo!"

A man rolled a barrel toward him. Brand grabbed a coil of rope out of his path and tossed it aside.

"Assistenza?" another yelled.

Brand stepped forward to help the man, who teetered under a heavy bundle of cloth. Together they moved it to the hold. Then Brand scanned

the deck to see what other aid he could lend.

Anabella's door was still closed. Was her heart also closed?

He could easily win her.

He could confess his identity. Divulge that he was from the most renown warrior clan in Scotland. The son of Vikings. Closely connected to the king. With extensive lands. A desirable match for any noblewoman looking for wealth, property, and title.

But the last woman he wanted for a wife was one who was only after his wealth, property, and title.

He wanted to be chosen for his chivalry, his loyalty, his generosity, his character.

His cousin Adam had been fortunate to make such a match. Eve had fallen in love with Adam in all his guises, never knowing who he was until she'd already given him her heart.

But Brand was who he was. He couldn't feign to be someone else. The most he could do was keep his identity secret.

Could Anabella fall in love with him, not knowing who he was? Could she forget his perfidy? Forgive his flaws?

It seemed impossible.

It was pointless to waste another moment pursuing such an unlikely union.

Indeed, he'd set his mind to giving up the chase when her cabin door abruptly opened.

His breath caught.

She looked like a delicate rose in the scarlet silk gown he'd picked out for her. The soft morning breeze caught the petals of sheer fabric, winding them around her slender form, accenting every curve.

Last eve, he'd rested his fingertips upon the gentle arch of that back. His fingers tingled at the memory. His lips remembered the taste of her mouth. And when he'd pressed her closer…

She spotted him then, and his thoughts vanished.

He expected her to avert her gaze at once. She would wish to disavow what had happened between them. And of course, being a gentleman, he would let her.

But when instead her face lit up with a brilliant smile, he was at first startled, then pleased, then confounded. Not since he was sprouting the hairs of his first beard had he felt so disarmed by a lass.

"Brand!" she called out.

Perhaps she'd completely forgotten about the kiss.

Perhaps she'd banished it from her memory.

Or perhaps it had meant nothing to her.

Aye, that was it. After all, she'd been living in a *harem* with other wives. Perhaps there had been other husbands as well. Perhaps exchanging kisses had little meaning.

It saddened him. But at least she appeared happy. The kiss hadn't ruined their friendship.

"Do ye notice anythin'?" she asked, floating toward him in a flurry of red skirts and loose black hair.

Aye. He noticed everything. Her flushed cheeks. Her twinkling eyes. Her lips curved up in a coy smile so tempting that…

“I’m not rushin’ to the railin’,” she told him. “I don’t feel ill. Not at all. The potion worked.”

Of course, he realized. She was happy because the surgeon had cured her.

Indeed, that pleased him as well.

He smiled and nodded back. But his heart twisted a wee bit to know he was not the cause of her joy.

As Anabella approached, it was all she could do not to throw herself into Brand’s arms. She’d dreamed of their kiss all night, reliving the intoxicating rush of desire that had washed over her. Looking forward to feeling it again.

This was the thrill she’d only imagined in her years of marriage. The raw excitement that pushed her beyond thought. The secret vibration that dissolved her bones and sent her spirit soaring.

But now that she stood before Brand in the flesh, he seemed too real. Too near. Too intimidating.

What if he rejected her?

What if she’d only caught him off-guard before?

Now that he was forewarned and forearmed, what if he never allowed her such liberties again?

What if he’d only fallen prey to a man’s primal urges?

What if—now he'd had time to reconsider what he'd done—he had regrets?

It crushed her to consider his passion might have been instinctive and naught to do with her.

Then she saw his eyes—tenuous, but softened by affection—and her heart blossomed. She blushed and was forced to look away, lest she betray her emotions to the entire crew.

He teased, "So you're saying he wasn't a counterfeit surgeon after all?"

Flush with relief and the renewed joy of bantering with him again, she retorted, "I'm not sure. Did ye take the potion he gave to *ye?*"

"Aye."

"And are ye feelin' better?"

"Aye."

She glanced askance at his brow. "So ye're *supposed* to have that horn growin' out o' your forehead?"

The smile that bloomed on his face erased all uncertainty. "Well played, m'lady."

The tension was broken. The uncomfortable distance was breached. The kiss hadn't destroyed what they had. They were still companions.

And yet, now that she'd tasted more, she wasn't sure she could be content with only friendship.

He arched a brow. "Are you taking audience with the king of Sicily today, m'lady?"

"What?"

His gaze coursed down her length, making her shiver as if he'd touched her with his hand instead.

"You're dressed in finery fit for court."

The gown *was* far too fine for a merchant ship. She should have warned him how impractical the gown was before he purchased it. But it was more beautiful than anything she owned. And she adored the embroidered white doves around the hem.

She dared not admit the truth, even to herself, that she'd worn the gown to impress him.

"This?" she asked, twirling once to show him. "I'm certain, after my heroics of yesterday, the captain wishes to honor me in fine style for saving his canine companion."

"Ah, so he plans a banquet? Some sort of formal ceremony?"

She effected a sigh. "Possibly a crownin'."

He shook his head. "'Tis a shame I did not bring along my velvet tabard."

She smirked. The notion of a mercenary wasting coin on velvet was amusing. Every penny went to chain mail and swords. On the other hand, she could easily imagine Brand dressed in the clothing of a king. And that vision did strange things to her insides.

She fought the sensation with humor. "Ye know, I have a spare gown ye could borrow."

"Do you?" He frowned, pretending to consider her offer. "I suppose 'tis only fair, since I lent you my plaid. But do you think I'll be able to squeeze into it?"

Any retort she might concoct stuck in her throat as she let her gaze drop to his shoulders. His broad, strong, capable shoulders. Shoulders that would rip the seams of her garments. Shoulders she'd pressed desperate fingertips into when she'd kissed him hours before.

She could utter only an imperceptible soft moan.

Suddenly she was eager to move on to a new subject—any subject.

"I fear my other garments are drenched from the sea," she said hastily.

His eyes were still dancing with levity. "Of course."

"I've draped them o'er the clothin' chest," she explained in all seriousness, "but they may take days to dry."

He sobered then, eager to help. "Give them to me." He gestured to a rope strung between the aftcastle and the railing, from which several garments hung like fluttering pennons. "I can hang them alongside mine. The brisk wind will dry them in no time."

It was a good solution. But the idea of their clothing tangling in the breeze, like lovers intertwined in the linens, made her breath catch.

"Are ye sure?" she croaked.

"Aye."

Before she could reconsider, he took action. To be honest, it was one of the things she admired about him. Like her, he was decisive and direct.

It was what made her do things that were sometimes impulsive.

Like stowing aboard a ship bound for the Holy Lands.

And leaping into the sea after a drowning dog.

And seizing a handsome mercenary to steal a kiss.

Brand was suddenly glad to have a purpose. Another moment of suggestive conversation with the lass, and he would have repeated the same mistake he'd made last night.

He strode across the deck and pushed through her cabin door. Spotting her wet garments on the chest, he swept them up with one arm and turned about quickly.

Too quickly.

Anabella must have been on his heels. He collided with her, dropping a piece of her clothing at her feet.

"Sorry," he muttered, bending down to retrieve the garment.

The first thing he noticed was he'd picked up a stocking. A soft woolen stocking that conformed perfectly to the shape of her lovely leg.

The second thing he noticed, picking up the stocking, was that it had landed on her foot.

Her bare foot.

A bare foot with smooth skin and five toes placed like perfect pearls across the sand.

He gulped, riveted by the sight. How had he not noticed before that she was barefoot?

And now that he'd noticed, why was he frozen? What was wrong with him?

He'd seen bare feet before. Rivenloch women were generally immodest. They toughened their feet by going barefoot in the snow.

But there was something about Anabella’s delicate foot that made him want to lower his head to kiss each precious toe.

Mortified at the direction of his thoughts, he shuttered his eyes. Tight.

Then, choosing the lesser of temptations, he rose with the stocking and stuffed it back into the bundle as if he hadn’t noticed what it was.

But she’d noticed. And she tried to stop him, grabbing at the thing in panic.

He had a choice.

He could feign horror, drop the stocking, and endure a moment of awkward embarrassment, after which he’d return the item to her, leaving it sodden and unwearable.

Or he could act as if it were perfectly normal for a man to handle a woman’s undergarments in the service of doing her a good deed, and continue on his mission, drying her stocking…and shortening the time he’d have to bear the temptation of her naked toes.

He opted for the latter.

Ignoring her feeble protests, he continued out the door.

He could do this.

He’d just pretend she was one of his sisters. After all, Isabel left her stockings drying by the fire all the time. And Hallie took hers off by the loch when she swam in summer.

Still, when he unwound the rope to lower the line and draped her garments over it beside his, the contrast between their size was marked. And when he raised and secured the line again, the way they danced

together in the wind like frolicking lovers made him almost regret his actions.

But the deed was done.

And if he could resist staring at her stockings—which kept alighting like pale butterflies on the dark bloom of his damp surcoat in the breeze—perhaps he could tend to more pressing matters.

He nodded toward the captain, who stood at the mast with Piccola tucked under his arm, barking out orders. “The captain plans to set sail by afternoon.”

“So soon?”

“A storm is brewing. He wants to get past the strait before it arrives.”

She gave a visible shiver.

He understood. Seasoned deckhands shuddered at the thought of passing through the strait. He wasn’t particularly thrilled at the idea of facing the roiling waves again. And considering Anabella had already had a traumatic experience with the treacherous tides, he wouldn’t blame her if she wanted to remain in the safe port of Messina forever.

But there was one more narrow passage to maneuver between Sicily and the mainland of Italy before they were free of danger. And the fact the captain was paying close heed to the weather boded well for the ship and their safety.

“Will the ship be loaded in time?” she asked.

“All hands are on deck to help.” He nodded to the crew passing crates from man to man and rolling barrels across the deck.

“How can *I* help?” she asked.

How could a wee barefoot lass in a silk gown help load a ship?

He almost smiled at that. But he knew that would be the wrong response.

Anabella had sneaked on board a ship to follow her husband.

Tried to escape captivity by clouting her captor on the head with a mallet.

Trespassed into a captain's cabin to steal a codex.

Rescued a dog from drowning by leaping into a turbulent sea.

She wasn't about to take "there's nothing you can do" for an answer.

He furrowed his brows. "Can you look after Piccola? I'm sure the captain would be grateful."

Would he? Most of the time the beast sat as docile as a brooch on the captain's cloak. But taking care of Piccola would keep Anabella out of harm's way as they loaded the ship with less-than-careful haste.

She approached the captain without hesitation, reaching for the dog.

"Let me keep Piccola in my cabin," she offered. "That way ye can load the ship faster."

The captain looked somewhat befuddled at her offer, but the dog was halfway out of his arms and seemed to be content enough in Anabella's hands. Tucking the beast under her chin, she marched back to her cabin.

Brand couldn't help but envy the wee creature its cozy perch, nuzzled against her neck. When she disappeared into her cabin, he threw himself into the labor of loading the hold with renewed fervor.

“Don’t ye fret o’er your captain, lassie,” Anabella cooed to the dog as she closed her cabin door. “He’ll take good care o’ the ship. And I’ll take good care o’ ye.”

Piccola wagged her tail as if she understood.

She drew the pup up to her face. “Ye won’t be goin’ on any more bathin’ adventures, will ye?”

Piccola licked her nose.

“That’s right. We’ll stay nice and dry in the cabin. And if ye’re very good, I’ll read to ye later.”

The dog seemed unimpressed. But she was content enough to be placed on the bed, where she began snuffling through the linens in her neverending search for crumbs.

Anabella entertained Piccola with a game of fetch the boot, until the pup began chewing on the leather.

Then she traded the boot for a knotted linen rag, which Piccola tugged back and forth with ferocious growls.

When the dog was panting from exertion, Anabella brought out the Albohali codex on astrology, sat on the bed, and opened it on her lap.

Piccola immediately settled down beside her.

“Now, Piccola, what’s the date o’ your birth?”

The dog looked up at her with wide, wet eyes.

“Ye don’t know? Well, perhaps ye know what star ye were born under?”

Piccola barked.

“Sirius. O’ course. ’Tis the dog star, after all. Let’s see what Albohali has to say.”

She looked for the correct section and read the translation. “Sirius is in the sign o’ Cancer. Cancer’s animal is the sea crab, which has a cold and humid nature. Och, Piccola, is that why ye leaped into the water? ’Tis your element.”

Piccola panted, but had no answer.

“The weapon o’ Cancer is the cleaver. Hmm, I would have said teeth. It looks like Cancer is connected to the moon, which explains variable moods. Are your moods variable, Piccola?”

Piccola let out a sigh and nestled her head onto her paws, apparently uninterested in Albohali’s opinions.

“Like the sea crab, they like to live in a protective shell, and they prefer the comfort o’ familiar places.”

She peered down at Piccola, whose eyes were closed. It seemed Albohali might be correct.

“Let’s see what mine says,” she whispered.

She turned to the page for her birth date and almost burst into giggles to discover her official weapon was the club. Apparently, she’d been correct in making a mallet her weapon of choice.

Her stars were usually represented by the twins, Castor and Pollux, in Greek mythology. But according to Albohali, the stars of Gemini were not siblings, but a pair of bonded male and female peacocks.

The characteristics seemed fairly accurate, though hardly flattering. Those born in Gemini were apparently lively and clever, observant and

adventurous. But according to Albohali, they were also fickle and unpredictable, rash and not to be trusted.

She frowned, imagining taking a club to the presumptuous astrologer.

But she couldn't argue with all of it. She *was* a bit unpredictable and rash, as exhibited by her diving into the sea.

She was also adventurous, a trait which had plagued her in her dull marriage to John and might have eventually done so in her confined marriage to Hasan as well.

It was difficult for her to sit still when there was so much going on in the world.

It was hard to remain ignorant when there was a wealth of knowledge waiting to be consumed.

And it was impossible to consider a life of chastity when she'd tasted the sweetness of desire.

Did Anabella's birth portend a destiny of adventure? She hoped so. Not that she wanted more incidents like yesterday's. But as long as one's life wasn't cut short, a wee bit of adventure kept life interesting.

She was tempted to look up John's birth date to see if Albohali had foreseen an early death for him. But what was past was past. There was no use dwelling on what Fate had already determined.

Then she thought about Sir Brand and wondered what his stars said.

Was he meant to be a lone mercenary all his life, his existence filled with naught but killing and coin?

Or was there more to his future?

“I don’t know when he was born,” she murmured to the uninterested sleeping dog.

She hoped there *was* more to his future, no matter what the stars said and even if she had no part in it. Despite her first impressions of him and his sometimes wicked behavior, Brand seemed to be a good man. He had learned to read quite quickly. He’d been thoughtful, bringing her meals to keep her from being hungry, buying codices to keep her from being bored. And he’d made himself useful on the ship.

He deserved a decent life. She was glad she’d done her part to see it hadn’t ended in the depths of the sea.

Piccola began snoring, and the sound was curiously comforting. Anabella set aside the codex and stretched out beside the wee snoozing beast, falling into a peaceful doze in a land where the sea was miles away, pups played all day, and she could kiss a man to her heart’s content.

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Chapter 12



Between Brand’s help, the captain being unhindered by his pet, and all hands on deck, the work of lading finished quickly. Which was fortunate, for by midday, storm clouds gathered on the distant horizon to the south.

They would set sail within the hour and hopefully make it through the strait just ahead of the storm. After that, the clouds would chase them, and they might get pelted by heavy rain. But by then they’d be past the shallow reef and unpredictable currents of the narrow passage.

Once the hold was full, the goods tied down, and the hatch secured, Brand stepped ashore briefly to purchase food from vendors roaming the port, selling their goods from baskets. A crust of bread. A block of cheese. A packet of preserved fish. A dozen dried figs.

Then he gathered the clothing from the line. As predicted, the garments were dry, albeit a bit stiff from their baptism in saltwater.

Before they weighed anchor, Brand—his arms full of provender and clothing—tapped lightly at Anabella’s door with his boot. There was no answer. He gently nudged the door inward with his shoulder.

Anabella was slumbering, stretched out on the pallet, looking like a wilted blossom in her scarlet gown. Her mouth was parted. One hand was curled under her chin. The other rested on Piccola’s haunch.

When Brand entered, Piccola perked up, but didn't bark or growl. Seeing who it was, the dog settled her head back down.

Brand started to call out to Anabella. Then he hesitated as his gaze lit upon her bare feet, peeping out below the hem of her gown, just beneath the embroidered row of white doves.

His voice stuck in his throat. His thoughts, however, raced away before he could rein them in. He wondered, if she wrapped those lovely legs around his thighs, how the soles of her feet would feel on his calves? Warm? Cool? Smooth?

So distracted was he by his musings, he didn't notice she'd opened her eyes.

"Have we set sail?" she asked.

He blinked away his sensual thoughts, flustered. "Aye. I mean nay. I mean anon."

He edged through the door, trying and failing to close it behind him with his hip as he juggled the food and clothing.

"What have ye brought?" She sat up, dislodging Piccola, and drew her feet back under her skirts.

He lifted the arm full of clothing. "Food." He lifted the arm full of food. "And your clothing."

At her quirky smile, he realized his mistake.

"Or the other way round," he corrected. Lord, he couldn't think straight around her.

"I hope ye brought a wee bit for Piccola."

“Of course.” Then he gave her a crooked smile. “Would Piccola prefer a leine or a surcoat?”

She giggled, and the sound struck him straight through the heart, like a bolt from Cupid’s bow. How pleasant it would be to have that sound greeting him every day.

“I suppose I can spare a wee bit of fish for the dog,” he said. “Has she been a good pup?”

She shrugged. “She didn’t leap into the sea today.”

“Well done, Piccola.”

Laying Anabella’s clothing across the chest, he turned to secure the door. Yet even as he did, it occurred to him he was treading on perilous ground. It was risky enough for them to be alone together on deck. They’d practically ravished each other last night, in plain view of anyone on the ship. Being alone together behind closed doors, who knew what could happen?

He scowled. That was ridiculous. Anabella obviously had her mind on other things—supper, the dog, her dry clothing, and the sailing ahead.

So should he. There would be time to work out the nature of his relationship with Lady Anabella when…*if*…they made it through the strait.

Instead of lingering in her cabin just to torture himself, he left the food with her and lent his efforts to keeping the ship on course.

When he’d started this journey, he hadn’t been an experienced sailor. Now he could follow basic commands and be of good use. And his strength was already being restored by the surgeon’s potion and his Rivenloch blood.

What he hadn’t counted on was the mental strain. He was revisiting the treacherous beast that had almost claimed his life. And facing the daunting challenge of protecting Anabella—protecting her, it turned out, mostly from herself.

Despite his pleading, the stubborn lass refused to stay in her cabin with Piccola where it was safe.

Frustrated, Brand was tempted to put her in chains to keep her there. But he’d already done enough damage where his reputation was concerned. If he imprisoned her again, the crew would condemn him as no better than a Saracen keeping a slave.

Besides, after rescuing the captain’s dog and dragging Brand from the sea, Anabella was now the crew’s heroine. The last thing he wanted to do, no matter how pure his motives, was confine their guardian angel to her quarters.

Still, when in the midst of the narrowest part of the strait, where the current was at its wildest, Anabella staggered across the tilting desk and seized the starboard side railing for balance, his heart pounded with fear. And when she leaned out over the side of the ship to peer into the depths, his breath stopped.

“Reef!” she yelled out in warning.

The hull scraped a bit, but Brand and three other men with poles quickly pushed the ship away from the treacherous shoals.

Then Anabella scrambled to the port side, and Brand’s heart dropped.

She pointed off the bow, crying, “Whirlpool ahead, Captain!”

The captain made the necessary adjustments to compensate.

In the end, Brand had to admit she proved useful. Perhaps from her long time at sea, she'd developed a keen eye for spotting hazards beneath the water.

But her competence didn't ease his horror, watching her cling to the railing with pale fingers while the horizon dramatically rose and fell behind her. With her dark hair and her scarlet skirts whipping in the wind, she looked like a frail bright rose about to be swallowed by the seething gray-green waves.

He felt like he couldn't breathe.

He'd grown up around warrior maids who fought with swords and axes, daggers and bare fists. He'd seen his mother face down grown knights. Watched his aunts take up arms against powerful foes. Never had he worried about them.

But Anabella? Though she was no less courageous or skilled than his kin, she seemed somehow more impulsive, more vulnerable. He couldn't bear the thought of her suffering injury or worse. And watching her put herself at risk was driving him mad.

Somewhere deep in his soul, he knew exactly why he was troubled.

Knew why his heart was racing.

Why he felt a sharp pain like a dagger in his gut every time he recalled the sight of Anabella sinking into the sea before his eyes.

Though he dared not let it surface, the reason for his distress churned beneath waves of denial, like Charybdis waiting invisibly for prey.

Brand was falling in love with Anabella.

Anabella cleaved to the railing. She tossed wet strands of hair out of her eyes to better see the motion of the waves boiling around the ship.

She wasn't afraid. She was excited.

There was no thrill quite like being of use. While the men around her were wrestling with the sail and poles and ropes, she could detect threatening shoals beneath the water and alert the captain to dangerous currents. And it was working. With her guidance, they were sailing safely through the strait.

John would never have allowed her such liberties. On their journey to the Holy Lands, he'd begged her to stay below deck in rough seas.

Her father would have forbidden her that freedom as well. He'd have been mortified to see her laboring like a deckhand.

Even kindhearted Hasan protected his wives and female servants by keeping them within the walls of his home.

Now Anabella was practically on her own. Free to follow her instincts. Able to put her knowledge and skills to work. To be useful.

With a triumphant smile, she took one hand off the railing to wave at Brand, who was holding aloft the pole he'd used to keep the ship clear of the rocks.

He didn't return her smile. Instead, his lips were compressed into a grim line. His brow was deeply furrowed. His fists were white where he gripped the pole. And his eyes flashed like lightning.

"Hold on!" he thundered.

She flinched at the force of his voice, and her smile sagged.

Then she heard a pause in the crash of the sea behind her, a strange foreboding silence.

Renewing her grip on the railing, she turned her head and saw a wall of water.

She had but an instant to hold on with all her might and gasp in a quick breath before the wave slapped her in the face.

But Charybdis was only cross with her. She didn't strike with enough power to scrape Anabella from the vessel. Just enough to smack her cheek, drench her beautiful gown, and leave stinging salt in her eyes.

It was the strait's final insult before the vessel sailed into calmer waters.

When Anabella blinked her eyes open, she saw Brand had discarded the pole and was charging toward her. The rage in his face was palpable. For a moment, she wondered if he meant to finish what the sea had failed to do and push her overboard.

Instead he seized her roughly by the shoulders and wrenched her away from the ship's railing, gripping her as if he'd never let her go.

"Are you all right?" he croaked.

She nodded. The concern in his eyes made her knees go weak, and her heart melted. For an instant, she almost believed she meant more to him than just a mercenary's ransom.

His eyes drifted down to her mouth, and a flurry of anticipation fluttered her pulse. She parted her lips, knowing what came next, welcoming it, inviting him to…

A loud cheer arose from the deckhands.

Anabella pulled back, glancing self-consciously around her.

But the crew was paying no heed to them. They were clapping each other on the back, celebrating the fact the ship had passed successfully through the strait.

Still, the moment was lost.

For the second time, Anabella felt cheated.

Brand released her and turned to the crew with a victorious smile that only she could see was forced.

The interruption was for the best.

At least that was what she told herself.

As far as the others on the ship were concerned, Brand was a trusted mercenary of the king returning a widowed noblewoman to her home. Naught more. It was best to keep it that way.

But she ached with longing. Even glancing at him made her want to throw herself into his arms.

While she suffered in silence, the captain passed around a bottle of congratulatory wine he'd purchased in Messina.

Like all the others, Anabella dutifully wiped the mouth of the bottle and took a sip. But she barely tasted it. All she could think was it wasn't as sweet as Brand's kiss. And when Brand took a sip after her, he neglected to wipe the bottle's mouth. She couldn't help but think it was on purpose.

It didn't matter. That was forbidden fruit.

Soon enough, the men had to return to sailing. The storm was still approaching and would likely be upon them by afternoon.

She changed into her salt-stiff but dry garments and lay her wet scarlet gown over the wooden chest. It seemed she was destined to wear clothing pickled by the sea on this voyage.

Not content to sit in her cabin while others toiled, she ventured forth again to see how she could be of assistance.

Most of the work involved things she couldn't do—rearranging and securing the hastily loaded goods to better balance them, carefully manipulating the sail for speed, looping the heavy ropes to keep them untangled, swabbing the sea-soaked deck to prepare for rain.

But while the deckhands were working hard to ready the ship for the storm, they still had to eat to keep up their strength. So she volunteered to bring a supper of cheese and preserved fish to each man so he wouldn't have to leave his post.

The sun had dipped under a rim of cloud and was sinking into the western sea when she took food to Brand, who was tightening the ropes around a barrel on deck.

"The thunderheads look like a great gray cat about to spring," she murmured.

He scoffed. "A lethal cat with lightning claws and a thunderous roar."

"I love a good storm."

He shook his head at that.

She shrugged. She knew most women were afraid of thunder and lightning. But she was fascinated by the power of storms. As long as one remained shielded from the intensely focused wind, which was what

philosophers had agreed lightning was composed of, it was safe enough to observe it.

As it turned out, the great gray cat was creeping toward them faster than expected. Rather than sailing onward, the captain decided to head east for the shore. They'd furl the sail and drop anchor until the storm passed over.

Brand was helping to lower the anchor chain when the rain began.

With little else to do, Anabella took refuge in her cabin. Her window was foggy, but it was growing dark outside anyway. There was naught to see.

She bundled under her bedlinens and listened to the light patter of rain on wood. The wind occasionally whistled through cracks in the beams of the cabin, as if a ghostly *caoineag* lamented a lost lover.

After a time, the wind stilled. But the rainfall grew heavier, sounding like a hundred cobblers hammering the deck.

Then a bright flash illuminated the cabin interior. Two heartbeats later, pounding thunder shook the ship.

She sat up with a grin. Was there anything more exhilarating than the power of nature?

A moment passed before the sky lit up again, this time with a jagged bolt of lightning she glimpsed through the window. The grumbling roar that followed came on its heels, closer than before.

She climbed out of bed and pulled on her boots. She wanted a better look.

No one would be on deck. The ship was safely anchored now. She could venture out unseen and witness the maelstrom in all its glory.

Wrapping the plaid around her, she crept to the door and pulled it slowly open.

“Och, nay, you don’t,” came a growl from outside.

Another brief flash revealed a snarling Brand, soaked to the skin.

“Bloody hell, ye’re drenched,” she remarked, though her words were interrupted by the rumble of thunder.

“There’s a storm on,” he muttered, “if you didn’t notice.”

“Aye. Isn’t it marvelous?”

“Nay, ’tisn’t marvelous. ’Tis perilous.”

Then, as if Zeus himself wished to prove Brand’s point, a bolt of lightning snaked down from the sky. It struck the top of the mast behind him with a mighty crack and an explosion of smoke and splinters.

Her eyes wide, she snagged Brand by the front of his sopping surcoat, hauled him inside, and slammed the door behind him.

Brand scowled.

He’d suspected the foolhardy lass would ignore his warnings and try to venture out on deck in the middle of the storm. That was why he’d stationed himself in front of her door, to protect her from her own poor judgment.

What he hadn’t anticipated was just how violent the storm would be. If the lightning had damaged the ship…

“It struck the mast,” Anabella breathed in horror.

Damn! He'd warned her about the danger. He wanted to tell her so. But this was no time for gloating. If the mast had caught fire, it was a threat to the entire crew.

So he wheeled away from her and opened the door just enough to peer out.

Shielding his eyes against the rain, he gazed toward the mast. There seemed to be no flames. Perhaps the rain had extinguished them. Whatever devastation the lightning had wrought—and that was impossible to discern—at least it wouldn't spread to the rest of the ship.

He eased the door closed again, leaving them in utter darkness.

"There's no fire?" she asked.

"Nay."

"But the mast could be split."

"Aye."

"What the devil were ye doin' out there?" she demanded.

A rumbling anger rose up from his belly. She dared to ask *him* that?

He bit out an answer between his teeth. "Guarding the door to make sure you weren't tempted to do something foolish."

He couldn't see her expression in the dark, but he hoped she looked chagrined.

And just to make sure she understood, he added, "Like venturing out on deck in the middle of a thunderstorm."

"I'm not the one who's soakin' wet." Though her words were defiant, her voice was shaky. She couldn't deny she'd *absolutely* meant to venture

out on deck.

Still, she was right. He *was* soaking wet. It hadn't been the best choice to station himself outside her cabin in such a fierce storm. Better he should have chained her door shut and gone below deck with the rest of the crew.

He gave an audible shiver.

"Ye should get out o' your wet things," she admonished.

"And into what?" All his clothing was below deck.

"I've got your plaid," she offered, shoving a bundle of wool at him, accidentally hitting him in the face in the dark. "Och, sorry."

He grunted.

"Unless ye'd rather wear one o' my gowns," she teased.

He scoffed.

"Wait," she said, withdrawing the plaid before he could take it. "Give me your wet things first. I'll lay them out o'er the chest to dry."

"Nay, I'm fine with the plaid. I'll wrap it o'er my clothing."

"Don't be foolish," she chided. "Ye'll freeze to death."

"I'm telling you 'twill be fine."

He wasn't about to remove any clothing in her presence. Not when he could vividly remember how tempted he'd been to kiss her earlier…when he'd been fully dressed…and in the company of the ship's crew.

But now? Here? Alone? In her cabin?

Nay, he'd keep his clothes on.

"Are ye shy?" she asked. "There's no need to be. 'Tis full dark. I can't even see my hand in front o' my face."

“Shy? Nay.” Involuntarily, he shivered through his teeth again.

“So are ye just stubborn then?” she persisted. “Look. I already had one man die on me at sea. Wasted away from sickness before my eyes. I won’t watch another. Not when I can do somethin’ to prevent it.”

She had a point. It must have been dreadful for her to look on, helpless, as her husband lay dying. And considering Brand’s health was already compromised from nearly drowning, there was a risk of falling ill.

“Fine,” he conceded on a sigh.

“Good. I’ll hold out my arm, and ye can give me your wet things.”

He batted at the air to locate her arm in the dark. He meant to stay well out of that arm’s reach. She may not be able to see him in the dark. But he didn’t want to risk any unintended contact.

He first pried off his saturated boots and sopping stockings, setting them aside.

It wasn’t easy removing drenched wool. But he managed to pull off his cloak and surcoat to hand to her. Next he peeled off his trews. The linen leine clung to him, but he removed it as well, draping it over her arm. Then he hastily untied his braies and gave them to her before he could think better of letting her touch such an intimate article.

Unfortunately, at that precise moment, Thor decided to make mischief.

As Brand placed the last garment over Anabella’s forearm, the sky beyond the window brightened with a spectacular flurry of lightning.

He distinctly saw her eyes drink in his naked body and linger for an instant on the place betwixt his thighs. The place where his cock lay pathetically shrunken from the cold.

Then the sky darkened again, and a clap of thunder drowned out the expletive he whispered under his breath.

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Chapter 13



Anabella’s eyes widened at the sight of Brand, completely naked. Beautiful. Magnificent.

In an instant, she took in everything. The breadth of his shoulders. The muscle of his arms. The width of his chest, and the soft line of hair that led down the middle to…

Och dear…

His poor member was withdrawn from the chill within its nest of dark curls.

Then, as suddenly as the lightning had granted her that vision, it vanished, leaving her blind again.

Before she could catch her breath, the loud crack of thunder startled her. She pitched forward, away from the window. Straight into all that flesh and muscle.

He grunted as she collided with him.

Mortified, she tried to extricate herself. “Sorry!”

He reached out to steady her. “Wait.”

Sweet Mary! One of his hands had inadvertently landed on her breast.

She gasped and extended her hands to keep from falling farther forward. Her palms pressed against the bulging muscle of his bare chest.

Pushed off balance, he staggered backwards. “Whoa.”

“Nay!” She reached out again for purchase, this time seizing what felt like his forearm.

“Hold on,” he bit out as he tried to keep her upright.

But her momentum made her sink down to her knees. Her free hand grazed his belly, landing on his hip bone.

Concerned, he asked her, “Are you—”

“Fine. I’m fine,” she whispered, but her breath told her her face was only an inch away from his thigh. At least she hoped it was his thigh.

Meanwhile, his questing hand clipped the top of her head. “Sorry.”

She pulled back at once. “Don’t move.” The last thing she needed was to get any closer to him.

“Right.”

Praying the lightning wouldn’t strike again to expose the awkwardness of their position, she released him and inched backwards on her knees.

Using the bed for leverage, she managed to regain her balance and stand. Regaining her composure, however, would be a challenge.

He made the first attempt. “I’m…sorry you had to see that.”

She gulped. “’Tis nothin’ I haven’t seen before.”

That was a lie. Neither of her husbands had a body like his. A body that —far more than the exciting storm outside—what had he said? *Tempted her to do something foolish.*

“Do you have the plaid, m’lady?” he asked.

“Shite.” Where had it gone? She must have dropped it in the confusion. She didn’t dare start feeling her way around in the dark to locate it.

“I’ll try to find it,” he offered.

“Nay! Nay.” The only thing worse than her feeling her way would be *him* doing it. “Stay there. It can’t have gone far.”

She crouched down to pat the floor near the bed, but could find naught. She reached out farther, to no avail.

After a few moments, he said, “’Tis only because I’m…*cold.”*

She repressed a smile. “Och aye. I know.” That had been obvious by his shivering and the diminished state of his cock.

“Are you laughing?”

“Nay,” she said, though she was sure there was laughter in her voice. Why men were so sensitive about their genitals, she would never understand.

“’Tisn’t a laughing matter, m’lady,” he told her.

Thankfully, before she had to discuss the fickle nature of a man’s body and why it didn’t matter to women, she located the plaid.

“Ah, here ’tis.”

The heavy wool made a suitable shield as she held it up at arm’s length to approach him again.

But he made the mistake of reaching out for it and captured her face instead.

“Oh!” she exclaimed.

“Sorry.” He withdrew his hand.

“Let me just…”

She moved forward and draped the plaid over his shoulders—his broad, strong, capable shoulders—and maybe let her fingers rest there a wee bit longer than necessary.

“This should warm ye up nicely,” she breathed, only belatedly realizing how that sounded.

“Oh aye, I’m already feeling warmer,” Brand murmured, only belatedly realizing how that sounded.

Not that it wasn’t true. Being near Anabella was warming him up faster than any plaid. If lightning were to strike again a moment from now, she’d see just how she was affecting him.

The way her eyes had grazed his body. The sensual vulnerability in her voice. Her hand on his hip. The heat of her breath, far too close to his flesh.

She was doing things to him that she should not.

Things that were far too dangerous, given their intimate surroundings, the excitement of the storm, and the opportunity that presented itself like an irrefutable gift between them.

He felt a tremor go through her as she offered him the plaid.

If the cabin had been lit by sunlight or a candle or even another bolt of lightning, he might have been able to read that tremor. To see it in her face. To tell whether it was a shudder of revulsion or a shiver of anticipation.

All he knew was her fingers trembled as they lingered on his shoulders.

Then she spoke—so softly, he almost thought it was his imagination. “I’m feelin’ warmer as well.”

She stepped closer, and he felt the lightest contact of her breasts against the plaid as she pressed it against his chest.

He was sure it was no accident.

He swallowed hard as his groin tightened and his cock thickened with alarming haste.

Then he felt her breath against his throat as she murmured, “So warm.”

She smelled like the storm. Fresh. Charged. Dangerous.

When her lips pressed to his neck, hot current streaked through his body like lightning. A jagged bolt ran from the place she kissed him to his groin, blazing a path of fiery lust.

He should have resisted it.

But it was as powerful as the whirlpool, dragging him into perilous seas.

Like thunder to her lightning, he growled deep in his chest. He wrapped his arms around her straining body to bring her closer, which seemed to be her wish.

Then he tipped his head down with a groan and parted his hungry lips.

Stirred by the primal sounds of his longing, Anabella nuzzled his neck, inhaling the scent of him. Damp skin. Soaked leather. Faint wine.

He pulled her into his arms, and she felt his fingers press into her back with longing and confidence and command. They collided, with only the

plaid between her and his naked body.

She drew in a silent gasp and lifted her head.

His mouth was there, so close she could feel their breath mingling. And yet he hesitated.

It was up to her whether to close the distance. Or not.

In the end, her heart decided for her.

With the force of pent-up yearning and the memory of the ecstasy that had come before, she plunged into the kiss as recklessly as she'd plunged into the sea.

It was better than she'd remembered. Though his lips were cool, they were soft and delicious. Hesitant at first. Then compliant. Then demanding.

And when his tongue delved within her mouth, hot as lightning, it was a bright spark that set her senses on fire.

Her ears sang a song of desire. Her nipples tingled. An erotic vibration wrapped around her like a plaid, warming and rousing the flesh betwixt her thighs.

The deep rumbling in his chest summoned her to answer. And answer she did, allowing her tongue to tangle with his in sensual play.

Outside, the rain poured harder, banging on the deck with ferocious force.

But here in her cabin, an even fiercer storm raged. She delved her hands into Brand's wet locks, and he lowered his hands to her buttocks, pulling her against him.

She gasped as she felt the hardened length of him, pressing like a dagger against her abdomen. She traced his massive shoulders with her

hands, slipping the plaid lower to warm his rigid nipples with her palms.

Deep within her womb, she began to ache with anticipation. And with each pulse of his manhood against her, she felt a throbbing reply.

She wanted him. Wanted this. It didn't matter that they were practically strangers. That she was wed to another. That he was her foe. She wanted him against her, around her, inside her.

And by the rasp in his breath, the pressure of his fingers, and the male beast rearing its hungry head, she knew he wanted her.

She retreated just enough to allow the plaid to fully drop between them.

Now that she'd lowered the drawbridge, she could storm his keep.

She wasted no time, sweeping her hands across the rippling muscles of his abdomen and then turning her palms to descend farther.

He tensed, and she feared he meant to stop her.

But she didn't wish to stop. She threaded her fingers through the coarse hair guarding his treasure, bypassing the jutting member to gently cup his ballocks.

"M'lady," he grunted.

"Aye?" she sighed.

"You mustn't."

"Mustn't I?" she cooed, continuing to fondle his curls.

"We cannot," he bit out, despite the fact his fingers dug into her buttocks.

"But we can," she insisted.

And why not? She wasn't a virgin, after all. She'd already had two husbands. And she couldn't get pregnant again.

"We *should* not," he amended.

She stopped caressing him while holding him still in her palm. Of course he was right. There were a dozen reasons they should not. But she didn't want to think of them right now. She could think of them later.

"We should not," he repeated.

Then he gulped.

Even though she couldn't see him, she knew that sound. He was wavering. Despite his words to the contrary, he welcomed her invitation. He wanted to consummate their passion as much as she did.

She murmured, "It seems to me we both do a lot o' things we should not."

He had no reply for that. He seemed to be holding his breath, trapped in indecision.

Then she added, "But the best adventures are found doin' what's forbidden."

In the silence, she could sense him struggling—with her truth and with his conscience.

"Unless," she whispered, "ye do not want me."

The sound he released was half groan, half chuckle. "Can you doubt it?"

He moved her hand to clasp his cock, which had rapidly swelled to an imposing size. A shiver of impatient longing swept through her.

Her voice was but a breath. “Then prithee come with me.”

How could Brand refuse? A beautiful lady was begging him to do the one thing he most longed to do. And if she was indeed willing…

She squeezed and slipped her hand along his length as if to confirm her willingness, sending a shudder as powerful as thunder through his bones.

“Are you..?” he choked out.

“Certain?” she supplied. “Aye. Come.”

She took his hand and pulled him toward the bed. Before he could get his bearings, she guided him down and pressed him upon his back on the pallet. Her hands threaded through his hair, and she bent over him, showering his face with kisses and tickling his chest with her soft locks.

He grasped her jaw with his fingers to kiss her, then deepened the kiss to taste the wonderful wet warmth within. She moaned gently as their tongues twined, and a pang of desire shot through his loins.

Things were happening too fast. It had been too long since he’d lain with a woman. What if he peaked too quickly? What if he disappointed her? What if he couldn’t withdraw at the critical moment?

She disengaged for a moment to peel off her clothing, and he clenched his jaw, willing control over his unruly body.

“Ye’ve done this before, aye?” she murmured.

That startled him. He wasn’t sure if he should be insulted or flattered. “Aye.”

She explained, “I didn’t mean to rush ye.”

He stifled a chuckle. “You’re not.”

“Because if ye’re seriously not ready…”

He growled. She was taunting him. He could hear it now. “Don’t tease me, wench.”

He reached up to capture her breasts and was rewarded by her gasp of pleasure. He brushed his thumbs across her awakened nipples and then lifted his head to bathe them with his tongue.

Her sigh was fuel to his lust, and he knew he had to act quickly before his self-restraint slipped away. He gathered her in his arms and placed her on the bed, poised above her with only a cushion of simmering passion between them.

He meant to be gentle, to ease into her with care.

But the impatient lass had other ideas. Once he positioned himself against her inviting nest of curls, she lifted her hips upward, enveloping his length as readily as a glove slipping onto his hand.

The sudden surge of heat took his breath away and threatened his already shaky control.

But he bit back the urge to begin thrusting.

Instead, he slipped his fingers between them to part her nether lips and rouse the tiny bud of flesh that hid within.

She tensed beneath him.

But he continued with his gentle ministrations, stroking her, slipping over her dewy skin, circling the straining nubbin.

She began to moan, writhing in sensual wonder.

The sound made him pulse within her, yearning to finish.

Her passions rose swiftly as well. Gasping with need, she strove against him, faster and with more force.

He clenched his jaw, intending to pull out before he could spill his seed inside her.

But the determined lass hooked her legs around his buttocks, drawing him close.

Before he could withdraw, she cried out in ecstasy. Rising up against him. Driving him deep into her body. Holding him there with her heels while she thrust again and again.

He exploded with a violence that rivaled the storm. Ignited like lightning. Bellowed like thunder. And let loose his store like rain gushing down upon the earth in waves of release.

Afterward, as they collapsed in weary repletion, there were no words to describe the perfect joy and blissful exhaustion he felt.

As he cradled the beautiful woman beneath him, they lay silent for a long while. The only sounds were their ragged breathing and the rising and falling patter of raindrops.

He floated in the dreamy afterglow of lovemaking while the world disappeared. His body was utterly satisfied. His soul felt completely fulfilled. All that existed were the two of them entwined.

Gradually the drowsy lass relaxed, and her legs fell away from him. He rolled off of her and tenderly tucked the coverlet around her.

But then, as he stretched out beside her, reality slowly crept back in. Troubled, he stared blindly at the ceiling.

Why had the lass clung to him? Why had she not let him withdraw? Why had she allowed him to erupt within her? She was no novice. She knew the dangers of swiving. Surely she realized there was the risk of making a bairn. Had she simply been unable to stop herself?

Then a dark thought intruded.

Perhaps that was her intent. Perhaps she meant to ensnare him in marriage by getting with child.

She wouldn't be the first lady to try such a ploy. A Rivenloch husband was a valuable prize indeed. He and his cousins had been warned against conniving women who were only after riches and a title.

The Rivenloch motto was *Amor vincit omnia,* Love conquers all. When it came to marriage, Laird Deirdre insisted her clan never sacrifice their hearts for a political alliance. One must be certain of love, his mother said, before committing to marriage.

Naturally, this was a point of amusing contention, since Deirdre had famously sacrificed her *own* heart to save her sister from an unwanted marriage, and it had taken some time for his parents to fall in love.

Nevertheless, her message was clear. Many a man made the mistake of thinking with his cock. And many an opportunistic lass would feign passion to trap a desirable prospect.

He hoped Anabella wasn't such a lass.

He didn't see how it was possible. After all, she didn't know who Brand was. To her, he was a mere mercenary. A completely unsuitable husband.

Whatever her reason for trysting with him, he vowed not to let it happen again. No matter how fulfilling it had been or how spectacular it had felt. No matter how he still glowed from the sensation of sharing sensual rapture with this most singular, bold, and delightful woman.

She didn't belong to him. Nor would she ever. He would not lie with her again, for he had no right to lay claim to her.

Anabella's thoughts raced to and fro like bees from a hive. But she feigned sleep. Mostly because she could find no words to describe those thoughts.

Never had she felt such elation. Never had her body been so aroused or invigorated. And never had she surrendered control in such a way—losing her modesty, her inhibitions, her restraint.

What had he done to her? What sorcery had he worked upon her body? What enchantment had he placed upon her mind? How had he tamed her so readily to his touch? And how had he transported her to a heavenly realm beyond her imagination?

She was mortified. Wasn't she?

Nay, forsooth she felt charmed.

She should be aghast, aye?

Nay, she was gratified.

Mostly she was utterly confounded.

After all, she wasn't new to coupling.

Her husband John had swived her dozens of times. The act had been pleasant enough. He'd kissed her sweetly, courted her with compliments, and barked in victory when he poured his seed into her.

Her husband Hasan had made tender, attentive love to her. He'd praised her beauty, stroked her hair, and sighed in gratitude when he reached his zenith.

Neither had been like this.

This was what she'd dreamed coupling could be when she'd imagined being taken by a handsome knight, a bold Viking, or a tempting Gancanagh.

All-encompassing. Fulfilling. Overwhelming.

But how could that be? This tryst had been at the hands, not of a devoted husband, but of a reckless mercenary. How could she feel more for a man who'd upset her world than those who'd promised her security?

She had no answer.

But she dared not let herself make the mistake of enticing him into her bed again.

It clearly dulled her intellect. Ruined her sense of independence. Destroyed her equilibrium.

No matter how divine it felt to surrender to his encouragements, she had to keep her wits about her. There was no future for her with a mercenary.

The mast, split by the lightning strike, cost them two days' delay.

For Brand, that was two additional days of suffering Anabella's alluring presence.

He hadn't been able to get their liaison out of his mind. Despite his determination to forget they had breached propriety on the night of the storm. Despite his fervent prayers that his seed would not take hold. Despite his decision to never again repeat that mistake.

As he helped the ship's carpenter, planing pieces of curved wood to reinforce the mast, he ignored the lass gazing at him from across the deck in blatant admiration. And attempted to forget their unforgettable joining for the fiftieth time.

Brand had never been a promiscuous fellow. But he'd had enough lovers to know there had been something different, something special about his encounter with Anabella.

He'd mulled it over for hours. If he could define the reason for his irrational attraction to the lass, perhaps he could more easily avoid future temptation.

In the end, he blamed the excitement of the storm. The fear had simply heightened their senses and magnified their relief.

But the storm had fled now. The skies were bright and sunny. Why did his heart continue to race every time she stepped out of her cabin?

As for Anabella, she made no further advances, which reinforced his opinion—what they'd done had been a mistake. If she didn't wish to speak of it, neither would he. He was a man of chivalry, after all. No more needed to be said.

She didn’t seem to look especially ashamed or contrite. She continued to bring food to the crew, read her codices on deck, and play with Piccola, as if naught untoward had happened.

The only time he had the sense that she even recalled that night—where they had risen together through the clouds to sizzle like blazing lightning across the sky—was when she gazed at him as she was doing now. With smoky eyes full of lust. Tucking her lip beneath her teeth.

“Enough,” the carpenter barked, startling him.

He stopped planing.

“You’ll shave it away to naught,” the carpenter grumbled. But he inspected Brand’s work with a satisfied grunt.

When he looked up again, Anabella was gone. It was just as well. Better she should bury her nose in one of the codices in her cabin than taunt him on deck with her hungry glances and her delectable body. How he’d withstand her temptation for the rest of the journey, he didn’t know.

“How much longer?” he muttered to himself.

The carpenter, misunderstanding, held up the twin wooden pieces and replied, “That’s it. We have the iron straps. We will send Falco up to bolt them on and knot the rope around. We should be ready to set sail on the morrow.”

This was good news. They were still a month or more away from Genova. From there, it would be another fortnight at least to France. Then they would travel by land.

If no more misfortune befell them, at that point they would be halfway home. Surely he could resist her for that long.

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Chapter 14



Anabella could resist him no longer.

She had imagined she could forget about that night. Pretend it had never happened. Common sense would prevent her from going down a path that led nowhere. Or so she believed.

She was wrong.

With the mast repaired, they'd been sailing now for a sennight, and she felt her attraction to her handsome captor growing each day. Never mind he hadn't spoken one word to her, hardly given her a glance.

Brand was probably mortified by what they'd done. A man who prided himself on a sense of honor—whether or not she agreed a mercenary could truly possess honor—was unlikely to forgive himself for the sin of adultery.

But deeming what they'd done "adultery" was nonsense. Her first husband was dead. Her second husband—if her father even accepted Hasan's claim to her—had other wives. For Anabella, what she and Brand had done was no sin.

It had only been an unwise decision on her part.

And being honest with herself, after a sennight apart from him to reflect, it wasn't even his embrace or his kiss or his tantalizing body she

most longed for.

She missed his wit, his kindness, his curiosity. She missed poring over a codex with him. Discovering new foods and fabrics in the market. Learning mariner's knots. Teaching him to read. Playing together with Piccola. Studying the currents of the sea. Discussing the movement of the stars.

More than a lover, she missed her companion.

As ludicrous as it sounded, she did consider him a friend. She supposed if she attempted to escape and he was forced to chase after her, she might feel otherwise. Then it would become clear she was merely an asset to be held and returned to the king.

But that wasn't what it felt like. What she felt for him was genuine affection. And she began to wonder if that was what had made their lovemaking so unique and so powerful.

If she wanted to regain that friendship, she would have to make the first overture. Brand had obliged her fascination with codices. Perhaps she could reach out to him through *his* interests.

While most of the crew broke their fast, Anabella spotted Brand standing at the ship's starboard rail, watching the dawn. The sun was breaking through the surface of the sea with a bright promise of light, only to be smothered in a coverlet of cloud. It looked to be a dreary day.

But Anabella had an idea that would disperse the gloom and heal the rift between them. An idea that had long fascinated her. One that now made her vibrate with anticipation.

She sauntered up beside him.

“Ye know,” she said casually, “I’ve heard if a mercenary like ye doesn’t keep up with his sparrin’, he loses his skills.”

Brand stiffened but didn’t reply.

“Do ye think that’s true?” she pressed.

He clearly didn’t want to look at her. His gaze was fixed on the sunrise. But he couldn’t refuse to speak to her. “I suppose.”

“And then what use will ye be?” She sighed. “I fear after a long voyage like this…”

He frowned for a long while into the distance before taking the bait. “Aye?”

She shrugged. “Ye’ll hardly have the strength to draw a blade.”

He snorted at that. They were both aware Brand was not in danger of losing his muscle, not with all the work he did on the ship—weighing the anchor, adjusting the sail, loading and unloading goods.

“I wonder,” she mused. “When did ye last wield a sword?”

She could see she’d made him think. It had been too long. Long enough that he couldn’t remember.

“Because I was thinkin’,” she said, drumming her fingers playfully on the rail, “ye’ve ne’er repaid me for teachin’ ye to read.”

His mouth tensed at that.

She turned to him with a conspiratorial smile. “I’d like ye to teach me to fight with a blade.”

That broke him out of his constraint.

“What?” he exploded, turning to stab her with a glare of disbelief. “You?”

She blinked, startled and displeased. She’d always wanted to learn to wield a sword. She’d expected him to indulge her curiosity about that, as he had with everything else. Was he doubting her ambitions?

His outburst had attracted the attention of a few of the crew.

Too hurt and offended to be polite, Anabella fired back, “Aye, me! Why? Do ye think the woman who singlehandedly pulled your sorry arse from the sea cannot wield a weapon?”

The crew was taking a definite interest now. After all, Anabella was their angel. At least that was what she’d heard.

Brand had the decency to look at least a wee bit ashamed. But he still scowled as he muttered, “A blade is a dangerous thing. And I’ve seen how you like to dance with danger.”

“Dance with danger. Pah! I don’t know what ye mean.”

She absolutely knew what he meant. She’d clouted a dangerous attacker with a mallet. Dived into a dangerous whirlpool. Faced a dangerous storm.

But what circled in her brain was the most dangerous feat of all—tangling with a mercenary in her bed.

And by the smoke that veiled his gaze for an instant—brief but significant—she could see it circled in his brain as well.

“Nay,” he decided, facing the sun again.

She wasn’t about to take nay for an answer. And since words wouldn’t convince him…

She bumped him with her shoulder and, while he was distracted, drew the dagger from his sheath.

His hand moved so quickly trying to prevent her, she almost sliced him with the blade.

But she stepped back fast enough to avoid cutting him. Then she brandished the dagger before her with a coy grin.

The crew was riveted now. A skirmish was always an exciting event. No doubt a battle between a man and a woman was even more enticing.

“Oho!” she cried in triumph.

More men started arriving from below deck to see what was happening.

Now she had him where she wanted him. With so many witnesses, he had no choice but to engage her. This was going to be fun.

Brand heaved a sigh of exasperation.

The intrepid lass was diving into waters that were too deep and deadly for her this time. She was ill-equipped to wield a blade.

Aye, his kinswomen wielded blades. But Rivenloch lasses were practically born with a sword in their hand.

Anabella? She was a woman who read codices. Played with pups. Brought food to hardworking deckhands. Mused over light and wind and stars.

A dagger no more belonged in her hand than a lit torch belonged in a hound’s teeth.

She was going to injure someone. She'd almost injured him, just drawing the blade. If she hurt herself on his dagger, he'd never forgive himself for letting her steal it from him.

He had to take it away.

And the last thing he needed was an audience.

With an audience, he couldn't use force. He had to do it in a way that preserved his good will with the crew. It would be unseemly to use harsh but efficient methods against their "angel."

So first, he'd try reason.

"Come, lass," he murmured, "you don't want to be brawling on deck."

The glimmer in her eyes said otherwise.

He tried, "What would the captain say?"

She shrugged. "The captain's not here."

"He'll come quickly if you start a row."

"Then we'd better get to it," she challenged.

"You'd attack an unarmed man?"

She half-smiled as she called out, "Someone give him a dagger."

"Nay!" he countered in no uncertain terms.

At least he still had the authority of his rank. The men who'd clapped hands on their daggers at her request slid them back into their sheaths.

She grinned. "Ye'd prefer to fight me with your bare hands?"

He locked gazes with her. *Would* she attack an unarmed man? A man with whom she'd been intimate? Did she have the heart to slash the flesh of a man who'd pressed that flesh to hers? Could he take the risk?

“Aye,” he decided. Then, praying he wagered well, he opened his arms wide and bid her, “Come then.”

Uncertainty immediately flashed in her eyes. She obviously hadn’t expected him to leave himself at her mercy. And now she was trapped in her own bluster. She would have to surrender or attack.

What Brand recognized about combat—what Anabella did not—was it was much easier to clout a man from behind, out of the shadows, with a woodworker’s mallet, than it was to pierce his flesh, face-to-face.

Violence was something he’d grown accustomed to at an early age. A warrior had to see his foe as a target. No more than that. Not a man—with a wife or a mother or children of his own. He was simply the enemy. That was the only way one could inflict the damage required to slay another human without losing one’s soul.

Unless one was trained in a warrior’s mold, that detachment was nigh impossible to achieve.

And despite Anabella’s strength and determination, he was almost certain she didn’t have the heart for killing.

Almost.

Anabella felt her cocky grin congeal on her face. She immediately sensed she’d misjudged the situation.

Shite. She’d been so sure the spark of interest would flash in Brand’s eyes. Someone would toss him a dagger. He’d face her with a happy gleam in his glance. And the two of them would engage in a lively and playful skirmish.

But nay.

Even the crew fell eerily silent, just like the sea had silenced before attempting to swipe her off the deck.

Brand’s expression was grim. His jaw was tense. His brows were lowered. He seemed to be holding his breath. And she felt as if, even weaponless, he might impale her with his sharp gaze.

Yielding was out of the question. She’d made the challenge. She couldn’t simply withdraw it.

But she wasn’t about to thrust him through with the dagger. Sweet Mary, she wasn’t a murderer.

The way she saw it, there was only one way out.

Trickery.

“Fine,” she said.

Using a fraction of her normal speed and strength, she feinted forward harmlessly with the dagger. Then, she swung her free hand round, intending to clout him across the cheek.

He was faster than she expected.

Not only did he block the dagger, knocking her wrist aside with the back of his fist. He simultaneously seized her other wrist, preventing the blow to his face.

Then, while she was still reeling, he grabbed her dagger hand. He pried the weapon from her as easily as snatching a sweetmeat from a child.

Her jaw dropped. She raised her hands in defense, staggering backwards into the crew. The men were of no help. Like wagerers at a

cockfight, they pushed her forward again into the fray, urging her on with raucous cries.

So much for her being their angel. Their thirst for entertainment apparently outweighed their concern for her safety.

Her eyes widened as Brand flipped the dagger in his hand, pinching the blade between his thumb and first finger.

Without a word, he flung his arm forward. The dagger flew past the ear of one of the deckhands and thudded into the door of Anabella's cabin.

Her shocked intake of breath was cut short as he caught her about the waist. Lifted her off the deck. Heaved her over his shoulder. And strode toward the cabin, scattering the crew like a wolf moving through a herd of deer.

Reaching her door, he paused only to wrench out his dagger, then charged inside and slammed the door behind him.

Inside, he slipped her off his shoulder, tossed her onto the bed, and sheathed. Then he crossed his arms to glare down at her.

Breathless, she rose on her elbows, staring at him through strands of her disheveled hair.

He looked as dangerous as the devil.

But she wasn't afraid of danger.

She wasn't afraid of him.

In this instant, she was afraid of *herself.* Because she realized—now that her heart was racing, now that they were alone, now that she was lying in the very bed where they'd trysted before—she wanted him more than ever.

Brand knew taking her to the cabin was a bad idea.

But it felt like his only choice.

If they remained on deck, one of two unacceptable things would happen.

One, she'd hurt herself on that blade. Somehow, some way—despite his best efforts, despite the fact he was unarmed, and *she* was the one with the weapon—he'd escape without a scratch, and she'd manage to give herself some mortal wound. He was sure of it.

Two, with all the uproar, the captain was bound to arrive on deck. It was one thing if he suspected Brand of trysting with the lady. Seafarers on long voyages were forgiving when it came to carnal needs. But the captain knew who he was. The son of the Laird of Rivenloch wielding a dagger against a helpless noblewoman? That would add scandal to a mission already tainted by dishonor. Brand couldn't afford to have his clan connected to any of this.

The only way he could keep both things from happening was to confiscate the weapon and take her somewhere out of view.

He knew the risks going in.

What he didn't know was that none of his calculations would matter once her door was closed. Once he saw the smoldering passion in her gaze. Once his body swiftly remembered what they'd done on the bed where she currently reclined.

Nonetheless, he needed to behave honorably. He needed his tongue to speak the words his heart could not. He needed to lie.

“We mustn’t do this,” he told her. “’Twould be a mistake.”

He was speaking of fighting. Of course he was. But that wasn’t what he was thinking.

And part of him—the unreasonable part—wanted her to say, *aye, we can—’tisn’t a mistake.*…or *if ’tis wrong, I don’t want to be right.*…or *but I love ye, and I want to marry ye, my beloved mercenary.*

Which was ludicrous.

Of course, she said none of those things. Instead, she sat up primly, lowered her eyes to stare at her clasped hands, and nodded.

“I know,” she said. “’Tis…irresponsible.”

He was glad they agreed on that. At least that was what he told himself. His loins had other ideas.

“Right,” he said. “So why do you insist on tempting me?” He winced at his own words. That wasn’t quite what he meant.

“Temptin’ ye?” She shot him a sharp glance.

“Aye, into…fighting with you?”

“Oh.” She dropped her gaze again. “Honestly? I missed ye.”

Despite his rigid demeanor, his heart melted at her words. He missed her as well.

It wasn’t only that his body hungered for her.

It was something different. Something deeper.

He’d been around women all his life. But he’d never truly had one for a *companion.* His childhood had been filled with clansmen and sparring partners, teachers and hounds and horses. He occasionally brawled with his

female kin and sometimes swived an eager lass or two. But none of them had been his friends.

Perhaps Anabella could be his first…if he could rein in the irrational desire he felt for her.

"And," she confessed, "I've always wanted to learn to fight properly."

"You have?" He raised a dubious brow.

Her eyes lit up. "Aye."

"Why?"

One corner of her lip curved into the teasing smirk he'd missed. "So I can fend off abductors."

He grunted at her obvious jab. "Fair enough." Then he lowered his brows. "If I agree to teach you, will you follow my commands?"

"O' course."

"You can't be swinging a blade around like a live eel."

She giggled. "I won't." Excited to begin, she sprang to her feet and headed toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To fetch a sword. I can probably borrow one from the captain."

"Nay." He shook his head. "I'm not going to let you skewer me."

Much to his chagrin, she looked disappointed. "How will ye teach me then?"

"The same way *I* learned. With a blunt wooden sword."

She nodded. "Do ye have one?"

"We'll have to make them."

She sighed. Clearly she didn't wish to wait. She wanted to learn how to fight. Now.

He shook his head. "I've ne'er met a woman so impulsive. So impatient. So implac-"

"Why are ye wastin' time talkin'?"

He resisted a smile. Her eagerness for new experiences was infectious. And as he was gradually discovering, much was to be gained, not by quashing her enthusiasm, but rather by redirecting it.

The truth was he'd been raised around maids with blades. He knew how dangerous they could be. Arming Anabella and teaching her to spar was a terrifying idea.

But he also knew he'd never talk her out of it. Once she got a notion into her head, she built a fortress around it. The best he could do was lay siege, delaying or distracting her until, with any luck, she lost interest.

He frowned thoughtfully. "Have you e'er used a woodworker's plane?"

"Nay." She added cheekily, "I have used a woodworker's mallet."

He arched a brow at that. Then he added, "Would you like to learn?"

She nodded rapidly. Her eyes sparkled like dew on a sunlit leaf.

His heart brightened. How easy it was to make her happy. How simple it had been to get back into her good graces. And how complete her companionship made him feel.

Now if he could just stop thinking about how he'd like to slide his body along hers like a woodworker's plane…

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Chapter 15



It took Anabella most of the day to finish her sword.

Not because working with wood was that difficult. But because after planing it into shape, she wanted to make it hers.

She'd decorated the guard with twining eels in homage to Brand's earlier jest. Now, as the sun began to dip back into the sea for the evening, she finished carving her name into the grip.

The captain had frowned this morn when Brand suggested splitting a valuable ship's oar into a pair of wooden swords. But he'd promised to replace the oar when they got to Genova.

The ship's carpenter had grumbled over a woman using his tools. But Brand had promised to sharpen them all when they were done.

At first, a few deckhands had taken an interest in Anabella's efforts at planing. But it wasn't as exciting as watching her threaten Brand with a dagger this morn. So they'd returned to their labors.

Now, as Anabella fashioned the last "A" of her name into the sword, she glanced over at Brand, who was making his own attempt at carving letters into his guard. To her surprise, he seemed to be making good progress. It still astounded her how quickly he had learned to read and write.

She brushed the wood shavings away, watching him behind hooded lids. While he was focused on his work, she could let her gaze roam freely over him. Over his caressable curls. His strong arms. His deft hands.

It was a pleasure just to watch him, now that they had breached their awkward rift. She hadn't been this happy in days.

Still, at the back of her mind, the future beckoned, troubling her.

How would she manage without him when they returned to Scotland? When they parted ways?

No other man would grant her the freedom to make her own sword. Or pore over philosophy in a codex with her. Or teach her how to fight.

Once she returned to her father's keep, she'd be forced to once again suppress her enthusiastic temperament and stifle her natural curiosity. It was either that or become an unruly daughter whose behavior would prevent her from ever winning another husband.

She didn't wish to remain alone the rest of her life.

But now that she'd met a man who respected her for who she was, how could she settle for anyone less?

"The light's disappearing," Brand said, setting aside his carving tools. "We'll have to resume on the morrow."

Anabella was disappointed. She'd hoped to cross blades with him today.

"We *will* spar on the morrow though, aye?"

"We shall see."

They didn't spar on the morrow either. Brand had decided to pay meticulous attention to completing the details of his weapon. It seemed

ridiculous to her, since she intended to move from blunted blades to sharp swords as soon as possible.

By the end of the day, she lost her patience.

“I’m beginnin’ to think ye’re afraid o’ me,” she charged.

“Afraid of you?”

“Aye. Either ye’re delayin’ battle by fussin’ o’er your weapon,” she said, waving her hand above his intricate carvings, “or ye’re carvin’ prayers for strength into the hilt because ye’re afraid I’ll best ye.”

“Is that so?” He moved the sword away before she could see what he’d carved there.

“Aye. So I’m challengin’ your honor, mercenary.”

“What?”

“Swords at dawn.”

“You’re not ready for battle.”

She smirked. “Words of a coward.”

That apparently raised his hackles. “I’m no coward.”

“Prove it.”

He sighed on a very foul word. “Fine. Swords at dawn then. Don’t be late.”

She smiled, standing to salute him with her newly made blade.

Despite her eagerness to spar, it was actually far past dawn when Anabella dragged herself out of bed. Her condition had made her sluggish of late.

She shimmied into her blue surcoat and made a quick braid of her hair. Then she picked up her newly made weapon and charged out the cabin door.

Brand was waiting, standing by the railing with his wooden sword planted between his boots.

Her heart caught. How she envied the bride who'd be greeted each morn by such a handsome husband. His dark hair blew in the light breeze. His sheer leine, alternately fluttering and clinging to his magnificent chest and shoulders, left little to the imagination.

But his brows lowered when she approached. "You're late," he bit out.

She shrugged. "My apologies."

Keeping his voice low so the crew wouldn't hear, he muttered, "Already you're disobeying my commands. You vowed you would do as I say."

She scoffed. "I wasn't aware 'twas a command." Hadn't it been *her* idea to meet at dawn?

But he was serious. "I have to be able to count on you to do as I say. This is not child's play."

She lifted a brow. Wasn't it? After all, they were fighting with blunt wooden swords.

"If you can't follow my orders…" he continued.

"I can. I will." She did intend to comply. She truly wanted to learn. "I promise." But her cheery mood was fast dissolving.

More men came on deck. He scowled and let out a vexed breath. "Now we'll have an audience."

Was that why he wanted to meet at dawn, while the crew was still below deck? Because he didn't want any witnesses?

Why it mattered, she didn't know. She didn't care if they watched. Unless…

"Ah," she whispered. "Ye're afraid I'm goin' to best ye."

That jarred a chuckle from him. "In your dreams."

She raised the sword before her in both hands. "Shall we?"

He caught the dull blade in his hand. "Hold on, Lancelot." He moved it aside. "You cannot walk before you learn to crawl."

She sighed. She supposed that was true.

"Give me your sword," he said.

"What? Why?"

"You must first warm up the blood," he said, taking her sword and propping it against the railing beside his.

She blinked. Warm up the blood. That was an unfortunate choice of words. It made her think of lovemaking, how he'd warmed up her blood with a kiss and caresses before sheathing his sword deep into…

She gulped.

"Like this," he said, lunging from left to right before her.

She blushed. She had to stop thinking about their tryst. It was over and done. She needed to focus on the task at hand. And for that, she had to start taking Brand's instruction seriously.

Brand was unhappy with Anabella's swift progress.

He’d hoped to delay her a few more days. He’d wasted hours decorating his sword with designs so elaborate they were fit for a king. But if he carved any more on the thing, he’d reduce it to splinters.

He’d tried to avoid creating a spectacle by dealing with the lass while the men were still in their beds. But she’d risen late, and now they were surrounded.

His only option now was to give her harmless drills until she was exhausted and the crew were bored.

That would be easy enough. It was the Rivenloch way. As a lad, he’d been forced to repeat the same dreary exercises—carrying buckets of stones, pulling ropes, striking at a straw pell—until his arms felt like fire and his legs trembled like a newborn lamb’s. But it worked to develop both the muscles and the discipline required of a warrior.

With any luck, Anabella would tire long before she ever picked up a sword. By then, they’d reach port, and he could look for a new distraction—perhaps dining on fresh fish with *agliata*, or viewing the impressive seafaring fleet of Genova, or procuring more codices—to keep her entertained.

In the next moment, however, she added a new level of horror to her endeavors.

“Hold on,” she said as he continued to lunge from side to side. “I don’t want to trip on my skirts.”

He stuttered on a lunge as she reached down between her thighs and brought forward the back hem of her surcoat. Pulling it up between her

knees, she tucked it into the leather belt around her hips, making billowy trews out of her skirts.

“Better,” she declared.

It *was* better for drills. Indeed, it was how his kinswomen tucked their surcoats out of the way when they battled.

But the fact that her lovely stockinged calves were now visible was made clear by the abrupt silence and stares of the deckhands.

“Like this?” she asked, lunging right and left, oblivious to the disruption she was causing.

“Aye,” he croaked.

When he lunged again, his knee nearly collapsed beneath him.

Then he blew out an angry breath. This was absurd. He had to get control.

He’d trained plenty of young lads in his clan. Against his will, he’d even trained a few young lasses. Fighting was a serious affair. If he let his emotions get in the way, someone would get hurt.

So, stiffening his spine and strengthening his resolve, he pretended Anabella was no different from any other youth he’d trained.

He demonstrated the various movements he used to stretch the joints and heat up the muscles. He leaned and twisted, lifted and reached.

She followed his every move, even when some were clearly unfamiliar to her.

The deckhands gathered in fascination.

As he watched her, he began to think it was a shame Anabella *wasn't* destined to be a warrior. She had heart and drive. She had a natural awareness of her body, grace of movement, and stamina. Most of all, she had determination.

The sun was high overhead when she stopped. Her cheeks were rosy with exertion, and a fine mist had settled on her brow.

"I think my blood is sufficiently warm now," she said, panting. "I'm ready for the sword."

It was on the tip of his tongue to bark, *I'll* say when you're ready for the sword. He often used that thunderous voice of command with lads who got too swellheaded for their helms.

But in this instance, she was right. She *was* ready for a sword. She had paid close heed to his instruction, had good form, and would probably master the blade in no time.

Which meant he had to think of another reason to delay her.

"Aye," he pretended to agree, "you may be ready for the sword."

He handed her the wooden weapon and retrieved his own.

"But that doesn't mean you're ready for combat."

"What?"

"There's still training to do."

He made her lift the heavy thing over and over, swinging it to and fro, circling it over her head, until her arm drooped with the effort.

Still she persisted. The woman refused to surrender.

Even when the sweat began to drip down her cheek, even when her breast heaved with exertion, even when her arms trembled, she continued.

Finally, Brand took pity on the lass and called an end to their exercise. “That’s enough for today.”

“What? Nay.”

“Patience, m’lady. The road to knighthood is long.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Are ye mockin’ me?”

He might have done so when he was younger. When he believed lasses should stay out of the lists and wield nothing larger than a sewing needle. When he silently resented the fact he belonged to a clan full of female warriors.

But not now.

He’d grown into manhood with a healthy respect for the women of his clan, some of it taught to him at the point of a sword. And while most of the women he knew did not possess the skills to achieve knighthood, nor were they much interested in possessing them, he didn’t believe that of Anabella.

He shook his head. Nay, he wasn’t mocking her.

“If you do any more,” he warned, “you won’t even be able to lift your dagger to eat on the morrow.”

“I’ll be fine,” Anabella assured him.

But secretly, she knew he was right. Already her arms burned. And her legs felt as if they might collapse beneath her. But the exhilaration in the

rest of her—the throbbing in her veins that reminded her too vividly of the thrill they'd enjoyed in her bed—was hard to deny.

"I mean to spar with ye on the morrow," she informed him.

He only grunted.

Why he continued to delay fighting her, she didn't know. But she wouldn't allow him to delay any further. She was done with carving designs into their weapons. Doing drills to warm her blood. Hefting her blade over and over without striking anything. She was weary of his excuses.

Holding out her hand for his wooden sword, she added pointedly, "I'd better keep your weapon safe in my cabin to be sure ye don't *lose* it."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "What? Give it to you so you can wreak sabotage—shave down my blade and sharpen your own?"

She scoffed in faux offense. "Sirrah, how dare ye accuse me o' such treachery." Then, with a spark in her eye, she added, "Now I shall definitely cross swords with ye, for ye've challenged my honor."

He abruptly reached out, seizing her belt and pulling her closer.

Her heart staggered. When she gazed up at him, words failed her.

This close, she could see the light dusting of sweat on his brow. The quick flare of his nostrils. The subtle lowering of his lids.

With her blood still warm and her muscles quivering, she instantly recalled the last time they'd been in such intimate contact.

Her eyes drifted close. The wooden swords she was holding clattered to the deck.

Was he going to embrace her? Kiss her? Whisper lusty promises in her ear?

To her disappointment, he did none of those.

Instead, he tugged at the skirts tucked beneath her belt and let them fall to the ground, restoring her modesty.

He stepped back with a brisk nod of his head. “Safeguard the blades, as you wish. I shall rely upon your honor.” Then he wheeled away and headed below deck.

Stunned, it took Anabella a few moments to notice the rest of the crew was staring at her, wondering what she would do next.

Rattled, she snipped at them, “Have ye no work to do?”

Collecting the two swords, she retreated in haste to her cabin.

Only when the door closed behind her was she able to let out a breath of relief. Tossing the weapons onto her pallet, she sank onto the edge of the bed to loosen her braid.

She’d hoped learning a new skill would rekindle her innocent friendship with Brand and distract her from the unnatural attraction she felt for him. But it seemed to make things worse. Clearly this was an activity in which they should not engage.

But now she was in too deep.

She was too proud to withdraw her challenge. Her only recourse was to go ahead with the fight and pray not to be distracted by her own desires. Perhaps if she distanced him with her weapon, it would diminish his power over her.

Meanwhile, though her brain was racing, her body was exhausted. She tossed aside her hair ribbon and fell back onto the bed. How she would summon the strength to fight him on the morrow, she didn’t know.

She should have grabbed a cup of watered ale before she retired to her cabin. Her thirst was fierce. But now that she stretched out on the pallet, she had no energy to rise again. Perhaps later, when she recovered and after the deckhands had dispersed, she'd venture out to fetch a drink.

Brand scowled into the shadows of the hold. He had to collect his wits.

He'd only repaired Anabella's skirts to stop the crew from staring at her luscious legs. If the lechers drooled any more over her, they'd need to swab the deck.

That's what he told himself.

But he was just as guilty as they were of a lusty fascination with the lass.

And moving close to her had been a reckless idea.

He hadn't counted on his own reaction. Or hers.

Her desire had struck him like the intense heat of the desert sun.

In another time, another place, he would have swept her up and pulled her into his arms. Feasted on her delicious mouth. Carried her off and made unrestrained, unapologetic love to her.

But she didn't belong to him.

And he wasn't a rutting knave.

Why then was he drawn to her like iron to a lodestone? Why was he thinking up excuses to go to her even now? Excuses like hunger and thirst?

After all, he reasoned, she must have worked up an appetite. And she had to be parched. It was important after such demanding exercise to

replenish the body's stores. He always insisted the men he trained indulge in plenty of food and drink after a drill.

With new purpose, he headed for the galley.

He procured a pair of twice-baked *friselle* and a vial of olive oil to soften the crust. Then he grabbed a wooden cup to tap the cask of fresh water and snagged a bottle of the strong wine they'd purchased in Messina.

When he returned to knock on Anabella's door, she didn't come to open it, but simply called out, "Come in."

He entered to find the lass sprawled on the pallet like a shipwrecked selkie. He didn't know whether to feel amused or guilty.

"I brought food and drink." He closed the door behind him.

Unmoving, she replied, "Can ye come o'er and just shovel it into my mouth?"

That made him laugh. He came close, but she still didn't move. She didn't even open her eyes.

"Are you dead then, m'lady?" he asked.

"Only half."

He sat on the pallet beside her and uncorked the bottle of wine.

With great effort, she rose up on her elbows. Spying the bottle of wine through half-lidded eyes, she managed to sit up.

Instead of waiting for him to dilute the wine, she grabbed the bottle from him and took a great swig. Then another. And another.

"M'lady," he scolded, "'tis full strength."

Between gulps, she said, "Can't wait."

She finished off half the bottle before returning it.

He offered her the cup of water. “At least water it down a wee bit.”

She took a few large gulps of the water as well, wiping her mouth with the back of one shaking hand.

He shook his head and poured a wee measure of wine into what was left of the water for himself.

“Training is thirsty work,” he said, saluting her with the cup and tossing back the drink.

She nodded. “I may bring a bottle o’ wine to the bout on the morrow.”

“What?” He grimaced in disapproval. “I hardly think…”

“Nay,” she said preemptively. “Don’t say it. There *will* be a bout on the morrow. I’ll not be delayed again, sirrah. Ye’ve been throwin’ stones in my path e’er since I embarked on this journey. I mean to fight, damn ye, and I won’t take nay for an answer. Swords at dawn.”

“I was only going to say I hardly think ’tis wise to combine wine and weaponry.”

“Why? Do ye think I cannot hold my drink?”

He did not. “Considering your size? And the fact you’re a lass?”

It was the absolute wrong thing to say. He knew it the instant the words left his tongue. He could feel the spirits of his Rivenloch warrior maid ancestors glaring at him from Valhalla.

A smug gleam flared in her eyes. Intentionally provoking him, she grabbed the bottle of wine from him and took several more reckless gulps.

“See?” she said. “I can drink as much as any man.” Her boast was tempered by a loud, involuntary burp.

“You can drink, to be sure. But can you keep your wits about you?”

“That sounds like a challenge. Is that a challenge?”

“Not a challenge. A warning.” He’d seen men in their cups suffer mortal wounds in combat. “Inebriation and swordplay do not go well together.”

For Anabella, the gauntlet had been thrown. He could see he would get nowhere with reason. She tipped back the bottle and began to guzzle its contents, stopping only when the last drop was drained.

Then she tossed the empty bottle onto the pallet with a grin of triumph.

He clucked his tongue. She’d pay for her overindulgence later, he supposed, when she slumped into a stupor and awakened with a raging headache.

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Chapter 16



Anabella had made a huge mistake. She could feel it now. The Messina wine was far stronger than ale. Stronger even than any of the wine she'd tasted in Scotland. But it was too late to remedy now.

Her head was already swimming. She was having trouble keeping her eyes open. And every word out of Brand's mouth—his succulent, tempting, kissable mouth—seemed like the most profoundly amusing thing she'd ever heard.

"You shouldn't have done that," he chided.

She smirked. "Why not? Do ye not think I can hold my own? Do ye not think I can keep up with ye, drink for drink?"

He arched a brow. "I suppose we'll ne'er know, since you finished off the bottle."

She giggled, then immediately covered her mouth, realizing her outburst was out of proportion. "Ye could fetch another," she suggested.

"Another? That would be reckless."

She smiled into his big, blue eyes. He made her *feel* reckless. The way he was looking at her—wise, stern, but also patient…and sincere…and irresistible…

“Ye have beautiful eyes,” she blurted.

He frowned. “Do I?”

“Aye,” she said, waxing poetic. “They’re as blue as a summer sky. As bright as a sapphire. As deep as the sea.”

“Is that so?” he said, leaning back on his elbows.

“Aye, and when ye’re happy, they sparkle like stars. But when ye’re angry, they flash like lightnin’.”

“I see.”

She could tell by the amused glimmer in his gaze that he was humoring her now. But she didn’t care. Warmed by the wine, she was feeling expressive, and there was naught wrong with that. Was there?

“Your hair is the color o’…walnuts,” she crooned, “as soft as down. Nay, velvet.” She reached out to run her fingers through his locks.

He caught her hand and returned it to her. “I think not, m’lady.”

“And your mouth,” she continued, “’tis warm and supple and delicious, like—”

“M’lady, that’s enough.”

She didn’t think so. “Delicious like…frumenty.”

“Frumenty?” he said on a laugh. “You, m’lady, are definitely sotted.”

“Perhaps,” she decided. “A bit.” And then she decided she liked feeling this way. Muddleheaded and audacious, she saw no reason to govern her tongue. Indeed, it seemed a good idea to confess her feelings for him. “But ’tis true. And furthermore, I should like to kiss ye again.”

“That would definitely be unwise.”

He was being coy. She could see that. When did a man *not* want to kiss a woman?

“Then I *wish* to be unwise,” she countered, gazing at his mouth with smoke in her eyes and hunger in her heart.

Before he could give her another excuse, she seized him by the front of his leine and pulled him to her. She angled her head, covered his lips with her own, and forced a firm, insistent kiss upon him.

He tried to pull back. At first. But his efforts were meager at best.

Soon he was kissing her in return, feasting on her mouth like a starving beggar.

Her pulse raced. Her breath grew rapid. The wine eased her muscles—and her self-control.

He growled in his throat, half in resistance, half in ardor. His hands drifted up to capture her tresses, tipping her head to deepen the kiss.

She pressed closer, slipping her arms around his neck, weaving her fingers through his thick hair.

His scent—clean sweat and damp linen and sweet wine—coiled into her nostrils, intoxicating her more than the drink.

She burned for him.

Seizing his wrists, she dragged his hands down over her shoulders until his palms cupped her breasts. She sucked in a quick breath at the lovely sensation as he grazed her piqued nipples.

“M’lady,” he groaned, trying to pull away.

“Aye?” she murmured against his mouth, holding him there.

“We must not.”

“Mustn’t we?” She released one hand to reach down between them, finding and fondling the bulging proof of his attraction.

He gulped. Clearly, despite his rejections, this part of him wanted her.

She let out a sensual chuckle.

But even as she reveled in a lusty haze, a tiny morsel of conscience wormed its way through the drunkenness.

Perhaps he *didn’t* want this.

Perhaps he didn’t feel the way *she* did.

Perhaps she was forcing him, seducing his body while ignoring his heart.

If she did that, she was no better than a scheming succubus.

She stiffened and whispered, “Do ye truly *not* want me?”

His hesitation was telling.

She swallowed hard against the hurt that managed to permeate her drunken euphoria. Then she awkwardly withdrew her hand. “I’m s—”

“I do. I *do* want you,” he insisted. “But not like we did before. We mustn’t.” Then he licked his lower lip in consideration. “Perhaps…”

He didn’t finish the thought, leaving her confused. He did, however, finish the kiss. He swept his tongue deeply into her mouth, stealing the breath from her. He stroked her breasts with his thumbs, reawakening her senses.

Her shame dissolved, and she submerged again into the fog of desire.

When he tipped her back on the pallet, she had no will or strength to resist.

Not that she wanted to.

But what did he mean by *not like we did before?*

Before, it had been in the dark of night. He'd been naked. She'd been beneath him. Did he not like that?

He loosened the laces of her surcoat and slipped the garment down over her shoulders, then lower, trapping her arms and revealing her breasts.

He smiled down in appreciation. Then he lowered his head and began to bathe her with his lips and tongue. He circled and suckled at her nipples, teasing them until she clutched at the coverlet in ecstasy.

Every inch of her skin felt alive, but none more so than the flesh between her thighs. Half itch, half ache, that part of her throbbed with longing.

As if sensing her pain, he used one hand to reach down and slide her skirts up, baring that part of her.

He uncorked the small vial of olive oil he'd brought with his teeth and poured a wee bit onto his fingers.

What he intended, she wasn't quite sure, but his smoldering gaze captivated her. He watched her closely as he moved his hand down toward her nest of curls.

When he touched her with the tip of an oily finger, she inhaled sharply in surprise, squeezing her eyes shut at the divine sensation.

"Do you like that?" he whispered.

She nodded, unable to speak.

He began slipping his fingers over her flesh, softly, tenderly, slowly.

“And that?” he murmured.

She nodded again.

As he continued to stroke her, he used his other hand to tuck her hair behind her ear. Then she felt his breath upon the side of her neck.

She shivered as he kissed her there, moving inch by inch along her flesh, leaving a trail of delight.

When he reached her ear, she moaned.

He breathed, “Shall I stop?”

“Nay!” she answered at once. To cease now would have been torture.

He continued as she wished. He fluttered over her yearning flesh with deft skill. With his other hand, he gently fondled the locks near her ear. He nibbled at the sensitive flesh of her lobe.

“More?” he asked.

She groaned in reply. She feared she might burst with yearning as every fiber of her body strained for…for what?

“’Tis nigh,” he whispered, “aye?”

She was too enthralled to answer, as his movements came faster and she seemed to rise higher and higher.

When she thought she could endure no more, her body suddenly stiffened and arched. She felt frozen in time, yet the sensations continued to increase in focus and strength. At their peak, she cried out, completely helpless to stop the explosion.

Then she burst, and uncontrollable rhythms rocked her over and over as she fell back down to earth, breathless, smoldering in satisfaction.

What had he done to her?

How was it possible?

They hadn't even swived.

Was this what he meant when he said *not like we did before?*

He gave her a final caress that made her shiver with delight. Then he dragged her skirts back down.

Too weary to speak, too depleted to open her eyes, she drifted off among her roiling thoughts…

How had he known what touching her like that would do?

Why had she never felt such a thing before?

Did other women experience such strong longings?

Did other men know how to give such pleasure to a woman?

Neither John nor Hasan had ever done such things. Touched her in that way. Brought her to such joy.

But now that she'd experienced the thrill for herself, she would never be satisfied with less again.

Somehow she dozed off. Or perhaps she passed out from the wine. When she opened her eyes again, she wasn't sure how much time had passed. A few moments? An hour? More?

Beside her, Brand smiled. "Are you all right?"

She laughed on a sigh. She was more than all right. She was blissfully exhausted. Thoroughly fulfilled. Utterly satiated.

Surely he could see that.

But what about him?

Anabella had flown beyond the stars. But she'd left Brand languishing on earth.

It hardly seemed fair.

She needed to give back, to swive him in return.

Still dizzy from the wine, she rolled toward him to unlace his trews.

He seized her hand to stop her. "We should not."

"Why?"

"You know why."

She did. She was destined to marry another. He dared not risk planting his seed within her. She could tell him the truth—that she'd already made a child with Hasan and could not become pregnant—but she needed to keep that secret as long as possible.

"'Tis fine," he assured her with a smile of regret. "'Twas a pleasure just to bring you pleasure."

It was a sweet thing to say. But Anabella wasn't satisfied.

"Perhaps I could pleasure ye," she ventured, "another way."

Perhaps she could bring him to completion without swiving him, the way he had for her.

"Perhaps," he replied tentatively.

"Show me."

Brand wondered what sort of dull husbands John and Hasan were if Anabella knew so little about lovemaking.

Then again, he supposed it was more common for a lad to learn about the endless variations of erotic fulfillment than it was for a lass.

He had to be cautious for fear of shocking her. Yet he was swept up in lusty anticipation. He helped her untie his trews, freeing his already hardening cock.

Then he poured a bit of olive oil into her palm.

Wary of her sensibilities and resisting the urge to race to his own release, he wrapped his hand over hers, guiding her with tender patience over his member. It was torment, but it was sweet torment.

He squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip, fighting his body's instinct to plunge violently into her hand for hasty gratification.

"Do ye like that?" she whispered, echoing his words.

"Och, aye," he breathed.

Her hand, soft and warm around his staff, felt like heaven. He thickened with sharp longing.

Then the mischievous minx slipped her other hand below to fondle his ballocks.

He could no longer restrain himself. He thrust hard and fast, gasping with growing urgency as she murmured wordless encouragements beside him.

He felt as volatile as the volcano on Sicily. When he erupted, it was in a powerful release that made the earth tremble beneath him.

He held tightly to her hand, clinging to the intimacy for as long as he could.

At last he caught his breath. His heart slowed. Awareness gradually returned.

There was a mess.

Anabella would doubtless want to wash her hands.

But when he opened one eye to steal a glance at her, he was astonished.

She gazed down at him in lusty wonder, as if she'd never seen such a miracle before. As if she were aroused by his release. As if, as he'd said, it was a pleasure for her to bring him pleasure.

"Are you all right?" he croaked.

"'Tis…amazin'," she gushed.

He felt a rush of pride. For an instant. Then he remembered the lass was deep in her cups and probably had no idea what she was saying. She'd be just as impressed by a drooling hound.

"Let me get you cleaned up," he said.

"Brand," she divulged before he could move, "I fear I'm in love with ye."

He blinked. Surely he'd misheard her.

"Nay," she decided, "I *know* I am."

He hadn't misheard her. But that was too good to be true. He shook his head. "You've been drinking, lass. You don't know what you're saying."

"But I do. I've had two husbands." She sighed. "Neither o' them made me feel the way ye do."

If that was true, it was unfortunate. Sometimes it surprised him how few men were curious enough to learn what pleased a woman.

Somewhat sadly, he told her, “You’ll have to teach your next husband what you like.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she said. “’Tisn’t only…this. Ye make me feel…like I’m unique. Like I’m worthy. Like I’m real.”

With her hands still enveloping him, Brand couldn’t think.

But he could feel. And he felt the same way.

Anabella treated him like more than just a handsome face. Or a bold warrior. Or a rich prospect. She treated him like a person.

Was that only the wine speaking for her?

Was it the afterglow of their tryst speaking for him?

He knew it was not. She was right. It felt real.

It was on the tip of his tongue to answer her in kind. To confess his love for her. To bare his soul.

And yet enough of common sense remained to tell him that would be wrong.

It was one thing for two consenting individuals to indulge in mutual love play.

It was quite another for their souls to become entwined. That was too complicated. Too perilous.

Nay, it would be better for both of them if they left their hearts out of it.

So he held his tongue.

Anabella didn’t know she could feel simultaneously content and despondent. But that was how his silence affected her.

Part of her wanted to repeat her confession over and over until he believed she was sincere.

He was everything she could wish for in a man. Bright. Witty. Handsome. Strong. Respectful. Kind. Generous.

But another part of her recognized the truth.

He was also unattainable. Their union could never be. Her father would sooner marry her to a decrepit old laird than let her wed a lowly mercenary.

She didn’t want to think about that right now.

Right now all she wanted to think about was how perfect the moment was. How glorious it was to care for someone so deeply.

She whispered her thoughts. “I ne’er want this to end.”

“The voyage?” He gave her a lopsided smile. “You won’t think so after months at sea.”

“Not the voyage.” She gazed at him with all the affection in her heart. “This.”

Clearly all that affection was too powerful for him. He averted his eyes, focusing instead on pouring water from her aquamanile into the basin nearby.

“We can’t stay in your cabin fore’er,” he murmured.

“True.” As he wet a linen rag in the water, she coyly mused, “What other places did ye have in mind? The hold? The captain’s cabin? The top

o’ the mainsail?”

“Saucy wench,” he scolded, wiping her fingers with the rag.

She smiled. “Ye’ll show me more, aye? More ways to pleasure ye without makin’ a bairn.”

He looked uncertain, hesitating as he began to swab his belly. Finally he replied, “Perhaps. But not today. I should go.”

Only mildly disappointed, she nodded. She understood. They were both exhausted, and she was more than a wee bit addled from the wine.

He tied up his trews and ran his fingers through his hair. Then he gave her a slow perusal from head to toe as if he wished to memorize her body. A perusal that made her breath catch and her heart flutter.

“Eat something, m’lady,” he urged, nodding toward the as yet untouched *frisella* as he exited the cabin.

Anabella sighed as he left. Then she glanced at the platter of crusty rounds. She *was* hungry. But as she drizzled olive oil on top to soften them, all she could imagine was a better use for the oil.

By the time she finished off her *frisella*, the sun was high. Beams of light streamed through the window, illuminating the cabin.

Her gaze wandered over the wooden swords, side by side.

Brand’s carving was far more ornate than hers. She picked up the blade and examined it. What had he inscribed into the grip? It looked like letters.

AMOR VINCIT OMNIA.

She furrowed her brows.

LOVE CONQUERS ALL.

Where had he heard that? She hadn’t taught him that phrase. And she was sure it didn’t appear in any of the codices they’d read together.

Maybe the captain had shown him the letters.

But why would a mercenary who earned his living with a weapon choose such a peaceable inscription for a sword? Surely he didn’t believe that.

She decided she’d ask him on the morrow—right before she engaged him in battle and showed him how much her love could conquer.

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Chapter 17



Few men caught Brand off guard. He was a battle-hardened warrior who had wielded a blade since he was a wee lad.

But as he was calmly watching the first sliver of the sun rise over the distant shore to the east, listening to the gentle lap of the sea against the ship, someone managed to steal up on him, giving him a rough poke in the back, and he nearly leaped out of his skin.

He wheeled instinctively, prepared to attack.

Only Anabella's grinning face prevented him from carrying through with it.

"Did I startle ye?" she asked, looking far too pleased with herself.

"Nay," he lied, stuffing his heart back into his chest. "I'm only surprised 'twas you." He sniffed and arched a brow. "I expected, after your drunken indulgence yesterday, you'd lie abed half the morn."

She clucked her tongue. "I told ye I'd meet ye at dawn."

"You did."

He couldn't help but smile. She was an enigma, this lovely lass. As soft as a kitten one moment. As tough as a tiger the next.

He noticed, despite yesterday's boast, she seemed to have wisely avoided wine this morn. He was glad of that.

He regretted allowing her to indulge so freely last night. They'd made mistakes, both of them. She'd confessed things she no doubt regretted. He'd done things for which he was ashamed.

But he bore the blame. And he was determined to salvage her honor. He would allow her to forget what had happened, as chivalry required.

She handed him his wooden sword. The sword with which she'd poked him.

Then she bundled her skirts as she had the day before, tucking them into the front of her belt.

Bending her knees and holding aloft her sword, she arched a brow.

"I hereby challenge ye, sirrah, to battle."

He shook his head. "Have you not learned yet? You need to warm up before…"

Impatient, she waved her sword wildly. "Ha!"

He was forced to block the blade. "What are you—"

"I warmed up in my cabin." She swung the weapon again, this time toward his head.

He ducked away. "M'lady, halt!"

But he could see by the fire in her eyes, she had no intention of stopping. How had he ever believed the willful vixen would follow his every command?

As she continued to slash forward, she explained between blows, “Besides…does a true warrior…have time to prepare…when the enemy is upon him?”

He scowled in disapproval as he continued defending himself against her attack. Then he began returning her blows, careful not to hurt her. Their blades might be wooden, but they still had impact enough to bruise and even break bones with enough power.

She had a point. Warriors often had no time to prepare. They were required to fight at a moment’s notice.

“With all due respect,” he told her, “you…are not yet…a true warrior.”

Despite clearly struggling beneath his onslaught, she declared, “We shall see.”

Though her swings strayed wildly, he quickly learned her habits—which side she favored and what her weaknesses were. She was predictable enough that he could easily defend against them.

He supposed it was fruitless to try to discourage her. She seemed as bullheaded as his warring aunts, who would sooner sacrifice a limb than give up a fight. So he began to give her assistance.

“Keep your blade in front of you. You don’t want to leave yourself open to attack.”

To his surprise, the stubborn lass followed his advice. “Like this?”

“Aye, good. Lunge forward when you strike. But return afterwards, out of range.”

She did so, slowly.

He nodded. “Speed will come with practice.”

She was spirited. But she was no doubt sore from yesterday's drills. Already, she was flagging.

"Try using both hands on the grip," he said, demonstrating.

She did so, with better results.

As they continued to battle, the clatter of wood on wood attracted the attention of the crew, who began to emerge from below deck to watch.

Inspired by the growing audience, Anabella redoubled her efforts.

"Oho, sirrah!" she cried with glee as she nearly caught his shoulder. "I'll bring ye down yet."

He shook his head. Pride was the downfall of every novice he'd ever trained. Anabella was no different.

She made a low jab forward, aiming for his shins.

He sidestepped out of harm's way and smacked her thigh lightly as he passed with the flat of his blade.

She wasn't hurt, only startled. But the crew voiced a collective, "Ooooh" as she scrambled back out of reach.

Then, with a tenacious frown, she tossed her head and advanced again. She made a diagonal slash, forcing Brand to turn aside to evade her blade.

The crew chuckled as the weapon whistled through empty air and struck the deck with a thud.

He leaned toward her, advising in a low voice, "Stop resisting. Start learning. You shun my advice at your own peril."

He expected her to bristle at that.

But she didn’t. Instead, she reset in the stance he’d shown her—knees bent, legs braced, blade forward.

“Come at me slowly,” he directed, “and I’ll show you how to defend yourself.”

She did so, though the crew muttered in complaint at her caution and tried to goad her into attacking.

For a while, she resisted their urging.

Eventually, however, she lost her patience. She succumbed to their taunts. She began to take risks again, relishing their cheers of approval. Swinging wide, she left herself unprotected and advanced when she should have retreated.

Clearly Anabella didn’t understand that he was holding back. Tempering his strength. Letting her take the advantage.

But he couldn’t do it forever. Even if it bruised her pride, she had to learn the lesson he taught all potential warriors. Not to get too self-assured for her own good. Overconfidence led to injury.

He knew it was time to put her in her place when she charged forward in an aggressive series of attacks, brazenly crying out, “Yield now, sirrah, or suffer my wrath!”

He knocked aside her weapon and advanced with calm power, striking her in quick succession with the flat of the blade—her shoulder, her hip, her knees.

She was forced to retreat as he rained light blows upon her.

Half the crew complained, seeing their angel falling back. The other half cheered for Brand, welcoming his revenge for her hubris.

When he cornered her against the railing, she was forced to lower her sword.

The men hooted in disapproval at her surrender.

She glared at them in her defense. “He *is* twice my size!”

“That shouldn’t matter,” he told her, lowering his blade. “Your strengths are just different. Speed. Agility. Unpredictability. They’re all good tactics.”

“Unpredictability?”

He should have paid attention to the dangerous gleam that flashed in her eyes.

Instead, he continued to advise her. “Aye. You can strike from above when your opponent’s blade is low. Spin away and return with a broad arc. Even bowl a great man o’er by diving at his feet.” His female cousins loved that strategy.

“Go again,” she invited, raising her weapon.

He backed away to give her room, and she came at him with a more measured attack.

“Good,” he said, countering her, but letting her move him backwards.

“I have a question,” she said as she held the sword in both hands, hacking from the left, then the right.

“Aye?”

“What is AMOR VINCIT OMNIA?”

His breath caught. His heart tripped. His blade slipped.

Where had she heard that? How did she know the Rivenloch motto? Did she know who he was?

While he was rattled, she came round with her sword and struck him on the arm.

He cursed under his breath. Unpredictable indeed. And he'd bear a bruise on the morrow to prove it.

Now he remembered. He'd engraved it on his sword. She'd kept the thing in her cabin. She must have seen it and wondered where it came from.

He wasn't about to tell her.

He wasn't about to reveal that *Amor vincit omnia* was the rallying cry of his clan.

That it wasn't a mercenary-for-hire who had botched her rescue, but a noble knight from one of the most prestigious clans in Scotland.

Meanwhile, seizing her advantage, Anabella continued pressing him—with her sword and her words.

"Where did ye hear it?" She jabbed forward. "Do ye know what it means?" She swept the blade down diagonally. "Why did ye carve those words?" She leveled a horizontal arc toward him.

He managed to hold her off, despite her verbal attacks.

Why he'd carved that motto into his sword, he didn't know. It had been a foolish lapse. He should have known the inquisitive lass would wonder about it.

He couldn't let her ask any more questions. She was not only prying. She was arousing the curiosity of the crew.

He had to silence her.

Anabella felt giddy with triumph.

This was more exhilarating than galloping out of the horse paddock behind her father's back. Diving into the loch while John lay sleeping. Delving into a new codex by one of the Greek philosophers. Fighting off thieves on the streets of Acre.

But the thrill of conquest was to be short-lived.

Her next mighty two-handed blow was clapped short by a hard block from his weapon that made her hands sting and her bones shiver.

The loud crack made her ears ring. As she staggered backwards from the force, her smile of victory soured into disappointment.

That one fierce blow told her everything she needed to know.

Brand had been withholding his strength, letting her advance, giving her the advantage.

He'd never been at her mercy. Not for an instant.

And now that she'd thrown him off-balance and humiliated him in front of the crew, she was about to find out what kind of violence he was truly capable of.

She wasn't seriously afraid of him. She didn't believe he would hurt her.

But he would definitely show her who was the true warrior.

He didn't disappoint.

In the next instant, he swept his weapon in the opposite direction, hooking his hilt on hers and wrenching the sword from her slackened grip. It sailed away from her, skittering across the deck.

Now she was unarmed.

She vaguely heard the crew's excitement as he advanced on her. But mostly she was distracted by the dark determination in Brand's eyes.

She gulped, attempting to stand her ground.

He didn't stop.

Raising the blade between them, he leveled its point at her chin.

As she froze, she saw what countless victims must have glimpsed with their last breath. A cold, merciless, grim vision of death staring them into submission.

But she refused to submit. Refused to let him intimidate her. No matter how rapidly her pulse beat in her throat.

She locked eyes with him. Bold. Fearless.

The crew waited with bated breath.

At first she was unable to penetrate the depths of his stormy glare.

But as she stared, she detected a softening of the black in his eyes, as if the devil turned away. And in his place, a gray storm cloud brewed.

Brand's gaze lowered almost imperceptibly to her mouth.

She smelled the heat of battle upon him. Felt the throb of her heart beneath his blade. Saw the glaze of sweat upon his brow.

For one mad moment, a smoky longing veiled his eyes, and she imagined he meant to kiss her. To tip her chin up, lower his head, and press

his hungry mouth to hers.

He did not.

But she glimpsed the temptation in his eyes. The same temptation she felt in hers.

And then it was gone.

He lowered the sword and stepped back.

“Do you yield, my lady?” he asked her formally.

So many wayward thoughts raced through her head, she couldn’t answer at first.

Bloody hell, aye, she yielded…her body…her heart…her soul.

“Aye,” she finally managed to choke out. “I yield.”

The crew responded with a mixture of cheers and grumbles. Apparently, the boors had wagered on the outcome of the bout.

“Enough for today,” Brand decided, going to retrieve her sword.

She had to agree.

She ached in every part of her body. She’d had enough of the meddling crew. And her mind was frayed with conflicting emotions.

Flustered, she untucked her skirts and let them fall, then wheeled and headed straight for her cabin.

Once inside, she paced before her pallet, trying to put everything that had happened into context.

It felt like Brand had made a fool of her, intentionally concealing his strength until the last moment.

Yet she supposed she'd brought it on herself, becoming too confident of her skills before she'd mastered them.

Still, what had started out as an entertaining skirmish had become something else.

Battling with him had made her blood race.

And somehow that feigned bloodlust had quickly turned into real lust.

She wanted him.

And she was certain, by the tempest in his eyes, he wanted her.

Brand flinched as Anabella slammed her cabin door behind her.

Then he rounded on the crew, grousing, "Away. Naught left to see here."

As they began to disperse, he gathered the two sword hilts in his fist and turned his back on the men to stare out to sea. He narrowed his eyes, casting perplexing thoughts across the vast, churning expanse.

How could Anabella possibly be aroused after he held a sword to her throat and turned his darkest scowl upon her? It was unthinkable. But there was no mistaking the scorching desire he'd seen reflected in her gaze. Desire that immediately melted his ire like a forge melting iron.

How had she done it?

What was it about the enchanting woman that took all the roar out of his thunder?

Bloody hell. Sir Brand Cameliard of Rivenloch made grown men quail in their mail. He was a force to be reckoned with. A warrior to be feared.

Why did she not fear him?

Did she imagine because she was a woman, he would not lay her low?

His female cousins had felt the brunt of Brand's assault on the practice field. To be sure, it wasn't often he bested them, but he'd knocked them onto their arses more than a few times.

And he may not have inflicted harm upon Anabella so far, but he'd already inflicted his *will* upon her, spiriting her away.

Did she imagine because he had an interest in delivering her safe and sound to her father, he would not hurt her?

If he were so inclined, he could give her battle scars where they wouldn't show.

On the other hand, Anabella wasn't wrong.

He couldn't bring himself to inflict harm upon her. Any more than he would hurt his cousins. Not seriously anyway.

But how could she be so certain of that?

He squinted against the bright jewels of sunlight dancing on the waves.

Last night, she'd told him, *I fear I'm in love with you.*

He'd tried to pass off her confession as a drunken rant. How could she possibly love him? She didn't even know him. Not really.

What she deemed love was only lust. The poor lass suffered from the inept affections of lazy husbands. His skilled hand had coaxed passions from her she'd never enjoyed before. That was all.

Surely this morn, once she was sober, she'd immediately regret her words.

But what Brand had been afraid to admit last night, even to himself—what he could no longer pretend this morn—was that he felt the same way.

He was absolutely in love with her.

And Anabella knew it. Knew how he felt. Knew his heart.

A flock of gulls suddenly flew past the ship. Their squawks sounded suspiciously like mocking laughter.

"So?" he dared, glaring at them.

So what if he *was* in love with her?

He wouldn't be the first man who'd fallen in love with someone he couldn't have.

Impossible love was the prevailing form of romance in the French court at the moment. Or so his sister Isabel had said. Such a relationship—where a man worshiped and fought for a noble lady he could never attain and only love from afar—was deemed the height of chivalry.

Perhaps he could love Anabella like that.

As he watched the flock of gulls circling overhead, untethered and carefree, he wondered if he could be as aloof with his affections.

Could he keep a safe distance while enjoying her companionship?

The birds swooped and dove, catching shimmering fish in their beaks for their breakfast.

Breakfast.

He'd forgotten to fetch something for Anabella to eat. After the humiliation he'd subjected her to, she'd doubtless be unwilling to show her face on deck for a while. And she might not wish to see his face either.

But he wouldn’t let her starve. And he needed to return her sword to her.

He didn’t, however, intend to repeat the mistake he’d made yesterday. Today he’d bring only water, no wine. In fact, considering she might be vexed with him, it might be best to avoid her altogether. He was considering the merits of having young Falco deliver her meal when he heard a low whistled summons behind him.

He ignored it at first. Deckhands were always calling one another with a whistle.

It came again. Again he ignored it. He cast his gaze toward the bow of the ship and wondered if Falco was there.

“Psst!”

Reflexively, he turned toward the hiss. And wished he hadn’t.

It was Anabella. She peered at him from behind her cabin door. After a quick survey of the deck for witnesses, she beckoned him with a hand.

Every instinct told him to ignore her summons. Entering her cabin would be entering a den of sin.

Yet against all sense, he was compelled to push off from the railing. His feet propelled him forward. In a few rash moments, swords in hand, he found himself firmly ensconced in the woman’s cabin. Again.

“Can ye believe they were wagerin’ on us?” she said as she closed the door. “I swear the crew would wager on whether or not the sun would rise.”

Her words put him at ease for the moment. Apparently she wasn’t angry. She’d moved on from asking about the Rivenloch motto. And she must have forgotten about the passion smoldering between them.

“I saved a bit o’ supper last night,” she told him. “We can share it.”

He couldn’t turn down the temptation of food. But he’d been able to withstand the temptation of her company. So far.

She seemed to be interested mostly in discussing their bout. If she still *feared she was in love with him*, she didn’t mention it.

He silently wondered if she’d been to France and learned their ways of courtly love.

“Ye tricked me, ye know,” she accused, tearing off a chunk of *frisella* for him.

“Tricked you? What do you mean?”

“Holdin’ back your force like that.”

He shrugged, placing her sword on the bed. “’Twas a courtesy.”

“’Twas a strategy.”

The corner of his lip twitched. “Perhaps.” He popped the *frisella* into his mouth.

“Ye made a fool o’ me.”

He spat the *frisella* back out into his hand, quickly assuring her, “’Twas not my intent.”

“What *was* your intent?”

“To make you a better warrior.”

That was the truth. As futile as it was to help her perfect her skill with a sword—a skill she’d never be allowed to use—he longed to please her. To help her master what she desired. To make her happy.

She let out a long sigh. “Tell me the truth. Do I have any talent at all?”

“Of course.” How could she think otherwise? “You learn fast. And you have a keen eye. Quick reflexes. Good instincts. Bushels of determination. With practice…”

He wasn’t quite sure how to finish that thought. She would never achieve the distinction of a Rivenloch maid. She had neither the intimidating stature of his mother, the icy nature of his sister, or the invisibility to slip into enemy ranks of his aunt. None equaled the warriors of his clan.

“With practice,” he decided, “you could hold your own in battle.”

“Do ye think so?” Her eyes lit up.

“Mm.”

Her enthusiasm troubled him. But he told himself it would never come to battle. Not on his watch. As long as she was under his protection, until she was safely back in her father’s hands, he would stand between her and danger.

He stuffed the morsel in his mouth again. It was dry and difficult to chew. But he wasn’t even going to *look* at the vial of olive oil.

She was rubbing her *frisella* thoughtfully across her lips.

“What do ye think my greatest weakness is?” she asked.

A dozen things came to mind.

The way she fell into his arms with such trust.

How she moaned when he kissed the sensitive spot beneath her ear.

Her breathlessness when he stroked the delicate blossom of her womanhood.

Instead he choked down the *frisella* and said, “Your backhand.”

“My backhand?” She put her uneaten bite back on the platter and picked up her wooden sword. “Show me.”

“Here?”

“Better here than out there,” she said with a nod of her head, “where the addlepates will wager on every blow.”

There was hardly room to swing a sword in her cabin. But he understood her reticence as far as the deckhands were concerned. It was twice as hard to learn with eyes of judgment upon you.

He knew all about that, growing up a son of Rivenloch. Everyone expected him to be perfect. He imagined it was even more challenging—that battle for respect—for his clanswomen.

“Now?” he asked, glancing hungrily at the *frisella* still languishing on the platter.

The gleam in her eyes answered for her.

She tucked in her skirts again with haphazard haste, and he caught a glimpse of bare thigh. He quickly shut his eyes, trying not to let the image imprint on his brain.

It didn’t work. But he clenched his jaw and addressed her fighting form as objectively as possible, telling himself she was no different from every other novice he’d trained.

“Lift your forearm a bit higher,” he said.

“Like this?”

“Aye,” he said, tossing his sword back on the bed and placing his hand

on her shoulder. “Now turn away. From the waist.”

She turned, and he used his other hand to turn her chin toward him.

“Turn your body, but keep your head this way. Straight ahead. Ne’er lose sight of your opponent.”

He could have bitten his tongue for choosing those words, for she took them to heart. She pinned him with her gaze. That bright, wide, emerald gaze that turned his bones to custard.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Now,” he said, his voice cracking over the word, “step forward, lead with your shoulder, and let the back of your fist follow.”

She moved slowly. “Like this?”

“Aye.”

“Should I still be lookin’ at ye?”

“Aye. For now.”

“For now?”

Misdirection, which was a skill particular to his clan, came later, after basic skills were mastered.

“We’ve got weeks at sea,” he told her. “Even more on land. You’ll have plenty of time to practice.”

“Like this?”

She repeated the movement, slightly faster. Her arm sagged.

“Hold your arm higher.”

She held it up.

“Turn away more,” he said.

She turned her head.

“Everything but your head. Eyes on me.”

He could see she was getting frustrated by so many commands.

“Here,” he said, moving to stand close behind her.

He reached around to clasp the wrist of her sword arm. Then, surrounding her body, he twisted with her, and they moved as one, recoiling and then reversing to strike a backhand blow.

“Again,” he said, moving with her.

“Again.” They glided through the arc again.

“Once more.” She moved with him as one.

“Now with a step forward.”

They practiced the move over and over until it was fluid.

Brand had shadowed wee lads in this way before. It was the swiftest way to teach them the rhythm and form for combat.

Never had he done so with a grown woman. And never had he considered how intimate the position was until now. Now he felt every inch of her body. Each flex of her muscle. The heat coming off of her skin.

It was highly distracting. And though he could feel she was learning the movement more quickly this way, all he could think about was the way her hip grazed his thigh every time they turned together.

“Perhaps we should move on to thrusts.”

He winced even as he said it. He prayed she hadn’t noticed.

She had.

She turned unexpectedly in his arms.

Suddenly they stood toe to toe, chest to breast. And he was drawn into her dewy gaze.

“Thrusts?” she asked.

He gulped.

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Chapter 18



Anabella tried to pay heed to Brand’s instruction. She took learning seriously. She always worked hard to master whatever she undertook.

But the instant he enveloped her in his embrace, pressing his chest against her back, and murmuring instructions into her ear, her brain turned to pottage, and she couldn’t think straight.

Did he sense it as well—the heat between them? Could he feel her muscles sliding along his? Was he as affected by the familiar scent of her sweat as she was by his?

She didn’t want him to let go of her. And when she turned in his embrace with that plea in her eyes, she could see he struggled with the same desire.

Her sword clattered to the floor, forgotten.

She seized him by the back of the neck and drew his head down to hers, claiming his mouth with her own.

Sweet Mary. He tasted of battle. Hunger. Passion.

He pressed his hands into the small of her back, holding her tightly against him, like he’d never let her go.

Soon he was covering her face with frantic kisses, devouring every morsel of her.

She plucked at his leine, willing it to dissolve away.

They gasped together, unable to find words to express their eagerness.

Finally she broke free, but only to breathlessly untuck her skirts.

He swept his arm across the bed, knocking his wooden sword aside. Then, in one graceful motion, he hefted her up in his arms and stretched her out across the pallet.

While he unlaced his trews to release the beast that raged inside them, she gathered her skirts out of the way.

She braced herself, waiting for the beast to delve into her.

Instead, he nudged her knees apart, opened up the flower between them, and lowered his head.

The sensation of his warm, wet mouth upon her sent a jolt of shock through her body. Heat flushed her face. She moaned in halfhearted protest, even as she clutched at his hair. His lips and tongue worked magic upon her. Soon she was drenched from his efforts.

By the time he moved upward, she was ready to cast caution aside, to welcome him with open arms—body and mind, heart and soul.

But he was a man of honor. He intended to keep his word.

He managed to slip with tantalizing precision between her thighs without violating her boundary and the promise he'd vowed to keep, arousing her while fomenting his own desires.

Thrusting against each other like crossing swords, they sparked fires of lust between them. Stronger and hotter they blazed until their flesh melted

together, and she was unable to tell where she ended and he began.

The ropes of the pallet creaked with their efforts. She gasped, digging her heels into his driving buttocks. He buried his head in her neck and then, with one fierce onslaught, brought them both to fruition in an explosion of flame.

She clung to him as tightly as a barnacle to a ship, holding fast against the raging tide. Even when the seas of their passion calmed, still she cleaved to him, never wanting to let him go.

Then, to her surprise and horror, her throat thickened with emotion and her eyes welled with tears.

What was wrong with her?

She should be happy. Exuberant. Full of joy. Beaming like a kitten with cream.

Instead, her heart pinched, and a deep melancholy swept over her like the shadow of a cloud. Sorrow furrowed her brow, and tears spilled over onto her cheek.

She wanted to hide away.

But Brand sensed her distress, rising up to look at her. “What’s wrong, Ana?”

It was the first time he’d called her by name. And he’d called her Ana. No one called her that. It was always Lady Anabella, which sounded stiff and formal.

It made her weep more.

She shook her head. She didn’t know what was wrong.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked.

“Nay.”

“Did you not…like that?”

The idea made her laugh through her tears. “I loved that.”

“Then what…”

After a long moment, she realized the truth. “I love *ye*, Brand. I *love* ye. So much. I’ve ne’er loved anyone as much as I love ye.”

She could tell that pleased him, though he wasn’t ready to admit it. Nor was he ready to return the sentiment. He tenderly brushed the hair back from her cheek.

“I’m afraid o’ losin’ ye,” she whispered.

His brow creased, but he tried to make light of her words. “’Tis a very long journey. By the time we reach France, you’ll be sick of me.”

“Never,” she said. And she meant it.

He wiped away her tears with his thumb and gave her a smile of reassurance. “All will be well. Trust me.”

A sob escaped her.

No doubt he figured once they got to Scotland, she’d be bored with him. Her father would find her a nobleman to wed, and she’d forget all about Brand.

“Ye’re wrong,” she said.

“All will be well,” he repeated. “I give you my word.” He seemed so confident.

But his word, his honor, his chivalry, his good intentions—they meant nothing as long as she kept the terrible secret growing inside her.

She sniffled softly against his chest, wishing she'd never left Scotland.

He murmured, "Perhaps we should…stay apart."

She looked up at him with wide eyes. "Sweet Saints, nay!"

Only one thing was worse than being tortured by love for Brand, and that was being deprived of him.

"Nay," she repeated. "If there's anythin' I've learned in my short life, 'tis to live for the moment."

He nodded, mumbling, *"Carpe diem."*

How did he know that?

"What did ye say?"

He looked startled for an instant. "I… 'Tis something I heard the captain say. I think it means…'do it now.'"

"Seize the day," she corrected. But she didn't believe she'd ever heard the captain say such a thing. She frowned, suspicious. "Ye seem to be learnin' quite fast." Which reminded her… "Ye ne'er told me. Why did ye carve *amor vincit omnia* on your sword?"

Brand had hoped she'd forgotten about that cursed inscription. Surely after the earthshaking tryst they'd just enjoyed, nothing could be further from her mind. But apparently she had the persistence of a fly.

Now he'd have to lie to her…again.

"I copied it," he said.

"Copied it from what?"

He couldn’t say it had come from a codex. She’d demand to know which one.

He couldn’t say it had come from the captain. The captain might advise Brand to seize the day, but he’d never suggest that love conquered all.

So he improvised. “From a chalice I saw in the market.”

“A chalice?”

“Aye. I remembered the letters. I don’t know what it means,” he lied. “But the chalice had a sword and a heart.” He shrugged.

“Love conquers all,” she supplied.

“What?”

“It means love conquers all.”

“Mm.”

“’Tis from the Greek poet, Virgil.”

“Is it?” Actually, that *was* news to him. His clan claimed it came from an ancient Norse saga, because of *course* they did.

“Do ye believe it?” she asked. “That love conquers all?”

When Brand was younger, he’d always thought the motto was stupid, a weak battle cry for a warrior clan. But now he understood the diplomacy behind war and the strategy of alliances.

In his own clan, enemies were often vanquished, not by battle, but by marriages.

“I do believe it,” he said.

She sighed. “I suppose we shall see.”

Never had he been more tempted to reveal himself. To confess that he was no mercenary, but indeed her noble hero. That he loved her as much as she loved him. That she could rest easy, because he had their destiny well in hand. Her father would gladly wed her to him, once he learned Brand was a Rivenloch.

It would transform the melancholy in her face to joy.

But he couldn't tell her. Not yet.

Not only did he have to consider his clan's reputation if he failed at this mission.

He also had to consider his own heart.

Anabella believed she loved him. But did she? Was hers a true and lasting affection? Or was she simply infatuated with him and starved for touch?

Once he revealed his identity, he would never be certain.

So he chose to remain silent.

Meanwhile, the days at sea passed in a haze of pleasure.

Each morn they practiced swordplay.

The crew, no longer fascinated by the novelty of a woman wielding a weapon against a man, stopped placing wagers or even paying much heed.

Afterwards, hot from battle, the two of them would repair to Anabella's cabin to eat, drink, and indulge their carnal hunger.

Brand couldn't decide which she learned quicker—how to best him in battle or how to please him in bed.

He still had to feign ignorance when it came to reading. But he didn’t mind. Every moment spent with Anabella was thrilling, whether they were caught up in the throes of passion or embroiled in a debate over philosophy.

Time passed quickly, and all too soon, they were approaching Genova, where they would linger at least a fortnight to empty and replenish the hold and to replace the damaged mast. When they reached port, they would be roughly a third of the way home.

Brand couldn’t make up his mind whether that was good or bad.

As long as he succeeded in his mission, the sooner they reached Laird Robert in Scotland, the sooner Brand could declare his identity and offer to marry the laird’s daughter.

On the other hand, part of him wished he could sail in this limbo of existence forever—exploring the world through her eyes, adrift on a sea of love and learning—and never return home.

Of course, that was impossible. The best he could hope for was smooth sailing. That she wouldn’t fall out of love with him. And that no misfortune—illness or injury or treacherous weather—would befall them before they reached Scotland.



Anabella woke to soft knocking on her cabin door. She frowned. Surely it wasn’t yet morn. She turned onto her side and pulled the coverlet over her head.

The knocking grew louder.

She whimpered softly in protest.

But when the knocking grew more insistent, her eyes popped open in alarm. Maybe something was wrong on the ship.

She threw back the coverlet, and sat upright, her heart pounding.

Before she could scramble to her feet, the door cracked open. “Ana!”

“What is it?” she demanded, clutching the coverlet to her chest as he peered in. “A fire? A storm? Enemy ships?”

“What? Nay.”

She clapped a hand to her breast and let out a sigh of relief. Then she lowered her brows at him. “Then why did ye wake me ere the crack o’ dawn?”

“Crack of dawn? The sun has been up for an hour. When you didn’t come out with your sword, I feared…”

He didn’t finish the thought, but she could see it in his eyes. He feared something dire might have happened to her.

For a lovely moment, her heart melted at his concern.

But then she remembered his concern might be about not getting paid by the king if he brought home a corpse.

She glanced out the window at the golden glow of day. “How did I sleep so late?”

“That’s what I wondered. You’ve been rising ere dawn for days now.”

That was true. Not today. This morn, she was exhausted. Aisha had warned her that pregnancy would make her energetic one day, fatigued the next.

“I’m a bit tired,” she admitted.

“Too tired to go ashore?”

“Ashore? Are we in port?”

“Nearly.”

She perked up at once. On her way to the Holy Lands with John she hadn’t seen Genova. They’d traveled over land to Rome. She’d been looking forward to seeing the magnificent port city. And enjoying fresh food after so many days at sea.

The captain and some of the crew planned to visit kin in Genova while the mast was replaced, so Anabella would have plenty of days to explore.

Still, she sprang from the bed, hardly giving Brand time to close the door between them. From the chest of clothing, she pulled out her striking green velvet gown with the silver ivy border. Now that she’d abandoned her plans to escape, there was no need to blend in with the crowd. She didn’t care if she looked conspicuous.

As soon as she set foot on deck, she gazed past Brand, distracted by the sight of the harbor and the scores of vessels anchored there.

“So many ships,” she marveled.

“Genova is known for its shipbuilding,” he told her. “The galley we’re on was built in Genova.”

Anabella had guessed that. John owned a collection of scrolls with illustrations of sailing vessels from all over the world. She’d studied them at length. This ship with its expertly crafted fittings, carved wooden railing, and perfectly joined and sealed deck, made the galley a veritable work of art.

But now, seeing the various ships personally was exhilarating.

She pointed off the bow to a half dozen small rounded vessels with single square sails heading for port. “Those are cogs.”

Blinking in surprise, he nodded. “They are.”

Sailing behind them was a unique craft with wooden castles at each end and a striped square sail, a ship that made her heart race. “Is that a Vikin’ nef?”

“I believe so.”

“And those,” she said, indicating a wall of formidable two-masted ships to their starboard side that were long and flat, fitted with a row of oars. “Those are dromons.”

“Right. Likely warships. But how did you—”

“Warships? Why? Is Genova at war?”

He arched a wry brow. “Almost always. But those are used to battle pirates as well.”

She found another pair of heavy dromons with single sails and multiple rows of oars. “What are those for?”

“Those are probably slave ships.”

She frowned. Though the slaves in the *harem* had seemed happy enough, she didn’t like the idea that they might be transported to a foreign land at the whim of a lord.

Then she smirked. *Transported at the whim of a lord?* By that definition, it seemed Anabella was a slave as well.

“What about those?” she asked, pointing to several dromons in a variety of sail and oar configurations.

“Most of those are probably used for transporting goods.”

She recalled a fascinating scroll from John’s collection. “Some dromons can carry horses in their hold.”

“True, but how did you—”

“They’re called hippogogas.”

Weary of her avoiding his questions, he gently pinched the point of her chin, turning her head to meet his gaze. “How, my clever lady, do you know the names of all these vessels? Are you a pirate?”

“Perhaps,” she teased.

The answering glimmer of amusement in his eyes made her heart flutter. Then his gaze lowered briefly to her lips. She caught her breath, parting them. His fingers tightened on her chin.

Suddenly she wished she *were* a pirate, a thief of the high seas, so she could steal a kiss.

But the crew was on deck. So far, if anyone suspected that she and Brand did more than dine in her cabin, they didn’t speak of it. But they were still careful to keep their affections to themselves. There was no need to spark rumors that might cause harm.

So Brand gazed off toward the docks without a word. Anabella stared unseeing across the canvas of ship masts. The tension between them screamed. But they were silent as the captain maneuvered the galley with practiced ease into its home port.

Once ashore, Brand was again charmed by Anabella's curiosity and eagerness to learn. She gobbled up each new experience like courses at a Christmas feast.

Each day, as they wandered the narrow streets of Genova, she cooed with delight over some unfamiliar sight or sound or taste.

She closed her eyes in ecstasy over the golden-crusted *fügassa*, served warm and drizzled with olive oil.

She gasped over the lush velvet, the damask cloth, the intricate patterns of threads fashioned like spider webs into lace.

She stared in hushed awe when she spotted the stunning black and white cathedral of San Lorenzo.

By the twelfth day, Brand had begun to wonder if Anabella's ardor for him was cooling, now that she had other things to claim her attention, when she stopped suddenly in her tracks and let out a reverent sigh.

Then he saw it. A shop full of weapons. Sharp, pointy weapons.

"Nay," he said.

"Oh aye."

"Nay."

"I've been practicin' every day," she pointed out. "I'm ready for a real sword."

"Nay, I said." The thought made him shiver.

"Ye said it yourself, I'm a fast learner."

"Aye, that's just it. You've become too good. I don't want to return to Scotland with missing limbs."

She cuffed him on the chest.

“Ah!” he cried, pretending injury.

“Cease, ye poltroon.” She started toward the shop. “I’m goin’ to—”

“Nay,” he said, grabbing the back of her dress before she could go.

“Let go o’ me.”

“I’m not buying you a sword.” The one piece of leverage he had was coin. It might be partly her father’s, but it was in his possession.

“I’m only goin’ to look.”

“Fine. Look. Don’t touch.”

He released her, and she scurried toward the shop.

He followed her, shaking his head.

In the end, he conceded. He should have realized he couldn’t resist her fluttering lashes.

By the time they headed back to the ship on what turned out to be their last day in Genova, she was in possession of two new codices, a needle and thread, a rich blue velvet gown he couldn’t resist gifting to her, a jar of garlicky *agliata*, and the smallest sword he could find. A sword that was still far too sharp for his liking.

Onlookers gave her a wide berth as she transported the thing back to the ship, carrying it with the reverence of the Magi bearing a gift for the Christ child.

Naturally, once they were on board, she wanted to try it.

Naturally he refused her.

“I’m not going to die by the sword I purchased for you,” he said.

“I won’t kill ye.”

“Maybe not. But you could maim me.”

“If I wanted to maim ye, I would have done it already.”

He scoffed.

“Besides,” she added, “why did ye buy it for me if ye weren’t goin’ to let me wield it?”

“You can wield it. You just can’t wield it against a living person.”

She fumed, narrowing her eyes. “That’s ridiculous.”

He crossed his arms with finality. He might have fallen for her charms when it came to buying the thing. But he refused to let her harm anyone or, God forbid, bring harm to herself with the deadly weapon.

He could too vividly imagine what her father would say. What the king would say. What his mother the Laird of Rivenloch would say.

You did what? Gave an untrained noblewoman a sharp sword?

He would reply that she wasn’t untrained. He’d proudly announce that he’d trained her himself.

And that would be worse. Much worse.

Anabella stuck out her lip in a pout. “Fine. I’ll practice alone. I’ll stuff that new blue velvet gown with straw to make a pell and—”

He growled at her.

She grinned. She was obviously jesting. She did love to rouse the thunder inside him.

Still, he wouldn’t put it past her to make a target of his gift. She clearly loved the sword he’d bought her ten times more than the gown.

By the time they were ready to set sail again, she'd nicked the mast, gouged a chunk out of the ship's railing, and sliced the ivy trim of her green surcoat.

But joy beamed from her face.

"Am I a true warrior now?" she asked.

The sight of her wielding the sharp steel blade made his gut clench. Had it lengthened since he'd bought it? As to her question, there was so much about warfare she had yet to learn. Ruthlessness. Timing. Sacrifice. Strategy. Engaging only as a last resort.

Instead, he replied to please her. "Aye. Aye, you're a true warrior now."

Days hence, he would have cause to replay those fateful words, regretting he'd ever uttered them.



Falco was the first to spot it. A ship following them. Gaining on them. Rapidly closing the distance.

He alerted the captain.

Brand knew at once what it was.

Enterprises for plunder and pillage ran rampant in the waters between Italy and France. A merchant's galley like theirs, laden with valuable goods from Genova, made a prime target.

The captain began shouting out commands. Cursing the meager wind, he sent crew to man the oars. Desperate to retain their newly acquired goods, he ordered the hold secured. Deckhands armed themselves with swords, daggers, bows, axes, kitchen knives, and whatever else was at hand.

Brand didn't care about the freight. Cloth and spices were things. Costly things, aye, but replaceable.

There was one bit of goods that concerned him more than anything they'd picked up in Genova.

Unfortunately, that bit of goods had just heard the noise and stepped out of her cabin to see what transpired.

Brand scowled. "Get back in your cabin."

"What's goin' on?"

"Go. Now. Block the door."

She scowled back. "Don't tell me what—"

"M'lady," he snarled in a voice that sent grown men scurrying.

"Not until ye—"

"Bloody hell!" he roared.

He'd hoped to spare her the knowledge of the danger ahead. But he could see he wouldn't get her cooperation until he gave her an answer.

Clamping his jaw in frustration and narrowing his eyes to angry slits, he bit out, "Pirates."

Her eyes widened.

Satisfied he'd frightened her into compliance, he added, "So get back in your cabin. Block the door. And let me do what I'm trained to do."

She bit her lip, then slammed the door shut. He trusted, now that she was suitably alarmed, she'd drag the heavy chest against the door to block the entrance.

He blew out a nerve-settling breath.

Now he could prepare for the battle to come.

Despite their best efforts, the oarsmen could coax no great speed out of the vessel. It was heavy in the water with its new goods, and available crew were stretched thin.

Meanwhile, the approaching ship sat high atop the sea while its full complement of oarsmen made it skim the waves like a dolphin.

Pirates wouldn't ram the vessel or set it on fire, not if they wanted to share in its spoils. But they *would* board the ship. They'd slay anyone who stood in their way. And if they found a noblewoman for whom they could demand ransom…or worse…

Brand had just enough time to shiver into his mail and snap up his sword.

The foreign ship drew up alongside theirs and immediately began firing arrows and hurling grappling hooks over the railing.

To Brand's surprise, the men clambering onto the ship weren't Italian or French. They had the dark skin and flowing garb of the men he'd seen in the Holy Lands.

As he braced himself for battle, he realized they didn't fight like knights either. The deckhands, already at a disadvantage with a lack of weaponry and experience, couldn't defend against them.

The captain—hearing the screams of oarsmen shot with arrows from the pirates' powerful recurve bows and crew savagely wounded on their wicked daggers, as well as Piccola's panicked yelps—quickly called for surrender.

He understood that all the goods in the world would profit him naught if he didn't have crew left to sail the ship.

But Brand wasn't about to submit. He was a warrior. He might not be able to triumph against a ship full of Saracen pirates. But he would at least take several of them down before he yielded.

Positioning himself aggressively at the railing, he knocked several interlopers into the sea with the pommel of his sword.

"The grappling hooks!" he called out to the crew.

If they could disengage the two ships, he could at least strand the pirates who made it on board.

But those on the attacking vessel now shot arrows across the bow. One bolt pierced a deckhand's leg. Another whistled past Brand's ear.

He ducked behind a barrel.

A pirate leaped across the gap.

Brand cut him down at the knees. He fell on the captain's wee dog. She yelped in pain.

Another pirate followed.

Brand thrust his sword into the man's leather hauberk.

A third slashed out at him with his wavy dagger, nicking Brand's neck above his mail.

Brand drove him away with his boot.

As fast as he cut one man down, another replaced him.

“The barrels!” he cried.

The crewmen began slicing the barrels loose, rolling them across the deck, bowling some of the pirates down like pins.

But some men he could hear screaming as they were targeted by the invading archers.

Still their numbers increased. And now came a second wave of attackers, those who were better trained, who had relied on the first wave of expendable servants to clear the way for them.

Now Brand engaged with three Saracens who knew how to use swords. So far, he was managing to hold them at bay with his superior strength and size. But with three blades slashing at him at once, it was challenging to stay on the offensive.

One pirate he finally dispatched by heaving him with great force. The man tripped and hit the mast head-first, and it shivered as he slithered to the deck.

The other two pirates required close attention as he dodged and blocked their blades, looking for an opening. Which was why at first, he didn’t notice the ally who’d joined the battle.

Pacing in her cabin, Anabella ground her teeth. There was no way she was going to wait like a helpless kitten shut up in a cupboard while pirate dogs ravaged the ship. Not when she could hear the cries of her shipmates being hurt and Piccola’s fierce barking.

The mercenary had said it himself. Anabella was a fast learner. She was a true warrior. And now she had a proper weapon. Destiny had put it into her hands just in time to wield it to good purpose. She was sure of it.

She pushed up her sleeves. Tucked in her skirts. Snatched up her sword. And peered carefully out the crack of the door.

She wasn't prepared for the blood. The deck was splattered with it, and she saw a few of the crew lying wounded, grimacing and groaning, one with an arrow protruding from his thigh. She felt nausea rise at the back of her throat.

But she was quickly distracted as combatants with clashing swords crossed her field of vision, just a few yards from the door.

Her first survival instinct was to slam the door. To shut out the horror.

But she resisted the urge.

In the next instant, she saw a warrior in chain mail fighting single-handedly against two pirates.

Brand.

Her fear instantly dissolved. She needed to help him.

"Nay!" she cried, exploding out of the cabin, brandishing her sword.

She immediately regretted bursting out rather than stealing up on them.

Startled, Brand turned toward her for an instant, and he paid for his inattention with a shove from his opponent that sent him staggering backwards.

Then the pirates turned on her.

Biting back dread, she steeled her jaw, gripped her weapon in two hands, and tried to remember what Brand had taught her.

Recognizing she had the element of surprise and the advantage of her sex, she moved boldly, slashing right and left before they could expect or prepare for her attack.

She managed to disarm one of the astonished pirates, sending his sword flying. But he hastily rushed in under her blade to try to bowl her over.

She stumbled back to avoid his attack.

To her surprise, the man was pulled up short like a hound yanked on its leash. Shock froze his face.

She fumbled with her sword.

His eyes glazed. Then he coughed, and droplets of blood spattered everywhere.

She flinched in horror as he dropped lifelessly to the ground. Then she saw Brand withdrawing his blade from the gaping wound that had slain the man.

Before she could thank him, the second pirate surged toward her.

She swept up her weapon and slashed out at him. The scrape of steel on steel, not at all like wooden swords, sounded like a shriek as she battled against his greater strength.

“Stop!” someone yelled.

She wasn’t about to stop. She was fighting for her life. Fighting for Brand. She continued lunging, swinging her blade. Still she was losing ground, inch by inch.

“Mah!” came a second cry.

This time her opponent was ripped away from her and tossed to the deck by one of his own. The man who’d yelled. A man she recognized at once.

Hasan.

From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Brand. Vengeance glittered in his gaze. Determination clenched his jaw. He raised his bloody sword over Hasan’s head.

And her heart stopped in her chest.

“Nay!” she screamed. “Nay, Brand!”

By some miracle, despite the murder in his eyes, Brand hesitated. Time slowed as she watched a drop of blood drip from his blade, splashing onto the deck like a wee red blossom.

“Nay!” she cried.

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Chapter 19



Deafened by his own pounding heartbeat, it took Brand a moment to hear Anabella's cries.

Blinded by bloodlust, it took him another moment to recognize the man who stood before her with a dagger.

Stunned by the impossibility, it took him a third moment to gather his wits.

But it took him only an instant to knock the dagger from the Saracen's hand with a punch full of rage.

What the devil was Hasan doing here, a thousand miles from his home?

How dared he threaten Anabella? A noblewoman? His own wife? With a dagger?

What kind of madman hunted a lady all that distance?

What kind of monster boarded her ship with a pack of savage pirates?

Brand tried to convince himself it was anger that moved him. Anger at Hasan's bullheadedness. Furious, pulsing rage.

But deep in his heart, he knew the truth.

Brand wasn't angry. He was devastated. Distressed. Heartbroken.

This merchant from the Holy Lands wasn't just Anabella's husband. He loved her so much he'd tracked her here. For miles. For weeks.

"I do not want your goods," Hasan announced, signaling his men, who were apparently not pirates, to cease fighting. "I want only my wife."

The crew gasped at the revelation that Anabella was his wife, a declaration that only increased Brand's pain.

"Your wife?" The captain, clutching to the irate wee dog he now held safe in his arms, stepped forward. "This lady is a Christian, Saracen. She is not your wife. Get off my ship."

Piccola growled in accord.

Hasan straightened with dignity. "I will not leave without her."

The captain straightened. "This is my ship. She is my passenger. You cannot come aboard my vessel and take someone you claim is—"

"He speaks the truth, Captain," Anabella said with bitter honesty, her eyes lowered. "His name is Hasan. And I was his wife in Acre."

"Was?" Hasan barked. "You *are* my wife. You will come back with me."

Brand stepped between them, his heart thundering. "What if she does not *want* to go back with you?"

Hasan fumed. "It is not a matter of want. She belongs to me. She is my wife."

Strictly speaking, that was true. But Brand was obsessed, determined to change Hasan's mind, so he pointed out, "You have other wives."

He could see this undeniable fact annoyed Hasan. And as he watched the impatient Saracen's beard tremble with ire, dark thoughts flooded his

brain. He wished he'd never heard Anabella begging for her husband's life. If he'd simply killed the man when he'd had the chance, there would be no discussion.

Now her fate hung by a thread.

Brand couldn't breathe.

The thought of losing Anabella was unbearable.

She was the light of his life. The rainbow after a storm. The bright spark of flint that ignited flame. The twinkle of sunlight atop a deep, vast sea.

She was a woman unlike any other. A women of character and substance, of intelligence and curiosity, of ambition and adventure. He'd never met a lass like Anabella. He was certain he would never again.

How could he live without her?

He could not.

He could not.

Indeed, Brand was willing to go to desperate lengths to ensure Anabella would never set foot on the Saracen's ship. Hasan might wish to reclaim his most precious jewel for his *harem.* But Brand knew the one thing a wealthy merchant could not resist.

"How much?" he ground out.

Hasan lowered his brows.

Brand repeated the question, clarifying. "How much gold will it take?"

"What?" Hasan seemed genuinely confused.

“For Anabella,” he said. “How much gold will it take to make you sail away, go back to your other wives, and forget about this one?”

Brand expected to see the gleam of greed in Hasan’s eyes. But to his astonishment, the man looked aghast.

“Sir, you offend me,” Hasan told him. “Anabella is not a slave, to be purchased. She is my wife by her own choice. You are the one who has stolen her from me.”

Bloody hell. He was afraid of that. Brand had started out this journey as a warrior of Rivenloch. The king’s man. A shining hero.

Yet somehow, between trusting the woman who’d let him into Hasan’s home, Anabella’s misunderstanding of his noble intentions, and Hasan’s surprising sense of honor, Brand had been reduced to a filthy mercenary and a crass villain.

Thank the Saints, Anabella came forward to defend him. “He didn’t steal me, Hasan. ’Twas Fatima who paid him to take me away.”

Brand frowned. That wasn’t quite right. “She didn’t pay me,” he told Anabella. “I took no coin from her for your rescue.”

“Rescue?” Hasan scoffed.

Brand let out an irked sigh. Perhaps the man, who seemed to possess gentlemanly qualities, deserved a truthful explanation. He took a deep breath and stood tall like the knight he was—or used to be.

“I am under the command of King Malcolm of Scotland,” he intoned. “His Grace charged me to return the lady to her noble father.”

Hasan straightened. “She no longer belongs to her father.”

Anabella bristled at that. “I don’t *belong* to any man.”

Hasan scowled. Clearly that was not his belief. “Fatima said a man took you by force in the dark of night. This man?”

Anabella nodded. “A man Fatima *hired*, because she wanted to get rid o’ me.”

“She didn’t *hire* me,” Brand once again insisted, turning to Hasan. “I took no coin from her, I swear. She only let me into the house.”

Hasan stroked his beard, seeming to digest this. “Fatima?”

“Aye, but…” Anabella said. “’Twas because Fatima was jealous. I was a threat to her.”

Hasan narrowed angry eyes at this damning revelation.

But despite Fatima’s foul play, Anabella clearly wished the woman no ill. “She did it for love, Hasan,” she quickly added. “She loves ye very much.”

Hasan’s gaze darted to her. “And what about you, Anabella? Do you love me very much? Do you wish to return to my *dar* with me?”

Brand held his breath.

Anabella’s long hesitation and her quick glance at Brand gave her away.

Hasan’s face darkened. “I see.”

Anabella was quick to assure him. “I do care for ye, Hasan. I always will. I’m grateful ye took me into your *dar.”*

Her words did naught to soften Hasan’s disappointment. “But now you wish for *khula?* To leave me?”

She lowered her eyes, bit her lip, and nodded.

Brand let out half his breath. But Hasan had not yet replied. And the man was taking his time, furrowing his brows, thinking the matter over.

When Hasan at last gave a single nod of grudging approval, the rest of Brand's breath escaped. He'd never been so relieved.

Part of him felt sorry for the man who had just been rejected by the most magnificent woman in the world.

On the other hand, how sorry could he be for a man greedy enough to claim four wives? Surely he didn't care for Anabella like Brand did.

But then the Saracen did something that utterly confounded him.

He fixed Brand with a steely stare and muttered under his breath for Brand's ears only. "You must care for her well. Give her respect. Protect her. Guide her. Give her many children. And all the codices she desires."

That last would have made Brand laugh. But he was reeling over the fact that Hasan had somehow assumed Brand meant to make her his wife.

Hasan stabbed his finger in the air toward Brand's face, hissing the threat, "And do not think of trading her for any amount of gold."

"You're mistaken," Brand protested. "I have no claim to her."

"You do," Hasan whispered, clouting Brand's chest with the back of his fist. "In here. I can see it." Then he said something that would haunt Brand for days. "And she has a claim to you. If she did not, she would have found a way to escape long ago."

Hasan's last words were not meant for Anabella's ears. But she heard them anyway.

Part of her was saddened. Hasan obviously cared a great deal about her. Enough to insist that, even if he couldn't have her, she would be treated well.

Part of her was stunned. Hasan knew naught about Brand, and yet he'd guessed there was a connection between them.

Was it so transparent?

Did the crew know?

Would her father detect it when Brand delivered her to him?

Hasan addressed the captain. "With your permission, my surgeon will treat your wounded." He raised a haughty brow. "Our physicians are superior to yours."

The captain might be insulted, but he wasn't foolish. He grunted in approval.

Then, after a stiff nod to Anabella, Hasan ordered his own dead retrieved and then returned to his ship to fetch the surgeon.

Anabella couldn't shake her guilt over the fact this was all her fault. Perhaps not *all* her fault. After all, it hadn't been her choice to be abducted.

But Hasan was right. She'd had the opportunity to return to him in Limassol. She could have run away in Messina. Or Genova.

She might have prevented Hasan from wasting time and coin, traveling all this way.

She might have kept good men from being hurt and killed.

The two ships were still lashed together. Even now, she could change her mind, even if she couldn't change her heart.

Going back with Hasan was, after all, the sensible thing to do. If she remained, her child would have no father.

Yet she couldn't make Brand face the king and her father, having failed in his mission. And seeing how fiercely he defended her, how desperately he bid to keep her, how could she deny the bond between them? A bond even Hasan could perceive.

Hasan never returned from his vessel to bid her farewell. No doubt his pride was injured. After the surgeon finished, the galley was set free, and Anabella watched Hasan's ship sail into the distance.

"Are you all right?" Brand asked, coming up behind her.

She nodded. Part of her felt relief. Part of her felt regret.

Had she done the right thing?

Brand seemed to read her thoughts. "If ever you change your mind, my lady, I will take you back to him."

She could tell the promise was difficult for Brand. By returning her to her husband in the Holy Lands, not only would he be defying the king and breaking his word to her father. He'd be willfully breaking his own heart.

She knew that now. She knew he loved her. Perhaps not as much as she loved him. But enough to sacrifice his honor for her.

With a lump in her throat and tears in her eyes, she nodded her thanks.



Over the next weeks of sailing, Anabella's belly began to swell beyond what her gowns could accommodate. She made use of the needle and thread she'd picked up in Genova to make a few alterations. But she feared her secret could not be kept for long. And considering her ongoing intimacies with Brand, he would find out first.

The crew had wrapped the bodies of the two casualties in linen and committed them to the sea. The wounded, due to the expert care by Hasan's surgeon, recovered.

Previously inexperienced men, unnerved by the swift violence of the attack and anticipating another, entreated Brand to train them. Subsequently, Anabella's time with him grew briefer as he spent long hours sparring with the rest of the crew.

But she recognized the need for such abilities on a merchant ship. Still haunted by her encounter with real armed swordsmen, she wondered if she'd even be alive if it weren't for the training Brand had given her.

Brand must have agreed, because one morn he pulled her aside privately.

"You need to be able to defend yourself when I'm not near," he decided.

She swept up her blade. "I have this. I'm improvin' every day. Ye said so yourself."

"What if you don't have a sword?" To prove his point, he briskly forced it from her hand and tossed it aside. "What then?"

She frowned. How easily he'd disarmed her. Was there any hope for her against a bigger, stronger foe?

“You always have your eating knife,” he told her.

“My eatin’ knife?”

“Let me see it.”

She pulled it out of its sheath. It was a wee thing. The blade was only as long as her littlest finger. It was barely sharp enough to cut bread.

“If you’re in dire circumstances,” he said in a low voice, “you can kill a man with it.”

Her eyes widened. “How?”

He wrapped his hand around hers on the knife and pressed it to the middle of his chest. “Feel here, just beneath the breastbone? You would drive the point quickly upward and inward, under the ribs, into the heart.”

The idea made her shudder. Sparring with a sword was one thing. Slipping a dagger beneath a man’s ribs was another.

But she could see by Brand’s serious stare, it was a skill he thought she should possess. So she nodded, relieved when he took the knife away from his heart.

In the end, she had no cause to worry. Their passage had been well guarded by Genovan warships. The merchant vessel was untroubled by pirates. And this was their final day at sea.

On the morrow, they would say farewell to the captain and his crew, who would eventually return to the Holy Lands for more shipments. Brand and Anabella would continue on foot to Calais before they boarded a ship again.

Anabella leaned back against the railing with her hands folded strategically over her belly, watching three deckhands face off against

Brand. He easily deflected their attacks, shouting out commands as they battled.

"Higher! Now dodge left. That's it. Wait! The other way. Spin…and thrust! Aye."

Piccola, limping on a bandaged leg from her own entanglement with the Saracens, nonetheless scampered across the deck and leaped up into Anabella's arms, scarcely allowing enough time to catch her.

"Och, Piccola! Look at ye. Ye're almost back to new. I'm goin' to miss ye, wee one."

The captain followed sternly after his pet. "Forgive me. She slipped out of my hands."

"That's all right," Anabella said, burying her nose in Piccola's frothy fur. "She's just happy to be able to frolic again." Then she spoke to the dog. "Are ye learnin' some fightin' skills too, Piccola? So next time ye won't get hurt?" She gazed at Brand, who was demonstrating a complicated around-the-head strike. Then she wrinkled her nose. "I don't think a pup can do that, lass."

The captain frowned thoughtfully. "There are not many *men* who can do that. Sir Brand is the finest fighter I have seen." He shrugged. "But I suppose you are aware of that, knowing the Rivenloch clan."

She blinked. "What?"

"They are the best knights of your country, yes?"

"The Rivenlochs?"

"Si."

"Well…aye."

Then she chuckled. The captain must be mistaken. The Rivenlochs *were* the premier warriors of Scotland. But Brand wasn't a Rivenloch.

"Is that what he told ye?" she asked. "That he's from the Rivenloch clan?"

The captain looked uncertain.

Anabella wondered if she should let the captain know he'd been deceived. Or just let the mercenary continue with his myth.

"He *is* a very fine warrior," she agreed and left it at that.

But the captain persisted, "The Rivenlochs are known far and wide."

"Aye, I'm certain." Which made it odd that Brand would choose that particular clan.

Then the captain leaned close and lowered his voice. "If I thought he was *not* a Rivenloch, my lady, I would not let him…keep you company in your cabin."

Anabella blushed to the roots of her hair. At a loss for words, she clung self-consciously to the dog. So the captain *did* know about their trysts.

"O'…o' course," she stammered.

The captain grunted and gave her a dismissive nod.

She gave the dog back to him, too flustered to say more.

As he walked away, her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach.

So Brand had told the captain he was a Rivenloch? Was that only to get the man's consent to "keep her company" in her cabin?

If so, it was an incredibly bold lie. It was true the Lowlands were swarming with Rivenlochs. It was unlikely anyone but their own laird knew

all their names. Still it was the height of brazenness for anyone to feign to be from such a well-known clan. Someone easily dismissed as an impostor.

Unless…

What if it was true?

What if the captain was right?

What if Brand *was* a Rivenloch?

He'd let Anabella believe he was a lowly mercenary.

Had he intentionally deceived her? And if so, why?

She glanced over at Brand as he directed the skirmishing deckhands. She'd never met anyone from the Rivenloch clan. After her mother's death, her father had shunned the court and tournaments. But Brand *could* be a Rivenloch. He certainly had a natural sense of authority.

Young Falco was wielding Brand's wooden sword. The one with the inscription. *Amor vincit omnia.*

Now she remembered where she'd heard it before.

It was the motto of the Rivenloch clan.



Despite the impressive Roman structures and awe-inspiring ships, the thronging roads clogged with travelers, and the sights and smells and hues of the shops lining the port, all Anabella could think about was the man holding fast to her elbow as they navigated their way through Marseille.

Was Brand truly a Rivenloch?

Why hadn’t he told her?

Why had he let her believe he was a common mercenary?

She didn’t dare ask. She feared it would change everything.

Perhaps he would tell her in his own time.

But as they weaved their way through the streets of the city, she began to wonder if she should have gone with Hasan after all.

Returning to Scotland with a mercenary, Anabella could have rebuked her father and run away with Brand.

But a Rivenloch? While her father would heartily approve of such a match, there was no way the Laird of Rivenloch would let one of her precious clansmen wed a landless widow. Especially when she discovered Anabella was already with child.

On the ship, facing Hasan, Brand had fought fiercely for her. But was that only to protect his reputation with the king? Or did he truly love her?

Once his mission was fulfilled and he brought her to her father, would he abandon her? Or did he mean to offer her marriage, even if it could mean challenging his own laird?

It didn’t matter. Surely once he found out she was carrying Hasan’s bairn, he would withdraw his offer.

She had to make a plan. Consider her options. Be prepared to face the consequences of her condition.

But not here. Not now.

For as long as she could, she wanted to live for the moment. Enjoy whatever time she had left with Brand.

She leaned her head against his shoulder as they stopped in front of a fine inn the captain had suggested for lodging.

He smiled down at her.

She smiled back, remembering rumors about the infamous Rivenloch charm. Now that she knew his secret, she couldn’t get it out of her mind.

And when, by either his charm or his coin, he secured a private chamber for the night, she thrilled at the thought of reveling in the arms of a warrior born of Vikings.



For Brand, the weeks passed far too swiftly. He purchased a donkey to carry all the codices he’d acquired. But they traveled alone together on foot, seeking lodging as Brand and Anabella Drummond. Feigning to be husband and wife was simpler, and it wasn’t too far from the truth. It also allowed them to continue their adventures in lovemaking.

On the nights he was unable to secure a private chamber, Anabella was remarkably amenable to trysting in a stable, in a stairwell, behind a cart, or against a tree. Once, on a hot summer day outside of Avignon, they swived in a lake, likely shocking the fish with their passionate thrashing.

But soon he discovered Anabella was keeping a secret from him. A secret that was going to change everything.

Growing up around the women of Rivenloch, who had little sense of modesty, he was familiar with the signs. He should have been aware from

the illness Anabella had experienced on the ship from the very beginning. An illness the surgeon had certainly recognized.

Now she'd advanced enough to have full breasts and a visibly swollen abdomen.

She'd tried to alter her garments to hide her condition, letting out some of the stitching and lacing her surcoats more loosely.

In his own clandestine way, he'd even contributed to her efforts, buying her an intentionally oversized surcoat that would disguise her condition.

But he couldn't pretend it didn't exist forever.

At times he worried the long trek through France would drain her and endanger the bairn.

His clanswomen, born of Vikings, walked and rode and battled until the day they delivered, and it was said one of his ancestors gave birth on a battlefield.

But Anabella was not a warrior maid, despite her claims to the contrary. She could wield a blade with some skill, as she'd proved against Hasan's men. But she was a gently born lady. And despite knowing the bairn wasn't his, he didn't want her to do anything that might jeopardize its life…or hers.

Still, it was a full six weeks later, when they arrived in Paris, he finally decided their trysting should cease.

Her belly had grown too large to ignore. Yet she said not a word about it.

Did she not understand she was with child? That was hard to believe. She was a brilliant and perceptive lass.

Did she think he would not notice? Brand knew every freckle, every curve, every inch of her intimately.

Or was she simply denying the truth of her condition, trying to freeze time and dwell forever in this idyllic moment, where the two of them were madly in love and had not a worry in the world?

Aye. As was he.

But the bairn was inevitable. And no matter how much they wished their situation was different, it was not to be.

He had to confront her. Soon. Tonight.

How she would react, he couldn't guess. It was a risk he had to take. But if he was going to destroy her happiness, he would at least make their first day together in Paris as pleasant and memorable as possible.

They first admired the cathedral school and the abbeys on the left bank of the Seine, then crossed the wooden bridge to the island in the middle of the river, where one of the abbots had boasted a grand cathedral was to be built beside the royal residence.

Another bridge carried them to the right bank, where they could see the tallest hill in Paris, topped by the church of Saint-Pierre de Montmartre. Anabella's eyes lit up. She wanted to climb up and look out across all of Paris.

Brand felt it was too risky in her condition. But he wasn't so foolish as to tell her so. Instead, he distracted her with the row of shops crowded

along the lane. By sheer number, Paris's shops put those of Genova to shame.

"Isn't that a *manuscripta?"* he asked, nodding.

She was immediately drawn to the colorfully illuminated codex chained to the counter.

"That is not for sale," the proprietor was quick to inform Brand.

Brand disagreed. Everything was for sale…for a price.

But he only nodded. It wasn't the sort of codex Anabella liked. She wasn't interested in richly decorated exteriors. She cared more about what was inside.

He realized that was what he most loved about her. She felt the same way about people. She didn't care whether someone was rich or poor. Christian or Saracen. A noble knight of Rivenloch or a lowly mercenary.

As she perused the scrolls and codices, his eye caught on a collection of texts he'd seen before. His brother Ian owned some of them.

Suddenly he knew how he would broach the subject of Anabella's pregnancy.

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Chapter 20



Anabella had been to Paris once before, when her mother was alive and she was but a wee lass. She remembered little of it, certainly not the magnificent structures, the river Seine that dwarfed Edinburgh's Leith, the number and array of merchants.

It was tempting to splurge on codices at the *manuscripta*, especially now that she realized it would hardly scratch the surface of the Rivenloch wealth. But Brand had already been so generous. Between the private lodgings and provender and gifts of codices and gowns, he'd spent a fortune on her already. She refused to take any more of his charity.

She found one codex, however, she couldn't resist. She quietly asked if Brand would purchase it for her. It was a publication her father would never have allowed her to read—Peter Abelard's *Sic et Non*, a controversial text questioning faith and God. Questioning God? Laird Robert didn't even believe a daughter should question her father.

But Anabella was a woman made of questions, and her curiosity about religion had been piqued by her trip to the Holy Lands.

Brand picked up the codex. "What is it?" he whispered, as if he didn't know.

She couldn’t believe he was still feigning illiteracy. The Rivenlochs took great pride in their ability to read.

“*Sic et Non.* It means Aye and Nay.” Then, just to confound him, she lied. “’Tis an instructional manuscript on the ways o’ charmin’ a man.”

A laugh escaped him, which he quickly turned into a cough. “Indeed? Aye and Nay?”

“Aye for when ye’re doin’ it right, nay for when ye’re not,” she told him.

He gave her a wink. “I hardly think you need instruction in charming a man, Ana.”

She smiled. It still thrilled her when he said her name.

While he made the purchase, she gazed wistfully off toward the church of Montmartre. It was hard to believe such a beautiful church would allow the terrible things that had been done to the author of *Sic et Non* and to his beloved Heloise, all because of their forbidden love.

In their instance, she supposed, it wasn’t true that love conquered all.

The thought saddened her.

She was tired. She no longer wanted to hike up the hill.

For weeks, she’d held onto the belief that everything would work out. That destiny would guide her. That she and Brand would find a way to be together. That they’d live happily ever after.

Now she realized she was living in a fantasy.

She had to come to terms with her situation.

She had to tell Brand her secret.

She had no idea how he would respond. But it was something she must do.

Before she did, before she splintered him with the trebuchet of her truth, she wanted to hold him close, kiss him, and tryst with him one more time.

“I fear I’ve grown weary,” she told him. “Can we find lodgin’ now?”

Brand was quick to accommodate her. Not far away, he found a small *auberge* tucked between the shops with a small stable for the donkey. Because it was not yet evening, when most travelers arrived, a private chamber was easy to procure, though she was certain it must have cost a wee fortune in such a desirable location.

For weeks she’d explored with Brand new and pleasurable erotic temptations. But now she ached to join with him, wholly and completely. To feel the magic of their union again. And for that, she had to lead him down a path he’d sworn not to follow.

When she brought him to the feather-filled pallet in the *auberge* and pushed him onto his back, he made no resistance.

When she began removing his clothing, piece by piece, he only looked up at her with languid eyes, letting her have her way with him.

When she removed her own gown, exposing her fuller breasts, she saw him harden with desire.

He reached for her, but she dodged him with a wry smile and anchored his wrists to the bed with her hands.

She swept one leg over him, moving to sit astride his hips and squeezing her knees against his sides. Then, with a smoky glaze in her eyes,

she lowered her body to drag her breasts softly across his chest and moved her woman’s mound tenderly across his member.

He squeezed his eyes shut with a groan.

She leaned forward to nudge his mouth open with her own, sweeping her tongue deep inside to joust with his, savoring the taste of fresh ale and ancient need.

He arched up against her, craving the sweet friction upon his flesh.

She danced away, teasing him.

He gasped, rising again to grind against her.

She let out a sensuous chuckle, pulling back.

“Vixen,” he growled, bursting free of her anchoring grip on his wrists and rolling her onto her back beneath him.

If he thought he could cut her triumph short, he was mistaken. She knew how to seduce him, even when he seemed to have the upper hand.

Using all the wiles she’d learned from him—tempting him with glances and whispers, touches and kisses, sighs and promises—she made him shiver with longing, even while her own desire made her hot and wet and ready.

Then, when he was hard and trembling, she drove up to envelop him within her body.

He cried out, half in passion, half in protest.

But passion won the day.

And when she rose up again and again, seeking divine fulfillment, he couldn’t resist answering her rhythm.

They moved as one body, one soul, rising high into the heavens. Together they soared. Together they tasted joy.

At long last, when she could endure no greater delight, she shuddered in pulses of release, fluttering and spinning and drifting like a feather back to earth.

She dug her heels into his buttocks, and Brand, unable to pull away, followed soon after. He bellowed and plunged into her with the thunderous force of a storm, even while he cradled her with hands as gentle as summer rain.

Afterward, he slid carefully off of her, pulling her back to nestle against his chest.

"Wicked lass," he murmured against her hair. "You took advantage of me. Did you learn that devilry from your 'charming a man' codex?"

She grinned. "Perhaps."

He clucked his tongue. "The proprietor warned me the text was dangerous."

Abelard's text might be dangerous. But charming Brand into swiving her? It wasn't actually dangerous. Not when he couldn't get her pregnant.

She'd tell him the news now, as if it were *good* news. Tell him they could swive every day from now until they reached Scotland. That there was no risk of Brand making a bairn with her, because she was already with child.

But her pregnancy wasn't truly good news. She knew that. So she'd tell him while they luxuriated in the mellow afterglow of their lovemaking.

While he couldn’t see the shame in her eyes. While she couldn’t see the condemnation in his.

“Brand?”

“Aye?”

She bit her lip. “There’s somethin’ I need to tell ye.”

“Aye?”

“I’ve been hidin’ it from ye because…I didn’t want it to be true.” She took a settling breath, preparing herself for his reaction. “But you’d find out eventually. I’m…” She whispered the last. “I’m with child.”

He was silent. His arms didn’t tense around her. His breathing never changed. For a moment, she wondered if he understood what she’d said.

“Did ye hear me?” she asked.

“Aye.”

She thought she should clarify. “’Tisn’t your bairn,” she said. “’Tis Hasan’s.”

“Of course.”

His calm unnerved her. Maybe he was in shock. Or maybe he was simply indifferent. After all, if it wasn’t his child, what concern was it of his?

Tears stung behind her eyes. She’d hoped for some kind of reaction. Rage. Sorrow. Despair.

Nay, that wasn’t true. What she’d truly hoped was that Brand—still breathless from their soul-searing, spirit-bonding outpouring of love—would tell her it didn’t matter. He’d confess his true identity and promise to

marry her. To give a name to her bairn. To cherish the both of them ever after.

“I have something to tell you as well,” he said.

Her heart flickered. Surely he meant to reveal his identity now.

He reached for his satchel and withdrew another manuscript, one she hadn’t seen him purchase. It was *De curis mulierum,* On Treatments for Women. Though she’d never seen it, she’d heard of it, and of the famous Trota of Salerno, the female physician who had inspired the texts. Much of her advice concerned fertility and childbirth.

Fertility and childbirth.

“Ye knew,” she realized.

“I knew.” So that was the secret he had to tell her.

“How long have ye known?”

“Since Avignon.”

That was over a month ago. “Why did ye ne’er say anythin’?”

“’Twas not my place to uncover your secrets.”

She had to admire his sense of honor, even if she was mildly perturbed, thinking about how careful he’d been with his own secrets. And his seed.

She took the manuscript from him. It *was* a thoughtful gift. Salerno had been the first city to allow women to study medicine. As far as Anabella was aware, Trota was the only physician to write about treatments specifically for women. It would help Anabella through childbirth.

But now that Brand had admitted he knew her secret, what did he plan to do about it? Would he offer her marriage? Or would he distance her, drop

her off with her father, and wash his hands of the matter?

She got her answer over the next days of travel.

Now that she'd admitted to her condition, he decided it would be best to discontinue their swiving. He claimed it was for fear of harming the bairn. And since Anabella could find naught in *De curis mulierum* to incontrovertibly dispel his fears, he would hear none of her arguments.

Several times he conceded to kisses and caresses. He whispered words of devotion and admiration. He even expressed how much he cared for her.

But she was left with frustrating, unsatisfied desire that was only complicated by his ongoing praise.

Worst of all, though she'd shared her secret with him, he had not revealed himself to her. And there could only be one reason for that.

He didn't intend to marry her.

Of *course* he didn't intend to marry her.

How could he? He was a Rivenloch warrior. A rich and noble knight. A valuable commodity. A precious prize intended for a worthy bride.

But Anabella knew she was not a worthy bride, no matter how much Brand extolled her virtues.

She was the daughter of a minor laird without much property. A widow carrying another man's child. Worse, the mother of the spawn of a Saracen.

Brand must know his Rivenloch laird would never sacrifice him to such a woman.

The truth of that broke her heart.

But there was naught to be done.

So in the spirit of her newfound freedom and her determination to live for the moment, she chose to close her eyes to the future. Instead, she tried to savor the journey through France.

If she dragged her heels as they made their way to Calais, stretching out their time together, she could always blame their slow progress on her condition.

Meanwhile, she enjoyed her beloved companion more and more with each passing day. They swapped stories of their childhood, explored the beautiful forests and rivers along the way, read codices by candlelight, chatted with pilgrims returning from Santiago de Compostela, and had lively discussions about astrology and philosophy.

Despite her efforts to modify their relationship from paramours to friends, to her dismay, she found she only grew more and more in love with him. And that was going to make things worse when she ultimately did what she had to do.

Brand wanted naught more than to give Anabella reassurance about the future.

Once he would have promised to wed her forthwith. Her previous marriage to a Saracen could have been easily annulled. He could have overruled any objections from his mother the laird and convinced his clan and the king that Anabella was a suitable wife for him.

But her pregnancy had complicated things.

Naturally, Anabella’s father would want to see his pregnant daughter wed as soon as possible. When he found out who the bairn’s sire was,

however, that would change. He might send her back to her Saracen husband. He might disown her, exiling her as the mother of an unholy bastard.

As for Brand, his mother would be glad to see her second son wed. But would she accept a grandchild who was half Saracen?

And if neither parent assented to the match, how would he secure the consent of the king?

Somehow he would do it. By fair means or foul, if Anabella would have him, he meant to take her to wife. But there would be much to do when they arrived in Scotland and not much time before she'd give birth, bringing all his mental deliberation into a manifest reality.

It was no wonder he preferred to linger with her here—on this winding road of bliss, rambling past brambles, sauntering past streams. He longed to remain in this time and place where there were no ultimatums, only pleasant company and cheerful banter, gentle smiles and loving laughter.

Far too soon, warm summer nights ripened into foggy autumn morns. On a gloomy October afternoon, despite their best efforts, they reached Calais.

They sold the donkey and were able to board a passenger cog bound for Berwick within a few days. It was much smaller than the galley they'd sailed on. There were no private quarters. But Brand made sure Anabella was given a prime spot to sleep—in the sheltered area under the forecastle, away from the sea spray and the rain that fell for most of the ten days it took to reach Scotland.

The lively conversation they'd enjoyed in France was dampened by the dreary weather and their inevitable farewell. Long silences alternated with

the hollow sound of raindrops on the deck. The gray haze of rain peppering the sea created an illusion of stillness, as if they moved not an inch through the water.

Still, by some miserable miracle, they made progress. On the first rainless day, they arrived. Brand spotted the castle in the distance.

There had been no residents of Berwick on the cog who might recognize the Keeper of the Castle and reveal his identity to Anabella.

But now the castle walls were coming into view. Soon he'd be surrounded by his townsfolk. He had to tell her who he was. It was better she hear the truth from him than from a horde of strangers.

Before, Anabella's gaze had darted excitedly over each new port upon making landfall. Now her face was glum. And whether his announcement would cheer her or make things worse, he couldn't be certain.

It would definitely complicate the situation.

But he could delay no longer.

"Ana," he said softly, "I need to tell you something."

She turned to him, her eyes full of sorrow. "Aye?"

"I've been hiding the truth from you. I'm not a common mercenary."

She expressed no shock at his pronouncement, only a small smile, as if she didn't believe him. "Is that so?"

"Aye," he confirmed. "I *was* sent by the king to rescue you. That much is true. But I'm not who I said I was."

"Your name isn't Brand?"

“Well, aye, that is my given name. But I didn’t tell you who I truly am.”

She looked away from him then to focus on the port. “I know who ye are.”

He frowned in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“I know who ye are,” she repeated. “Ye’re one o’ the Rivenloch lads.”

Rivenloch lads? Had she actually said it like that? Without surprise? Or awe? Or respect? As if his clan name meant naught?

From anyone else, it would have been an insult. From Anabella, it was amusing.

He couldn’t help but laugh. “One of the Rivenloch lads?”

She laughed at his laugh. “Are ye not?”

“Well, aye, I suppose, but…” How the bloody hell had she found out? When had she found out? Why had she kept that knowledge secret? “How did you…?”

“The captain.”

His heart dropped. How long had she known? Since she’d first welcomed him into her bed? When she’d sworn her love to him? All this time, could her affection have been for his title, not his person?

“When?” he choked out.

As if she understood the significance of his question, she met his gaze with all sincerity, assuring him, “I chose to leave Hasan before I knew who ye were.”

That was a relief at least. Anabella had fallen in love with the mercenary then. She'd chosen to leave Hasan, to stay with Brand, before she was aware he was a Rivenloch.

She did love him for who he was, not what he was.

But what did his title mean now?

As if she'd read his thoughts, she said, "It doesn't change how I feel about ye. It ne'er will." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "But it makes *us*… impossible." She placed her hand over her belly. "I'm carryin' another man's child, Brand. The child of a Saracen."

"Listen to me." He took hold of her shoulders and told her in earnest, "I care not. I love you, Ana. I want to marry you. I don't care if you're carrying another man's child. Any child of yours is precious to me."

Anabella's throat knotted, and her tears spilled over.

She'd known this moment would be difficult. She hadn't realized how difficult.

Brand was definitely a Rivenloch. Brave. Loyal. Honorable.

But she saw more than chivalry in his eyes. She saw honesty. He spoke, not from his sense of honor, but from his heart. He truly did love her. Maybe as much as she loved him. And he meant what he said about loving any child of hers.

Too overwhelmed to respond, she only nodded. She couldn't tell him that his feelings didn't matter. Couldn't remind him their fate was not their own.

That time would come. Eventually he would be forced to face reality. Then the responsibilities of being the son of a powerful laird would overshadow his fragile memories of her.

But for now, she would make every moment count.

The cog turned west, sailing along the current of the River Tweed. The closer it came to the port of Berwick, the more clearly she saw that Brand had omitted a key detail about his identity. As he waved from the bow of the ship, an excited crowd began gathering at the dock. It seemed everyone in Berwick knew who he was.

“M’laird!” several cried.

“Returned at last!” one man called out.

“Laird Brand!” echoed from person to person.

Anabella turned to him. “Laird?”

He gave her a sheepish shrug. “I may have been given a keep to manage.”

Simultaneously impressed by his accomplishments and his modesty, she smiled. “Ye’re the Keeper o’ Berwick Castle?”

“For now.”

But even as her heart swelled with admiration, it ached with the realization that Brand’s fate was even more firmly sealed than she’d imagined. If King Malcolm had entrusted him with such an important castle—the keep that formed the border between England and Scotland—he must be a worthy and powerful knight indeed. A knight who deserved only the worthiest of wives.

Still she kept up a wavering smile for his townsfolk. They were already aware of their laird's bold mission—venturing to the Holy Lands to rescue a maiden in distress—even if that wasn't quite how Anabella saw it. The villagers welcomed their returning hero with awe.

As the two of them walked up the sloping road to the castle, Brand greeted several vassals by name, asking after their welfare.

How different it would have been, Anabella thought, were she his bride. How lovely it would have been to befriend the villagers. To learn their names. To visit their shops. To hear their grievances and celebrate their victories.

Because it belonged to the king, Berwick Castle was magnificent. Almost as magnificent as Perth, which she'd been to once, before her father had decided she was too contrary for royal company. The walls were nearly impenetrable. The entrance was majestic. The great hall was spacious. A roaring fire and numerous tapestries kept the place warm. And the denizens bustling about with trays and loaves and cups of wine for the weary travelers were cheerful and welcoming.

Anabella had been careful to disguise her pregnancy with a generously cut gown. Already a heroic narrative of her rescue by their laird was being crafted by the castle talebearers. She dared not confuse them with the complicated truth.

Besides, with luck, she'd be on her way home to Drummond within a day or two. No one would be the wiser. Brand would emerge untouched by scandal, as would she.

Later, on her own, she would face the embarrassing truth—and her father's disappointment.

That was her plan at least.

Unfortunately, she hadn't counted on Lady Eve la Nuit of Rivenloch, Brand's cousin by marriage, a woman who possessed an uncommonly perceptive nature.

Brand first introduced Anabella to his cousin Adam, who had watched over Berwick in his absence, She found the man quiet, pleasant, charming. He had the same kind of noble bearing and good looks as Brand.

But his wife Eve—a lively bit of a woman with dark hair and dancing brown eyes—took one look at Anabella and grabbed her hand, tugging her across the hall. She pulled her behind the screen of the buttery where they could find privacy.

"When are ye due?" she demanded.

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Chapter 21



Anabella, taken aback by Eve's bluntness, stood with her jaw slack.

"Near Christmas?" Eve persisted. "Or Candlemas?"

Why she should confide in a stranger, Anabella didn't know. But something compelled her to trust Eve. "C-closer to Saint Valentine's."

"Is it Brand's?" Her eyes sparkled with delight.

Anabella was appalled. That was none of the woman's affair. She should tell her so. But some quality in Eve made her hesitate. The lady was so earnest and so endearing. And Anabella longed to confide in someone.

She lowered her eyes and murmured sadly, "Nay."

"Oh." Eve sounded just as discouraged. Then she perked up. "But it doesn't matter, does it? I mean, Brand is a Rivenloch. He'll do the honorable thing and—"

"I don't want him to do the honorable thing," Anabella blurted, placing a hand over her abdomen. "'Tisn't up to him to save me from this."

"But he loves ye, aye? And ye love him?"

Was it so obvious? She'd hoped no one would notice. She nodded.

"And ye'll have to marry *someone*, aye?" Eve asked.

She sighed. "I've been married twice already."

“Twice?”

Anabella hesitated. She’d already said too much.

Eve confided in her, “I’m a nun. Ye can tell me. I’ll keep your secret.” Just for emphasis, she made the sign of the Cross.

Anabella gave Eve a quick perusal. She didn’t look at all like a nun. Besides, wasn’t she married? “A nun?”

“Aye,” Eve said with a shrug. “Sometimes.”

Sometimes? Anabella wondered for an instant if the woman might be daft.

She bit her lip in indecision. She didn’t know why, but she trusted Eve, even if she *was* daft. And it was a relief to be able to tell someone the whole truth.

“My first husband took ill. I had to bury him at sea on the way to the Holy Lands.”

“Och, nay. I’m so sorry.” She took Anabella’s hand between her own in sympathy, as if she was accustomed to comforting those in pain. Perhaps she *was* a nun after all.

“And my second husband was a…a Saracen.”

She expected her confession to shock a nun. But though Eve’s fingers tightened briefly around her hand, she displayed no condemnation. “I see. And what became o’ him?”

“He’s still livin’ in the Holy Lands with his three other wives.”

“Three other…?” Eve patted her hand. “Well,” she decided, “no man needs four wives.”

It was a kind thing to say. A flimsy excuse Anabella didn't really deserve.

"But the bairn is his," Anabella said.

"Ye're sure?"

Anabella nodded. But she could see calculations whirling behind Eve's scheming eyes.

"So I think ye have three choices," Eve told her. She held up one finger. "Ye can send the child back to its father once 'tis born." A second finger went up. "Ye can wed a half-blind dotard who will ne'er know the bairn is a Saracen." She lifted a third finger. "Or ye can surrender the child to the church."

"To the church? The Christian church? A Saracen?"

Eve wrinkled her nose. "Och aye, perhaps not."

"Or," Anabella said, "I can raise the child on my own."

She'd been thinking more and more about that option. There was no way she could part with her own bairn, least of all send the child halfway across the world. And if she couldn't marry Brand, she didn't want anyone else. She'd already had two marriages that, while not loveless, had been unsatisfying. Why would she want another?

"On your own?" Eve said. "Certainly not." Then she pursed her lips, thinking very hard. "Listen. I'm goin' to help ye."

"What?" Anabella couldn't have been more startled. Eve hardly knew her. "Ye? How?"

"I'm goin' to be your midwife."

Anabella blinked. “I though ye were a nun.”

Eve gave her a wink and a sly smile. “I’m a woman o’ many talents.”

“But I’m goin’ home to my da.”

“Then I’m comin’ with ye.”

Though Anabella felt a weight lift off of her at the prospect of having a supportive companion, surely Eve’s plan was completely impractical. Surely she couldn’t decide on her own to abandon her husband and go running off with a stranger to Drummond.

“What about your husband?” she asked.

She shrugged. “I suppose he could come as well. I can be a midwife, and he can be a stable lad or somethin’.”

Anabella didn’t know what to think about that. Brand had told her about Adam’s famous disguises. But a Rivenloch feigning to be a stable lad? That was almost as preposterous as…as Brand feigning to be a mercenary.

In the end, Anabella consented, not because she thought it was a good idea, but because persistent Eve wouldn’t take nay for an answer.

As for Brand, he’d been forced to dive back into his responsibilities as Keeper of Berwick Castle. In addition to addressing all the usual grievances of castle denizens, he had to negotiate the release of a prisoner of the king whose father had died last year and was no longer needed as a hostage.

Thus Brand readily agreed to the arrangements for her return to Drummond, with one alteration. Adam would not accompany them, as Brand required his cousin for his own purposes. So he sent along another young cousin, Logan, to serve as their guardian. Logan was a newly made

knight, full of purpose and eager to serve. It seemed a relief to Brand to know Anabella was in the care of his capable kin.

Her farewell to Brand was painful in its brevity. Even though Eve assured her that the two of them would meet again, Anabella could not be consoled as they trudged away from Berwick, farther and farther with each mile from the man she loved. If and when they did meet again, Brand would likely have a bride on his arm, and she would have a squalling bairn on her hip. Naught would ever be the same.

Brand hated to be apart from Anabella for even a moment, let alone weeks.

At least she was in safe hands.

Young Logan had the fire of chivalry in his heart. He'd grown into an excellent Rivenloch warrior, as bold and fearless as his mother Helena, as clever and charming as his father Colin. He would serve well to defend the ladies, whether it was with his lightning-sharp blade or his lightning-fast wit.

Eve too would make a good companion for Anabella. She truly did have the caring heart of a nun, despite her playful taste for adventure. Best of all, she had experience as a midwife.

Still, it crushed him to watch from the parapet as the three of them strode away, leading Logan's destrier and the ass Brand had lent them to carry their belongings. He'd become accustomed to seeing Anabella every day for nigh six months. Waking up without her each morn would be like a fresh bruise to his heart.

Of course, he had obligations to the castle folk and the villagers to keep him occupied. The Berwick warriors hadn't been put through as rigorous training as he'd like. He needed to arrange for Uchtred's release. Since Laird Fergus had died at Holyrood, there was no point in holding onto his son. There were conflicts to be resolved. Taxes to collect. Preparations to make for the upcoming Yule season.

Of utmost importance, of course, was arranging his own marriage. He would have preferred to visit Laird Deirdre and the king in person to secure the match. But that was not reasonable. He'd been away from Berwick long enough. He had to resort to penning a carefully worded missive to convince them of the wisdom of his choice.

He'd send it with his most trusted messenger, his cousin Adam. Adam would deliver it to Laird Deirdre with all haste, await her reply, and—if all went well—proceed to Perth to procure the king's seal.

As he set quill to parchment, Brand had to smile. How amusing it would have been if Anabella had seen his scribe's skills while they were on the galley. Not only did he know how to read, he had a decent hand when it came to writing. It was something every Rivenloch—male or female, no matter how talented they were with a sword—was required to learn. Many a breach of security could be avoided when one penned one's own correspondence.

Brand hoped his mother would see things his way. If naught else, he trusted that the laird of a clan whose motto was *Amor vincit omnia* would appreciate his plea to take a bride of his choice. Lady Anabella of Drummond was, after all, a woman of appropriate nobility and of

childbearing age. She may not be wealthy in terms of land, but the land she owned was strategically well situated near the king's seat at Perth.

Had he omitted the fact his intended bride was currently with child?

Perhaps.

Had he sworn Adam to secrecy regarding Anabella's condition?

Absolutely.

Everyone would learn soon enough. And if anyone was so bold as to inquire, he would claim the bairn was his. He wouldn't be the first Rivenloch to impregnate his bride before the wedding. And only the most discerning of physicians or perhaps his astute brother Ian would calculate the birth date and realize its improbability.

In any event, Laird Deirdre needed to know none of that. It was better not to complicate matters. After she approved the marriage, she'd send along her endorsement to King Malcolm.

As for the king, Malcolm would have no reason to object. Indeed, Brand suspected the romantic young monarch would be delighted to imagine he himself had made the match by sending Brand to the Holy Lands to rescue the lady. It would be a tale the king would relish telling.

Brand signed and sealed the document. Before the wax was even cool, he pressed the missive into Adam's capable hands, lent him his fastest horse, and wished him godspeed.



The journey to Drummond took a sennight. Eve forced them to the slow pace due to Anabella's condition. Though Anabella hardly required such caution or coddling, she complied, in no hurry to arrive and face her father.

Sir Logan—and he insisted Eve use his new title—was an enthusiastic guardian, almost too eager to exercise the duties of chivalry. One morn, hearing a rustling in the brush, he defended the ladies against what turned out to be a pack of wild coneys. Another day, he challenged a man he imagined had accosted Anabella, not noticing the poor soul was blind.

But his heart was in the right place, and Anabella decided that must be a Rivenloch trait. No wonder they were the king's most trusted warriors. It saddened her to realize, if not for cruel circumstances, she might have happily married into the illustrious Rivenloch clan.

Plodding through the fog, Anabella finally glimpsed the familiar gray stones of Drummond. This time she saw the dreary keep with new eyes. Eyes that had grown accustomed to the shining walls of Acre, the colorful market of Genoa, the bright blue of the sea. Her heart sank, and she began to wonder if she'd made the right choice.

The guards at the door spotted the small entourage when they first emerged from the pines. Recognizing her and noting the quality of Sir Logan's steed, one of them hurried to alert her father to their arrival.

The destrier and ass were attended to by the stable lad. Then the three travelers were ushered into the great hall.

Anabella entered first. As usual, Laird Robert was seated formally on his dais, commanding the half dozen servants in the hall from his wooden throne. He regarded her with thinly disguised disapproval. His first words

were not of relief at her arrival. Neither were they welcoming. They were rife with irritation.

“Your recklessness has cost me a great deal o’ coin, Anabella.”

Behind her, she sensed the heat of shock and anger boiling up in her Rivenloch companions. While it pleased her that they were outraged by her father’s rude greeting, Anabella wanted no trouble. With a subtle lift of her hand, she bid them remain silent.

She was accustomed to Laird Robert’s frank opinions. She’d grown up with his harsh words. She knew best how to deal with him.

She ignored his comment. “Father, ’tis good to see ye after so long,” she said with a nod of her head. “I trust ye were informed o’ John’s death?”

He grumbled in unconvincing sympathy. He’d never cared for John. For his lack of a firm hand in dealing with Anabella. He was probably glad of a second chance to make a better match for her.

“I’ve brought travelin’ companions, Father,” she said, stepping aside to make the introductions. “May I present Laird Robert o’ Drummond. Father, this is…” She turned to Eve, realizing she’d never asked what name she meant to use.

“My name is Gruoch, m’laird.” Eve said in a soft voice Anabella had never heard from her before, adding a humble curtsy.

Before Anabella could introduce him, Sir Logan doffed his cap and made a sweeping bow.

“My laird, I am Sir Logan du Lac of Rivenloch, son of Colin and Helena, nephew to—”

“Rivenloch?” her father interrupted, suddenly taking a keen interest. “Are ye the one who rescued my daughter?”

“Nay, that was my cousin Brand,” Logan admitted, quickly following with, “though if the king had asked me in his stead, I would have been honored to do so. I too am King Malcolm’s loyal servant.”

“No doubt, sir, no doubt,” Laird Robert said, rubbing a finger across his lip.

Anabella felt the prickle of irritation behind her eyes. Her father’s motives were so transparent. He naturally wished to endear himself to the Rivenlochs, especially any eligible males. The marriage of his daughter into such a powerful clan would secure his future and enrich his coffers.

But though he took no note of her swollen belly, he would discover her condition soon enough. Then he’d realize he’d have to lower his ambitions.

For the moment, however, Laird Robert apparently planned to ingratiate himself to Logan as if the sun rose and set on his head.

“Welcome, Sir…what was it?” he prompted.

“Logan, my laird.”

“Sir Logan,” the laird said, rising and coming forward to take the lad’s hand. “I owe your clan a great debt o’ gratitude for returnin’ my beloved daughter.”

Incredulity flashed for an instant in Logan’s eyes at her father’s sudden change of attitude. But the young knight was clever enough to recognize boot-licking. He was also clever enough to hide his disgust with a simple nod of acknowledgment.

“For a knight,” Logan said, “there is no greater honor than to be of service. And there is no cost too dear for the life of a noble lady.”

Even Anabella was impressed with his words. Her father was so pleased, he actually giggled.

“Come, good sir,” he said, taking Logan by the elbow and leading him away. “Let us retire to my chambers.” He paused to snap his fingers at a servant. “Bring us ale!” Then he grinned at Logan. “Ye can give me news o’ your clan and the king.”

Logan spared Eve one smoldering stare that expressed how much he detested being cornered like this. Then he settled into fake friendly conversation with Laird Robert as they departed.

When they were gone, Eve turned to her with a scowl that was half fury, half pity. She shook her head. “We’re goin’ to get ye away from here. Away from…” She glared toward the stairs where her father had disappeared. “Him.”

“He’s not so bad,” Anabella said, although the words tasted sour on her tongue. “He can be cruel,” she admitted. “But I know how to handle him. He mostly ignores me. I can do what I like under his nose.”

“That’s not good enough,” Eve decided. “Lucifer’s ballocks, Anabella! Ye deserve far better.”

Anabella’s lips twitched with amusement at the sound of a nun cursing, but tears collected in her eyes. No one had ever told her that before.

For good measure, Eve added, “Ye deserve Brand.”

Anabella lowered her gaze. “I can’t set my sights on things that cannot be, Eve.”

“Gruoch.”

“What?”

“Gruoch. Call me Gruoch.”

That made Anabella snicker. The sometimes-nun, sometimes-midwife, sometimes-noblewoman could always cheer her in the darkest times. “Sweet Saints, what made ye choose such an ugly name?”

Eve’s lips twitched, and she replied in Gruoch’s soft voice. “My ma named me for my da. ’Tis what he said into the privy every night when he came home from the alehouse.”

Anabella burst into laughter, startling the servant who was taking two cups of ale up the stairs. But she knew he wouldn’t repeat the conversation to her father. No one liked to interact with the irritable laird any more than they had to.

Within a few days, the Rivenlochs had formed similar opinions about Laird Robert. Anabella overheard them muttering together in the solar one morn.

“His tiresome fawning,” Logan hissed, “is unbearable.”

“Ye’ll have to bear it,” Eve murmured. “We can’t leave Anabella alone with him.”

“That’s for certain. You know, there are those who say his wife took her own life. I can see why.”

Anabella’s breath caught. She’d never heard that. All she remembered was her mother being terribly sad. Her father never spoke of her death.

“Well,” Eve said, “’tis not for us to wonder, but ’tis certainly understandable. The craven brute has no respect for Anabella. His own

daughter."

"You haven't had to listen to him whine," Logan said. "Calling her wayward and bullheaded. *Bullheaded?* Has he not met my clanswomen?"

That made Eve chuckle. "I fear he has his eyes on the Rivenloch wealth."

"Pah!" Logan spat. "He doesn't even have eyes to see she's with child."

"And ye're not goin' to be the one to tell him, Logan," Eve threatened. "'Twill be bad enough when he does notice."

"*Sir* Logan," he corrected out of habit. "You don't think he'll harm her?"

Anabella gulped. That hadn't occurred to her. Her father was capable of disparaging her, of saying mean, callous, hurtful things. But he'd never laid a violent hand on her.

Then Logan added, "Do you think he'll harm the bairn?"

Anabella flinched. Harm the bairn? Surely he wouldn't do that. Not his own flesh and blood. Not the heir to Drummond.

But Eve didn't answer.

Her heart racing, Anabella stole silently away, afraid to hear more. But she was haunted by uncertainty. What would her father do once he realized she was pregnant?

After the conversation in the solar, Anabella noticed Logan became fiercely protective of her. He stayed close when her father entered the room. He came to her defense when her father insulted her, softening Laird

Robert's slights with humor. He praised Anabella's talents in front of him, lavishing flattery on her that made her blush.

One overcast autumn day, however, her guardian lapsed. Her father beckoned Anabella to his chambers alone.

"Ye've been home for weeks now," he said without preamble, closing the door and slowly pacing the floor. "Ye've had ample time to mourn your late husband. 'Tis time to find a new one."

She'd been dreading this conversation. The fact he still hadn't noticed she was with child wouldn't make it any easier. Once she told him, he'd be furious. He'd insist on forcing a marriage with all haste. A marriage that would no doubt be displeasing to her.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, preparing to reveal herself and face his wrath.

Before she could speak, he turned his back and decreed over his shoulder, "Ye could hardly do better than a knight o' Rivenloch."

Anabella stopped breathing. Her eyes flew open. Rivenloch? Could it be true? Had her father somehow—impossibly—gotten the Laird of Rivenloch to agree to her marriage to Brand?

Her father continued. "Marriage into the Rivenloch clan would be quite…" He turned toward her with the gleam of greed in his eyes. "Beneficial."

Anabella was dumbfounded. She hardly knew what to say. Of course he meant it would be beneficial for *him.* The Rivenlochs had wealth and status, things the Drummond clan was lacking. But she didn't care what his motives were if it meant she'd marry for love.

How had he managed it? Had Brand asked for her hand? Had Eve manipulated the match? Had Logan's compliments convinced her father of her worth?

She didn't know. But for the first time in her life, as she gazed in wonder at her father, her heart thrummed with gratitude.

She rushed forward, ignoring his startled blink, threw her arms around his neck, and rested her cheek against his chest in a thankful embrace.

Sputtering and befuddled, he pushed her away, holding her at arm's length. Clearing his throat, he said, "I'll…present the proposition…at supper tonight."

"Supper?" Was Brand coming to Drummond?

Then he released her shoulders, clearly uncomfortable with the contact, muttering, "I'm sure the Laird o' Rivenloch will be happy to see young Logan wed. He's a second son, after all."

Anabella gasped. "Logan?"

She blinked. Surely he didn't mean for her to wed Logan. Logan was a child. Aye, he was a loyal companion and an honorable knight. But she didn't love him. Not like a husband. He was more like a little brother to Anabella. A sweet, earnest, impetuous young lad.

Her heart dropped like a stone.

"Nay," she sighed in despair.

Her father's familiar frown returned. The one full of bitterness and scorn. The one that conveyed what a disappointment she was.

The grimace of ire came close on its heels.

“Ye will not deny me, daughter,” he ground out. “’Tis the luckiest match we’ll e’er get. I won’t be robbed o’ the best opportunity to fall into __”

“I’m with child!” she cried.

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Chapter 22



Why Anabella had blurted it out like that, she didn’t know. It was rash and foolish and dangerous.

Her father’s shocked gaze fell instantly to her belly, as if he’d never seen her before.

She supposed it should be no surprise he hadn’t noticed. Brand said Laird Robert couldn’t remember the color of her eyes or whether she was short or tall.

“What?” he exploded.

She raised her chin, proudly owning her words. “I’m with child.”

After a moment of dreadful, awkward silence, he narrowed his eyes. “Whose?”

She’d practiced this part in her head. “I cannot be certain.” She owed him no explanation. And as far as he knew, it was the truth. After all, she’d had a husband, a kidnapper, a rescuer, and a long voyage on a ship full of men.

But to him, it must have sounded like she was admitting to a life of lechery.

He reared back and slapped her hard across the cheek. Hard enough to rock her head sideways.

She staggered back. Stunned. Stung. At a loss for words.

If he'd been any other man, she would have answered him with a punch hard enough to break his nose. Her fingers itched to do just that.

But this was her father.

He snarled at her, "How could ye do this? How could ye ruin our chances for…?" He lifted his hand as if he meant to strike her again.

She flinched, and he lowered his hand with a curse, demanding, "When do ye deliver?"

It took her a moment to find her voice. When she did, it was a wispy thread of sound. "Anon. Winter."

He whirled round and began pacing, feverishly muttering to himself. "It might be John's. It *could* be John's."

Anabella knew that wasn't true. John had been dead too long to be the father. But if it eased the laird's anger to believe so, perhaps that was best for the moment.

She lifted the back of her hand against her stinging cheek. Never had he struck her before. Logan was right. She *did* have to worry her father might harm her…or the bairn.

Laird Robert suddenly froze in his tracks, his eyes glittering. "Or…"

Where his thoughts had drifted, she couldn't tell. But his scowl slowly turned into a scheming grin that reminded her of the gargoyles she'd seen in France.

“O’ course.”

“Father?” What was he thinking? What was he planning?

He flung his arm out, pointing to the door. “Out. I have work to do.”

She wasn’t sure what work he meant. At least he hadn’t insisted she wed Logan. Not that Logan would have been the least bit interested in marriage. He was just beginning to sow his wild oats.

The days grew dark behind the grim walls of Drummond.

The weather worsened.

Anabella’s time drew near.

Yet her father made no attempt to introduce her to suitors. He didn’t mention marriage at all. She began to think maybe he *would* allow her to raise the bairn herself.

Meanwhile, she and Eve pored over the copy of *De curis mulierum* Brand had bought for her, reviewing the advice for pregnancy.

As the codex and her experience advised, Eve the midwife prepared oils of olive, rose, and violet. She made extracts of wormwood and pennyroyal. Procured silk thread for sewing tears. Had the woodworker craft a birthing stool. But when Eve the nun began reciting daily prayers to Saint Margaret for a safe delivery, Anabella warned her it might offend the good saint to be asked to bless a bairn that was half Saracen.

Anabella grew more and more unwieldy.

By Yuletide, she was too large to hide her pregnancy any longer. When everyone from the nearby villages gathered for the holiday feast at Drummond, they greeted her with awkward smiles and speculated in whispers about the bairn’s sire.

By Twelfth Night, Anabella grew restless, burdened by her sluggish inability to move and eager to be delivered of her bairn.

Laird Robert had availed himself of Sir Logan's presence, asking after his clanfolk and putting the Rivenloch knight to work training with the men of Drummond. Frustrated that she couldn't train alongside them and show off what she'd learned from Brand, Anabella settled for watching from the perimeter of the practice yard.

She stood there now, with her cloak draped over the wattle fence, too hot to wear it despite the late winter chill and the storm clouds churning in the heavens.

Sir Logan was demonstrating a cunning move he'd invented to a trio of fascinated students. He would toss his sword straight up several inches into the air, distracting his opponent, and then catch it with the opposite hand, slashing downward from a new, unexpected angle. It was difficult to defend against and a brilliant ruse.

On the fifth display of the trick, he'd just tossed the sword up when a flash of light and a crackle filled the air. A jagged bolt snaked down from the sky with a snap of current, kissing the tip of Logan's blade.

He was clever enough not to try to catch the weapon. He staggered back just as the crackling surged into a boom of thunder and the smoking sword struck the sod.

"To ground!" he shouted.

The warriors didn't need to be told twice. They flattened themselves on the field, out of the way of the lightning's reach.

Anabella would have done so as well. Remembering the damage lightning had done to the top of the ship's mast, she knew the best shelter was low to the ground.

Unfortunately, she wasn't the only one startled by the thunder. Within her womb, the bairn jerked, and Anabella was seized by a sudden knifing pain that bent her in half. For an instant, she wondered if she'd been struck.

She grimaced, having no strength to scream, and waited for the pain to pass.

The lightning didn't return, but as she clung to the wattle fence, fat drops of rain began to plop onto the back of her head.

"Anabella!" Logan cried.

She lifted her pain-glazed eyes, but couldn't reply.

Ignoring the danger, he scrambled up and came to her. "Were you hit?"

She shook her head. "Nay. I think…I think the bairn…"

"The bairn is coming?"

She nodded.

His expression was so horrified, if she hadn't been transfixed with pain, she would have found it comical. Logan may have earned his spurs, fought grown men, ridden into battle, and defended her against coneys. But this terrified him.

Somehow he screwed up enough courage to help her and his men through the torrential downpour into the castle.

When Anabella entered through the doors of the great hall, leaning heavily on Logan's arm and no doubt looking like a drowned kitten, Eve

sprang up from the hearth.

“What’s happened?” she demanded.

“’Tis the bairn,” Logan said.

For an instant, she saw a flash of dread in Eve’s eyes. “Is it…” she breathed, as if afraid to say the word.

“Writhin’ like a swarm of eels,” Anabella told her in a moment between twinges.

Timid Gruoch instantly became efficient Eve.

“Boil water!” she commanded Logan.

His eyes went round. She may as well have ordered him to slay a dragon. He didn’t appear to have any idea of how to boil water. But he wasted no time fetching servants to do his bidding.

“You! And you! Boil water! Now!”

The sound of someone barking out demands in his great hall alerted Laird Robert. He stomped down the stairs. “Who’s issuin’ orders in my keep?”

“Forgive me, m’laird,” Logan said. “Your grandchild comes.” He added, “I meant no disrespect.”

Her father’s face instantly melted. “My grandchild?”

“Aye, m’laird,” Eve said softly in the voice of Gruoch. “If ye’ll allow me…”

He frowned at Eve. “Harken to me, midwife. Ye’ll not lose the bairn. Do ye hear me? If ye do, I’ll have your head.”

Anabella saw Eve's teeth clench in fury. But she only gave him a humble nod. "O' course, m'laird."

Eve then took her arm and guided her gently across the hall. They'd already determined Anabella would deliver in the solar, where the light was best. A straw pallet was placed on the floor so Anabella could rest as necessary. The birthing stool sat beside it, along with potions, linens, and a tray of tools—scissors, a knife, and a needle threaded with silk.

It wasn't lost on either woman that although Anabella's father had warned Eve not to lose the bairn, he'd said naught about losing his daughter.



Adam blew in to Berwick from his travels on a howling winter's day. Thunder and lightning swept through the countryside like conquering Romans.

By the time Adam propped his sopping boots by the hearth of Berwick Castle, Brand could tell the heavy rains had dampened his normally cheerful cousin's spirits.

Either the rains or being exiled from Eve, his lady love.

Brand understood. He felt the same way about Anabella. Living without her had been sheer torment. Every day of her absence had left a new crease of worry in his face, making him feel as if he'd aged a decade in a few months.

Now that Adam had returned, Brand wouldn't waste a moment. If all had gone well, he'd leave for Drummond at once, rain or no rain.

So as Adam propped his wet-stockinged feet by the fire, impatient Brand pestered him.

"What news, cousin?"

"From Rivenloch?" Adam asked. "Your mother the laird is well. Your father has grayed a bit, but he's also well. Of course, your sister Isabel is all a-flutter with her latest match. And your brother Ian has constructed some sort of device to—"

"Bloody hell, Adam," Brand growled, impatient with his cousin's delay. "What news about my missive? Have you heard from the king?"

"The king? Oh aye. Malcolm married off his sister Margaret to the Duke of Brittany last year. Did you know that? Then for Yuletide, he held the most magnificent feast at Perth with—"

"Adam!" Brand thundered.

"What?" Adam's face was all innocence. But the glimmer of mischief in his eyes gave him away.

"The missive?" he bit out.

Adam gave him a half-smile and pulled a rolled parchment from his soaked satchel. It was a bit damp, a bit crushed, but intact. "You mean this?"

Brand snatched it from him with trembling fingers. He traced the king's seal with his thumb.

Adam grinned and shook his head. "I don't know how you managed it, but aye, you've got permission from Laird Deirdre and King Malcolm to

wed your lady."

Despite his irritation with Adam, Brand was so grateful for the good tidings, he grabbed his cousin and trapped him in a fierce embrace, kissing him heartily on the cheek.

Adam feigned annoyance, pulling back and wiping away the kiss. "So when do we leave?"

Brand blew out an uncomfortable breath. He knew Adam missed his wife. But he needed him for one more task. He rested an apologetic hand on Adam's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Adam. I need you here."

"What? Why?"

"I need you to watch over Berwick."

"Can't you find someone else?"

"To guard the castle of the king? Nay, you're the only one I can trust."

Adam was clearly flattered by the praise. He was also frustrated by the delay. He cursed under his breath. "I suppose you're going alone?"

"Aye."

"But you'll leave anon?"

"At once."

Adam seized him by the gambeson and drilled him with his gaze. "You'll return at once as well." It wasn't a question. "And you'll bring Eve back to me."

"Aye, as quickly as you can say 'swive your wife'," he promised.

Adam gave him a chiding punch on the shoulder.

Brand wasted no time. The stable lad saddled up his most robust horse, a rouncey that could travel for miles without tiring. Brand stuffed his clothing and bundles of food wrapped in waxed linen into a satchel.

In less than an hour, he set out at a gallop through a relentless downpour for the shelter of the forest.

The woods were dark. But the path was relatively dry. It meant he had to slow the rouncey to a steady walk. But the journey would still be quicker than taking the muddy main road. He'd arrive in perhaps three or four days.



"When the pain comes again, push just once more. As hard as ye can."

Anabella didn't even have the strength to glare at Eve, who'd been telling her to push for hours now. But if Eve was right, if it was just one last push, she would muster all her strength and do it.

Eve had attended Anabella all day and all night. By the dim dawn light, she could see the midwife's eyes were red and shadowed. Sweat dotted her brow, and wet strands of hair escaped the linen wimple she'd secured around her head.

She'd been tireless in her efforts, gently massaging Anabella's belly with rosemary oil, giving her sips of wine, encouraging the progress of labor by helping Anabella walk through the solar.

Anabella had been seated in the birthing chair since midnight. In the moments between pushing, she'd thought about Brand. He'd promised everything would be fine. And even though she knew it was impossible, a

wee part of her had hoped he would somehow show up at the birth, like a hero come to save the day.

But as she felt the wave of pain come again, she knew it was not to be. The bairn was coming *now.* She clenched her fists around the grips of the birthing chair and took a deep breath.

“There ye are,” Eve said, crouched betwixt her legs with a linen sheet. “Now. Push. Push with all your might.”

Anabella squeezed her eyes shut and followed her natural instinct to push. But this time she used all her strength to expel the bairn from her womb. There was a sudden sensation of stretching, a brief sting, and then the wee body slithered out.

“Got ye!” Eve exclaimed.

She caught the newborn in the sheet, immediately using the linen to clear the liquid from the wet face. She rubbed briskly at the chest. The bairn coughed, inhaled, and finally emitted an indignant squall loud enough to summon the dead.

The ladies laughed together in relief.

Anabella peered down at the impossibly perfect creature. The toes and fingers were tiny and perfect. The face, squinched up with annoyed screaming, was perfect. The body, mottled with a creamy film and squirming to adjust to its new freedom, was perfect. Even the bairn’s olive-dark skin and the shock of thick black hair was perfect.

“Ye’ve got a lass,” Eve told her.

Anabella gazed down at her beautiful daughter and sighed, adoring every inch of her.

Eve helped her deliver the afterbirth and then tenderly cleaned the bairn's body. Then she cut the cord, said a blessing over the child's head, and swaddled the wee lass tightly in fresh linens.

The bairn seemed happier to be confined again. Her screams subsided to whimpers. And when Eve placed her in Anabella's arms, she settled at once, as if she recognized her own flesh and blood.

While Eve tidied the chamber, Anabella couldn't stop staring at her wee miracle. She felt a surge of love welling in her breast for this tiny lass, a sweet child whom she would cherish and teach and protect and watch grow into a lovely woman. How anyone could ever send their own bairn away, she couldn't imagine. The connection between them felt inseverable.

Weary from birthing, soothed by the bairn's slumber, Anabella began to drift off to sleep as well.

Suddenly her peace was shattered by a loud banging on the door.

"Let me in!" her father bellowed.

Anabella gasped. The bairn jerked awake. Eve muttered an expletive.

"I heard screams, midwife!" he called out. "If ye've harmed my—"

Eve snatched open the door with a vengeance, startling him. Incensed that a man would violate the privacy of the birthing chamber, Gruoch the timid midwife turned into Eve the avenging vixen.

"Your granddaughter is fine," she bit out. "Or she *was*, until ye—"

Laird Robert shoved her aside and approached Anabella. Wearing only his leine and a linen coif, he appeared to have come directly from his bed. He frowned down at the bairn. "Grand*daughter?"*

"She needs her rest," Eve scolded.

Laird Robert ignored her. His scowl deepened as he looked closer at the bairn. The wee lass blinked and began wailing again.

“What the bloody hell? That’s the spawn of a damned Saracen,” he snarled. “Black hair. Stained skin. Eyes like the devil.”

Apalled by his harsh speech, Anabella clung fiercely to her daughter.

Behind her father, Eve roared, “Do not touch a hair on her head, sirrah!”

Anabella could see by Laird Robert’s wild eyes, he didn’t hear a word. His brain was too busy making hellish calculations.

“I’ll tell Rivenloch his child died,” he muttered. “The bairn died in childbirth. Surely he’ll still wed her. After all, ’tis the honorable thing to do. And his clansmen are naught but honorable.”

Anabella couldn’t breathe. Died? What was he ranting about? What did he mean to do?

Before she could stop him, Laird Robert snatched the bairn out of her arms. Ignoring Anabella’s screams of protest, he unwrapped enough of the linen swaddling to stuff into the bairn’s mouth, silencing her cries. Then he pressed his palm over her face.

Anabella’s heart stopped. He was smothering her bairn. She felt the breath drag from her own lungs.

Eve shrieked in rage. She picked up her tray, scattering the tools on the floor and began beating the laird about the head with the heavy steel.

Like a madman, intent on his task, he seemed oblivious to the blows.

The bairn, her wee daughter, her precious child, had gone silent.

Anabella had to do something. She had to stop him. Now.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the tools Eve had spilled on the ground.

There was no time to waste.

With what little strength she had left, she swept up the knife, still bloody from cutting the cord. Then she rose on quaking legs.

Laird Robert was too preoccupied, glaring down intently at the victim of his violence, to register the threat.

Anabella clenched the knife in her fist. Thrust it forward. Shoved it hard into the spot Brand had shown her.

The soft spot just beneath his ribs.

The spot that led straight to his heart.

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Chapter 23



The sharp blade sank in with sickening ease, like a spoon going into custard.

Laird Robert staggered back with a horrible gasp.

Thank God, Eve swept in to seize the swaddled bairn before he could drop her, because all Anabella could do was tremble. Dazed. Unable to speak. Unable to breathe.

What had she done?

Her father’s face went white. His eyes bulged. Like a trout dragged out of the water onto the killing shore, his mouth gaped soundlessly open.

His hands went to the place where the knife protruded. He gripped the haft. Tried to pull it out. But that only made it worse. He groaned as blood seeping from the wound gushed out, staining his tunic.

Then he crashed backwards. Knocked over a chair. Banged his head on the oak chest. And landed with a horrifying thud on the floor. Breathless. Lifeless. Gone.

For what seemed an eternity, Anabella stood frozen over her devil’s handiwork. Too stunned to move. Overwhelmed by the death she’d wrought.

Suddenly the bairn let out a loud wail, jarring her from her shock.

That was why she'd done it. For her bairn. For her child. Her beautiful daughter.

She turned toward the cry.

Eve was holding the lass. But the midwife seemed cautious, in no hurry to turn her over to Anabella.

Anabella knew why. How could a nun in good faith turn a helpless child over to a murderer? Anabella felt like a monster. She didn't deserve the innocent bairn.

She gulped, racked with remorse.

But Eve surprised her.

"Listen to me," she said. "Ye did the right thing. He was goin' to kill the wee lass. We both know that. 'Tisn't your fault. Ye did what ye had to do. Ye saved her."

It didn't absolve her. Anabella knew that. Guilt coiled inside her like a poisonous cloud. Patricide was one of the worst crimes one could commit.

At least the bairn was safe. Her daughter was safe. And that was all Anabella wanted to hear.

"I'll take care o'…this," Eve promised, glancing quickly down at the laird's body. "Ye need to rest."

There was no rest for the wicked. So the Bible said. Anabella needed to take responsibility for her wrongdoing. She'd committed a terrible sin. A sin for which she'd face severe consequences.

But Eve was right. For now she was so tired. Too tired to reason things

out. Too tired to even think.

The last thing she remembered was lying on the pallet and Eve tucking the swaddled bairn in beside her.



Brand didn't know which of them looked worse for wear… His lathered rouncey with mud-caked hooves and a tangled mane. Or the horse's rider with his filthy clothing and red-rimmed eyes.

Desperation pushed him onward. Through the storm. Through the dead of night. Through an encounter with a hungry wolf.

He'd promised Adam to ride with all haste. But at this point, he'd be lucky to arrive at all. Fate seemed determined to throw every obstacle in his path.

On the second day, just when he thought the tempest was over, leaving the woods dripping and steaming in the meager morning sunlight, a new, ferocious storm arrived to take its place. This one whipped the tops of the pines, sending needles down like murderous spears. It cracked loose branches from the willows and wailed through the woods like a *ban-sith.*

All day long it blew its wrackful, frigid breath, tormenting him at every turn.

By the time the wicked lungs of the wind were finally empty, night had fallen. The trees were still. The forest was peaceful.

Because his travel by day had been hindered by the storm, Brand needed to take advantage of the calm. So he guided the rouncey on through

the dark. He should have guessed as they plodded down the narrow woodland path—a path made by animals—they would encounter a beast along the way.

By its snarling teeth and protruding ribs, the lone wolf was hungry. But it wasn't quite bold enough to attack a full-grown horse and its sword-brandishing rider.

By dawn on the third day, his mount was weary, and Brand could barely stay upright in the saddle. They rested in a stable outside of Edinburgh for a few hours before continuing on.

When afternoon arrived, Brand began to wonder if he'd somehow offended Thor. All around him, the air began to flash with lightning and crack with thunder. When the heavy rain started again, he sheltered with his horse in a crofter's shed for the worst of it.

The heavens never stopped weeping. But in a few hours, the drops were reduced to a light drizzle that was passable enough.

The weather held. The rouncey rallied. Just before dark, they at last arrived at Drummond. Brand was spent.

No one would turn away a sodden stranger, even if he hadn't announced he was a Rivenloch. Still, upon hearing his name, the guards rushed to welcome him, and the stable lad attended to his exhausted horse at once. His cousins must have made a good impression on the Drummond clan.

He changed his opinion when he dragged himself into the great hall, weary as a white-haired hound, to see it was nearly empty. He was instantly accosted by Logan, who paced as if a devil pursued him.

“Brand,” Logan said, a feverish fire burning in his eyes. “Thank God you’re here. I need you to watch the castle.”

Brand’s hackles rose at once. How dared his upstart cub of a cousin order him about. Logan hadn’t even given him a proper greeting.

“Do not feign to command me, cousin,” he bit out. “I am in no mood.”

To his surprise, normally lightning-tempered Logan didn’t strike back with a sharp retort. Perhaps he *was* growing up.

Instead, he took a breath and stopped pacing, though his fists were clenched with restraint. “Sorry.”

Brand accepted the apology with a nod. “Where are all the castlefolk?”

“I sent them away. I needed to see you alone.”

“Alone. Why?”

“We have a…a situation,” Logan explained.

Now he had Brand’s attention. A dozen ideas seethed in his brain, all of them dire. “What kind of situation?”

Logan hesitated.

“What’s happened?” Brand demanded.

“Lady Anabella…”

“Nay.” Brand’s heart dropped. Where was Anabella? Was she safe? Was she hurt?

“She’s fine,” Logan hurried to say. “She’s well.”

Relief didn’t slow the panicked pounding of Brand’s heart. It was too late for that.

Logan continued. “And her bairn—”

“Her bairn?” he croaked as his mind spun. What bairn? Anabella’s bairn? Had she given birth already?

“She’s fine as well.”

“She?” A lass. Anabella had given birth to a lass. But in spite of Logan’s reassurances, the blood still coursed like a flooded river through Brand’s body, erratic and turbulent.

“Aye,” Logan added, “although…”

“What?”

“The father is apparently a…a Saracen.”

“I know that.”

Logan’s brows shot up in surprise. “You do?”

“Aye.”

“Well. They’re both fine. I’ve taken care of everything. And I mean to complete that mission, which is why I need you to watch over the keep.”

Logan was trying to be an adult. Brand could see that. But he didn’t want his young cousin taking care of *any*thing. Not when he could remember the lad in tailclouts.

“What mission?”

“’Tis a long tale,” Logan said with a restless frown. “And you look exhausted. I’m not sure we have time.”

“Damn you, *tell* me. Now.”

As much as Brand longed to see Anabella—and her new bairn—Logan would not be this overwrought over nothing. Or if indeed it *was* nothing, Brand needed to get the lad under control before he did something foolish.

“Very well,” Logan said on a sigh, warning him, “but we’d better sit down.”

Brand, growing impatient, dragged a chair near the hearth.

“And we’d better keep our voices low,” Logan added in a murmur. “The walls have ears.”

When he was done with the telling, Brand felt drained of hope. He should have been relieved to hear Anabella and her daughter were healthy. But to learn the rest—that Laird Robert had tried to kill the bairn and that Anabella had defended the child by murdering her own father—hit Brand like a battering ram to the chest.

He’d shown her how to do it, he realized. He’d shown her how to kill someone quickly and efficiently with a knife. Was Brand responsible for the laird’s death?

As chilling as it was, there was no time now to dwell on who was to blame.

“What about this mission of yours?” he asked Logan.

Logan straightened with noble aspiration. “I mean to go to the king.”

“What?” Brand blinked in disbelief. His cousin intended to betray him to Malcolm? To betray Anabella? “You mean to stab me in the back, cousin?”

Logan scowled and hushed his voice to a whisper. “Nay, nay, nay. I mean to tell Malcolm the truth ere anyone else can poison his mind. Explain to him that Lady Anabella only killed her father to save her bairn. Plead her innocence.”

Brand exhaled in relief. He should have known Logan was a good man. His cousin would never forsake him. He had a true heart. The best of intentions. And a knight's honor.

But Logan knew nothing of royal matters. He was unaware of the machinations of kings. He was ignorant of the cruel battles being conducted overseas. He bore no scars from the wounds of religious conflict.

Still, the one thing he was right about was that they had no time.

Brand couldn't afford wasting precious minutes to explain to Logan the wars men waged over gods. The invasion of the peaceful Holy Lands. The risk to Anabella, who, in the eyes of the king, had murdered a devout servant of God to save the unholy child of a Saracen.

King Malcolm would not sympathize. He might even view sacrificing Anabella and her heathen bairn as proof of his own devotion to the church.

There had to be a better way.

After long consideration, he asked, "Where is Laird Robert's body?"

"In the solar. We covered him in a shroud."

"Who else knows?"

"Nobody. Just Anabella, Eve, and me."

"Tell no one," he instructed. "As far as anyone is aware, Laird Robert is still alive and breathing."

"What? Lie?"

"Aye," Brand said.

"Why?"

"I have a better idea."



Anabella had kept her composure all day long.

She'd recovered from the trauma of childbirth. She'd retired to her bedchamber to bond with her newborn daughter. She'd even managed to suckle her until the wee bairn filled her belly and fell asleep in her arms.

Focusing on her newfound duties as a mother, Anabella was able to hold at bay the gruesome memory of the awful sin she'd committed.

Until Eve entered the bedchamber with twinkling eyes and a sweet smile and said, "There's someone here to see ye."

When the door widened to reveal Brand—bleary-eyed, scruffy-chinned, muck-stained, but as handsome as ever—something inside her broke. She burst into tears, waking the infant.

Brand rushed forward. "No need to cry, Ana. I'm here now."

"Brand," was all she could sob out as Eve made a quiet exit.

Brand sat upon the pallet and awkwardly held her while she wept uncontrollably. All the tension and guilt she'd bottled up exploded like wine kept too long in the cask, draining all over poor Brand's shoulder as he cradled her head.

It felt so right to be in Brand's arms. So comforting. So perfect.

He smelled of the road—mud and smoke, damp wool and sweat, leather and horseflesh—but she'd never been more grateful to inhale the scent of him.

Before long the bairn awoke to join in her weeping, whimpering in sympathetic upset.

For a long while, he cradled them both as Anabella cried out her troubles, her dread, her anguish.

Finally her well of tears ran dry.

Still she wished he could hold her forever.

When her sobbing subsided to wee hitches in her chest, Brand's gaze drifted to the swaddled bairn between them. "And who is this?"

He'd once told Anabella that any child of hers would be precious to him. But she couldn't believe that now. Not when the bairn was red-faced and wrinkled and squalling. And surely once he noticed her tawny skin and black hair—so odd, so foreign—he'd change his mind.

She sniffed, wiping away the last of her tears. "I haven't named her yet."

"She's beautiful."

Beautiful? Anabella furrowed her brows, confused. She thought so. But she was the lass's mother. Certainly Brand was only saying that to please her.

"May I?" he asked, reaching out for the squealing infant.

Despite the dire circumstances, Anabella's lip twitched with amusement. "A warrior o' Rivenloch willin' to hold a cryin' bairn? Ye *are* brave."

He chuckled softly. "'Tis the final test every knight of Rivenloch must take. Our laird insists upon it."

Without hesitation, as if he'd done it a hundred times, he swept up Anabella's daughter, tucked her into the crook of his arm, and jostled her gently.

"Good even, my wee lady," he cooed to her. "You've picked a harsh time to come into the world. But you've got the best mother anyone could ask for. She's bright and kind and loving. She'll make sure you get the best in life."

The bairn stopped crying and blinked up at him as if she understood the weight of his words.

Anabella's throat thickened again. The tears she thought were all spent welled in her eyes.

Brand was so gentle. So caring. So patient. One day he was going to make an excellent father for someone.

Just not her daughter.

"And if you're very good," he continued in a whisper, "I'll wager your mother will let you swim in the loch and ride a horse. Maybe she'll even teach you to read."

The bairn seemed transfixed by Brand's voice.

Brand glanced at Anabella then with his brows raised in askance.

She nodded. Of course she'd teach the lass to read.

"And your father," he continued. "He'll do the best he can to protect you and guide you and teach you how to wield a sword."

Anabella frowned. Her father? Did he mean Hasan? Did he think she meant to return to him? Did he intend to send the wee lass back to the Holy Lands?

She snatched the bairn back out of his hands, snapping, “I won’t give her up.”

He looked baffled. “I’m not asking you to.”

For a moment they stared at each other in confusion.

Then his gaze softened. “I’m asking you to let *me* be her father.”

Anabella’s heart melted. She gulped. She wanted to believe him. She wanted to imagine Brand could just burst in, declare a thing, and make it so.

But she knew better. Neither of them were masters of their own fate. Not an eligible bridegroom from a wealthy and powerful clan like Rivenloch. And not a woman who had murdered her father and given birth to the child of a Saracen.

Still she nodded, holding back grateful tears. It took every bit of willpower she had not to accept his gracious offer.

She steadied her voice and told him, “That means everything to me, Brand. I’m truly thankful for your friendship. Your honor. Your kind heart.”

“Then say aye. Marry me.”

She forced the words out. “I cannot.”

“Why?”

She lowered her eyes. “Your laird. The king. I’m certain they have high sights set for ye. We have to face the truth. They won’t let a man like ye throw yourself away at a widowed woman with a Saracen’s bairn.”

“They already have.”

She glanced sharply at him. “What?”

Humor danced in his eyes, and his lip lifted up in a crooked smile. He withdrew a rolled parchment from inside his gambeson. It was soggy and crumpled, but it was closed with an impressive wax mark that might have been a royal seal.

"They've granted us permission to wed," he said.

Her eyes fluttered in disbelief. Her heart flipped over with a rush of joy. Was it true? Had he done it? Had he made everything right as he'd promised?

In the next instant, however, reality slapped her across the face. Her joy curdled into despair as she remembered his status as a Rivenloch and her having a Saracen's child weren't the worst of her problems.

"Ye don't know what I've done," she murmured. "They don't know. And once they find out…"

He sobered at once and clasped her shoulders. "I do know. I *know.* But listen to me. You did nothing."

"But I killed him. I killed my father. I took a knife and—"

He shook her once. "Nay. You did not. Do you understand?"

She frowned. Nay, she didn't understand.

"For now, as far as anyone knows," he told her, "as far as anyone will swear, Laird Robert is not dead."

"But I saw…" She couldn't finish. What she'd seen was too abhorrent to recall.

The wee bairn must have felt her shudder of horror, for she began to cry again.

“Forget what you saw,” Brand said.

He took the child from her and began soothing her against his shoulder with the practiced ease of a midwife.

“Eve and Logan will swear he is alive,” he said.

“But how—”

There was a soft knocking on the door.

Brand called out, “Come in.”

Eve poked her head in. But she wasn’t the Eve Anabella knew. Her face was painted as pale as ash, and dark shadows ringed her eyes.

“’Tis done,” she said.

“Good,” Brand replied. “You look terrible.”

“Do I?” Eve seemed pleased at this. She entered then, closing the door behind her. Wrapped head-to-toe in white linen, she looked like she’d crawled out of the grave. Anabella was struck speechless.

Then Eve gave Brand a saucy wink that belied her deathly aspect. “Ye’re a natural father, I see.”

It was true. Once again, the bairn had grown silent in Brand’s arms.

He smiled. Then he sobered and asked Eve, “Has Logan summoned the castlefolk?”

Eve nodded.

“Then we’d better prepare for your burial,” he told her.

“Burial?” Anabella had heard enough. “What the devil are ye two plottin’?”

Eve gave Brand a chiding scowl. “Ye haven’t told her yet?”

“There wasn’t time.”

Eve shook her head. “This is what happened. And we’re all goin’ to swear to it. Ye. Me. Logan. And Brand.”

“Swear to what?” Anabella asked.

“Listen carefully,” Eve said. “Gruoch the midwife died from exhaustion while deliverin’ your bairn. ’Twas sad, aye, but she was honestly a bit of a milksop, if ye ask me. Anyway, she managed to keep ye and the bairn alive. So they’re goin’ to give her a decent burial in the church yard.”

“What?”

“After the castlefolk get a good glimpse o’ her poor, pale, lifeless face,” Eve said, framing her face with her hands, “they’ll cover her with a veil and carry her off.”

“But instead of Gruoch,” Brand chimed in, “’twill be Laird Robert’s body they bury. He’ll be shrouded in linen, so the gravediggers won’t know the difference.”

But Anabella remembered what he’d told her before. “Ye said everyone would believe my father is alive.”

“Right, they will,” Brand agreed, “but he won’t be staying at Drummond. He’s going to make a journey this eve to visit the king.”

Eve added, “To announce the birth o’ his new granddaughter, o’ course.”

“What?” Anabella blurted. “How?”

Eve’s smug grin was unsettling. Not only because it contrasted badly with her ghastly visage. But because it seemed she was actually taking

delight in this scheme.

“I’m goin’ to be Laird Robert,” she announced.

Anabella felt ill. She knew Eve loved disguises. But how this nymph of a lass with her chestnut hair and dancing green eyes, her light step and her laughing voice, could ever feign to be her father was unimaginable.

Her doubt must have shown on her face.

“Don’t fret,” Eve assured her. “I can make it work. I’m very good. The right boots, the right cloak, my face hidden within a cowl…”

“And we’ll be leaving by dark,” Brand added. “Eve *is* very convincing.”

Anabella wasn’t convinced. “Then what?”

Brand gave Eve a conspiratorial glance Anabella didn’t like. “I think ’tis best to leave the rest to us.”

“What rest?” Anabella said. “Ye said ye’re goin’ to take Laird Robert to see the king.”

Eve winced. “Aye, that’s what we *said* we were doin’.”

“Ye’re not goin’ to see the king?”

“’Tis…complicated,” Brand told her.

Anabella didn’t like this. It was too risky and too out of her control. She’d already had to live under the thumb of her father and two husbands. She wouldn’t make that mistake again.

“I’m goin’ with ye,” she decided.

Their immediate protests were too vehement and tangled to decipher.

Finally, Brand told her, “I need you to stay here, Ana. To help Logan run Drummond. To command the clan in your father’s stead. And…” He gently pulled back the swaddling and kissed the ebony curls on top of her wee head. “To care for our daughter.”

Anabella’s heart softened. Our daughter? *Our* daughter? “But she isn’t…”

“Mine?” Brand countered, raising a brow. “Who’s to say she isn’t?”

“Anyone with eyes,” Anabella replied. She feared he was letting affection interfere with reason. Clearly the dark-skinned, black-haired bairn was not the daughter of a Rivenloch.

“I mean to make her mine,” Brand said. “To claim her as a Rivenloch.”

Eve crossed her arms. “And none would dare challenge a Rivenloch.”

They had a point. And she was touched by Brand’s generosity. His acceptance. His love.

She glanced between them—the eager maid with sparkling eyes at odds with her sickly appearance and the road-worn hero who would ride to hell and back for her—and decided she could ask for no better champions.

“Fine,” she agreed. “But I want your word—”

“There’s no time,” Eve interrupted, rushing to the door and peering out for witnesses. “Ye two say your farewells,” she whispered, fluttering her hand dismissively. “I’ve got to go die.”

When she was gone, Brand placed the bairn back in Anabella’s arms. Then he gazed into her eyes, brushing back her hair.

“I’ll be back on the morrow.”

“Ye promise?”

“I promise.”

“Because if ye’re not, I *will* come after ye. With the bairn on my back, if need be.”

“I’ve no doubt.” Cupping her jaw in one hand, he pressed a sweet, lingering, heartfelt kiss upon her lips. “I love you,” he whispered, tipping his brow to touch hers.

“And I love ye,” she replied. “Be careful.”

He smiled and placed a hand over his heart. “*Amor vincit omnia.*”

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Chapter 24



“’Twas a very touchin’ burial,” Eve told Brand an hour later in the solar as she wiped the white ash from her face.

Logan nodded. “A few maids were actually sniffling o’er your corpse.”

But Brand was more concerned about the next part of their plan. “You have the garments?”

“O’ course,” Eve replied, picking up Laird Robert’s cloak and waggling it in his face. “’Tisn’t my first mystery play, ye know.”

He did know. He’d been fooled by Eve’s disguises a humiliating number of times. But thinking of Anabella and her wee infant, he knew how reliant on him they were to make this work. The weight of guardianship was heavy on his shoulders.

As promised, Eve made a convincing Laird Robert. She even managed to imitate his lumbering walk. Logan told her the likeness was eerie.

When darkness fell, the three of them made their way to the great hall.

News traveled fast at Drummond. Several castlefolk offered their congratulations on the laird’s new granddaughter. Since Laird Robert had never been particularly amicable, Eve was able to acknowledge their well

wishes at a distance, with a nod of her hooded head and a wave of her gloved hand.

As agreed, Brand announced he and the laird would leave at once to share the happy news with the king. Meanwhile, Sir Logan would steward the castle and watch over Lady Anabella until their return on the morrow.

And then, as the stars began to wink through the strands of cloud in the cold night sky, he and the disguised Eve saddled two fresh rounceys from the stable and rode toward Perth by the main road.

Along the way, Eve slipped into the woods to change out of Laird Robert's clothing.

Brand was surprised to see her emerge wearing her nun's habit.

"You're not coming as Gruoch? The midwife was a witness to the crime."

"Remember, Gruoch is dead, God rest her soul," Eve said, making the sign of the Cross. "But Sister Eve was there at the birth as well."

He supposed, in a sense, that was true.

"Besides," she added, "nuns are invisible. And everyone trusts them."

She was right. When they arrived after dawn and requested an audience with the king, Malcolm was too preoccupied with clapping a loyal Rivenloch on the shoulder to pay any heed to the woman of the church.

"Sir Brand, to what do we owe this visit?" the king asked.

"First, I give Your Grace thanks for securing my marriage to Lady Anabella."

The king clasped his hands together with joy. "'Tis such a magnificent story. The jongleurs will be singing about our romantic intercession for

years. Imagine. We choose a hero to rescue a lady from captivity in the Holy Lands, and they fall in love on the journey home."

"I will forever be grateful to Your Majesty." Brand managed a humble smile, though he wondered, if the king knew the details of that rescue, how differently the jongleurs' accounts might unfold.

"When is the wedding to be?" Malcolm asked. Clearly, as the instigator of the romance, he expected to figure prominently in the celebration.

Brand stumbled at that. "We…we haven't yet decided."

"Anon, Your Grace," Sister Eve chimed in.

"Aye, anon," Brand agreed, "which is why I've come."

The king raised a brow in askance.

"I must make confession of a sin," he said.

The king glanced briefly at Sister Eve, probably wondering if the confession was for her ears. "Confession?"

Brand hung his head, appropriately contrite, and murmured, "I fear I've not been wholly forthcoming, My Liege. I was so overwhelmed with my love for Lady Anabella and my eagerness to be wed that I omitted…a wee detail."

Malcolm's brow creased. "What detail?"

"That Lady Anabella was with child," he whispered.

The king started, momentarily rattled. Then he stroked his chin in thought. "Hmm." Malcolm was by nature a pious man. He'd sworn himself to chastity. But he wasn't naive. "Well…," he said carefully, "we suppose you would not be the first man to till the fields of Venus ere the vows were spoken."

“’Tis generous of you to say, Your Grace. But as you know, the lady was wed before. I regret that I cannot be certain the bairn is mine.”

The king’s face fell a bit at that. But since he’d already envisioned the jongleurs spreading his name as the Cupid figure in the heroic songs of their marriage, he waxed philosophical. “What man *can* be? The point is, you intend to do the honorable thing and marry her.”

“Aye, Your Majesty. And I mean to claim the child as mine, no matter what.”

“Indeed.” He seemed relieved. “Then we must hurry along the wedding arrangements ere her ‘sin’ becomes too apparent.” He rubbed his hands together and glanced about the hall as if he intended to summon servants to begin decorating the keep at once.

“’Tis too late, my liege. She’s already birthed the bairn.”

The king blinked, taken aback. “Already?”

“Aye, Your Majesty.” He straightened. “A strong lass. A daughter to make Rivenloch proud.”

“No doubt,” the king said, well aware of the strength of the Rivenloch women. “Then what more do you require?”

Brand indicated Sister Eve. “If it please the Crown, I should like Your Grace to give ear to this nun’s testimony. She was there at the birth. I fear she witnessed…an unfortunate incident.”

“Indeed? Go on.”

In a meek voice, Sister Eve recounted what had transpired. She spoke of the gentle guidance of Gruoch the midwife. Anabella’s successful birth. The beauty of the new bairn.

“But then, Your Grace, with no provocation,” she said with a concerned frown, “Laird Robert, the lady’s father, burst into the birthing chamber.”

Malcolm’s brows shot up. The birthing chamber was reserved solely for women. It was the height of impropriety for a man to enter such a private space.

She continued. “When the laird saw Lady Anabella had given birth, not to a son, but to what he claimed was a useless daughter, he grew furious. And knowin’ ’twas a *bastard* daughter, he lost all rein on his temper.”

Brand’s jaw tightened with ire as he heard the story again. It was just as well he hadn’t been there. He might have throttled the laird himself.

“In a fit o’ rage, Your Majesty,” Sister Eve recalled, “I fear he…he seized the wee bairn and tried to smother her.”

Brand clenched his fists. He itched to murder the laird all over again with his own hands.

“The midwife had no choice. In order to save the child…” Sister Eve said, glancing pointedly at Brand, “…the child she believed to be the daughter o’ Sir Brand Cameliard o’ Rivenloch, she did what she had to do, Your Grace. She stopped the devil from suffocatin’ the bairn.”

The king was drawn in to the story now. “How? How did she stop him?”

Sister Eve crossed herself. “God forgive her, she stabbed him with a knife.”

Malcolm frowned at Brand, as if verifying her account. Brand nodded.

“He was seriously wounded, Your Majesty,” Brand confirmed. It wasn’t a lie. Not exactly. “But my child is safe. For now.”

Sister Eve added, “As for the poor midwife, she keeled o’er and died from the shock.”

The king’s eyes darkened to a dangerous shade. The Rivenlochs were loyal subjects. Any enemy of theirs was an enemy of his.

“Laird Robert is a peril to your child,” Malcolm decided, “and we must punish him severely for his crime. ’Twould be right and reasonable to execute him.”

“Aye, Your Grace,” Brand agreed. “I cannot have my daughter’s life in danger. But…how can I in good faith condone the execution of my bride’s father?”

King Malcolm nodded in agreement, tapping his lip as he considered alternatives. “Not execution then. But something fitting.”

“If I may suggest?” Brand prompted.

“Go on.”

“Since I’m Keeper of Berwick Castle…”

Malcolm guessed, “Imprison him there?”

“Aye.”

“Perhaps,” the king agreed. “For the rest of his life. And we swear on our devotion to Rivenloch,” he bit out, “’twill be in a prison so dark and deep, he will wish we had had him executed.”

Ordinarily, Brand would find such vengeful speech distasteful. But Laird Robert had made Anabella’s childhood miserable. He’d seen her as little more than a pawn to advance his own interests. He’d forced her into

one unwanted marriage and tried to force her into another. And he'd tried to slay her daughter, *their* daughter.

He deserved whatever punishment the king dished out.

They accepted Malcolm's hospitality for supper and a night's lodging. But before they retired, Brand quietly read the king's decree to Eve.

According to Malcolm, Laird Robert was to be imprisoned at Berwick in utter darkness, bound and shackled with heavy iron. He was to remain unknown, to have no visitors, no comforts, no relief from the relentless black horror. Thus he was to remain for the rest of his days, alone and forgotten.

They decided it was just as well Laird Robert had died from the stabbing. There was no way Brand could carry out the king's harsh commands, not in good conscience. They were too cruel for any man.

Eve assured him they could easily fake the laird's imprisonment by going to Berwick in the dead of night, and using a disguise, a stuffed pell, and a trusted guard to watch over the empty cell.

But all Brand could think about as he stretched out by the hearth in the great hall, nestled among the other sleeping castlefolk, was getting back to Drummond.

He knew Anabella. She would grow restless. And who knew what the intrepid lass would attempt if he didn't return?

Anabella paced her bedchamber, jostling her daughter with each step. She anxiously eyed the sun, which was cresting the horizon through the shutters, only to disappear again under a thick coverlet of clouds.

The bairn seemed to like the motion. Perhaps, like Anabella, she was weary of lying abed and craved adventure.

As for Anabella, she felt remarkably hale for having birthed a bairn just a day ago. She supposed it was the expert care Eve had given her. Indeed, she felt healthy enough to make good on her promise. If Brand didn't return today, she'd set out for Perth with the bairn on her back and intercede with the king on Brand's behalf.

It was her fault she'd gotten him into this mess, after all. If anyone should pay for her crime, it was she.

The hours passed on the back of a snail.

She nursed the bairn herself. Eve had confided that the healthiest children seemed to be born to crofters, who nursed their own bairns.

With guidance from a servant, she learned to change the wee lass's tailclouts. She napped when the wee lass napped. And she ate voraciously at the table.

Fascinated by the bairn's perfection—her instinct to suckle, her ability to sneeze, the way her fingers curled, how she seemed to grow more beautiful with each passing hour—Anabella couldn't imagine parting with her.

Her heart twinged as she thought how close she'd come to losing her.

As the day dragged on with no sign of Brand, Anabella's worry grew. What if the king had seen through Eve's disguise and Brand's lies? What if he knew he'd been deceived?

By afternoon, she could bear no more sitting and waiting.

She slipped the bairn into a sling fashioned of a woolen cloak. In a satchel, she packed stacks of linen, a full wineskin, a dagger, and a handful of shillings. Then she added a comb and a few jewels. After all, if she needed to meet with the king, she couldn't look like a peasant.

She was below stairs, having just come out of the storeroom with a supply of crowdie and oatcakes, when she was stopped in the passageway by a stern-faced Logan. He must have followed her.

"What are you doing, my lady?"

"I'm…hungry," she hedged.

He looked at the large food supply and scowled. There was enough to feed a dozen warriors.

She lifted her chin and whispered in challenge, "I'm a nursin' mother. I'm eatin' for two."

Flustered, the young knight turned an adorable shade of pink. But he didn't move out of her way.

"What's in the satchel?" he demanded. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Who do ye think ye are, sirrah?" she hissed. "My prison guard?"

His eyes flashed with ire, but they softened just as quickly. "My lady, Laird Brand has entrusted me with keeping you safe."

"And so ye have. Now get out o' my way."

He crossed his arms. "I'm afraid I cannot do that."

She glowered at him. She didn't have time for this. Brand could be in trouble. And this arrogant young lad wanted to play Master of the Gaol.

As Hippocrates said, desperate times called for desperate measures.

“Ye want to see what I have in my satchel?” she asked.

He nodded once.

She reached into the bag and drew out the dagger, swiftly placing it against his throat.

Logan’s arms unfolded. His eyes widened. He gulped.

She didn’t need to remind him she’d already slain her father with a blade. And her fingers trembled a wee bit at the memory.

But she had to get past Logan. Up the stairs. Into the great hall. And out of the keep.

She had to go to Perth. To find Brand. She couldn’t let him suffer for her sins.

At that moment, a shadow moved to block the exit at the top of the stairs.

“What the devil?” came a familiar voice.

“Brand!” she cried, waking the bairn.

But she still held the dagger at Logan’s throat.

Logan raised his hands and his brows in expectation, waiting for her to withdraw it.

“Och. Sorry.” She dropped the weapon onto the floor and gazed up at Brand in wonder. “Ye came back.”

“And not a moment too soon, ’twould appear,” he said with a chiding smile as he marched down the steps, “if you’re holding my kin at the point of a dagger.”

“She was trying to leave,” Logan informed him.

“Am I a slave in my own keep, Logan?” she asked. “God’s eyes. I may as well have stayed in the *harem.”*

Logan, disgruntled at being upbraided, muttered, “*Sir* Logan.”

Brand came to his defense. “I asked him to look after you, Ana.”

“I don’t need a guardian.”

“Perhaps not,” he said, his eyes twinkling, “but our bairn does.”

From behind Brand, a heavily veiled nun suddenly peered out, materializing as if from the ether. Anabella hadn’t noticed her there before. But she quickly recognized Eve’s dancing eyes.

“He got the king’s permission to claim the wee lass,” Eve divulged. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Claim her?” Anabella asked. “Does that mean we’re to be…”

“Wed?” Brand said. “Aye, if you’ll have me.”

She was left speechless. Her heart brimmed with joy. It appeared he’d done it. He’d negotiated what she’d dreamed of. What she’d thought impossible. The most unlikely of marriages.

“How?” she finally managed to ask. “How did ye manage it?”

Brand grinned. “I told you. *Amor vincit omnia.”*

Surely he’d made her the happiest lass in Scotland.

Or perhaps the *second* happiest.

Her daughter—*their* daughter—was craning her wee head to look up at the man who’d claimed her. She swore she saw adoration in the bairn’s eyes.

Brand was already proving to be an exceptional father.

Which reminded her…

“What o’ my father?”

Brand and Eve exchanged a glance Anabella didn’t care for.

“What o’ my *father?”* she repeated.

Eve motioned to Logan. “Come, Sir Knight, let’s leave the bridegroom to his bride.”

Anabella steeled her jaw. It must be terrible news if Eve didn’t want to be near. Waiting until they left, she asked, “What’s happened?”

He reached out to fondly stroke the bairn’s swaddling. “As you might imagine, the king was quite wroth to learn that one of his lairds attempted to kill the future heir of a Rivenloch.”

Anabella, remembering the sight of her father trying to smother the poor wee lass, hugged the bairn closer.

“If the king were left to his own devices,” he continued, “he would have had your father executed.”

She inhaled sharply. “But he’s already…”

“Dead and buried, aye. But the king doesn’t know that. Nor does your clan. Which is why I suggested life in prison for him at Berwick instead.”

“Life in prison? But how will ye manage that when he’s—”

“Don’t ask,” Brand cautioned. “’Tis a complicated plot involving a great deal of subterfuge. But Eve seems to have it all worked out.”

“Eve.” That shouldn’t surprise her. Eve was a remarkable woman with a head full of schemes. “Tell me somethin’. Is she really a nun?”

The corner of Brand's lip lifted in a smile. "I'm not even sure *she* knows."

The bairn whimpered then, probably annoyed by the erratic plunging and soaring of Anabella's heart.

Anabella held her close, kissing the top of her precious head.

Brand pulled them both into his arms, kissing the top of Anabella's head.

The road ahead of them, protecting a wee lass of mixed blood and questionable faith, might be rocky and challenging. But as long as the bairn had parents who would stand by her side, defend her honor, and raise her to be trustworthy, kind, and wise, she would thrive.

Anabella only hoped his clan would be as welcoming of her half-Saracen bairn as Brand had been.

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Chapter 25



Rivenloch Castle

Spring 1162

"My turn," Isabel demanded.

Brand's younger sister had been waiting impatiently as her various Rivenloch aunts and uncles and cousins had passed the happy infant from hand to hand at the wedding feast.

Despite the chaos in the great hall, the two-month-old bairn seemed to love the attention. Her dark eyes lit up, and she gurgled and waved her wee fists as Isabel cooed at her.

To Anabella's relief and delight, most of the Rivenloch clan had fussed over the lass as if she were a princess. No one commented on her raven hair, her dark brown eyes, or her gingerbread-colored skin. They simply accepted that she was the newest member of the clan.

All except Laird Deirdre.

As it turned out, King Malcolm had been too preoccupied with discussing designs for a Cistercian abbey he was funding to plan or attend their wedding. This was fine with Anabella and satisfactory for all parties

concerned. Malcolm was still unaware her child was half-Saracen, and she was in no hurry for him to find out. Also, as Brand pointed out, no one truly wished to hear the king's glorified account of how His Majesty had singlehandedly devised their betrothal.

So the quiet ceremony on the chapel steps and the magnificent feast that followed were held at Rivenloch, which was even more grand than Anabella could ever have imagined. A sugar subtlety of a Viking longship decorated the table. Myriad flowers were strewn atop the fresh spring rushes covering the flagstones. Beeswax candles flooded the hall with warm light. And reflecting that light down upon the colorfully dressed denizens filling the hall were the shields of the conquered—dozens of heraldic crests won in battle.

All of Brand's clan was there…

His mother, the commanding Laird Deirdre, with her equally illustrious husband, Pagan Cameliard…

Deirdre's sisters with their husbands—hot-tempered Helena and amusing Colin du Lac, mysterious Miriel and convivial Rand la Nuit…

Brand's sister, coolheaded Hallidis, and her warmhearted husband, Colban an Curaidh…

His aunts and their husbands—fiery Jenefer and powerful Morgan Mor mac Giric, sly Feiyan and tough Dougal mac Darragh…

His brother, heroic Gellir, and his wife, saucy Merraid…

His cousin, axe-wielding Hew, and his wife, beast-charming Carenza…

His many siblings and cousins—the intrepid masters of disguise Adam and Eve, *Sir* Logan, Isabel the romantic, Ian the genius, Nichola, Neyl,

Tian, Alexander, Gavand, and Merewen, along with too many wee ones to remember by name.

As Anabella tried to recall who the young lass dozing with the hounds was, an imperious voice rang out over the crowd. “She needs a name.”

Everyone silenced, including the bairn.

Anabella turned to see Laird Deirdre, who’d been frostily aloof through the wedding, pinning her with an icy gaze.

The world stood still. Her heart felt frozen.

Then Anabella gave her head a scornful mental shake. That was ludicrous. What was she afraid of?

After all, she’d fought off an abductor. Withstood a treacherous whirlpool. Battled pirates. Faced a ferocious storm. Survived two crossings of the sea. And defended her bairn from a murderer.

Why then, when she gazed into her new mother-in-law’s eyes, did she feel the breath leave her lungs?

No wonder the woman was laird of her clan. Her power was palpable. Her control was absolute. Her quiet authority was unquestionable.

“Give me the child.” The hushed command was aimed at Isabel.

Isabel glanced at Anabella for permission.

Anabella stiffened. But she trusted Laird Deirdre, didn’t she? After all, this was the woman who’d raised Brand. And the Rivenloch clan had been cordial so far. It was hard to imagine them turning on her now.

But this was her daughter. And the bairn was obviously not Brand’s blood kin. What did Laird Deirdre mean to do?

A mother’s instincts ran deep. It was tempting to snatch the bairn from Isabel and run from the hall.

But that was not who Anabella was now. She *was* the woman who had stood up to the sea. And pirates. And her own murderous father.

She straightened to her full height, still inches shorter than the towering laird who was clearly the daughter of Vikings. Then she gave a solemn nod of approval to Isabel.

Isabel handed the wee lass over to Deirdre.

To Anabella’s astonishment, the laird was unexpectedly gentle. Cradling her in one arm, she peeled back the swaddling and peered into the bairn’s eyes. The hint of a smile touched her lips.

Still gazing at the bairn, she asked Anabella, “Do you have any ideas?”

“I do.” Her voice came out on a rough whisper, so she cleared her throat and repeated the words, louder. “I do.”

She knew she was late to name the child. Most mothers named their bairns within a fortnight of their birth. But it was because she’d been giving the matter careful thought.

Deirdre looked up at her, waiting.

Anabella announced, “I’d like to name her…Lofn.”

Deirdre’s eyes sparked in surprise for an instant. Then her face blossomed with a smile of approval. “The Viking goddess who blesses forbidden love.”

“Aye,” she replied.

“’Tis perfect,” Deirdre decided.

Brand smiled. Of course his mother approved. He expected naught less. Though Laird Deirdre had a steely appearance, her heart was as soft as custard. She would have approved if Anabella had named the bairn *Gruoch.*

Still, his own heart swelled with pride that Anabella had chosen a name to honor the Rivenloch heritage.

As was the custom at Rivenloch, they would have a naming ceremony within a few days. Since it was a Viking rite, there was no need to call a priest, who might balk at baptizing the child of a Saracen.

The grandparents would recite blessings for protection, guidance, grace, wisdom, kindness, honor, and luck. As Lofn's adoptive father, Brand would sprinkle water over the bairn and speak the words of the water blessing: *May beauty delight you and happiness uplift you, May wonder fulfill you and love surround you, May your step be steady and your arm be strong, May your heart be peaceful and your word be true, May you seek to learn, may you learn to live, May you live to love, and may you love—always.*

As he and Anabella sat down for one more course of the endless feast, wee Lofn finally tired of all the attention. She fell asleep in the sheepskin-lined basket his cousin Merewen had prepared for her.

Pouring another measure of mead into Anabella's cup, Brand murmured in her ear, "Did you e'er dream you'd be dining in a hall full of Vikings?"

Anabella giggled and whispered back, "I'm half expectin' to be carried off by the handsome horde and ravished."

Brand grinned and furrowed his brows in feigned annoyance. “I don’t care for the gleam in your eye when you say that.”

Her prediction wasn’t far off. To her great consternation, after the final course and the requisite drunken toasts to their union, six women of the clan hefted Anabella up and carried her to the bedchamber they’d prepared for the wedding night.

Six men came for Brand next, making ribald remarks all the way to the chamber, finally setting him on his feet before the door. Then he had to listen to more taunting as they waited to be allowed into the chamber.

At last, Feiyan opened the door, and his clansmen pushed him inside.

Brand needed no encouragement. When he saw Anabella reclined on the bed—like a goddess, set among linens decked with sunny primrose petals, surrounded by golden beeswax candles—he grew blind to anyone else.

At some point, the others left. Somehow the door closed behind them. But Brand only had eyes for his beautiful wife. As she clutched the covers over her breasts, he could see the fine silver chain encircling her throat and the wee Thor’s hammer hanging from it, a gift from the laird.

But he knew she was wearing naught else.

In the flickering candlelight, she glowed. Her lips curved up in a seductive smile. Her eyes grew smoky, as alluring as a Siren calling him to his doom. A doom he welcomed.

As she gazed at him in hunger, he slowly peeled off his garments, one by one.

It had been too long since he'd trysted with her. He desired her now with the power of a thunderbolt.

But he knew this night was significant. It was the first time they would lie together as husband and wife. He wanted to take his time.

Anabella wished he would hurry.

She was already drunk on the copious mead she'd been obligated to imbibe.

All their talk of Vikings ravishing her had piqued her lust.

The passion simmering in Brand's eyes was awakening her every nerve.

And watching him undress with taunting leisure had increased her yearning to a fever pitch.

It had been too long since she'd felt him betwixt her thighs. Too long since she'd joined with him in blissful union. But not so long that she didn't remember the absolute ecstasy of trysting with him.

She was ready now. Healed from childbirth. Hungry with desire. Drunk with longing.

"Come ravish me, Viking," she beckoned.

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Viking? Do you not want a noble knight who will bed you with honor?"

She shook her head nay.

"A stealthy abductor who will slyly compromise your virtue?"

She frowned. She could hardly be called virtuous.

“A wild pirate who will claim your hidden treasure?”

She smirked. She’d had enough of pirates.

“Very well.” His sigh of disappointment was as fake as his reluctance to couple with her.

When the son of Vikings slipped off his braies, it became apparent he was up to the task of ravishing her at once.

Yet he was tender and patient and seductive. Brushing back her hair. Whispering in her ear. Stroking her throat with the back of his knuckles. Slipping the linens from her breasts with furtive fingers. Dragging his bare thigh across hers.

She shivered with longing. Her ears hummed. Her eyes grew drowsy. Her veins sang with a rush of blood. Every inch of her flesh prickled, the way it had when lightning hit the ship.

In the end, it was she who ravished Brand.

Unable to withstand any more of his sensuous teasing, she rose up beneath him, engulfing his full member within her waiting womb.

He gasped in surprised pleasure.

She groaned at the bliss of fulfillment.

Together they strove, colliding like the crashing of waves, ebbing and flowing in the tumultuous currents of long-awaited passion.

This was what she’d longed for. This was what she’d dreamed of. This was the perfect union of body and heart and soul she’d always imagined.

She thought she could happily dwell in this joy forever.

But soon one forceful wave lifted them higher than the rest, as if striving for the sky. Then there was no turning back.

They cried out, clinging to each other, riding the powerful surge until they broke free of earthly bounds and soared together into the heavens, shuddering with the ecstasy of flight and release.

For a long while afterward, cradled in Brand's loving arms, Anabella felt as if she floated among the clouds. Weightless. Careless. Content.

Then she drifted slowly back to earth.

An earth abundant with family.

Freedom.

And enough adventure to last a lifetime.



How Brand managed to sleep like the dead all night when he was lying beside the most beautiful woman in the world—a woman he was also lucky enough to call his wife—was a mystery to him. The last thing he remembered was exploding like thunder and splintering into a thousand bright sparks that slowly cooled and faded until they wafted down to rest, their fire spent, on the soft bed of feathers.

It was well past dawn when the sun stabbed through the cracks of the shutters. Brand's head throbbed from too much mead. His arm was numb where the still-asleep Anabella's shoulder rested on it.

Still, he couldn't help but smile. Anabella was no beholden damsel in distress. No sycophant seeking wealth and power. No leech looking for a

lover to sustain her.

She was the light of his life. A woman with a will and a way of her own who had *chosen* to love him.

So he wouldn't wake her just yet. He'd let the sun blind him. Let his head ache. Let his arm tingle for a while. Soon enough Lofn would be hungry and demand her mother's attention. Meanwhile, he'd let Anabella sleep.

Later they could talk of the future.

A future Brand had once thought impossible.

A future where he was happily married.

Brand had always done his duty. He'd been a loyal warrior. A dutiful son. An honorable brother. He'd expected to be wed to a meek and submissive wife chosen for him by the king. A wife who would cling to his side, bear his children, and likely bore him to tears.

Anabella had shown him a different future. She too had once been a dutiful daughter and wife, following the dictates of men. But strong and clever and capable, she didn't let her oppression dim her spirit. Instead, she polished it to a bright sheen to light the way forward. She cast off the shackles of obedience, followed her heart, and triumphed against all odds.

Beside her, he'd learned to liberate his spirit as well. To expand his expectations. When he finally burst free of the chains of convention and followed where his heart led, he was surprised to find himself falling in love.

He wished all men could see the world through his eyes. He wished they could envision such an enlightened future. A future where men and

women could breathe and feel and speak on equal terms.

And it occurred to him perhaps that was the true meaning of the Rivenloch creed. *Amor vincit omnia.*

He wondered if the people of Drummond would begin to follow that creed once his cousin Logan wielded his influence. Despite his young age and his status as an outsider, Sir Logan was so beloved by the clanfolk there, they'd chosen him to remain in charge of their warriors. Brand couldn't help but wonder how many women Logan might convince to take up arms.

Anabella had no desire to return to Drummond, which Brand well understood. For her, it was a place haunted by painful memories. Eventually another laird would be chosen by the clan.

After the naming ceremony at Rivenloch, Anabella and he would travel with Lofn to Berwick. There they would watch over the king's castle, ostensibly keeping an eye on her imprisoned father.

Of course, since the king allowed no visitors for the prisoner, no one would be able to report the cell was empty. Not a word would be heard from the man. The bowl of watery pottage provided to him each day would mysteriously disappear. His chamberpot would remain spotless.

A trustworthy guard would be posted there nonetheless. In the vacuum of news, rumors would spring up about the plight of the prisoner. His horrible crime. His terrible suffering.

Once the castlefolk fell in love with wee Lofn, however, they would agree no punishment was too severe for the man who'd tried to slay her.

At some point, Laird Robert would inevitably die from such horrific mistreatment and be buried at a crossroads. When the time came, Brand was sure Eve would come up with a plan for his demise.

The future was secure.

Then a knock came on the door, startling Brand from his thoughts and waking Anabella.

Anabella responded even before she was fully alert. “Comin’!”

She’d grown accustomed to the demands of a hungry child. Sometimes she was certain she fed Lofn in her sleep.

“May I bring her in?” a maidservant asked through the door.

“Just a moment,” she said on a yawn.

She shook the sleep from her head, rubbed her eyes, and blinked awake. Then her gaze lit on Brand.

He stared at her with a twinkly smile. Even sleep-mussed, he was handsome. Delectable. Irresistible.

Her heart melted, and her glance dissolved into naked adoration. She still couldn’t believe he was her husband. And Lofn’s father. How lucky she was.

She arched a sly brow, murmuring, “Are ye decent, husband?”

“Rarely,” he replied with a teasing smile. But to spare the maidservant’s innocent eyes, he pulled the coverlet up to his chin.

“Come in!” Anabella called out.

The maid carried in wee Lofn, who was sucking on her knuckles, clearly hungry.

“I waited as long as I could,” the maid apologized, handing over Lofn.

“’Tis time we were awake,” Anabella assured her, offering her breast to the bairn, who latched on at once.

When she looked up again, she saw someone enter behind the maidservant. It was Brand’s cousin Carenza, carrying some wee animal in her arms, as she often did. But her face registered confusion.

“This was delivered to the keep this morn,” Carenza told them.

“What is it?” Anabella asked.

It seemed to be a white pup, perhaps half a year old.

Brand reached out to scratch its furry neck. “There’s a note attached.”

“What does it say?”

Brand grinned as he read the words. “A gift for Lady Anabella, From Piccola, With a thousand thanks.”

Anabella gasped in pleased surprise and held out her free hand for the pup. She was adorable. A miniature version of the captain’s dog. The wee beast wiggled and wagged her tail as she licked enthusiastically at Anabella’s hand.

“Who is Piccola?” Carenza asked.

“Piccola is this pup’s mother,” Anabella explained, which of course only confused Carenza more.

“I’m sure she had someone else pen the missive,” Brand explained. Then he leaned forward and fondled the pup’s snowy ear. “What will you

name her?”

She thought for a moment. Piccola had been a force all her own. A wee beast who didn’t realize her own size. Who didn’t recognize her limitations. Who never hesitated to jump fearlessly into the fray, even when it brought her trouble.

Not unlike Anabella herself.

This pup, however, would serve as Anabella’s loyal companion as she embarked on a whole new adventure. One brimming with possibilities. Science. Discoveries. Hope. She would need the beast’s calm wisdom and healing heart.

“I think I shall name her Panakeia,” she decided, “after the goddess of cures.”

“Perfect.”

She grinned. She’d never been happier. This was the best adventure of all.

A bairn at her breast.

A pup on her lap.

And a husband who looked at her with such a lusty gaze, she was tempted to abandon the bairn and pup.

Chase everyone out.

Bar the door.

And have her way with him.

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Epilogue



Berwick Castle

Spring 1165

Anabella had very little room on her pregnant lap for three-year-old Lofn to sit. Nonetheless, on this pleasant morn, where the clouds puffed like cotton above the rows of bright green medicinal herbs, and the garden was scented with sage and chamomile, rosemary and mint, she knew there was naught more important than the wee lass's concerns.

She planted her spade in the soft soil. Brushed the dirt from her hands. And sat back to beckon the child onto what little space remained of her knees.

Lofn's black curls were soft against Anabella's chin as she presented her ratty rag doll.

"Ma, Zohra has an injury."

"Och, that she does."

Anabella took the doll and scowled briefly at Panakeia. The dog stared sheepishly up from her lowered head. Her tail sank in guilt. Without a doubt

she was responsible for the injury. The doll's arm had been wrenched almost completely off its body.

"Can ye fix her?"

"Let me see," Anabella said, examining the torn cloth.

Without prompting, Lofn said, "I'll fetch the codex."

The wee lass popped up and sprinted across the garden.

Anabella smiled. She'd trained her daughter well. Lofn could already read simple words, and she understood the importance of the stacks of codices in Ma's library.

Lofn knew her mother as a physician. She never questioned her skills or wisdom, unlike those who challenged Anabella at every turn. Most men, and even some women, resented Anabella's intelligence. The fact she'd lived in the Holy Lands for a time and brought back knowledge from "heathens" made her cures even more suspect.

Fortunately, there were enough castlefolk who respected the Rivenloch clan, and those who had benefited from Anabella's healing, to allow her to continue treating them.

She looked closer at the rag doll. Brand's sister Isabel had made Zohra just after Lofn was born. The doll had hair of black wool and eyes of black glass beads to resemble the wee lass. Its red velvet gown had been beautiful once. It was now worn and stained to a gruesome rusty color. Nonetheless, Zohra was Lofn's favorite companion. Especially now that Panakeia had lost that title through her destructive deed.

Panakeia settled onto the grass now and rested her head on her paws. She was clearly feeling remorse.

So Anabella gave her several strokes of reassurance.

“Don’t fret, Pana. I’m sure Zohra will be good as new with a few stitches.”

The dog raised her head as if she understood. Then she turned abruptly toward the garden gate and stood alert.

Anabella glanced where she was staring. Spotting Brand, she felt the usual rush of pleasure. “’Tis just Brand, Pana. He’s come to visit us in the garden.”

But in an instant, she knew something was amiss. She could see it in the furrow of Brand’s brow. The grim set of his mouth. The dark force in his eyes. And his thundering footfalls as he strode toward her.

Her heart plummeted.

Her first thought was of Lofn. Was the wee lass all right? Had she fallen on the stairs? Tangled with the hounds? Spilled ink on the codex?

“What is it?” she asked hoarsely.

He held out a hand to help her up.

She accepted the help and staggered to her feet, trying to read his gaze.

“Is it Lofn?” she asked, her heart pounding.

He shook his head. “Nay,” he ground out.

Her initial rush of relief was tempered by the sight of a strange young woman scurrying up behind Brand. She was small but formidable, and she clutched her gray skirts in her hands as she struggled to keep pace with Brand. She was fair of face with a sprinkling of freckles. Her honey-brown

hair was bound in a single braid. She had a frosty glimmer in her pale blue-gray eyes and a smug smile on her pink lips.

"You're the mother?" she demanded.

Anabella's hackles immediately went up at the woman's tone, as did Panakeia's. The wee dog began to growl.

Brand's growl followed. He whipped around to address the woman in a snarl. "I told you to wait."

The woman naturally recoiled. Brand could be as intimidating as a clap of thunder.

But she immediately recovered and shook a finger in his face. "And I told you this will be addressed. At once."

Anabella was astonished…and not unimpressed. She knew very few people who could stand up to Brand's rages.

He grunted. "'Tisn't your concern."

"What's goin' on?" Anabella asked. "Brand?"

"This woman…" he began.

Before he could finish, the woman pushed past him and faced Anabella. She seemed startled for an instant at the sight of Anabella's bulging belly. But she raised her chin and continued, holding aloft a rolled parchment.

"I have here a document stating the name of the true father of your child," she announced. After a second glance, she corrected herself. "Your *first* child."

Anabella's gaze locked onto the parchment. She felt like she was going to be sick. And she didn't think she could blame it on her pregnancy.

For a long while, she'd told herself things were fine. Brand had adopted Lofn. She'd been accepted into the Rivenloch clan. The king had never objected. True, in four years, he'd never laid eyes on the wee lass. But he trusted Rivenloch.

She'd let Hasan's memory fade. He'd let her go after all. The fact he hadn't realized at the time she was carrying his child should make no difference.

Yet in the back of her mind, she realized it might.

Despite his multiple wives and numerous children, Hasan might care that he had a daughter being raised in another country. In another faith. By another father.

The truth had always been there like a mouse nibbling at the corner of a barrel. It seemed small and inconsequential. But sooner or later, everything would spill out. And then what would happen to Lofn?

Brand scowled at the woman. "You have no proof."

"I do," she crowed.

"A piece of parchment is naught."

"'Tis a beginning."

"You were never there," he accused.

Her confidence faltered a bit, but she replied, "I…know people who were."

Anabella closed her eyes against the feeling that her world was dissolving into ashes. Who could have told her about Hasan? And how would they even know? Surely this woman was fabricating tales.

“This cannot be,” Anabella finally decided, scooping up Panakeia to keep her from biting the intruder. “Who are you?”

The woman straightened. “I am Lady Katherine of Graham.”

Brand towered over her and bit out, “And what rock did you crawl out from under, my lady?”

Lady Katherine was still undaunted. “I’ve been staying at Drummond.” She gave Anabella a smirk. “I’m sure you know the place.”

Brand narrowed his eyes. “Then I’m sure you know my cousin, Sir Logan, the Captain of the Guard.”

She gave him a knowing smile. “Oh, he was the first one I questioned.”

“Questioned about what?” Anabella asked.

“About locating the child’s true sire.”

Suddenly a voice boomed out from the garden gate. “And what did I tell you about that?”

It was Logan himself. He looked haggard, as if he’d ridden a very long distance at a reckless speed. His hair hung in strings. His eyes were rimmed with shadows. His chin was covered with days-old stubble.

“Logan!” the woman exclaimed. And despite all her bravado while facing the menace of Brand, before Logan, she stammered, “Wh-what are you doing here? How, how did you…”

Logan stalked forward in rage and snatched the parchment from her hand. “What did I say to you, Kate?” he repeated between his teeth. “What exactly did I reveal to you about the child’s true sire?”

She gulped and turned so white, her freckles stood out like specks of

pepper on cream. Then she gazed at the ground, mortified.

“Naught,” she was forced to admit, glancing once at Anabella. “You told me naught. But it wasn’t for lack of trying.”

“I told you to leave the matter alone,” Logan said. “I told you everything was settled. I told you not to poke sticks into beehives.”

Katherine slowly regained her courage. “But ’tis my nature, Logan. No one else will do it. Justice must be done, or else mothers like her—”

“Ma!” Lofn called out as she burst into the garden, staggering under the weight of the codex. “I found the Avicenna.”

Lofn stopped short when she spied the gathering in the garden. Everyone fell silent. All eyes were on her.

“Ma?” she repeated.

Before anyone else could reach her, Katherine intercepted the wee lass, hunkering down before her.

Anabella’s heart leaped into her throat.

“Good day, lass,” the woman said. “I’m Katherine, your mother’s friend. Are you Lofn?”

“Aye, my lady.” Lofn, taught to be polite, gave a wee curtsy.

Anabella trembled. Not in fear. But with ire. Mother’s friend indeed. If the woman touched one hair on Lofn’s head…

“Stay away from her.” The growl came out before she realized she’d voiced her thoughts aloud.

“I mean the lass no harm,” Katherine said over her shoulder.

Brand and Logan stood with clenched fists, ready to intervene at the slightest provocation.

“She’s…beautiful,” the woman murmured to herself, reiterating, “I would never hurt a child.”

The three Rivenlochs and one squirming dog stood poised to attack the woman. Anabella felt as if they protected Lofn against a rabid wolf that could attack at any moment. They dared not incite the woman to violence while she was so close to Lofn. But if she so much as lifted a finger against the wee lass…

Katherine nodded to the codex. “What have you got there, Lofn?”

“The Avicenna,” Lofn replied.

“What’s the Avicenna?”

“Kate,” Logan cautioned.

“Ma’s codex,” Lofn said. “She’s going to fix Zohra.”

“Zohra?”

“My doll.”

“Kate,” Logan warned again.

The woman narrowed her eyes at the codex. “That’s a very fine codex. Where did your Ma get it?”

“Enough, Kate,” Logan decided. “Move away from her.”

The woman let out a sigh of frustration. “Fine.” Then she rose and turned on Logan. “But I’m not finished with this. I’ll ne’er be finished. If it takes me half my life, I’ll find out the truth.”

Logan pierced her with a sharp glare. “Half your life may be shorter than you think if you don’t mind your own affairs.”

“Are you threatening me?” she asked, incredulous.

“Bloody well right, I’m threatening you,” he fired back. “This is Rivenloch you’re accusing. Brand is my cousin. Anabella is his wife. I won’t have you making trouble for them.”

“I’m not the one making trouble.” She pointed emphatically at Anabella. “*She* brought this upon herself.”

“Brought this upon…?” Logan was so enraged, he couldn’t finish the sentence. He towered over the woman and shot his words down at her like missiles from a trebuchet. “She is an innocent woman. She was abducted by Saracens. Held captive. My cousin risked his life to save her. And she risked her life by fleeing. How dare you accuse her of bringing this upon herself.”

While Anabella couldn’t attest to the complete accuracy of his account, she had to admire his powerful defense of her.

“How dare she keep the truth from the child?” the woman demanded.

“The child is two years old,” Logan told her.

“I’m three,” Lofn protested.

“She’s three,” the woman agreed with a self-satisfied smirk. “She’s old enough to know who *is* and who *isn’t,*” she said, glaring pointedly at Brand, “her fa-”

Like lightning striking, Logan seized the woman by the throat, choking off her words, and bit out, “Not. Now.”

Anabella was stunned. She'd witnessed Logan's quick reflexes before in combat. But never had she seen him use them against a woman. For an instant she felt a pang of fear.

Had Logan hurt the woman? What did he mean to do? Would he throttle the life out of her?

In the next moment her worries vanished.

The woman jabbed her knee hard into Logan's groin.

He immediately released her and bent forward in pain. "Damn you, Kate!"

While he was indisposed, she snatched the parchment from his hand and pointed it at Brand and Anabella.

"I'm not through with you," she said. "I don't care if you're from the high and mighty Rivenloch clan. This is unjust. And as long as I have breath in my body, I will pursue the matter until justice is served."

It was a shame the woman was on such a scurrilous mission. Anabella admired her fortitude and determination. Not to mention the clever ploy of kneeing her opponent in the ballocks.

With the parchment in one hand and her skirts in the other, she sidled past Logan and clucked her tongue. "I can't believe you followed me all the way here."

He grated out, "I promise you this, Kate. I'll follow you to the ends of the earth if you dare confront my kin again."

The woman glanced down at the Avicenna, lying on the ground beside Lofn. "Maybe you can find some remedy in this codex for soothing bruised

cods.” She marched off then, pausing just once to grumble over her shoulder, “And stop calling me Kate.”

Anabella was relieved when the gate closed behind the woman. She let Panakeia down and checked to be sure Lofn was all right.

But if she hoped Logan would give them any further explanation, she was disappointed.

“My apologies,” he told them. “I must go after her. She means well. But she’s like a loaded trebuchet. And I can’t afford to have her firing boulders all o’er Scotland.”

With a curt nod, he departed.

“She means well?” Anabella asked Brand after they were gone. “I don’t think she means well at all. Do ye think she’s dangerous?”

Brand furrowed his brow at the garden gate. “Nay. I think Logan will keep her in line.”

That sounded dire. “Ye don’t think he’d hurt her?” Anabella had seen his deadly glare when he’d wrapped his hand around her throat.

“Nay.”

“Because he’s a Rivenloch?” she guessed. That was Brand’s answer for everything.

“Nay.”

“Why then?”

“Because the poor fool is in love with her.”

Anabella laughed, thinking he was jesting.

But his expression was serious.

“In love with her?” she asked.

“Hopelessly.”

Now she was intrigued by the possibilities that loomed ahead. What challenges were in store for the fearless knight? Did he really believe he could tame such a shrew? And did he honestly think he could make her fall in love with him?

Then again, Anabella had married her abductor.

So maybe it was true.

Maybe when it came to Rivenlochs, love *did* conquer all.



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Dedication



For Peanut,
the best little assistant
an author could hope for –
May you frolic forever
in Piccola

For my mom,
flower fairy,
sweet soul,
nurturing spirit –
I hope the other side is
everything you imagined

And for the world,
for which I wish
a lasting peace

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Rich for the best chats about getting struck by lightning and sailing medieval ships

Henry Cavill and Katie McGrath for inspiration

and this passage which started it all

from Reginaldi Monachi Libellus de Admirandis Beati Cuthberti:

"Malcolm King of Scots had committed a man to be imprisoned in darkness in Berwick castle and ordered that no small care be taken for his keeping. He compassed him about with every vigilance on the part of the servants in whose custody he was, and allowed nothing good to be done to him of any sort… The King, enraged against him with the fury of a great indignation, also had him constrained with divers bonds of iron. For he had him thrust into a prison darker than other prisons and had him shackled

with great weights of iron. For the prison, from its gloomy and tangible darkness was called Cole, because nothing was left there save shame and the blackest horror…”

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About Glynnis Campbell



I'm a *USA Today* bestselling author of swashbuckling action-adventure historical romances, mostly set in Scotland, with more than 25 award-winning books published in six languages.

But before my role as a medieval matchmaker, I sang in *The Pinups,* an all-girl band on CBS Records, and provided voices for the MTV animated series *The Maxx*, Blizzard's *Diablo* and *Starcraft* video games, and *Star Wars* audiobooks.

I'm the wife of a rock star (if you want to know which one, contact me) and the mother of two young adults. I do my best writing on cruise ships, in

Scottish castles, on my husband's tour bus, and at home in my sunny southern California garden.

I love transporting readers to a place where the bold heroes have endearing flaws, the women are stronger than they look, the land is lush and untamed, and chivalry is alive and well!

I'm always delighted to hear from my readers, so please feel free to email me at glynnis@glynnis.net. And if you're a super-fan who would like to join my inner circle, sign up to be part of Glynnis Campbell's Readers Clan on Facebook, where you'll get glimpses behind the scenes, sneak peeks of works-in-progress, and extra special surprises!

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