



THE
DUKE
& THE
PIRATE
QUEEN

VICTORIA JANSSEN

Spice

Victoria Janssen

The Duke and the Pirate Queen

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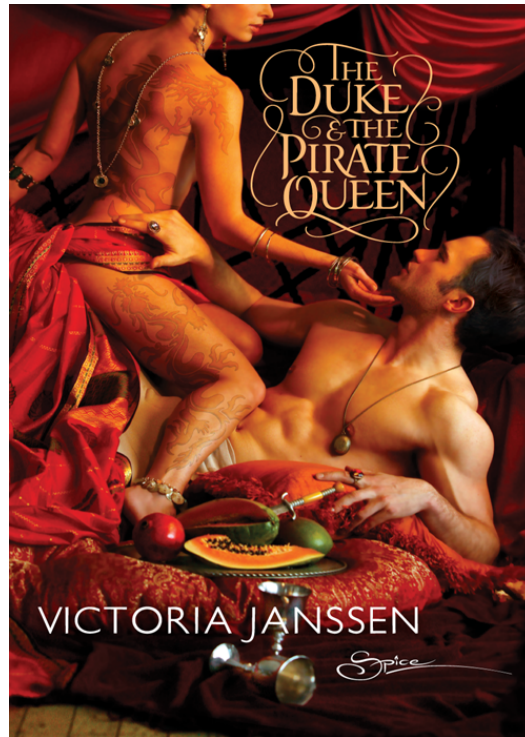
Aboard her privateering ship, The Seaflower, Captain Imena Leung is the law. Ashore she answers only to her liege, Duke Maxime. They are a powerful couple, with an intense attraction neither can disguise nor deny. As a nobleman, Maxime is destined to wed strategically, so his seductive advances must be purely for pleasure. And what self-respecting pirate denies herself any pleasure? Their delicious dalliance is prolonged when Imena is forced to abduct Maxime to thwart a political plot against him. At sea, with a stunningly virile man bound and held in her private quarters, Imena can imagine—and enact—any number of intoxicating scenarios. The heat between captain and captive is matched only by the perils that beset The Seaflower and her crew. Violent storms, marauding corsairs and life-or-death sex games on a desert island—how fortunate for the seemingly insatiable lovers that danger and desire go hand-in-hand.

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About the Author

VICTORIA JANSSEN is a voracious reader but has never once defeated the to-be-read pile at the foot of her bed. Under her pseudonym, Elspeth Potter, she has sold more than thirty short stories. She's the only writer she knows who's published a story that includes giant people-eating turtles.

The Duke & the Pirate Queen is Victoria's third novel for Spice Books, and she's currently hard at work on number four.

Learn more about Victoria at www.VictoriaJanssen.com.



VICTORIA JANSSEN



www.spice-books.co.uk

For the Nameless Workshop, then and now, near and far.

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Further information may be found at my website, www.victoriajanssen.com.

CHAPTER ONE

“MY LADY,” MAXIME SAID, “I UNDERSTAND YOU’RE disappointed—”

Lady Diamanta Picot threw a gold-and-ruby pomegranate at Maxime’s head. He ducked, but it still clipped the top edge of his coronet and rebounded into the wall of the receiving room before hitting the floor and spinning to a stop.

A handblown goblet whizzed by his ear; he flung up his hand and caught it before it could shatter against the ducal throne behind him. “Now, wait,” he said. “That was a particular token of my esteem—look at all these beautiful cloud fish etched into the bowl—” “Fuck you!” Lady Diamanta screamed. “I’m afraid not,” Maxime said. “I did not agree to this marriage. Therefore I will not marry you.”

Diamanta vibrated with rage, her slender fingers clenched upon the next gift, a handful of ebony hair sticks topped with gold knobs, the rich coppery-red gold of the far south, seldom seen in the duchies. She snarled, “You have no choice in the matter.”

“On the contrary,” Maxime said. “I am a duke of the realm. I may marry whom I please. My charter clearly states—”

“You will marry at the king’s command,” Diamanta said, her voice going cold. She set the hair sticks back on the table, but continued to fondle them, as an archer might fondle arrows. “If you refuse me, my life will be ruined.”

“No, it won’t,” Maxime said. “You hate me. You’ve hated me since we were both fourteen.” He set the goblet down on another table, out of her reach.

Diamanta licked her lips. They were plump and pink and inviting. Her fingers trailed along the table and lightly caressed the marquetry lid of a box of caraway comfits before returning to the hair sticks. She said, “My feelings don’t enter into it, nor do yours. I am wealthy.”

“So am I.”

“That’s why we belong together. That’s why I am to be a duchess. My father’s wealth will provide a substantial dowry for the crown, and for your duchy, as well. I’ve been trained from birth to manage a duchy and its interests.”

“You won’t be my duchess,” Maxime said. He clasped his hands behind his back. The elaborate rings he’d worn, hoping she’d see them as the respect he intended for her, dug painfully into his fingers. “My refusal has nothing to do with your management skills. I am despondent you traveled all this way. I informed the king weeks ago I would not marry you, or anyone of his choosing. Perhaps you could convey this to him directly.”

“You are a fool,” she spat. “Our marriage could be a mutually beneficial arrangement. I would increase your wealth beyond anything you can imagine. You may have two heirs of me, or even three. And I would not restrain you from your ... interests outside the marriage bed, if you would extend me the same courtesy.”

She’d just stated his worst nightmare. Slowly, he shook his head.

He held her gaze. She held his. Slowly, she released her grip on the hair sticks and trailed her fingers up her rib cage and over her bosom, perfectly displayed in her low-cut purple gown. It was one of the finest bosoms in all the duchies. She lifted a brow. Maxime shook his head.

Diamanta took one of the hair sticks and briskly used it to tidy dislodged strands of her platinum-pale hair. She remarked, “You would have been lucky to have me. You’re not such a prize, you know. No matter what the women of the court say of your ... endowments.”

“I’d rather not be a prize in a contest,” Maxime said. “You will of course accept my gifts, which express my regret in refusing our betrothal?”

Diamanta cast a glance over the tables spanning the room, each one laden with silks, jewels, sweetmeats and exquisite handicrafts. Thirty matched tourmalines were arrayed on black velvet and

surrounded by twists of intricate lace. Whole pears, glittering with an armor of sugar crystals, spilled from a brightly polished silver bowl, and a mixture of saffron pastilles and candied violets adorned a perfect marzipan replica of the king's castle. A tiny yellow bird with an orange beak warbled sweetly in its bamboo cage, and an albino monkey watched them from atop a tree carved from jade.

Diamanta fondled a distinctive enameled sweets box, this one the most valuable item of the lot, containing as it did candied lumps of a balsam imported from the other side of the world, which Maxime had not yet released to a general market. Feigning reluctance, she picked up the palm-size box. "I suppose they will have to do." She gestured to her silently waiting maid, whirled in a swirl of silks and exited.

After the door closed, Maxime sank into a chair and scrubbed his hands over his cropped dark beard. He'd barely escaped a fate that made him shudder inside—a lifetime of brittle politeness and brittle, obligatory sex with someone with whom he never wanted to converse. Being threatened with such a marriage was one of the things he'd managed to avoid while still merely Lord Maxime of the Coastal Protectorate.

He was lucky the king hadn't had him drugged and forced to speak vows. He cast a glance at his wineglass, remembered Diamanta had passed near it and poured its contents into a potted tree.

The monkey ate another grape.

He'd thought he had more time.

Until five months ago, he and his duchy had been treated as a client state in all that mattered. As the son of a duke murdered for unspecified acts of treason, Maxime's position had been precarious. One false move, or even a whim on the part of the king, and he would have been swept from power, perhaps even executed. For that reason, he had never married, and made certain never to sire an heir or indeed any child. He'd been left orphaned when his own parents were killed. He wouldn't wish that fate on anyone, either the initial pain or the subsequent subjugation to another.

He'd wanted to be his own man when he proposed marriage, free to ask because it was what he wanted, not because it was required of him. He'd wanted to marry a woman of his own choosing, who would share in ruling the duchy with him, as his parents had shared. He wanted a lover and a confidante, and he wanted those things with legal status that no one could take away. He'd waited years for the privilege of marrying as he wished.

This business of being a duke was not all that he'd hoped it would be. It was more of a prison than a privilege.

When he was still merely a lord, his unmarried status had been allowed, and even encouraged. Now, though, the dukedom was restored to him. His marriage had become a matter of concern to the new king, a concern that grew steadily more pressing. Letters and messengers had been succeeded by the actual appearance of Diamanta as a potential bride, and he didn't doubt other "choices" would soon arrive at his castle gates. He needed to marry soon, before the king took stronger action.

He would have to approach Captain Imena Leung.

For the thousandth time, he cursed himself for employing her soon after they'd met. If he'd known she would be so scrupulous about separating pleasure from her business relationships, he could have tried some other method to get to know her. It was too late now. He had to work with what he had, and if he wished to escape being married off like a virgin princess, he needed to work quickly.

He hadn't wanted to rush something so important. Again and again he'd delayed, out of fear he'd make a mistake and lose any chance at her forever. Now he had no choice, and for that, he cursed King Julien as well as his own cowardice.

Captain Leung was due back in the duchy this week, after a visit to her parents in the Horizon Empire. He would speak to her then.

Captain Leung seized one end of her trunk and hauled it noisily across the bamboo decking. "I'll visit in the spring," she said.

Her father stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Let me call a servant to carry your trunk."

“Quickly,” she said. She didn’t actually want to manhandle her trunk all the way across the palatial houseboat, up the stairs to the main deck and then down to the waiting cargo skip. She lowered it to the deck.

Her father smiled and gently stroked her arm with his large, callused hand. To most, his dark-skinned, elaborately tattooed face with its odd pale eyes was frightening; to her, impossibly dear. “Imena, you don’t have to leave just yet. Your mother and I—”

Imena crossed her arms over her chest. “It was her idea to marry me off.”

“Well, you *are* past thirty now, and—”

“*Your* marriage wasn’t arranged for you,” she pointed out. In fact, her father had been a prisoner of the imperial navy; his love match with her mother, his former captor, was still a scandal, decades later.

“That was different,” he said. “Utterly different. We want to do the right thing for you. We don’t want you to grow old alone.”

“I’d rather marry one of Mother’s lapdogs than one of that crew of—”

“Imena!” Her mother stood in the doorway, dressed in full regalia as an admiral of the fleet, looking much larger than she actually was; the immense pile of hair atop her head added to the illusion of size, but not as much as her posture and air of command. Three snub-faced dogs with silky black-and-white hair snuffled at the hem of her deck-length robe. The fourth flung itself onto a pillow on the deck, resting its head on its paws. “They are all respectable men,” she said. “You won’t have to suffer for your choice as I did. I had them investigated very carefully. Any one of them would make a fine husband for you.”

“I don’t want—”

“I spoke to all of them first, as well, and made sure to impress upon them how closely I’ll keep my eye on them,” her father said. He stroked the long knife he wore at his hip. “I’ve seen that these arranged marriages often work out well, much better than you would think at first. Most of the marriages in this port came about that way. If you would only reconsider—”

“I don’t want—”

Her mother interrupted. “You’ll never find a husband at sea, or among the foreigners. Be reasonable. Let us find a suitable man for you.”

Apparently, her mother’s own husband didn’t count as a *foreigner*. “I don’t want you to find a suitable man for me.”

Admiral Leung’s cheeks colored with anger. “Imena! I am your mother. It’s your duty to obey me in this.”

“As you obeyed *your* parents?” Imena asked. “I’ll see you both in the spring.” She bowed to her parents, stepped over her trunk, pushed past her mother and climbed up to the deck. She’d catch a ride in the cargo skip rather than wait for more formal transport.

At least on her ship people listened to her.

Three weeks later

Imena straightened her embroidered turquoise dress coat and brushed off the matching silk trousers as she emerged onto the deck of her ship, *Seaflower*. Her feet were bare, displaying their swirling wavelike tattoos, and she wore a long, jeweled dagger at her waist, a gift from her employer, Duke Maxime. She smiled. It felt good to be back in the duchy, where she was free of parental dictates. If only her mind could be free of them, as well. Her visit to Maxime should help. She always looked forward to seeing him. He was pleasant to look upon, and he wasn’t difficult to talk to, either. Under other circumstances, she might have tried to seduce him.

No, she *would* have tried. And knowing him as she did, she would easily have succeeded.

Imena’s handpicked sailors, both male and female, filled *Seaflower’s* narrow deck, chanting while they passed crates of mangosteens from hand to hand and thus onto the dock. She gave them a nod in appreciation of their efficiency, and went to the railing where her first mate waited.

Chetri smiled at her. His long, wavy hair was loose, rippling in the breeze, a sure sign of upcoming shore leave; normally he wore it tightly coiled at the back of his neck. “We’ll finish the offloading by this afternoon,” he said.

“Shore leave is port watch first, this trip.”

“Aye, Captain.” He grinned at her. “And may I say the captain looks ... very clean and tidy?”

She laughed. “You may.” She ran her hand over her bare head. At sea, she rarely bothered to use a razor, but in port she made a point to expose the intricate blue, red and white designs tattooed on her scalp, each hard won in her youth as an imperial privateer. Like Chetri, she’d outlined her eyes with kohl.

Chetri wore tightly fitting trousers and a silver-embroidered vest that showed his muscular form and the black tattoos on his pectorals, circles within circles within circles, to good advantage. Silver rings cascaded along his earlobes; his neck was hung with bright silver chains, one of them suspending a medallion engraved with birds, another a cluster of black pearls. Another tattoo, this of a snarling monster’s face with a tongue of flame, marked out his hard-muscled belly. He needn’t worry that advancing middle age would deter anyone’s glances. She said, “May I offer the hope that my first mate is ... lucky ... on his shore leave?”

“You most certainly may. Now, be off with you, Imena, and do the pretty with His Grace. And may you be lucky, too. What’s his name again? Sanji?”

Her stern glare only made him laugh. Chetri knew very well that Sanji had been her only lover for almost a year. There was a saying, that making the tide on land didn’t count. For her, that had never been true.

She was lucky the potential husbands her mother had introduced to her hadn’t permanently put her off sex. She’d never seen a more tightly laced bunch, draped in layers of fine silk robes and ballasted with necklaces and belts enough to festoon an entire fishing village, all of them eyeing her as if she were a trinket they wanted to buy, if they could only overcome their distaste at her profession.

She would have to face them again the next time she visited, or worse, she would have to confront her mother and make plain that she would not marry a man of the Horizon Empire, and forever be considered his accessory. After that, it would be almost trivial to convince her father that he could never threaten such a man into loving her. For a couple who swore they’d fallen in love at first sight, their opinions on marriage for their daughter seemed decidedly odd. Perhaps they’d finally realized the truth of the matter, as Imena had.

Her good mood was spoiling rapidly. Imena concentrated on the wooden pier beneath her bare feet, and the warmth of the sun on her scalp. Slowly, her mood improved. She missed the sea, as always when a voyage had ended, but shore had its own charms.

Here in port, the briny sea air mingled with the bite of boiling tar from the shipyard and tantalizing whiffs of sugary fried dough, overlaid with the scents of ripe fruits and steaming mint tea served hot and honeyed, of sticky rice balls and steamed fresh fish and hot spices. Her mouth watered; she would snack on a fish cake before she reported to Maxime.

Perhaps she would ask his advice on what to do about her parents’ demands. He was past forty and unmarried, though his position was much different from hers; he could pick and choose his potential spouses. She shook her head. Doubtless, he had no time for personal conversations of that nature. Or if he made time ... she didn’t want his pity. She wanted ... she didn’t know what she wanted from him.

She stopped at the harbormaster’s office to drop off the necessary paperwork from her last voyage. She made a brief call at the shipyard to deliver a list of supplies she and Chetri had prepared, bought a fish cake and a sugared dumpling for good measure, then waved over a donkey cart to carry her up the long hill to Maxime’s castle.

The ride was the first time she’d had entirely to herself in months. She savored each bite of her fish cake as she watched the traffic around them, mostly traders, but a few locals, as well, who

divided their work between the castle and the nearby town. One day, she planned to be one of those locals. She thought the duchy would be a better home to her than the land of her birth, where her position suffered from her mixed race. Her mother might be an admiral in the empress's navy, but even now her father was considered barely higher in rank than a concubine, despite all her mother's efforts to the contrary.

If Imena lived in the empire, with them, she would have to endure low status. Privateers were considered far inferior to sailors in the navy, and in the company of her mother's people, her darker skin and paler eyes marked her out to even casual view. If she married here, however, she would be a citizen. Mixed race was less of a sin here, and she would be far from the only person of foreign birth, as well.

However, her past as an imperial privateer would still be against her. It was emblazoned forever on her skin. Even here, in a coastal town that knew the difference between pirates and privateers, she was often looked at askance, and sometimes worse. After all, she hadn't been a privateer for the duchy, but for a country that was only nominally an ally. Her motives would always be suspect.

She imagined presenting a list of her failings to a potential husband in the duchies. She could write each problem in a different color of ink: foreigner, mixed-race daughter of a not-entirely-respectable potentially-enemy naval officer and her exotic barbarian husband (acquired in dubious circumstances), and had she mentioned she was a suspected pirate?

Of course, she needn't marry. She could bear a child to a citizen of the duchy and gain citizenship through that route, but she didn't plan to go through the rigors of childbearing unless she was married already. Owning land in the duchy was another path to citizenship, except she was always at sea and wouldn't be able to oversee the land properly; also, even if she met all the other legal conditions, she would need to steward the land for a period of ten years before her petition would be heard. Marriage was the most direct path, and the most appealing to her.

An ox-drawn wagon trundled by, loaded with vegetables. Two children rode on the tail, their bare legs dangling over the edge. They whooped when they saw her; she waved a casual salute and they bounced with excitement until her donkey cart passed them. She glanced at her driver. "You'd think I was the duke."

He grinned. "His Grace they can see any day. It's not often they get to see Captain Leung."

Imena rubbed her hand over her scalp. "No, I suppose not." Sometimes it still took her by surprise that people she'd never met might be impressed with her; she was more used to wariness or outright fear from those who'd heard about her past and linked her with piracy and other crimes. Being viewed with admiration had never happened in her previous postings; but then, before her employment with the duchy she'd worked for and around the empire, where she would always be her mother's daughter, who could not inherit her mother's position as was proper. Where her appearance would always set her apart.

She could make her own position, here.

The duke's castle was built of local stone, green alternating with white in striped layers, the whole topped with crenellations and spiky observation towers, lending a resemblance to fish she'd seen when swimming among tropical reefs. The donkey cart crested the hill, passed the castle's first low wall and approached the bronze gates, heavily ornamented from top to bottom with representations of octopuses and different species of fish. The gates stood open on a path made of crushed white shells leading to the castle's ceremonial main doors, used for occasions such as when Maxime had been made duke.

Imena paid off her driver and approached a side entrance. Two guards with pikes checked her credentials and the handwritten note that allowed her to carry weapons into the castle, then a boy in livery swung open the door and waved her through. The temperature dropped inside, the deep green floor tiles cool against her bare soles. Imena was led down a corridor where oil lamps flung colored light on the white walls. Near the corridor's branching, she entered a chamber full of clerks, all busy

calculating the duchy's wealth. Her own cargo would soon be written in the long books, minus her own share, and that of Chetri and her sailors.

The duke's aunt, Lady Gisele, was seated on a high stool near the door, reviewing columns of figures while a senior clerk stood by attentively. The pen Gisele held looked more incongruous in her scarred hand than the sword that hung at her hip. She looked up when Imena entered. "Captain! How very good to see you back. Will you have time for an evening of cards while you're here?"

Imena was always surprised that Lady Gisele welcomed her personally. She'd seen the older woman stand on much more ceremony with other captains in Maxime's employ. She replied, "I'll find out shortly, from His Grace. Chetri is arranging for your special shipment to be carried to the castle." Imena usually obtained some of Gisele's favorite teas on each voyage, along with new types for her to try. She reached into her pocket and withdrew a tin box. "I've also brought you more of the balsam ointment."

"Thank you!" Gisele beamed. "I used the last pot you brought me on an old scar. It's much better, look." She swung her arm in a full circle and added, "Sylvie is visiting. Perhaps she will join us for cards later. Maxime is in the baths. He asked that you be sent to him whenever you should arrive."

Imena had last seen Sylvie, the duchess Camille's bodyguard and lady's maid, at Maxime's accession. Sylvie had lost to her at cards, but, Imena later learned, had seduced Imena's card partner, a wealthy merchant. And the wealthy merchant's male paramour, an acrobat. And the acrobat's female performance partner, a contortionist. All at the same time. Imena was not in the mood for hearing about such adventures today. She resolved to avoid seeing Sylvie this trip.

She said, "I'll find His Grace in the baths."

Maxime often welcomed his guests in the extensive system of steam baths in the castle's lowest level. Sometimes sexual pleasures were offered, as well. Imena wasn't often entertained there, and she wondered at it now. Though they'd never spoken of it, Duke Maxime clearly found her attractive, and she just as clearly never encouraged him in the least. He was her employer, and off-limits.

She'd made *that* mistake once before. Never again. One unmitigated disaster was enough for any lifetime.

If Maxime *hadn't* been her employer, though, he might have been a candidate for a shore-leave affair, except that now he was also a duke, and clearly out of her reach. He definitely wasn't husband material. Dukes couldn't afford companionate marriage, and she refused to be merely a concubine or occasional lover.

She tried not to regret his accession to the dukedom. He'd been denied it his entire life; she ought to be happier that he'd achieved his goal. She never could have married him. Dukes or even almost-dukes didn't marry politically difficult foreign sailors of ambiguous social rank.

And Maxime ... she didn't think he was made for marriage. Not the sort she would want. He had too many sexual partners, both his social equals and his servants alike. She wouldn't share. She couldn't see how he could forswear all others.

It was her parents' fault she'd suddenly become obsessed with marriage. Perhaps Maxime had planned on a bath anyway, and had no ulterior motives. It wasn't as if he had summoned her to his bedroom. She could use a soak in hot, mineralized water, and perhaps a massage from one of Maxime's highly trained servants.

Her muscles had been knotted for weeks, ever since she'd arrived home and been ushered aboard her parents' houseboat. The decks had been crammed with wealthy bureaucrats, swilling her parents' liquor and estimating the value of the furnishings. One of them in particular, a provincial tax collector, had offended her with his oily grins and the way he took every opportunity to offer her food and drink, as if he were the host and not her parents. He'd touched her arm without asking, pretending fascination with the muscles of a woman who worked on a ship. She'd had to resist planting her knee in his crotch.

She really must stop stewing over it. Her mother meant well. Her father went along because he trusted her mother's opinions when it came to imperial society, and planned to make the best of it in his own way. That didn't mean Imena had to go along, as well. She would tell her parents so, as soon as she saw them again. Or, better, she would simply marry here and tell them afterward. She didn't want to marry for convenience, but offered the alternative of an imperial, she would do it ... wouldn't she? If it didn't work out, there was always the sea.

The corridor leading to the baths was utterly silent except for the faint rippling sound of lantern flames behind colored glass.

A heavy door, decorated with octopuses, opened and a man stepped out. He was naked, but in the area of the baths that was unremarkable. They exchanged polite nods, and he headed in the opposite direction, toward a row of guest chambers.

Was the man one of Maxime's lovers? He'd partnered with almost as many men as women. She knew firsthand from two different ship captains that they'd shared liaisons with him.

It shouldn't matter to her. Maxime was no worse than many a sailor, except he had more opportunity for affairs. She wasn't sure why it bothered her. She had no business being jealous of his attentions.

She dragged open the door and slipped in, remembering to say, "Your Grace?" rather than "my lord." She had not seen Maxime since soon after his accession.

He'd looked grand that day, his shoulder-length hair bound back in a sheath of gold filigree, emeralds glinting from his earlobes, encrusting his white gloves and shining from the buttons of his white silk coat, embroidered all over with waving kelp and heraldic octopuses.

Just now, all the panoply was gone; he was naked, and pouring a pail of water over his head. Soap bubbles sped down his muscular back, rear and thighs along with the water, leaving a damp sheen on his pale skin that begged for touch. Also, for her tongue.

Imena shook herself and repeated, "Your Grace?"

Maxime whirled. The pail in his hand did not block her view of his dark chest hair, flat belly and impressive cock. Hastily, she shifted her gaze to his face. Nudity was normal in the baths, but it wasn't polite to stare.

He didn't look as if he'd been engaging in sex, and the bathing room did not hold any scent of such activities.

His voice was low and pleasant as usual. "Captain Leung. I hadn't expected you so soon. It's good to see you. How was your visit home?"

He turned away quickly and scooped up a towel from a nearby bench, wrapping it around his waist. He wasn't usually modest at all, so the towel surprised her, but perhaps he was chilled. Perhaps he'd dunked himself in cold water, but if so, surely his genitals. She stopped the thought, and an urge to laugh.

No doubt the towel was intended to let her know he wasn't trying to seduce her. She hadn't expected to find him alone, without even a servant. It was the unexpected intimacy that led to such thoughts about him, forgetting he was her employer. She hadn't ogled him before, in similar situations. Well, not very much.

"I can return later, if you wish," she said.

He used another towel to rub at his dark hair, then wisted it back from his face with a ribbon. "No, no." He gave her a closer look, and grinned. His smiles could be stunning, white teeth slowly revealed in his dark beard, and Imena was momentarily dazed. "Perhaps I shouldn't have asked about your visit home. You look as if you could use a nice soak. Here, I'll scrub you down while you report."

Men and women were usually segregated in public baths, but in private ones standards were relaxed. She'd more than once visited the castle baths to see servants ministering to guests of opposite gender, or guests doing so themselves. However, she hadn't thought a duke would take on such a task.

She was being foolish. This was Maxime. Duke or not, he was a very physical man. He wouldn't change his bathing habits because of a title. And she ... would like to have someone else bathe her. She was more tired than she had any right to be, her body tight with stress and unresolved anger. Maxime's strong hands would feel good on her skin. A little indulgence wouldn't kill her. This was only a bath.

"That would be welcome, Your Grace."

She was already sweating in her silk coat and trousers, and it felt good to slip them off and hang them on hooks next to Maxime's elaborate coat. Her dagger and belt knife went on a shelf next to his. The gold hoops from her ears went into a wooden bowl that already held his lacquered finger sheaths, an official-looking medallion and a pair of immense ruby earrings. Normally, he didn't adorn himself quite so much. She asked, "Who visited today?"

He grimaced. "An envoy of the king." Imena glanced around, and he gestured to a wooden bench. "Sit. I'll carry the water."

The bench was warm and polished to a sheen with age and scrubbing. Oil lamps in niches lit the stone chamber in sunset shades of red, orange, pink and gold; portions of the stone floor had been mosaicked in similar colors. Steam curled gently from the soaking pools; she inhaled and felt her breathing ease. It felt good to be nude. She could already feel the warmth easing into her as she laid a towel over the bench and sat. She listened to Maxime pour water. As he approached, she asked, "Why did the king send an envoy? Does he want his taxes? Have you been holding back, Maxime? Your Grace," she added.

He didn't appear to notice how she'd addressed him. "Close your eyes." He smoothed a warmed cream around her eyes and gently wiped it away, removing the kohl from her skin. She could feel his breath on her face as he worked, more intimate than his hand's touch. He cleaned the rest of her face with more lotion and a new cloth, then scrubbed her ears and finally her scalp. Shivers passed down her back with each touch. She was hard put not to shove her head against his hand like a petted cat.

"Why an envoy?" she asked again.

The soapy cloth touched her shoulder blade and he scrubbed vigorously. She bit back a moan of pleasure and closed her eyes. Maxime didn't answer her until the delightful scrubbing paused and she heard him rinsing the cloth in the bucket. "His Highness sent the lord Odell, whom you might remember is the chief steward of the Duke's Council. His Highness King Julien the Seventh, Master of the Eastern Passes, Sovereign of the Eight Duchies—which includes mine, he made sure to remind me—requires me to marry. He is weary of waiting for me to accomplish this on my own recognizance, and has ordered I marry immediately." He returned to scrubbing her back, more vigorously than before.

She sighed and rested her elbows on her thighs so he could scrub harder. "I suppose since he can't bear your heir himself, someone under his thumb is the next best thing."

A moment's silence, then Maxime laughed. "Julien *is* an attractive man, but I don't think his tastes run to partners who are bearded."

Fighting down an unexpected sharp disappointment, she asked, "When's the wedding?"

"I refused."

Imena peered over her shoulder at him, awkwardly because he was scrubbing her arm, shoulder to fingers. He wasn't smiling. "You're a duke of his realm," she said.

"So I am. With all the rights and powers given thereunto. I'm a tad annoyed it took blackmail for that to happen, given that I was born to the position. Julien likely has another envoy on the way. I've already begun preparing a legal defense if he should try anything dubious."

"Do you have an heir already?"

"I wouldn't be so careless!" he said harshly. Immediately, he released his grip on her. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

His fingers had tightened on her, but only for a moment. “No. Will you scrub the other arm?” She’d never seen him show anger, not like this; not helpless anger, like the kind she felt herself. The rush of empathy she felt for him startled her, and she barely resisted laying her hand on his shoulder.

Maxime was much gentler with her left arm. “You didn’t come here to listen to me complain,” he said. “I have nothing to complain of.” He rinsed the cloth and added more soap; he swept the cloth over her breasts and belly with cool detachment. “Did the mangosteens travel well?”

Imena tried to ignore the warmth of his hands through the cloth. “Exceptionally so. We’ll be stowing them that way next time, as well. The custard fruit also. Chetri will be sending up a crate for you.”

She detailed the rest of the cargo, its cost and the expected profit, grateful for the distraction. As he swept the cloth over her thighs, Maxime said absently, “I like this one.” His fingers outlined an octopus tattoo, concealed within swirling tracery.

She shivered; this touch felt more intimate than the others. She didn’t mention she’d been thinking of him as she chose the design, and seen him in her mind as the needles had punctured her skin. The memory mixed oddly with the gentle pleasure of his touch.

He moved on to the rest of her leg without further comment. He asked other questions, his usual ones involving local conditions at the ports she’d visited, occasionally inquiring after a port official or shipyard master whom he knew. She gave him all the bits of information she’d gathered, no matter how small, including reports she’d had from Chetri, various of her sailors and her cabin girl, Norris.

Maxime listened to it all, an abstracted look on his face, but she knew from past experience he would forget nothing. When she’d finished speaking, he tossed a towel on the floor, knelt and began washing her feet.

He wasn’t massaging, or stroking more than he needed to stroke, but she couldn’t deny the erotic thrill racing up her legs. Imena stared down at the nape of his neck and thought about resting her hand there, or pressing her lips where his hair was pulled aside. She needed to say something, anything to distract her from his fingers sliding soap between her toes. She imagined his tongue sliding delicately between her toes and shivered with desire. Desperately, she said, “My parents want me to marry.”

CHAPTER TWO

MAXIME'S HANDS STOPPED MOVING, AND IMENA slowly let out her breath. He would stop touching her now, and she could relax. He was to marry a courtier's daughter because his king commanded. She was to marry someone who wasn't a duke; therefore even the thought of ... this ... was impossible.

There was no *this*. Maxime was performing a servant's duty for her, that was all. One of his odd notions of diplomacy. She was a little overcome by his touch because she'd been at sea for months and was sadly deprived of sex.

She needed to shake off inappropriate arousal, leave here and find Sanji, who was always glad to see her on her infrequent visits to his chandler's shop. Sanji would take care of her need in his sunny bedroom, and then they'd have a lovely dinner and she would play with his two sons out in his garden, and she might spend the night. He'd be happy to have her spend the night. He always said he'd like to see more of her.

She was having a difficult time remembering why mild, steady Sanji was preferable to Maxime.

After a pregnant pause, Maxime placed her soapy foot on the towel covering his thigh and began washing her calf, his strokes slower than before. She flexed her callused toes involuntarily against hard muscle; his shoulders tightened. She looked away. She would not think of it. She would not. He said, "Did your parents offer you any choice of husbands?"

Never had she been so grateful for conversation. "Nearly a dozen," she said.

"Were any of them suitable?"

"They were all ... very monied. Very eager to marry into the family of Admiral Leung. She chose them, though my father had final say."

Maxime moved to her other calf. "They were eager to join with her family, but not with you? They object to your father?" When she didn't answer, he said, "You told me about him, remember? I know he was a foreign captive."

She'd forgotten that drunken evening, which he'd referred to as her interview for a position as his trusted captain. "Did I tell you what else that means?"

"You can't inherit a position in the imperial navy," he said in a detached tone. "Nor can your children. They can't work for the imperium, at least not for payment, though their children's children will be allowed to do so, so long as they pass the appropriate examinations. And provided all their other ancestry is imperial. You *are*, however, permitted to work as a privateer, risking death for the imperium's glory." As he spoke, he stood and dropped the cloth in the bucket. His hands closed over her tight shoulders and massaged.

Despite the bitter truth of his words, Imena drooped forward, sighing with pleasure. His thumbs were digging unerringly into the worst knot, just at the base of her neck. She hadn't realized how much her head was aching until the gnarled muscle released. As if he knew, Maxime smoothed his palm over her scalp before returning to the massage. He said, "So what is the advantage, if you marry one of these men?"

Imena considered, though it was hard to think while his hands squeezed the tension from her shoulders and neck. "Position," she said. "I'd be absorbed into his family, and would thus be considered trustworthy, at least to a certain extent. My husband would be responsible for me." She tried to keep the anger from her tone, but couldn't manage it.

"You're not going to do that."

"I might have to." She slumped on the bench as his hands traveled down either side of her spine, pressing out tension as they went. "I'd have money of my own, to dispose of as I wanted. I would have to give up *Seaflower*, though. The wives of wealthy men don't go to sea."

He said, "It won't come to that, if you'd accept sanctuary in the duchy."

She smiled. “Thank you for the offer, but I don’t think King Julien would be happy to have the daughter of an imperial admiral living in his kingdom.”

“What if you married someone here? Your loyalty would be assumed more readily, and your children could do whatever they wished.”

She closed her eyes. “I’ve ... considered it.”

“Have you?” Maxime clapped his hand against her shoulder. “Let’s have that soak.”

Imena chose cool water to douse herself and disperse her arousal before she slid into one of the smaller pools, across from Maxime. The stone bench beneath the water was slippery, and she had to brace herself with her toes. A moment later, she realized she’d braced herself against Maxime’s leg.

“I *am* sorry!” she said, splashing as she hitched herself higher on the bench.

Maxime laughed. He reached out and snagged her arm, drawing her to sit next to him. “If you sit here, you can see the new sculptures.”

Imena eyed him and tried not to grin. “Your Grace, are you trying to seduce me?”

“Only a little,” he said, and slung his arm over her shoulders. “Have pity,” he said. “I’ve had a difficult day, too.” He leered in a patently false way, and she laughed. Perhaps it would be all right. She could indulge, just a little, and harm nothing.

“Just this once, I will sit with you,” she said, and settled back against him. A velvety thrill chased over her skin as their bodies met. She shifted so their shoulders overlapped. His muscular bulk was as solid and comforting as it looked; the hair on his chest was softer than she’d expected. She wanted to rub herself against him, all over, just for the sensual pleasure of it, a reaction she didn’t even have to Sanji.

Such a pity Maxime was a duke, a pity for her and for him. She, at least, could flee the men her parents had chosen for her. She didn’t think Maxime would elude his king’s choices for very long. His arm tightened around her shoulders. It was more difficult to fight her body’s desire when she was this close to him. She slid lower in the water and rested her cheek on his firm pectoral, her nose tantalizingly close to his nipple. He smelled of cedar-scented soap. She could lick him with no effort at all, if she wanted.

Maxime said, “You’re not dozing off, are you? You haven’t admired the sculptures. Over there, in the grotto.”

Imena looked. The grotto had been hollowed out of the bathing chamber’s far corner to reveal stalactites; they’d been embedded with crystals that glowed softly in the lamplight. The new sculptures were small glass octopuses in every color of the rainbow, attached in different positions as if they swam among a forest of stone.

“They’re lovely,” she said.

“I’m glad you like them,” he said. He rubbed his hand over her upper arm. “Captain Leung, what if you married me?”

Imena laughed. “That’s the worst possible solution to both our problems. I would be a terrible liability to you.”

“Not necessarily,” Maxime said. He leaned a fraction to the side and kissed her ear, then the bare sensitive skin above it; the touch resonated down to her toes. Imena shivered and thought about edging away, but her body didn’t want to move. His nearness sang along her nerves. He said, “You have many valuable qualities. I also have many admirable traits that I would like you to consider.”

“Such as?” He was nuzzling behind her ear now, and at the back of her neck, and she really ought to stop him, but just those small touches felt amazingly sweet. She reached out to steady herself and found she’d grabbed his thigh.

“I would make your mother angry,” he suggested. His fingers trailed along her forearm, more gently than she would have expected. “You didn’t say you wanted that, exactly, but—”

“You’re entirely too good at this,” Imena said. Still she didn’t move away from him. She should do it. She should. But his touch felt so good, and she felt ... close to him. Close from their talking,

not from his body against hers. She wanted more closeness, however she could get it. Just a little. A little while longer.

She could be casual with him. She could keep her emotions under control. She was in no danger from him, nor he from her. She always worried too much. Perhaps she should give that up, and just once take what she wanted when she wanted it.

He said, "I'm too good at enticing you, or at guessing what you want?"

"Either. Both. I don't know." His breath was warm on her skin. It was making her flush more than the heat of the water. What if he kissed her? What could it hurt if she kissed him? She'd hardly be the first and would certainly not be the last.

"If you married me, you'd be a citizen of this duchy, and your children would even have diplomatic protection if they wanted to visit their grandparents."

She said, "I never said I wanted children." Maxime kissed the nape of her neck and, retaliating, Imena squeezed his thigh.

"You wouldn't have to give up your ship."

"Stop it," she said. She twisted around, grabbed his hair and said, "If you're trying to seduce me, I'd rather you didn't talk about impossibilities." She kissed him, firmly, and had to take a sharp breath at the taste of him. "Your seduction has worked. You don't have to discuss this anymore."

"But what if I want to—"

Imena kissed him again. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. I have had a very trying few weeks. Do you want to fuck, or not?"

"An interesting question." Maxime slid off the bench and stood in the pool before her. "I've tried that, in these pools, and it really wasn't as exciting as you'd think. Inconveniently placed lumps of stone, for example, and of course there's the mineral residue. But if you would just lean back and relax—" He smoothed his hands over her arms, then cupped her breasts. He could cover each one entirely with a hand; she felt her nipples tighten and press into his palms. "Stop scowling."

His touch felt wonderful, but wasn't distracting her from her problems. "I'm not scowling."

"You think this is a bad idea."

"Not entirely," she admitted. "I do want you."

"I suppose my being a cure for a terrible mood is better than some of the alternatives. I won't be offended if you refuse me. Do you want me to stop?" When she shook her head, Maxime smiled and touched her face. His thumb brushed her cheek like a kiss. "Then perhaps if you come screaming a few times, it will help."

Startled at his bluntness, Imena laughed. His mouth closed over hers, his tongue searching. She grasped his shoulders, then tangled her fingers in his hair. Wet, it dragged between her fingers. She burrowed down to his scalp and scratched. He moaned into her mouth and pulled back.

"No, no, you're the one who's supposed to be moaning," he said. He rubbed his palms over her bare scalp, sending tingles down her torso. He didn't stop, and she shuddered, arching up toward his body. "I wonder if I could make you come like this? You just shaved it, didn't you? Your skin is so smooth. It feels like honey looks." He leaned forward and licked. "You taste better than honey," he said, his voice lowering.

He bent and suckled her nipples, one after the other, just enough to tantalize, not enough to satisfy. "Round and firm as grapes," he murmured, and pressed them with the flat of his tongue, as a tongue might press her clitoris. She spread her knees, using her thighs to grab his hips; he made a needy sound and nestled between her legs. His cock thumped against her belly, enormous and hard and hot as the water, and she squeezed his length with her hand while he rubbed against her. His cock filled her palm, heavy and growing heavier. She wanted to put her mouth on it.

"That feels exquisite," he murmured in her ear. "Stop, stop. You've got to stop that, or I won't be able to—here."

He slid his hands beneath her buttocks and lifted her out of the water, planting her firmly on the pool's edge. "Strong," she gasped. She caressed his shoulders, his skin satiny from its recent scrubbing, his muscles like carved jade beneath.

Maxime rubbed her thighs, then pressed her legs apart and teased her cunt with his forefinger, sliding down the seam of her outer lips, leaving heat in his wake. She stopped breathing. He said, "You're all gorgeous muscle with this glorious softness in the center. Have you ever sucked the sweetness from an orange? I'm going to peel you open, hold you captive against my mouth and suck your flesh until your juice runs down my chin."

Imena grabbed his head and tugged him forward. She saw his teeth glint in a grin before he pressed a kiss to her inner thigh, on her octopus tattoo, his damp beard rasping softly against her skin as he nuzzled the line where her torso met her thigh. "Your skin is like silk, soft as water, soft as water on my skin," he murmured. One cheek brushed her cunt, his beard tangling in her hair, pulling with a thousand tiny flashes of pleasure. She dragged his head to her cunt and growled wordlessly, knowing he would allow it, sensing he would even like her forcefulness.

Maxime's breath steamed over her flesh. Delicately, he opened her lower lips with his thumbs. "Did you know all women look different inside? But you're all so tender, and slick, and you smell so delicious—" He rubbed her with his nose, then pressed his tongue to her flesh, a sensation soft and wet above and faintly rasping with beard below. "You taste like the ocean."

Imena panted and dug her fingers into his hair. She might be hurting him. She tried to relax her grip, but couldn't manage it at first. When she did, she couldn't drag her hands away from his head, couldn't stop stroking his hair.

He was suckling at her now, and teasing inside her with a fingertip. She wound tighter, tighter, then shuddered in a brief climax. "More?" he said. He scraped her clit with his teeth, soothed with his tongue, then did it again, and again until she gasped and writhed up against his mouth. Still he continued with the sequence of hard and soft until all at once she came forcefully, for a few moments losing control of her limbs.

Maxime brushed her softly with his tongue as ripples of feeling passed through her, easing her down. When she'd caught her breath again, she released her grip on his hair. Her arms felt loose and relaxed now, at least more so than they had been; she still wanted to bury her fingers in his hair, stroke his scalp and tickle her fingers with his beard. Perhaps it was the way he smiled at her, openly delighted that he'd made her come.

Her chest tightened at the sight, tightened enough to hurt. For long moments, she couldn't breathe, couldn't look away from his eyes, creased at the corners with his smile. He was sweet, as sweet as Sanji. She hadn't expected that. She wanted to curl up against him and lie quietly for a time; she wanted to close her eyes so the sight of his smile wouldn't hurt her anymore. Instead, she said, "My thanks."

"You didn't scream," he said, stroking her thighs. Her muscles were still trembling, just on the edge of perception. "I think you need another or three."

He rose higher on his knees and kissed her; she tasted the sea on his lips, and belatedly realized she was tasting herself. She shuddered, deep in her belly, and Maxime caught her to him with one arm. Her breasts rubbed his chest and she abruptly wanted to be lying down, with his weight pinning her. Wanted to hook her thighs around his hips and burrow her heels into his muscular buttocks. Another few moments and her desire would be fulfilled.

She couldn't do this. It would hurt too much.

She couldn't make the tide with her employer. She shouldn't even have glimpsed the merest flicker of a possibility of fucking her employer. Who was a duke. It was a terrible idea, and she'd even warned herself against it before arriving here. It didn't matter that Maxime was a trustworthy man whom she liked. She had learned her lesson about mixing business with pleasure years ago. She should never have taken her clothes off in the first place.

“Thank you,” she said again. “That was lovely. I’ll send the manifests over as soon as I’ve received them from the harbormaster. Goodbye, Your Grace.”

She was nearly out the door before he called to her. She whirled; he’d scrambled out of the pool and stood dripping on the floor. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “It was fun. Thank you. I’ll see you later on—”

He glanced down at the floor. “You might want to put on a robe first,” he said. “No, why don’t I leave? You can stay here, and have your soak. I’m sorry I upset you.”

“You didn’t.” Useless words, when he could see her knees trembling.

Maxime grimaced. “Of course not. If you need me, I’ll be in my rooms.” Imena barely remembered to move out of the doorway so he could leave. He snagged a robe from a hook, wrapped it around himself and exited.

Imena stared around the empty bathing chamber. “That went well,” she muttered.

She ought to have stayed at sea.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WALK BACK TO HIS QUARTERS DID NOTHING to ease Maxime's agitation. He hadn't been so maladroit since he was a boy. Imena had enjoyed his seduction, it was clear, but it was also clear to him he'd misjudged how to ease her mind about marriage. Or misjudged something else entirely. Or—

He stopped in the middle of the staircase and glared down at his erection until it subsided somewhat. He might have done better to remain distant, but such a thing was impossible when he was faced with her. He had never wanted anyone so much in his entire life. At least not since he'd been a young man ruled entirely by his genitals.

Resuming his climb, he muttered, "I seem to be ruled by them even now." Next time—if there was a next time—he would plan. He would make sure to take himself in hand before he saw her, to be able to ignore his own desires for long enough to convince her of his sincerity. Even if he had to take himself in hand several times.

He flung open the door to his rooms, strode in and stopped. Sylvie, a trusted courier of the adjacent duchy, sat cross-legged on a padded hassock, idly selecting from a tray of grapes and other dainties. Her blond hair hung loose to her waist, contrast to the snug riding leathers and matching jacket she wore, which clung to every sleek curve of her body; that lushness balanced nicely with her sharp features and the sarcastic intensity of her expression. He wondered if she was about to cut another swath through his staff. Her visits usually resulted in a string of besotted glances.

Sylvie never had problems with her unending stream of lovers. He should take a lesson from her, and not let a physical act affect his emotions in this way.

"The reports are on your desk, Your Grace," she said, looking up at his entrance. She popped a marzipan starfish into her mouth. After she'd swallowed, she added, in a more formal tone, "Her Grace the Duchess Camille and her consort, Henri, send greetings." She took a sip of wine. "Henri said Aimée sends her greetings, as well, though I think this is unlikely, since the child doesn't yet speak intelligibly, and I doubt she remembers you at all. It has been so many months since any of us have seen you. If you recall, she fell asleep during the ceremony when you were made duke."

"Have you done putting me in my place?" Maxime asked. "Was there anything specific Camille wished from me, that you couldn't leave with my aunt or one of the secretaries?" Camille was enough his friend—they'd once been lovers—that she likely would have sent him a detailed document if she'd needed anything from him personally. And Sylvie would have told him before now if she'd carried any queries that could not be committed to paper.

Sylvie sampled a few aniseed comfits, uncurled and rose effortlessly to her feet. "I think you have a sea urchin shoved in a delicate place," she said. "Has the exquisite captain refused you?"

Maxime swallowed outrage. Sometimes he liked Sylvie's impertinence. Today was not one of those times. Rather than answer, he passed through a doorway into his office and opened the diplomatic pouch. He spilled letters, reports and other dispatches onto the desk's marquetry surface. Camille had sent a drawing of her plump baby daughter: her lover, Henri, held the child atop a sleek pony. Maxime reflected that the child might be his if things had been different. In the normal way of things, one duke might marry his daughter to the son of his neighbor, forming local alliances. Instead, Camille's father had slain both Maxime's parents, taken their duchy as his own protectorate and kept Maxime as a political hostage. Camille's father had let Maxime know, in more ways than one, that he would not be permitted to marry his captor's daughter or even to think himself worthy of her.

Perhaps it was for the best. He and Camille were far too much alike. Maxime was happy and relieved she'd displaced her insane husband in order to rule her own duchy, and found love in the process, however much she might deny how she felt about Henri.

His mind snapped back to the present when Sylvie said, “I don’t think you normally walk about your castle clad only in a robe. And the lady Gisele told me Captain Leung had gone to speak with you. Are your bollocks still in a clench over her?”

He grabbed his own diplomatic pouch and thrust it into Sylvie’s hands. “I am going to marry her.”

“Madame tells me the king says different.”

“Julien can go and suck a splintery arse-dildo,” Maxime snarled.

Sylvie laughed. She tossed the diplomatic pouch onto a latticed chair. “The exquisite captain is a fool, refusing both me and you.”

“She has no interest in women,” Maxime said. “She’s interested in me. I know it.”

Sylvie stepped closer, and closer still. She laid her small hands inside the open neck of Maxime’s robe. “Quiet,” she said.

“I’m running out of time,” Maxime said. He hadn’t intended to say it, but her soft touch had bypassed his control.

Sylvie slid her hands down, parting his robe as they went. “This will help,” she said. “You needn’t fear. I do this merely as a favor given out of pity for your sad state, and will have forgotten it by tomorrow. Let me help.”

“I can—”

“Oh, be quiet. It will help me, at least. I’ve been wanting to get my hands on your cock.” True to her words, she grasped him firmly in both hands. She pricked him briefly with her nails, and he gasped. “Pay attention.”

He’d been aroused for a considerable time already, and her touch had made his painful erection rigid again. He closed his eyes as her hands stroked him firmly. “Sylvie, you really don’t have to—”

“I have never heard any man protest as much as you! Not even Henri!” Her grip changed, and when he looked, she’d dropped to her knees in front of him. Thoughtfully, she said, “You have the biggest cock I have ever seen.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Maxime said glumly. “I’ve thought of giving it its own title and lands, a signet cock ring, maybe commissioning a special song from the ducal musicians.”

She wasn’t listening to his attempt at humor. She said, her tone still speculative, “I’m sure I can swallow it.”

“Sylvie!” Maxime tried to step back, but gently, afraid she wouldn’t loosen her grip. Or perhaps afraid she would loosen it. “Don’t you have business elsewhere?”

“You look very uncomfortable. Do you want me to suck your cock?”

Her touch felt wonderful. She wasn’t Imena, but. “Yes?”

Keeping a firm grip on him, one hand over the other, Sylvie licked the ridge beneath his cock, end to end. “I need a better answer than that,” she prompted. She licked him again.

“All right! Go on!”

“That’s the answer I wanted,” she noted approvingly, and nestled her mouth over his cock’s head. Her tongue dipped into the slit and he grasped her slender shoulders, leather crumpling softly beneath his fingers. Sylvie smelled overwhelmingly of leather, with hints of aniseed and marzipan. Nothing like Imena.

If she’d only given him another chance, it might be Imena’s mouth on him now, her full lips grasping and pulling at his cock’s head, her soft tongue swirling beneath his foreskin. She’d liked it when he’d caressed her scalp. He would do that for her, caress her with palms and hard fingertips and the gentlest of scratches.

Sylvie. This was Sylvie, not Imena. He was letting Sylvie suck his cock because it was less lonely than bringing himself off, alone in his rooms. He needed to tell her how much he appreciated this, but she was so skilled it was difficult for him to form words. A groan fell from his lips, and she rubbed his hip approvingly.

“Sylvie—” he said.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

She nibbled at his foreskin, fondling him with both hands. This wasn’t as encompassing as her steady suction, and he breathed easier. He said, “I’ll never be able to watch you eat anything again without remembering this.”

“I know.” She reached around and slapped his buttock. “I think you would like this to be fast and hard.”

“I would prefer that, yes.” Fast and hard would blank his mind, stop him yearning for the woman he could not have.

Sylvie let go of his erection and dug her fingers into his buttocks. “You are pathetically in love with her, aren’t you?”

“Just get on with it, Sylvie. Are you going to swallow that or not?”

Sylvie pinched him sharply, an exquisite thrill down the length of his cock, and sucked him into her mouth, unmercifully torturing his tenderest spots. Seconds later, all his thoughts were gone, whited out with rapidly climbing, painful need.

He came hard, his spine unkinking with each spasm. Gasping for breath, he threw out a hand and caught himself on the desk. Warmth shuddered over his skin, leaving relaxation in its wake, but also burgeoning despair. “Thank you,” he said to Sylvie, who still crouched on the carpet. She was smirking with arrogant satisfaction. At least she had enjoyed herself. “And you?” he asked.

Sylvie rose to her feet, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. “You’re already wishing you hadn’t let me, aren’t you?”

“Of course not!” Maxime said. “You’re amazing, Sylvie. What would you like from me? The same? Or would you like to take your pleasure with me otherwise?”

She laughed. “*Pah!* I can see it in your eyes. Guilt. You don’t want me right now. The captain hasn’t given you anything, and still you feel loyalty to her.” She dug a handkerchief from the pocket of her jacket and wiped Maxime’s softened cock, a little more roughly than he would have liked. “You are like a girl in the first throes of infatuation.” She tugged him down to her and kissed his mouth, quick and hard. “I already had to endure endless sighs of longing from Henri and Madame as they discovered romance. From you, it is even more pitiful.”

Wonderful. He couldn’t even manage an uncomplicated fuck to console himself. “I see. I’m dismissed, am I?”

“You are, Your Grace,” Sylvie said. She patted his hip. “If you will excuse me, a pair of your largest footmen await me in my chambers. And the little one, too, Volker. The one who does the thing with his tongue.”

Maxime winced. “I’d prefer not to know what you’re doing to my staff.”

Sylvie poked out her tongue at him. “You may come to me again when the delicious captain abandons you barefoot on the docks of a foreign port, and I will consider—consider only—tying you to a bed for my pleasure.”

CHAPTER FOUR

IMENA WASN'T ABLE TO ENJOY HER SOAK IN THE baths. As soon as she was sure Maxime had truly departed, she dried herself, dressed and returned to *Seaflower*, heaving a sigh of relief as soon as she felt the deck shifting beneath her feet. Chetri was gone, as was half of her crew, all of them no doubt carousing throughout the town's shops, brothels and bathhouses, having perfectly licentious shore leave. She would do the same. She stormed into her cabin and swiftly divested herself of her turquoise finery, tossing it onto her wide bunk.

"No, sir! You'll crush it!"

Imena's cabin girl, Norris, darted into the cabin, hands outthrust as if to prevent wrinkles by force of will. She darted beneath Imena's arm and seized the jacket and trousers to her flat chest. Small and slim-hipped, she wore her long ginger hair pinned up with myriad lacquered clips, and her face made up with a careful selection of cosmetics. Though she was, in fact, male, she had dressed as a girl since a young age, and as a result was usually better turned out than her captain. Her tailored green jacket and loose trousers were considerably more elegant and stylish than most of Imena's garments. Also, she was very skilled at making the most of Imena's minimal bosom.

Imena scooped up a faded linen singlet and yanked it over her head. "Fine. Pack it away. I won't need it for a while."

Norris took the silk garments to the wide table Imena used for charts and spread them carefully atop the glass surface. "I've packed a trunk for you, to take to the castle."

"I'm not going back to the castle."

"But Chetri said—"

"I've already seen His Grace. I'm going to visit Sanji." Imena snatched a pair of linen trousers from atop a trunk and yanked them on over her knee-length drawers. "Where's my jacket?"

"Hanging in the wardrobe," Norris said. "I pressed it. You can't go ashore all crumpled. You're the captain."

Imena slid open the wardrobe's bamboo door and found her plain black jacket, now crisply tidy and scented with lavender. She grabbed a brimmed cap from the top shelf and crammed it onto her head to shade her eyes. "His Grace did not hire me for my sartorial elegance," she said wryly.

"No, I don't think he did," Norris said, winking. Imena threw her discarded undershirt at her.

A few minutes later, Imena ventured back into the streets of the town. Past the dock area, she was much more conspicuous, and as usual, she steeled herself against stares, most of them curious, a few hostile, and all of them wary. As soon as she could, she hailed a pony-cab and gave Sanji's address. She leaned back in the padded seat and closed her eyes, forcing herself to replace Maxime's image in her mind with Sanji's. It was more difficult than she'd thought. She'd seen Sanji's body dozens of times, Maxime's rarely, but she had recent sense memory of Maxime's heavy muscularity and the scent and texture of his hair and skin. Remembering how his hands had felt on her body made her belly melt. If only he was not the duke. If only.

Sanji's home adjoined his chandler's shop. For once, his two young sons were not playing in the grassy back garden where Sanji kept a milch goat; with a twinge, she remembered this was their week to visit with their aunt who lived inland. She had been looking forward to playing with the boys. Imena went into the shop, saw Sanji's assistant minding the counter and ducked outside again.

She found Sanji in his workshop, mounting a compass into a new protective casing crafted from slender strips of varicolored woods. The navigator in her appreciated his craftsmanship; as apprentice to a starmaster in her teens and early twenties, on *Sea Tiger*, she'd learned the basics of building instruments, and had a healthy respect for the difficulty of the task.

She leaned against the open doorway for a time, watching him work. He was a tallish man, as dark a brown as Chetri, with narrow stooped shoulders and lush black hair he wore in a messy

tail down his back. Wide, thick black eyebrows gave his eyes a severe look at odds with his mild personality. Imena found him soothing. His hands at work were as gentle as his hands would be on her skin.

She waited until he'd set aside the compass before clearing her throat. Sanji looked up and smiled. "Imena. I heard *Seaflower* was in."

"Yes." She swallowed. She opened her mouth to ask if he could spare an evening for her, but instead said, "Sanji, I'm not sure I can see you anymore."

His welcoming expression changed to mild dismay. "That's unfortunate for me, but ... have you met someone else?"

"Yes," she said. She might as well admit the truth. Just because she couldn't have Maxime didn't mean he wasn't there, in her thoughts, seemingly inside her very skin. "I'm very fond of you, Sanji," she admitted. "You and the boys, too. But—"

"I understand," he said. He rose from his stool and took her hand, kissing her fingers. "I must confess, I've been wanting to, well, marry. Give my sons a new mother. And I wasn't sure what you would say."

A few weeks ago, she might have said yes. "They need someone who will be here with them," she said. "You and I, we're good together, but." She took his hand in hers and drew it to her mouth, placing a kiss in his palm. "You need someone who will be here always. Don't you? You just haven't said so."

"Yes," Sanji said, his cheeks flushing. He caressed her cheek. "Will you stay for the evening meal, at least?"

"I can't," she said. "I need to find Chetri. A business matter." She paused, and slipped her hand into her jacket pocket, withdrawing a small canvas bag. "I brought shark's teeth for the boys. Remind them the teeth are sharp."

"I will," he said. When he took the bag from her, their fingers did not touch. He said, "They'll miss you. You'll visit now and again?"

Throat tight, she nodded. She said, "There is a pearl in there for you, the purple-black such as you like so well."

"Thank you," Sanji said. "I'll think of you when I wear it." He slipped the bag into his trousers pocket. He added, "You're always welcome in my home, you know. For whatever reason."

"And you are always welcome on *Seaflower*," she said. She took a deep breath. "Goodbye, Sanji."

"Fair sailing, Imena," he said, and kissed her gently. They shared a long, close embrace of farewell. She walked away, her regret mingled with relief.

Imena refused to admit she'd failed at shore leave by returning to her ship. She left Sanji's shop and wandered the streets until darkness fell. She spotted Seretse, the ship's carpenter, at an open-air stall buying clusters of fine steel needles for the tattooing he practiced. Twice, she saw groups of her crew amusing themselves. Her purser, Arionrhod, rambled through the night market in company with One-Eye, the cook, their apprentice mates and several of the other youngsters. Later she saw a cheerful group of sailors led by Nabhi, the armsmaster, and her unofficial master's mate, Kuan, chatting and laughing beneath the awning of a crowded coffeehouse. The opulent smell of roasting beans and honeyed pastries emanating from the latter almost enticed her to stop, but she walked on, not caring that even her callused feet were beginning to hurt from cobblestoned streets and stone pavements.

Her feet led her to the cluster of tavern-boats anchored off the far end of the docks. The licenses for such taverns cost less than those on shore, and customers could enter by boat as well as from the docks, creating privacy for business deals. Imena routinely visited offshore taverns and brothels in every port to obtain information for Maxime, but she'd never been to these. She assumed Maxime's local staff kept their ears open here.

The carved and painted wooden sign for the Squirting Squid depicted a squid whose tentacles closely resembled long, stiff cocks, each given a distinct shape that might have come from nature. Noise spilled out from the tavern, heavy with male voices and the *thwacking* of leather tankards on wood; she could smell bread fried in lard and sour wine. The next tavern along looked more welcoming. Glass lanterns in bright colors hung from its railings. She could go there, if she wanted to be welcomed.

She chose the Squid, stooping through its low doorway, brushing aside the curtain of shells that served as a door. The decking was tacky with spilled wine and pine tar, and she regretted not wearing shoes. She halted in the doorway and took in the single narrow room. Its sole purpose appeared to be drinking, though trenchers of fried bread were available to soak up the alcohol if one desired. A plank propped on barrels ran the length of the space. A young man stood behind the plank, splashing wine from a skin flask directly into a row of tankards. The drinkers crowded on the other side of the plank, jostling for position. Most of them wore padded harnesses of one kind or another, with leather gloves or gauntlets shoved through their belts, the garb of porters and cargo handlers. Two men at the far end wore no shirts at all and were shaved as bald as she was; she recognized their large shoulder tattoos as those of divers, who were often employed to cut free trapped anchors, scrape hulls or retrieve items lost off the docks. She didn't see any of Maxime's spies whom she could identify. After a moment, she also realized she saw no women at all. Given the sign outside, she decided it had to be a men's den, intended for quick pickups of a sexual partner for the night, or perhaps just for a few moments. Good. No one would look for her here.

Most of the noise she'd heard came through a second doorway, which led into a larger room crowded with tall tables, each just large enough for two or three tankards. A boy wiggled between the tables while carrying a tray atop his head. Imena stopped him with a click of her fingers. When she didn't promptly hand over a tankard, he muttered, "Cup rental's extra," and held out his grimy hand.

Imena handed over three coppers. The boy said, "Four coppers for a bunk down below, no sleeping allowed." She shook her head; she had no need to rent a private space. The boy pocketed the coins, unhooked a tankard from his belt and expertly aimed a stream of wine into it before ducking behind the bar for a new flask. She sniffed discreetly at the wine—awful—and pretended to take a sip as she shouldered her way into the rear cabin.

No one took notice of her. Her cap hid her distinctive face and scalp tattooing; her loose clothing hid the shape of her body. No one was looking at the floor to see her tattooed feet. She was tall and slender enough to pass as a man at a casual glance. The anonymity relaxed her. She eased between patrons clustered around the tables, heading for the end of the cabin, where one bulkhead was propped on poles, leaving that side open to the outside air.

One of the cargo handlers leaned against the outside bulkhead, another kneeling before him, apparently just having completed a brief encounter, as the kneeling man was licking his partner clean. They ignored her as they tucked away their cocks and went back inside. She glanced around but saw no others concealed in the shadows cast by the deck lamps.

If she'd been thinking logically, she would have headed inland for her solitude. Few traveled even the main road up to the castle at night. She might have sat beneath a tree in complete comfort, and forgone this tankard of wine more suited to stripping paint than drinking. But then she would not be listening to the slow lapping of the water against the sides of the boat and feeling the easy rocking beneath her feet.

She set her tankard on the deck and dangled her feet over the side, hooking one arm around a post and resting her feet on one of the ropes that traversed the side. She inhaled the sea air and tried not to think of Maxime. She need stay ashore only tonight. Tomorrow, perhaps she would hire a light boat and go out alone, or take Norris and give her a lesson or two in handling small craft. Also, there was the business of visiting the enclave of naturalists down the coast; she had samples to show them, of resins and dried flowers, dried leaves and seeds. Some were probably useless except for the sake of

study, but others might have monetary value. She had particular hope for one of the resins; not only would it bring in considerable coin, of which she and her crew would receive the largest share, but the trade itself provided a useful excuse for information gathering, among peoples who'd had little contact with the duchies thus far. The new resin might be as valuable, or more so, as the balsam she'd found on her last trip; it was reputed to have medicinal value.

The boat's motion and her own exhaustion lulled her to a doze. She dreamed Maxime was there, settling in behind her on the deck, and insisting she call him by his name; then she came awake and realized she had heard his name, and more than once.

Voices carried by the breeze to her ears. A man's voice with a sleek accent was saying, "Julien will reward me well if I bring Maxime to heel."

Julien the king? Referred to so informally? The king had sent a man here recently, Maxime had told her. Was this the messenger Maxime had spoken of, or someone else?

The other man's voice was also accented, and more indistinct. Imena heard only fragments of his reply: "Your business—she won't—I could—" An indistinct murmur, then she clearly heard, "An accident."

Imena stiffened. Men speaking softly of *accidents* did not bode well. And who was *she*? What wouldn't she do? Cause an accident? Pay for an accident to happen? Or something else entirely?

Imena couldn't identify the exact source of the voices. The men could be concealed behind a heap of cable opposite from where she sat, or they could even be on one of the adjoining craft. Until she had a hint of which direction to move, she didn't dare risk alerting them to her position.

The first man said, "I will arrange everything. You may return, and report back to me if there is any news."

"—king asks?"

They did refer to Julien, then.

"You know nothing. I will take care of that rutting tomcat Maxime. He won't trouble Julien any further. And when I'm rewarded with this duchy, I will reward you beyond your wildest dreams."

The clink of coins carried even better than the sound of voices. It was clear Maxime was in danger. Imena didn't wait to hear more. She eased soundlessly over the boat's side and slithered down ropes until her foot touched water. She took a series of deep breaths as silently as she could, then slid beneath the cold water, keeping one hand on the boat's hull as her guide.

She had to go to Maxime, and quickly. But first, she would need to find Chetri.

CHAPTER FIVE

AFTER SYLVIE LEFT HIM, MAXIME CALLED FOR A bath in his quarters, but it did not make him sleepy as he'd hoped. He sent the servants away and spent several hours at his desk, reading the accounting for the past couple of days and then placing his seal on various permissions, customs documents and requisitions to supply the castle. All had been meticulously prepared by his aunt, Lady Gisele, and two of her children, whom she was presently training in the fine art of bureaucracy. He tried not to think about how little he was actually needed here; no longer was he necessary to distract Julien's attention from the business of the duchy, because now everything was legal, open to inspection.

Being a duke felt more like extra bonds than the freedom he'd thought the position would represent. He was tempted, sometimes, to run. To head down to the docks and take ship for elsewhere.

He moved to a tray of letters already opened and ready for him to peruse. As he'd feared, Julien hadn't waited for his formal refusal of Diamanta; another envoy was on the way.

Maxime glanced at the piles of legal texts he'd assembled. He would need to shift a few of his secretaries to that duty, for copying documents if nothing else. Because no one was watching, he put his head in his hands for a few moments and allowed himself to curse at length. He didn't want to do it, but he would start in on the legal tomes tomorrow. For now, he composed replies to some of Camille's letters, and to a personal one from Henri, whom he was beginning to consider a friend, as well. He briefly considered sharing his worries about marriage with Henri, but what could the boy tell him in return? Henri was barely twenty, and though acknowledged as legal consort to Camille, his situation was vastly different from Maxime's.

When he'd finished, he wiped off his signet ring and laid it in its dish along with the carved stamp that bore the same design, an octopus curling around the initial letter of his name. He blew out the lamp, tossed his robe over the back of his chair and walked naked into his bedroom. The floor, heated by piped water from the hot springs, soothed his feet. Sometimes he stretched out upon the warm tile, with a pillow to prop his head, and reviewed the day's work in his mind. Today, though, he planned to go straight to bed. Perhaps sleep would organize his thoughts on Imena Leung and how he could entice her to listen to his point of view.

His bed, with its intricately carved wooden canopy, loomed in the dim light of a single yellow lamp. The servants had carefully tidied the heaps of goose-down-filled bedding and pillows and attempted to straighten the mountain of leather-bound books and encased scrolls stacked near the bed's head. Despite their efforts, the pile leaned dangerously and soon would create a landslide of reading material in five languages.

It didn't matter if the room was a mess. He rarely entertained anyone in here. He preferred the baths and the adjacent chambers; it was safer that way, easier to keep his partners at a distance. The only woman he'd fucked in his own bed was Camille, and he didn't count her, exactly; they'd known each other for such a long time that she didn't seem like a mere sexual partner, and besides that, he'd known she was in love with her stable boy, Henri. It had been safe to have her here, safe to let her see his things spread about. He'd known she wouldn't ask more of him than he was willing and able to provide for her.

Strangely, after he'd shared this room with her, and they'd finally consummated their relationship, he'd known they were finished as lovers. It was as if a string, pulled tight for decades, had finally snapped, and his burning desire for her had flown away with it. He was grateful they'd had other commonalities between them, and remained friends.

He ignored all the books, even a half-finished legal treatise on marriage laws and the manual he'd lately been reading on stellar navigation. It was written in the court language of the Horizon Empire, and though like all the aristocracy of his duchy, he'd studied the language since boyhood,

it was rough going, with technical vocabulary that wasn't usually required for normal trade relations. He was still trapped in the introduction. He had hoped to ask Imena to help him; she'd been trained in stellar navigation and he suspected she would have a gift for teaching it.

He blew out the lamp before sliding wearily between soft cotton sheets. He'd been awake since the dawn, waiting for Imena's visit. He closed his eyes and the world tilted into sleep.

He woke to a familiar touch and scent—Imena. Groggily, he smiled. He didn't mind her in his rooms. He didn't mind her here in the least. Her callused hand clamped over his mouth. "Get his feet, Seretse," she said.

Maxime struggled to blink awake. A sailor had a firm grip on his ankles, and another grabbed his shoulders as Imena removed her hand from his face. "Quiet," she said in a low voice. "Don't struggle."

He hadn't thought she played these sorts of games, but he was willing to go along, even when the two sailors laid him on a cinnamon-scented wool carpet and proceeded to thoroughly wrap him within its folds. He tried to lift a hand to clear fabric away from his face only to find it trapped. "Imena—" In the other room, he heard his door open.

"Quiet! Chetri, did you find the courier?"

"Aye, Captain. Here she is."

Maxime heard a laugh, quickly muffled, then Sylvie's voice. "Well, well, Captain. You want him after all. I never would have thought you'd have your muscled crewmen carry him off."

"Listen carefully, Sylvie," Imena said. "Chetri, go with Seretse and Kuan."

Maxime relaxed. Imena clearly intended to tell Sylvie her plans for him. She might play games, but she didn't plan to put his entire castle into an uproar. He remembered the envoy from King Julien that would be arriving in the next day or so and began to struggle. Someone, probably Imena, kicked the carpet with a bare foot and said, "Get him out of here!"

He realized even a complicated game like this one would be unlikely to last more than a day and a night, and if the envoy arrived during that time, someone would send him a message. He had quite a lot of work to do, but courting his future wife was work, as well. He relaxed into the spice-scented carpet—the sensation of soft wool all over his bare skin reminded him of pleasurable encounters of the past—and let the crewmen carry him from his rooms and out into the corridor. They exited, he thought, through one of the side entrances and loaded him, still wrapped in the carpet, onto a cart. He heard a pony snort. Two men climbed onto the bench seat, shifting the cart's weight, while the remaining man, probably Chetri, stayed in the rear with him. Maxime could just sense the weight of Chetri's hand on the outside of the roll of carpet; the hand rested just over his genitals. Maxime grinned, wondering if Chetri was intended to be part of the evening's entertainment, as well. If Imena had no objections, he certainly wouldn't raise a protest.

Soon he smelled the sea. Chetri and the two crewmen slid his carpet from the cart and carried him down the dock, their feet slapping hollowly on the boards. He almost protested when he felt a cargo sling being adjusted around his carpet, but closed his mouth when he remembered his role. She'd told him to be quiet, so quiet he would be.

It was rather exhilarating, being swung into the air and into a boat, rowed for a distance, then lifted much higher and swung across to what he assumed was *Seaflower's* deck, more exhilarating because he couldn't see, move his limbs or balance himself in any way. He had to give over control completely. Imena was delightfully devious. He'd chosen even better than he'd imagined.

The sailors manhandled his carpet down a set of shallow stairs, which told him they were beneath the captain's cabin. He remembered the low-ceilinged space there. Temporary bulkheads could be erected at different intervals. It was sometimes used for passengers, sometimes for cargo, and at present smelled strongly of mangosteens and farm animals, who were kept below. His carpet was carried into a space that felt smaller, a temporary cabin perhaps, and set on the deck. The sailors departed in a hurry. The door shut and a chain rattled. They did not leave a light.

He wondered how long Imena would be, and if waiting was part of the game. He didn't think he was intended to remain rolled in a carpet until her return; or if he was, he didn't intend to behave, as the pressure of fabric against his face was beginning to irritate him. He shifted his weight, struggled and rolled to one side then the other. The folds of the carpet loosened. He persevered, and was soon free.

The cabin was small, only just long enough for his outstretched body, the ceiling too low for him to stand without stooping. There was no bunk or chair, but someone had provided a pair of loose trousers, a blanket and a spread towel that held a large jug of water, a loaf of bread, several oranges and a waxed-paper package of soft cheese, which he identified by smell and by the faint light filtering through tiny cracks between the boards of the temporary bulkhead. His searching fingers soon found an enameled box, as well: candied balsam, probably from the same shipment as the box he'd given to Diamanta. The food indicated his wait might be lengthy, and they didn't intend to stint on him while he was aboard. He was grateful someone had thought to leave a chamber pot, as well.

It was a good thing Imena had told Sylvie where he was. He pushed the towel with the food into the corner and spread the carpet as far as it would go, folding the edges under so one end made a sort of pillow. He leaned back against it, pulled the blanket over himself and in moments was asleep.

Imena shoved her hastily scribbled transcript of the conversation she'd heard into Sylvie's hands. "So there is a woman involved, but I wasn't able to tell how, or what, her intentions might be."

Sylvie made a face. "Where His Grace is concerned, she might be any one of dozens. Including you, Captain Leung."

"It is *not* me," Imena said sternly. "You will take care of this? At least until it's safe for us to return?"

Solemn and cold, Sylvie nodded. "You may take refuge with Madame Camille if needed."

"I don't want to put Her Grace in jeopardy, as well. Her position is still precarious, isn't it?"

"The Duke's Council is growing used to her," Sylvie said. Then she grinned. "You will take good care of His Grace?" The tone of her voice made it clear she meant the words prudently.

Imena stared down her nose at the smaller woman. "I have to go now if we're to catch the tide."

A cat was meowing loudly.

Maxime woke, unsure at first what had changed. The cabin was cooler than before, and he'd dislodged his blanket. An enormous ginger tomcat had probably helped; it was sleeping behind his knees. He groped for the blanket, found it, then froze with his hand full of wool. He smelled the sea. Not the docks, but the sea. He vaulted to his feet amid feline protest. The gentle sway beneath his feet was not a ship docked, or even a ship at anchor, but one in motion, fleeing before the wind and propelled by a good tide.

"Fuck!" Maxime tried the door—fastened closed by a chain passed through bolts—then banged on the bulkhead. "Imena! Captain!"

His fist rang hollowly. He could hear it echoing across the empty deck. She hadn't loaded cargo. Of course not. She'd hardly had time. Half her crew would have been enjoying shore leave. What was she about, heading out to sea under such circumstances? He would have been happy to entertain her in port. Why had she taken him to sea? Perhaps they hadn't gone far?

"Captain!"

No response. In fact, not even a rush of sailors' feet toward his door. He rubbed his sore fist and listened; he could hear feet pattering on the main deck above, distant shouting, the loud creaking of wood, the heavy hum of rope and the snap of sail. From below, he heard the grunting of pigs, chickens gabbling, a goat's bleat and the plaintive lowing of a milk cow.

Being ignored was more frustrating than he could have imagined. He paced the narrow room, faster and faster. He was no longer in the mood for sexual games or sex, unless it was the quick-and-hard kind. What was she doing? Testing him?

If she kept him out here too long, he'd miss the king's next envoy. And what of all the business that would await him this morning?

He might not want to deal with any of that, but he wanted it to be his choice if he did not.

After pacing off the worst of his anger, he put his back to the bulkhead and slid to the deck. It was too bad he didn't have those legal texts with him; if he missed the envoy, he would need all the references he could get to keep in Julien's good graces. But he had nothing in here, not even a treatise on sailing. He would just have to wait until someone came to his door. Then he'd beat Imena at her own game.

But first, he was going to put on some trousers.

"Captain!" Chetri called. "Sail approaching."

Imena, who'd been about to go below and speak to Maxime, cursed. "Norris, take the spyglass and see if you can identify it."

"Aye, Captain." She scampered up the rigging, barely touching the ropes with her feet.

Chetri said, for her ears alone, "Looks like one of the king's cutters."

"Fuck him with a bowsprit," she said. "I don't think it's a courtesy visit."

"Do you think they'd take His Grace by force?"

Imena took a deep breath and concentrated on the clean salty breeze that brushed her face and scalp. As always, sea air calmed her. She was in command here, not just of the ship, but of herself. "The duchess Camille told me that King Julien is a reasonable man, but I don't know what her definition of *reasonable* might be, after she lived with that insane husband of hers for so many years, while he wreaked havoc on the duchy." She added, "I would have thought a reasonable king would have removed the man from power himself, not left it to Camille to take care of."

"Who knows how royalty thinks?" Chetri asked. "Her Grace Camille seems a woman of good judgment in many ways, so perhaps she's right about her king."

"I believe she trusts him, but ... whether this cutter is the king's doing, or that of the men I heard at the Squid, or just coincidence, I can't take the risk."

"There won't be any accidents on *Seaflower*," Chetri said. He touched the long knife at his side.

"It's best if they're not allowed to board."

Norris slid down the ropes and landed almost at Imena's feet. "A royal cutter," she said. "No signals flying."

Chetri said, "They'll have seen us by now, and it's no secret you're His Grace's captain."

Flee or bluff? Fleeing was more suspicious. The fewer suspicions about Maxime's whereabouts, the safer he would be.

"We let them approach, and we bluff," she said. "On no account does anyone from that cutter go below."

"Captain," Norris said. "I could stow His Grace more safely."

"Where?" Imena asked. "No, don't tell me. I don't want to betray his hiding place. Very well, Norris. Do it now, then hop back up top as quickly as you can."

Maxime waited impatiently as someone fussed with the chain and padlock on his door. When the door was flung open, he was startled to see Norris, Imena's cabin girl. "What's going on?" he demanded.

"This way," she said. When he didn't move, she hesitantly reached out and grabbed his wrist.

"Where are we going?"

"I have orders to hurry."

"Whose? Captain Leung's? I pay her salary, you know. And that means I also pay yours, Norris."

She heaved at his arm, but he braced his weight and didn't budge. He said, "There's no real rush, is there? Given that she left me here for half the night."

"Please, Your Grace." Norris released his wrist.

Maxime didn't think Imena would blame Norris for his lack of cooperation, but the girl seemed distressed, so he sighed and said, "All right."

He regretted acquiescing when he saw the narrow deck cubby into which he was expected to squeeze himself. “Is this your cabin?” he asked. Little more than the size of a small wardrobe, the enclosed space held only a hammock and a large trunk. “Have you been smuggling? Does the captain know? Of course she must—”

“Just climb in!” Norris struggled with the weight of the trapdoor as she wrestled it to the side. “Is there air?”

“Enough. It won’t be long, I promise.” Another test? Was Imena testing his sincerity? He was willing to do a great deal more than pretend to be smuggled goods, if he could have her in the end. He managed to cram himself into the cubby, which smelled sweetly but strongly of the valuable balsam resin that had been stored within. Norris yanked the trapdoor over him and hammered it down with the heels of her hands. Maxime was left in warm, perfumed darkness.

Imena did her best to appear bored as the royal cutter’s first officer examined the papers Arionrhod, the purser, had handed over. Chetri stood at her side, chewing mastic, hands clasped behind his back. He looked casual but was ready, she knew, to draw his knife at a moment’s notice. Several of her crew handled inconsequential tasks within easy distance; she’d been careful to order most of the younger sailors to stay below on the lower cargo deck. At the first sign of trouble, the cutter’s first officer and his boat crew would become hostages. If worse came to worst, she might also claim diplomatic immunity; anything to gain time.

She might also accidentally knock the officer down for looking at her as if he’d like to pay for her services. A knife pressed to his genitals might give him more respect for women.

The officer peeled off the second sheet and returned it to her. Imena slid the page into its case. “As you can see, we’re in the employ of the duke Maxime.”

“You were scheduled to remain in port for another week. Why did you depart early? Without a full cargo?”

He wasn’t looking at her face, but at her bosom, despite its being bound into a bodice and concealed beneath a loose shirt. She was careful to show no hint of emotion as she said, “Personal matters.”

“Personal matters that caused you to recall your crew from shore leave and vanish from the docks in the wee hours of the morning?”

“I wanted to catch the tide,” she said blandly. “Are we finished here?”

“I’m curious as to the nature of these personal matters.” He glanced up at her face now, and smiled. He was a young man with bright teeth, symmetrical features and glossy hair. He wouldn’t be used to being refused.

“You will remain curious, then,” she said. “Chetri, will you escort the officer to his boat? I need to speak with Bonnevie.” She turned toward the wheelhouse.

“Oh, come now,” the officer said, looking annoyed. “You could at least offer me a drink.”

Imena frowned. “That’s not required by law.”

The officer’s back stiffened. “I wasn’t aware you particularly cared for laws, Captain Leung.”

“I have no idea what you mean.” She felt Chetri ease closer to her.

“Everyone knows why His Grace hired you. You’re a pirate.”

Chetri’s blade whistled from its sheath, and he spat the mastic gum at the man’s feet. Imena blocked his arm without breaking the officer’s gaze. She heard movement, then settling, as the sailors realized there would be no fighting. “I was a privateer, in the service of my government.”

“It’s all the same to us. We’ve been keeping an eye on you.”

“Have you.” She pushed on Chetri’s arm until it lowered and he stepped back to sheathe his blade. “Unless you are accusing me of piracy now, you will leave my ship.”

CHAPTER SIX

MAXIME HAD NEVER FEARED ENCLOSED SPACES, but as time passed, he felt more and more confined in his narrow cubby. The bottom wasn't padded, and though he didn't feel any splinters, it wasn't comfortable, either. The trapdoor pressed entirely too close to the end of his nose, now numbed to the smell of balsam; his breath returned to him, forcing him to tell himself that he was not suffocating. It only felt as if there was no air. He could feel air: warmish, stale air, flowing across the soles of his feet. He could also feel the trapdoor against his chest if he took too deep a breath. Perhaps he was lucky he wore only trousers; if he'd been wearing his usual layers of clothing, this cubby would be considerably more stifling.

He opened his eyes. That was a little better. There was no light in the cubby, but it made him feel better anyway.

He'd heard quite a lot of noise from above: pounding feet in large numbers, a wooden thumping as of something heavy rocking into *Seaflower's* hull, more feet. Then silence, until he heard more steps, closer, and the welcome sounds of someone wrenching open the trapdoor above his head.

As soon as the door was opened, he said, "I've had about enough of this game."

Chetri stared down at him without answering, brown face studiously blank, light playing on his necklaces and array of silver earrings, many more than any courtier would wear. Despite all his adornments, he clearly had no fear of anyone's branding him a dandy. He extended a hand, layered in calluses, to pull Maxime up.

Maxime was impressed there seemed to be no effort involved, despite the fact that he was considerably larger than Imena's first mate. He eyed Chetri's muscular chest, decorated across the pectorals with dense black tattooing. He wondered how much Imena liked looking at such a fine specimen of a man, day in and day out. "How far out to sea have we gone?"

Chetri looked him up and down slowly, without answering. "Come along," he said. When Maxime didn't follow, he grabbed his hand and tugged him.

Maxime soon discerned they were returning to his belowdecks cell. He said, "I shouldn't be away for this long. Much as I'd prefer to stay, I'm expecting a royal envoy any day now."

"I'll fetch you out later on," Chetri said, gently pushing him into his cell with a hand on his back.

Maxime grasped Chetri's shoulder to stop him from closing the door. Imena would be displeased if Maxime seduced him. At the moment, he was in the mood to cause her displeasure. "You don't need to lock me in here."

"I suspect I *do* have to lock you in here," Chetri said with a wry twist to his mouth.

Maxime tightened his hand on Chetri's shoulder, squeezing gently and sensually. "Perhaps we could both be locked in here."

Chetri turned his head and nipped at Maxime's fingers. "I don't trust myself, and I don't trust you further than I could throw you, Your Grace."

"You wouldn't be sorry. I suspect you have no aversion to men. Wise of you."

Chetri grinned. "And I'm sure you'd make it worth my while, is that it?" Gently, he dislodged Maxime's hand and stepped back. "You'll be a handful for the captain, that you will." Easily fending off Maxime's lunge, he slammed the door closed, calling through it, "I'll bring you something to read later. A nice philosophical volume." A moment later, Maxime heard the noise of the lock and chain.

It hadn't been polite to try to seduce her second-in-command when he was hoping to convince her that she ought to marry him, but did she really expect him to play the innocent virgin and wait patiently for her attentions? Otherwise, why make him wait so long?

Unless she knew what he'd done with Sylvie. Maxime sighed. That had been a mistake, too. It wouldn't do him any good to explain that it had been nothing to Sylvie, and that he'd been thinking

of Imena throughout most of it. Despite knowing Sylvie, and what Sylvie was like, Imena wouldn't be pleased with him for giving in, not at all.

Yes, that could be the reason for his current imprisonment. Imena knew about his brief encounter with Sylvie, and she planned to make him pay. But couldn't she have chosen a more ... pleasant revenge?

He refused to consider that Imena might not care at all.

Maxime grimaced, sat on the blanket and tore off a hunk of bread.

This bit of ocean was far too crowded for Imena's liking. It made sense that every courier cutter and fishing trawler would be taking advantage of the wind, but that also meant every one of them would spot *Seaflower* with her distinctive imperial rigging and duchy profile. While Chetri sent the crew through a series of complex maneuvers designed to get them out of the most trafficked sea lanes, Imena sat in her cabin and labored over her charts, deliberately putting off talking to Maxime. He would be furious that she'd swept him away out of danger without telling him. She didn't want to face that right now. She didn't want to face him, after what they'd done in the baths, and what she'd briefly felt there.

Here, she could work in peace for a while. She had the largest cabin on *Seaflower*, furnished with a spacious wooden bunk projecting from one wall, two trunks to serve as seats, and her worktable and chair. One bulkhead was lined with a row of glassed-in windows, the others decorated with painted screens of historical battles. Several books and a new length of hempen rope, which Norris would use for drying clothes, were piled in a basket near the door, waiting to be stowed, distracting her from the charts spread in front of her.

The problem was, she had no idea how long Maxime would be in danger. He was safe belowdecks, but he would be wild with curiosity about the situation right now, and angry. Rightly so. Angry with her.

Sylvie would pass on the vital information about the plot to Lady Gisele, and hopefully Gisele would be able to stall any royal envoys who traveled to the castle, but Maxime himself was still in the dark.

Doubtless he'd figured out something had happened. He was no fool, and would know she only had his best interests at heart. He wouldn't be angry for long. He could wait.

Imena returned her thoughts to navigation. Remaining on the open sea seemed the safest option, but just to be safe, she reminded herself of available ports, official or otherwise, on the heading she planned. She scribbled down her preferred course, then two options, with some side notes to Chetri, then fastened the paper firmly onto the corner of a table. Carefully, she rolled and stowed her charts in their waterproof casings. She couldn't put off talking to Maxime for much longer. She would go and speak to him immediately after she'd been up to pass on her orders.

Chetri said, "We're not fully provisioned. We got the extra spars loaded last night, but we're lacking some of the supplies I'd like to have, if we're to stay out for as long as you fear."

"You think I'm being too cautious?" she asked.

He considered, stroking his fingers over the hilt of his dagger. "No," he said finally. "I don't trust royalty, especially not when money's involved. And that's what it's really about—His Highness wants control of His Grace because then he'll have control of a duchy stuffed with coin."

"If it is King Julien."

"If not him, then his flunky," he said. "They're all corrupt—well, aside from His Grace. He's fair and honest in his dealings. Will we be getting word from that Sylvie girl? Will she really be able to uncover this plot? She puked the whole time she was aboard that one time."

"Her Grace the Duchess Camille relies upon Sylvie," Imena reminded him. "She's an experienced courier and spy. She'll know to send us news through the usual channels. We'll just have to be careful where we dock."

“Aye, Captain,” Chetri said. “By the way—you might want to speak to His Grace soon. He’s ... anxious ... to be released from durance vile.”

Chetri’s sly grin arrested her attention. “Anxious?”

“He offered me delights of the flesh if I’d set him free.”

“He did *what*?” She paused. “Was he joking?”

“Possibly. Possibly not.” Chetri licked his lips. “He *is* a fine figure of a man, your duke. Plenty to hold on to, a bitable arse, and I hear reports he’s skilled as any whore with that cock of his *and* otherwise. Making the tide with him would be no hardship, no, not at all. I almost took him up on it.”

Through a red haze, Imena said, “You will not bite his arse nor hold on to any part of him.”

Chetri laughed. “Of course not. I know he’s yours.”

“He is not—”

He patted her shoulder. “Of course not, Captain, sir. That’s why you scooped him up, naked as the day he was born, and tossed him into your hold.”

“I was in a hurry.” She was aware she sounded surly, but could not help herself. Sometimes, Chetri considered himself entirely too much like her father. Only worse.

Chetri continued, “You had time to let him put his trousers on before you rolled him up in a carpet. Nice cock like that, you ought to wrap it up safe.” He lifted his eyebrow, the silver ring through it glinting in the sun.

“Enough.” She thrust the orders into his hand. “Get us out of here. Every scrap of canvas we have. Spring a topmast if you have to. I’m going below.”

Imena had intended to invite Maxime up to her cabin, now that the chance of discovery was so much less, but that was before he’d tried to seduce Chetri. As she unlocked the door to his refuge, she considered simply leaving him in the hold. The accommodations might not be to his liking. She was no longer in a mood to please him. However, if she left him down here, who knew how many more of her crew he would try to subvert? Or seduce? Or both? Who would be next? No doubt Maxime would like a challenge. Seretse? Leggy Roxanne, the second mate?

It was a pity they needed to shift the cargo, poorly stowed thanks to their precipitous departure. Maxime would be in the way belowdecks. The needs of her ship were more important than a small act of revenge.

She shouldn’t have expected better of him, anyway. She knew what he was like. She knew far too much about what he liked.

But he’d made a fool of her on her own ship. It would serve him right if she treated him as a prisoner for a little while. Did she dare? She thought she might be angry enough to dare. And perhaps jealous enough, even though she had no right to *be* jealous.

She swung the door open a bit too hard, and it slammed against the temporary bulkhead. Maxime sat cross-legged on the deck, eating an orange. The tart scent perfumed the cabin. His lips and fingers were shiny with the sticky juice, forcibly reminding her of how he’d looked, smiling at her with *her* juices on his mouth.

“Keep your hands off my crew,” she said.

“Even if they ask nicely?” He rose slowly, effortlessly, and held out a crescent of fruit. “Orange?”

“Chetri didn’t ask.”

“He was certainly looking. I know that’s mostly frowned upon in the empire, but surely you—”

“I should leave you locked in here.”

“That won’t be much fun,” Maxime said, and popped the slice of orange into his mouth. Hypnotized, she watched him chew and swallow.

She said, “I *would* leave you down here, but we need to shift the cargo. We stowed it hastily, and—Never mind. Get your things. I’ll put you in my cabin.”

Maxime smiled and bowed. “Thank you. I’m at your command.” Nearly naked and smeared all over with sweaty streaks of grime from the smuggling cubby, he nevertheless made her want to straighten her spine. Belatedly, she realized he had that in common with her mother, and winced.

“Hurry up, I have things to do.”

As they ascended the stairs, Imena first, Maxime said, “You really didn’t need to go to all this trouble. I was willing to fuck you yesterday. But if you enjoy games—”

Outraged, she exclaimed, “Is that what you think?” She’d left port with her ship barely provisioned and still bristling with barnacles, for his sake, to save him from potential murder, and all he could think about was making the tide. She bit back a longer retort.

“I must admit, the carpet was novel. Being carried off by two muscular young men—I assume they must have been muscular—the solitary confinement to think it over—”

She whirled on him. “I never realized you could be so utterly infuriating.” She would not fight with him now. She would not.

“It’s a talent I spent my entire childhood honing. If I had to live with Camille’s father after he’d killed my parents, I wasn’t about to make it easy for him.” He paused. “So, did I make you jealous? With Chetri? I’d be willing to go further with him, if he’d consent, if that would make you jealous. Or if you’d like it.”

If he didn’t shut his mouth, she was going to have to kill him. Perhaps she’d better shut it for him. “In,” she said, swinging wide her cabin door.

“I’m to be a prisoner in your cabin now, am I?” He grinned and swept through the doorway. “I feel a flutter of virginal apprehension. I’ve always wondered what went on in the cabins of privateers. Though I did fuck in a hammock once. That was terribly awkward, but it came out all right in the end.”

“Sit.” She pointed at one of her two trunks that doubled as seats; they were spread with folded layerings of cloth, to pad the hardware fittings. Maxime did her bidding, but he sat straddle-legged, his cock and bollocks lewdly on display through the cloth of his trousers. Idly, he stroked the length of his cock, which was considerable.

“Stop that,” she said. “I need to speak with you.”

“Oh, I can speak and do this at the same time,” he said, grinning at her. “You’ve really made me wait quite a long time. I’m not sure I can wait much longer. I might have to ask Chetri to ease my pain—”

Imena’s hand closed over the coil of line Norris had left behind. It was fairly soft, chosen so it wouldn’t snag silk clothing. “You were less asinine before I let you bathe me,” she said.

His grin faded. “That was before you locked me up and left me, then sailed me out into the ocean without so much as a please or thank-you. I think that entitles me to be as asinine as I like.”

Imena strode over to him. “Give me your hands,” she said.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” he said. His irritation sounded genuine, and she felt a glimmer of triumph. She said, “You won’t fight me.”

“Won’t I?”

Imena grabbed his wrists and, in a few swift movements, lashed them together with a series of hurricane knots.

Maxime stared down at his forearms, now wrapped in hempen line. “I didn’t think you truly would do it.”

Imena grinned at him. Suddenly, she felt much better. She sliced through the long end of the line with her belt knife, knelt and snugly hitched his ankles to the trunk’s deck braces, which were loops of iron embedded in the planking. To do so, she drew his legs even farther apart. As she sat up, her mouth nearly brushed his knee, and she saw his thigh muscle twitch.

“Tying my hands was enough to make your displeasure clear,” he pointed out.

“Not for me,” she said. Her eyes were nearly on a level with his genitals; quickly, she shoved herself to her feet before he could get the wrong idea. “I’ll return in a while, and then I will talk and you will listen.”

“Wait!” Maxime said. “We’re not finished. Why are you leaving me again?”

Imena grabbed a piece of candied lemon peel and popped it into his mouth before she escaped. She didn’t trust herself not to truss him head to foot, just for the pleasure of seeing him at her mercy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MAXIME HEARD THE SHIP'S BELL RING TWO QUARTER hours before the cabin's door opened again. Norris poked her head in, then slid around the door and shut it behind her, reaching for a basket on the deck. When she saw Maxime, she stopped and looked at him incredulously.

"Is this your rope?" Maxime asked mildly.

Her mouth opened, then closed.

"You can have it back if you like. Though I'm afraid you'll have to untie it yourself."

Norris clutched the basket to her flat chest. "I. The captain borrowed it? My line?"

"She did."

"You'll have to ask her about untying it, then." Norris grinned and slipped out again, this time with the basket.

Maxime cursed, but without much vigor. He returned to trying to lift his feet. The deck braces to which he was hitched showed no hint of movement and the sturdy decking didn't even creak, no matter how hard he pulled. The knots on his wrists, he'd quickly learned, drew tighter if he struggled, and there was no accessible end for him to attack with his teeth.

"Being kidnapped," he said, "is much more dull than I would have expected." Perhaps things would improve once the ravishing began. If it began. He was beginning to have his doubts.

When another quarter-bell rang, he began to sing, loudly. "Oh, the army had no courage in them! But then came La Rose, the whore! She swore she'd put the courage in them! And give them something mo-o-ore!" He paused, and swallowed, wishing for another orange.

"La Rose, she had a dainty hand! And lips as red as blood! She took the captain first in hand! And soon, upright he stoo-oo-ood!"

The door slammed open. "My ship is not a bawdy house!"

"They're called licensed brothels in my duchy," he said. He looked at her hopefully. "All that singing made me thirsty, and I recall there are seventeen more verses. Twenty-three, if you count the extras my aunt taught me. Those are even worse. There's one where her dog licks—"

Imena stalked over to stand in front of him. Anger had brought a high color to her cheeks, and he was forcibly reminded of how she'd looked as he'd pleased her in the castle baths. He lifted his hand to touch her before remembering his wrists were bound together. She glared at him, then looked away, visibly collecting herself. She said, "I'll get you a drink. Did I tie you too tightly?"

She didn't betray me. Until relief at that realization washed over him, Maxime hadn't realized he'd been doubting her loyalty. He lifted his bound hands. "You could loosen these. I won't be much good to you if my hands are numbed."

She propped her foot on the trunk beside him and placed his hands on her knee, unfortunately palm up, so he couldn't sneak in a squeeze of her leg. She bent over his wrists, tugging at the knots. The faint rasp of hemp against his skin wasn't entirely unpleasant. When coupled with the warmth from her hands, it was intriguing. Maxime leaned forward and nuzzled her bare scalp, letting the warmth of his breath caress her skin. A shudder rippled across her before she said, "Stop that."

"Why?" He bent closer, investigating the soft skin behind her ear. "You smell good," he said.

"Now is not the time. Occupy your thoughts with something else if you can." With a final tug at the rope, she straightened and stepped back, out of his reach. She poured water from a stoppered jug and held the wooden cup to his mouth while he drank. After two cups, he refused more, and she said, "I'm busy up top. I promise, I'll be back later to speak with you."

"You could untie me, then."

"I don't think so," she said. "You're too unpredictable." She smiled at him. "I hear tales of how creative you are. Surely you can amuse yourself for a little while."

Before he could ask her to untie his hands and provide him with pen and paper, she was gone. “Agh!” he growled.

The cabin, he realized, smelled of her. Even pine tar and lemon oil could not conceal from him that she lived in this space, worked and ate and slept here. She would sleep nude on the spacious bunk across from him; the flat, cotton-stuffed mattress would smell of her skin even more strongly. He closed his eyes and inhaled. Her trunks were lined with cedar, whose scent impregnated all her clothing; sitting atop one of the trunks was like being close to her.

He opened his eyes. “You are just as pathetic as Sylvie said,” he noted to himself. Smelling her furniture. He was behaving worse than the soggiest hero of a provincial melodrama.

He’d wasted enough time with patience, waiting for her to speak of her interest in him, or at the least demonstrate she *had* an interest in him beyond her immediate needs. His seduction of her in the baths had gone well, much better than he’d expected, at least until she’d rejected him. That was the first advance he’d made since he met her. He needed to continue in that way, as talking didn’t seem to be doing any good. He could sway her with touch. A little sway, as a way into her thoughts and feelings, was all he needed.

Therefore, he had to touch her again. That would be difficult at the moment, given that she’d knotted his hands together.

His singing had brought her into the cabin. He would draw her into the room again, and then he would talk. Talking had served him well over the years. It was a lucky thing he’d honed the skill, because he needed it now.

He stared at her bunk, unfocused his eyes and meditated on what he would say.

* * *

Norris spotted another royal cutter from the upper nest, necessitating another alteration in *Seaflower’s* course and subsequent tacking to accommodate both the new heading and the change in wind. Chetri might have handled it all on his own, but Imena was reluctant to enter her cabin again, at least not yet.

She couldn’t leave Maxime tied there indefinitely. Sooner or later, she would have to be close enough to him to untie him so he could put on the rest of his clothes. Then she would have to fight the urge to taste him again, mouth or throat or the muscle atop his shoulder, she didn’t care.

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