

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

TREASURE

Kim Fielding

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

TREASURE

By Kim Fielding

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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TREASURE

By Kim Fielding

Photo Description

A handsome blond wearing a cape and embroidered tunic is on one knee. He's clutching a smaller man protectively to him. The smaller man is bound hand and foot and wears knee breeches and a long shirt. The blond wields a sword, which he has just used to cut the rope that is twisted around the smaller man's arms.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The sea air would be good for me. That's what the doctor had said. The sea air and the sun. "A few quiet weeks on the coast is what you need. Go for a swim. Explore the beaches and the caves. Maybe you'll find a mermaid. Or..." he added with a wink, "some hidden treasure, like in your adventure books."

He was teasing me, I know, but a part of me burned with the idea that maybe... there would be something there, something special, something hidden.

Of all the things to find washed up on the beach, I was not expecting this half-drowned man. Nor what followed after.

Sincerely,

ttg

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: alternate world, pirates, virgin/first time, hurt/comfort, abduction/kidnapping, bookish/nerdy/geeky

Word count: 38,760

TREASURE

By Kim Fielding

CHAPTER ONE

The room smelled of dust, sour sweat, and bergamot. And of medicine. The heavy curtains were closed and Julian found the shadows oppressive, as though they had an actual weight and were pinning him to the chair. The darkness also seemed to muffle sounds, reducing the conversation in the hallway to senseless murmurs—his mother’s thin and high, his father’s and Dr. Brinkett’s deep and low.

The door opened with a groan, and Julian squinted against the light. His parents and the doctor entered in a small parade, his mother and Dr. Brinkett with false, bright smiles.

“Well now!” boomed Dr. Brinkett, making Julian wince. “And how are we feeling this afternoon, my boy?”

“Fine.” Julian kept his gaze on a gloomy painting of fruit in a bowl. He hated that painting. Why on earth hadn’t he removed it from his wall long ago?

His mother made a clucking sound. “You are *not* fine. You’ve hardly left your room, you won’t eat—Look at him, Doctor! He’s thin as a rail.”

Dr. Brinkett frowned. “How is your appetite, Julian?”

“It is fine. I am fine. I only... I only need peace and quiet.”

Julian’s father gestured at one of the room’s untidy stacks of books. “What you need is to stop filling your mind with all this rubbish and get out in the world. You will never regain your strength by turning pages.”

Julian compressed his lips. He’d never had much strength to begin with, as his father well knew. As a child, he’d always been the first to contract illnesses and the last to be cured of them. Whereas his older brothers had grown into big, strapping men with muscles as large as any laborer’s, Julian was shorter, slighter. His mother liked to say that he had a delicate constitution. Sometimes it felt as if he’d spent half of his twenty-five years ill in bed. During the long

days of his confinements, it was only his books—the *rubbish*, as his father would have it—that provided companionship and allowed him to escape, in mind if not in body.

The doctor was a cheerful sort, prone to bad jokes and silly stories. He'd been tending to Julian for years and still treated him like a child. Now, Dr. Brinkett chuckled uncomfortably and rubbed his hands together. "We've a fine idea for you, Julian. One that will give you peace and quiet yet also expose you to fresh air and exercise."

Narrowing his eyes skeptically, Julian asked, "What?"

"The seaside, my boy! The lovely seaside. And it is all arranged for you already. You shall travel by rail to Bythington. I have taken that journey myself; loads of beautiful scenery to admire along the way. But I expect Bythington itself is rather too... boisterous for your tastes. More of a place for mobs of young families. A coach shall take you from there two hours north to Urchin Cove, a quaint little village. Quite serene. I used to spend summers there myself when I was a boy. You shall have a cottage all to yourself, with the sandy beach right outside your door. And you shall have all the sunshine and bracing sea air you could want. Just the thing to make you well again."

The doctor sounded like a tourism salesman. Julian didn't care for the idea at all, but he could tell by the set look on his father's face that decisions had been made and arguing would get him nowhere. Julian didn't have the will to fight. Besides, what did it really matter where he was? He could be lonely at the seaside just as neatly as he could in the city, and it would be a pleasure to be away from his mother's eternal hovering.

Perhaps Dr. Brinkett thought Julian needed more convincing, because he picked up the topmost book on the nearest pile and waved it around a bit. "You can have a bit of exercise in Urchin Cove. A walk on the beach, a bracing swim. And it may be that you will find a bit of adventure, just like in your books. A hidden treasure, perhaps." He winked jovially.

Resigned to his fate, Julian squeezed his eyes shut. "When do I leave?"

He might have enjoyed the rail journey if he could have allowed the swaying motion to lull him to sleep. But his mother had used his travels as an excuse to shop, and had filled trunk after trunk with clothing he would probably never wear. As a result, Julian's compartment was almost entirely filled with his luggage. His father had lectured him at great length on the dangers of thieves who would sneak into unwary travelers' compartments and steal their belongings. So Julian felt obligated to remain vigilant. His feet were propped on a suitcase, a blanket spread over his lap. He leaned his cheek against the cool window glass and watched the scenery roll by.

It was late afternoon by the time he reached Bythington. The porters gave him sour looks over the number and weight of his bags, then scurried away as soon as he handed them a few coppers. Weary and hungry, he stood abandoned in front of the train station for quite some time. Perhaps some error had been made with the arrangements. Perhaps he was stranded.

He was beginning to feel the first twinges of panic when a large, disreputable-looking wagon rattled to a stop in front of him. It could not, even under the most charitable description, be called a coach. It looked like the sort of vehicle a farmer might use to haul turnips to market—or perhaps even less savory loads. The dragons that pulled the cart were stocky and rather lumpy, with little shine to their green scales. They growled impatiently as the driver looked down at Julian from her high seat.

"Mr. Massey?" the driver asked, and Julian gave up the last bit of hope that this conveyance wasn't intended for him.

"Yes," he answered quietly. "I suppose so."

The driver pushed a tangled mass of gray hair behind her ears. "Well, get yer kit in the wagon then. I want to be home by suppertime."

He sighed and lifted the nearest trunk. But when she saw how he struggled to get the heavy pieces on board, she heaved an aggrieved sigh of her own and hopped down from her seat with an audible *umph*. Despite being older than his mother and quite round, she was clearly much stronger than Julian. She made short work of the loading, then rolled her eyes as he scrambled ungracefully up to the seat. The wood sagged a little when she sat beside him. She barked a

gee-up at her dragons and flicked a lazy switch at the larger one's tail, and then they were off, the cart heaving and shaking over the rutted road.

"Name's Nerva Crabbottom," she said as she turned the cart onto a wider street that led out of town. "I own the house yer stayin' in. Finest holiday home in Urchin Cove." She enunciated *holiday home* very clearly, as if she wanted to make sure he understood the grandness of it. "Got it all ready for you, I have. Bedding, pots'n'pans, a goodly stock of fuelstones for the fire. Some groceries too. When you need more, you'll come into the village. My husband runs the store, and your family's set up an account fer ya."

He nodded. "And the servants? Are they settled as well?"

Mrs. Crabbottom guffawed so hard that one of the dragons craned its neck to look at her. "Servants? *Servants* he says! Sure. Got a whole flock o' pixies and merfolk ready to cater to his lordship."

It hadn't occurred to Julian that he'd have to cook and clean for himself. He'd never done so before. When he was a boy, he'd spent long hours in the kitchen, watching Cook bustle about her work. Now he hoped he'd be able to replicate some of her cooking.

The driver continued to chuckle as the wooden houses of Bythington grew smaller and farther apart, and soon they were traveling past fields of sunflowers and corn and other crops he couldn't identify. Just as the doctor had promised, the sun shone brightly here—none of the city's eternal gloom—and Julian was thankful his broad-brimmed hat was protecting him from a burn. His skin was pale and prone to freckles.

"Yer from Greynox," Mrs. Crabbottom commented after a long silence.

"Yes."

"Ain't never been there myself. Don't see the point of it, all those crowds. I like to know my neighbors, I do. Like to know who I can trust and how far I can trust 'em."

He started to reply with something inane, but a cloud of dust set him to coughing hard. By the time the fit passed, his chest hurt, but at least there was no sign of blood in his handkerchief. For years he'd been fearing the appearance of those deadly little specks of scarlet.

“You been sick?” the driver asked.

He nodded.

“It’s the city air. I wonder the whole lot of ya don’t drop dead. You’ll do better here, you’ll see. Good food, clean air. You’ll put a little meat on yer bones in no time atall.” Then she segued into a long monologue on her children and grandchildren, on her husband, on the strengths and vices of each and every inhabitant of Urchin Cove.

Julian slumped uncomfortably, hoping the shaking of the cart over the rutted road wouldn’t make him vomit. She didn’t seem to expect more from him than an occasional grunt. He watched the broad gray-green backs of the dragons. After a time, the road began to rise and the fields gave way to scattered trees and then thicker woods. Every now and then they neared a cliff edge and he’d catch an uneasy glimpse of the sea far below. He’d never seen anything so vast and featureless. Something about the water unsettled him, as if he feared monsters hiding below the gentle waves.

Maybe his father was right—maybe he *did* read too much nonsense.

If he squinted at the horizon, he could make out a few tiny fishing boats. He’d never been on a boat before. He marveled at the courage of sailors, who would trust their lives to such small crafts in such a great ocean.

Mrs. Crabbottom’s words weren’t quite limitless: she ran out as they began to descend. But the dragons must have known they were nearing home because their pace became considerably more sprightly, causing Julian to grasp the seat handles firmly.

They were back down at sea level, once again passing between fields, when Mrs. Crabbottom turned the wagon onto a narrow path that was even bumpier than the main road. They crested a tiny hill and Julian caught his first glimpse of his temporary home. It wasn’t an impressive sight: a half-dozen tiny cottages clustered in a rough semicircle around a minuscule bay. The buildings looked long abandoned, and due to high rocks on either side of the inlet, the entire area looked isolated from the rest of the world.

“See?” Mrs. Crabbottom announced happily. “Peace and quiet.”

“I’m to stay *here*?”

“Course. Yers is the biggest of ’em.” She brought the wagon to a halt in front of a ramshackle house that, to his eyes, looked as small as the others but might have been in marginally better repair. The roof looked intact, in any case, and red flowers bloomed in boxes fastened beneath the shuttered windows.

The dragons shuffled and huffed impatiently as Julian and Mrs. Crabbottom unloaded the wagon. The cottage contained only a single room, with a bed against one wall, a table with two chairs in the middle, and a small kitchen tucked into a corner. Some small pieces of furniture, mainly stools and shelves, stood here and there, and a few bright rugs were scattered over the stone-paved floor.

“That pump there’ll bring water straight to the sink,” Mrs. Crabbottom said proudly. “You’ll find enough pots and pans for yer needs. Extra bedding and towels in that cupboard. Outhouse is just steps away.”

Outhouse. Julian shuddered. “And where shall I bathe?”

She gave him a look as if he were something strange and exotic. “You’ve got the whole ocean right there. If the salt gets too much fer ya, just wipe it away. I think it’s good fer ya. It’s like pickles—salt keeps ya fresh longer.”

He attempted a wan smile.

After several trips back and forth—and really, she carried far more than he—Julian’s belongings were heaped inside the cottage. She looked around and nodded. “Well, yer set then. There’s food here to last you a day or two. After that, just go up the main road. Town’s twenty minutes’ walk. My husband keeps the store open ’til suppertime every day, and we’ve one tavern open at night if you fancy a drink or two. Or three.” She winked.

He was suddenly loath for her to leave. “And the... the other guests?”

That earned him one of her cackles. “Ain’t no other guests, love. Yer lord of all the holiday homes.” She was still chuckling to herself as she climbed onto the cart and urged the dragons away.

Julian didn't have the energy to unpack. A chill was coming on as the sun began to set, so he chucked a couple of fuelstones into the stove and then struggled with the pump, filled the kettle, and set it to boil. He was relieved to discover a pair of lanterns hanging from hooks on the wall, and lighting them gave the room a comforting glow. After finding a loaf of soft bread and a hunk of cheese, he ate while standing at the open door, staring out at the twilit sea.

His new home wasn't exactly quiet, not with the waves pounding against sand and stone. But it was a different sort of noise than he was used to. No noisy carts passing over cobblestones, no salesmen hawking their wares, no family members or servants bustling about the house. He wasn't sure if his current situation was an improvement. In Greynox the sounds had often bothered him, especially when he was ill, but at least they'd been company of a sort. Now he had only himself.

His dinner eaten and his tea drunk, he rinsed his cup and knife at the sink. A quick visit to the outhouse brought the pleasant discovery that it was reasonably clean, and back inside again, he washed his hands and face. He ran his fingers through his reddish-brown hair. It had grown too long; he should have had it cut before he left the city. His nightshirts were still packed away, so he removed his boots, breeches, and tunic, leaving on his hose, linen drawers, and undershirt. He lay on the bed—a bit too firm but reasonably wide—and listened to the waves until he fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

It was very odd to wake up on his own, without his mother or a servant pushing a tray at him and insisting he eat *something* for breakfast. And strangely enough, the fact that nobody was insisting he eat made him suddenly quite ravenous. He hopped out of bed. While the kettle heated, he ate more bread and cheese, as well as some salty dried fish. He felt a bit silly, standing half-dressed and shoving food into his face, but then who was there to see him? Without an audience, he could be as ridiculous as he wished.

When his stomach was full and he'd had three cups of tea, he washed up quickly. It occurred to him for the first time that he was going to need to learn to shave himself, or else decide to grow a beard. Not that his whiskers came in particularly quickly or well, but eventually they would come in.

The sky was as relentlessly blue as the day before, with the sun setting the wavelets glittering like jewels. Gulls squabbled on the beach while something larger wheeled far overhead. He could have been the only man on the planet, except for a few distant boats that he saw through the rocky mouth of his inlet. Maybe they had ghost crews, as in some of the tales he'd read. He grinned crookedly at his foolishness.

The first order of the day, he decided, was to unpack. He didn't wish to unpack *everything*—not only would he never need a fraction of what his mother had sent, but he had no place to store most of it. The biggest problem was that he didn't know which pieces of luggage contained which items. As a result, he spent the better part of the morning rummaging, moving the heavy bags here and there, unfolding and refolding various items of clothing. He was exhausted by the time he'd gathered a few of his plainest, most comfortable shirts and several sets of hose, breeches, and drawers to go with.

He'd saved one piece of luggage for last. It was the only bag he'd packed himself, and it contained nothing but books. He'd agonized at length over which of them to bring and, in the end, had chosen a dozen favorites. Each was thick, with a worn cover. The well-thumbed pages contained stories of princes and knights, of explorers, powerful wizards, heroes, and brave men who saved

beautiful women or desperate kingdoms. Nobody wrote books about shy, sickly types who possessed no discernible skills and for whom a seaside cottage was the pinnacle of exoticism.

He spent the afternoon sitting in bed, reading one of his books, and listening to the waves.

Within a few days of his arrival, Julian had begun a daily walk to the village for food. That round trip was far more exercise than he was used to, and at first his legs and feet had complained. But very soon he'd grown stronger and was surprised to find himself seeking out even more activity. He walked on his beach and traipsed around in a nearby woods, and for the past few days he'd even done some climbing on the rocks at the entrance to his inlet. Interesting small creatures lived on those rocks, but he was even more intrigued by the caves he'd discovered. Chances were they were perfectly ordinary caves, but he could imagine them as hiding places for treasure or homes for sirens.

As Julian walked the dusty road into town this time, his mind wandered. He was curious whether his family and Dr. Brinkett had deliberately settled him so far from civilization. It was possible that in the doctor's youth, Urchin Cove had been much more popular among holiday travelers, and that neither he nor Julian's parents were aware that the place had been nearly abandoned. On the other hand, it was possible that they knew he'd be here alone and had sent him deliberately. Julian was always an embarrassment to his father: the weakly youngest son who, even when well enough to be seen in public, kept to the shadows and muttered inanities when spoken to. Julian had even overheard the servants repeating rumors that he was simpleminded, that the fevers had shriveled his brain as well as his body.

Whatever the motive, Julian found his parents' decision to send him to Urchin Cove surprisingly pleasing. The solitude wasn't nearly as much a shock to him as it might be to someone who'd lived a more gregarious existence. And he'd come to rather enjoy doing tasks for himself, such as preparing his meals and keeping the cottage clean. Yes, they were small tasks indeed, but they gave him a sense of accomplishment.

A pair of sprites flittered a few paces ahead of him, making him smile. He'd never seen wild sprites in Greynox, just a few miserable and tattered captives kept in cages in the Zoological Gardens. Those had made him sad, but the wild ones were joyous and amusing. Sometimes he even found himself chuckling—an unfamiliar action for him.

In the three weeks since he'd arrived, he'd seen sprites every day. Also more kinds of birds and insects than he'd known existed, and ground squirrels who scolded when he passed, and at least two species of long-haired imps. He'd taken to leaving his bread crusts, cheese rinds, and other food scraps in his doorway, and sometimes the imps crept over to snatch them away with an excited squeak. And it wasn't just the land creatures that fascinated him; twice now he'd spotted dolphins leaping in the waters of his little bay.

He came upon a little stone house close by the side of the road and knew he'd almost reached the village. On every one of his forays into town, the elderly couple who lived there had been working in their front garden, pulling weeds and harvesting vegetables. Julian had heard that the man was a wizard, but he suspected that was an exaggeration. The old man looked perfectly ordinary: graying, slightly stooped, and with a gardener's dirty hands. Julian waved at the couple and they waved back.

Urchin Cove was almost too small to be called a village. Perhaps two hundred people lived in or near the little hamlet. Most of them were fisherfolk, their brightly painted little boats bobbing in the harbor that gave the town its name. Almost everyone in Urchin Cove resembled Mrs. Crabbottom: stout and weathered, plain-speaking but not unfriendly. As far as Julian knew, the entire town might be related to his landlady.

As had become his new habit, Julian went first to the village's sole tavern. The tavern keeper walked with an unsteady gait that suggested he might be oversampling his own wares, but he was pleasant enough. Julian sat down among the grizzled old men and women who seemed to spend all day drinking, smoking, and talking, and the tavern keeper immediately brought him a huge bowl of hearty fish stew and a small loaf of crusty bread. He plopped a tankard of bitter ale on the table as well.

Julian ate his meal with a gusto he'd never experienced in Greynox. It wasn't so much that the food was all that delicious, although it wasn't bad. But it was the only hot meal he would eat that day; back in his cottage he subsisted on cheese and fruit, bread, and bits of sausage and dried fish. Besides, he'd been working up an appetite lately.

The local residents didn't speak to Julian as he ate, but they didn't seem to resent his presence. They gossiped about their children and the weather. They told unlikely tales about the huge fish of their youth or encounters with pirates. They complained about their illnesses and crippled limbs and compared their mysterious aches and pains. And they teased each other about their sex lives, which always made Julian blush furiously. He'd never had so much as an amorous kiss, and his knowledge of the matter was limited to his brothers' tales and a few furtive peeks at scandalous volumes in bookstores.

Julian used his bread to sop the remaining stew from his bowl and wondered whether he was daring enough to order a second pint of ale. But before he could make a decision, a large man entered the tavern and squeezed onto the bench next to him. "I'll take my pint now!" the man yelled at the innkeeper, who was clearing away someone else's dishes.

"You'll wait yer turn, Samuels," was the gruff reply.

Samuels snorted. "If the seaguards worked on yer schedule we'd be overrun by pirates by now, we would."

An ancient woman named Editha flapped her hands at Samuels. "Pirates, he says. Liken he knows so much of 'em."

"Know 'em far better'n I ever want to. Seen what they do to towns what have more'n fish guts to plunder."

"The seaguards keep the pirates far from here." Editha leaned closer to Julian. "My Bobby's a seaguardsman. Just like his daddy and *his* daddy afore him."

"Seaguards and our wizard, you mean. Pirates know better than to cross our wizard."

She flapped her hand dismissively. “*Him*. Uses his magic for nothin’ but growin’ tomatoes and boilbeans. It’s the seaguards what make a difference. No pirates near here.”

Julian nodded at her. That was his usual contribution to these discussions, and it seemed to satisfy her. But Samuels shook his head. “I seen the *Dark Prince* not far from here, just the other day. Runnin’ quick she was.”

A thrill ran up Julian’s spine. Even he had heard of the *Dark Prince*; he’d read lurid accounts of the ship in the Greynox broadsheets. Headed by the infamous Captain Thomas Booth, the crew was said to have murdered countless innocent sea merchants while looting their shipments.

Editha made a sour face. “You didn’t see no such thing. ’Twas a sunspot and too much drink.”

“I know what I seen, and what I seen was a tight little sloop flyin’ Booth’s colors. Crowned devil on a red background, ’twas.”

Most of the men and women proceeded to make fun of Samuels’ ability to discern shapes or colors with any accuracy. Although they scoffed, Julian thought he detected a note of unease. Well, didn’t matter much to him. He had nothing to interest a pirate—unless the pirate wanted several trunks full of Greynox’s latest men’s fashions, in which case Captain Booth was welcome to them.

Julian left two coppers to pay for his meal and then left. Urchin Cove’s only store was across the street. Its shelves were crowded with foodstuffs, home goods, and nearly everything a sailor could want. Mr. Crabbottom was behind the counter, measuring a bolt of cloth for a young woman. He nodded in Julian’s direction.

Julian browsed a bit before choosing a round of seeded bread, a small pot of strawberry jam, and a bag of hazelnuts. He took his purchases to the counter and waited for Mr. Crabbottom to finish with the other customer.

“Yer lookin’ hale an’ hearty today,” Mr. Crabbottom said when it was Julian’s turn. “Sea air agrees with ya.”

“I suppose it does.”

“I ain’t never used a doctor in my life. All of them potions and medicines. Pff. Give me fresh air and a spot o’ exercise, and I’ll be healthy as can be. Good food don’t hurt neither.” He pointed at Julian’s little pile of purchases. “Ya still got fish? You’ll be wantin’ to eat it every day, ya know. Makes you strong.”

“I had some fish stew already, and I have some of the dried sardines I bought the other day.”

“Good.” Mr. Crabbottom placed the food into the burlap sack he’d given Julian during his first visit to the store. Then he made a few scratches in a ledger, no doubt keeping track of Julian’s account. “There’s a storm blowin’ through, tonight and tomorrow.”

“A storm?” Julian said with alarm.

“Just make sure ya keep them shutters closed and you’ll be fine. That house o’ yers has stood much bigger blows than this ’un. But ’ware the waves this evenin’. That little bay o’ yers usually ain’t much tossier than a copper washtub, but sometimes the sea’ll bring you a surprise with a storm.”

“All right. Thank you.” Julian gathered his bag and left the store. He walked faster than usual. Although the sky remained cloudless and the ocean was placid, the thought of bad weather worried him. Greynox was prone to damp but rarely experienced anything severe. And on the few occasions when the wind had raged, Julian had been safe within the thick brick walls of his family’s large house.

Three sprites buzzed past him in a much more straightforward manner than usual, and Julian hurried his steps.

CHAPTER THREE

The shutters rattled. The door shook in its frame. The rain pounded on the roof like an army of goblins trying to get in. Julian huddled on his bed with a quilt wrapped around his shoulders.

He supposed it was daytime, but he couldn't be sure of the hour. He hadn't slept well at all, fearing that every gust of wind would blow his cottage down. When he had managed to doze off, his dreams had been unsettling. He couldn't remember the details, but he was sure they involved pirates and storms and dangerous waves.

He'd eventually given up on sleeping and brewed himself some tea. Since then he'd been trying to read, but his attention kept wandering from the pages. The characters' adventures were less engrossing when his stomach was churning with unease. He wondered if the authors had ever known true danger. Probably they were fat old men who spent their days sitting in overstuffed chairs in the Greynox gentlemen's clubs, scribbling away with their bottles of spirits close at hand.

"This is entirely ridiculous," he said out loud. "It's only a bluster. You're not in mortal danger. You've faced worse scares being nearly run over by omnibuses in the street." But his heart pounded anyway, and he worried at his lower lip until it bled.

Finally he put down his book and lowered his head onto the pillows. Perhaps he could catch a nap and when he woke up, the storm might be over. But he couldn't sleep. So, in desperation, he turned his thoughts as far away from his current predicament as he could imagine. He thought about sex.

He'd *known* about sex—in the abstract, anyway—since he was quite young. His brother Robert was ten years older and fancied himself a ladies' man. He would come home from school and brag in detail to his siblings about his supposed exploits with girls. Julian had listened with morbid curiosity, and had later heard additional stories from his other brothers as well. But Julian himself had been considered too unwell to be sent away to school; his parents had brought in tutors instead. So if he'd fancied following in his brothers' footsteps, he'd had no opportunity to do so.

And probably, he admitted in the darkest corner of his mind, he would never have had such adventures with girls even if he had gone to school. Because Julian Wade Massey liked boys instead.

As isolated as he was from people outside his household, he had gone a long time not knowing it was possible for a male to desire other males. Not that he hadn't felt vague yearnings, a twist of the heart when he caught sight of a handsome tradesman, perhaps. But he'd told himself it was only envy over their strength.

And then one afternoon when he was eighteen—not so very long ago—he'd visited his favorite bookseller. He liked this one because the shop was enormous, the books immensely varied in content, and the owner generally too busy reading his own books to notice what his customers were up to. Some months earlier, Julian had discovered an entire shelf of explicit books hidden in a dusty corner. Since then he'd been skulking in that corner, reading the salacious words, eyeing the engravings. But shortly after his eighteenth birthday he'd found a volume containing drawings of naked men engaged in sexual activities with one another. That was when he learned there was a name for people like him. Deviants.

He hadn't told anyone, of course. Who would he tell? His mother would be shocked, his brothers outraged. His father would disown him. And, needless to say, Julian had never acted on his inclinations, at least outside the literary realm. He'd found a few similar books, however, and had nearly memorized them.

Now in his bed, with the wind roaring outside, Julian remembered some of the drawings he'd seen. He imagined himself in those scenes: nude and unashamed, with another man nude as well. Touching him. Tasting him. Julian took himself in hand and wondered what it would feel like to be stroked by fingers that were broad where his were slender, hard and calloused where his were soft. How would another man's sweat taste, licked off skin that stretched over heavy muscles? What was the sound of another man's breaths in his ear? And how would strong arms feel wrapped around him, someone else's body keeping him warm?

Usually when Julian pleased himself, he swallowed his sounds. But today he cried out and his sounds were swallowed by the storm.

He must have dozed a little. Normally he would have been embarrassed by his lewd fantasies, but in this case his bout of weakness had enabled him to overcome his fear of the storm. When he woke up, there were no sounds other than the patient pounding of the waves and the cry of a gull. He opened the door and saw all that remained of the storm were a few tattered clouds. A quick check showed him that the cottage had survived unscathed, as had all the neighboring cabins. Some of them looked ready to fall apart at the faintest puff of wind, so he couldn't imagine how they avoided damage. It seemed unlikely that Mrs. Crabbottom could have afforded paying a sorcerer to place a protective hex on the structures.

His short stroll around the cottages left him wanting more exercise. He smiled. Just a few weeks ago he hadn't minded being cooped up for days on end, but now he was restless after less than a day. Due to the lateness of the hour, he decided on just a short walk around his inlet.

He didn't bother with shoes and stockings. They weren't worth the trouble, considering how they'd inevitably collect sand; and besides, Julian had learned that the beach felt nice against his bare feet. He did throw on a light cloak, however, because the evening chill had already begun to settle.

The storm had wet the sand much farther inland than usual, and it had tossed up piles of debris. He poked his toes at the huge snarls of seaweed and inspected the chunks of driftwood. A few of the pieces of wood were man-made planks with chips of paint still clinging to them. He wondered if they came from a ship. Smaller detritus lay scattered on the sand as well: colored shells, polished stones, bits of glass frosted and worn smooth. He slipped a few of the prettier pieces in his pocket. Souvenirs. He'd found his own little treasure after all.

And then he caught sight of another pile of debris. He couldn't quite make out what it was because it lay where the waves kept washing over it. It might have been seaweed, but it appeared more brown than green. Perhaps it was an

animal of some sort—a beached seal, maybe. With mixed curiosity and trepidation, Julian went to investigate.

When he came close enough to identify the object, his heart caught in his throat and he stumbled, nearly falling. It was a person.

Was it a fisherman drowned in the storm? How long had the body been in the water, and how horrifying would it look up close? Gracious gods, what was he going to do with a *corpse*? He felt as if he might be ill.

But he couldn't just abandon the poor soul. The tide was coming in and would surely wash the dead man away before Julian could fetch help. There was no way around it: Julian was going to have to handle the matter himself. At the very least, he must drag the corpse farther from the sea. And then... well, he couldn't just leave it there until morning, could he? But it was too late to walk to the village. The sun would be setting very soon and the road was too dark to travel at night. Fine then. Perhaps Julian could cover the poor fellow with a blanket—a sort of temporary burial—and then get assistance in the morning.

This was rather more adventure than he'd expected to have.

Julian crouched beside the body, shivering slightly as the sea lapped at his feet. The body was belly-down, barefoot, dressed in torn and sodden rags. Julian wasn't certain, but he thought the person was male. His hair was long and tangled, too wet for its color to be discerned, and the strands covered the man's face.

How terribly sad to die alone and nameless, to be tossed aside like rubbish.

Julian took a deep breath, grasped the corpse's hip and shoulder, and gently turned the body onto its back.

The corpse's eyes fluttered open. Julian shrieked and scrambled away, then lost his footing and fell, wetting himself thoroughly in the wavelets. He remained sprawled there, gasping. Good gods! The man was *alive*.

CHAPTER FOUR

If Julian had been uncertain about what to do with a washed-up corpse, he had even less idea what to do with a living human being. None of his books had prepared him for this.

After a few moments of confused and frantic thought, he realized the man wasn't moving. He might be alive, but he was clearly in no condition to escape the sea's grasp. Soon the tide would be high enough to drown him for good, or to carry him away, which would certainly amount to the same thing. Covering the man with a blanket and leaving him on the beach until morning was probably not the best option.

"Get yourself *moving*, man!" Julian said fiercely to himself. "Stop being such a pathetic ass." He rose unsteadily to his feet and crept closer to the man. The eyes were closed again. He was older than Julian, but not by a great deal. Thirty, perhaps. And even in his poor condition, with his skin gone fish-belly pale and his mouth slack, he was quite beautiful, with full lips (now bluish), fine-drawn brows, and sharply sculpted cheekbones. Gathering all his bravery, Julian grasped him under the armpits and dragged him out of reach of the waves. The man didn't react to this rough treatment.

If one of Julian's brothers had found this man, he could have easily picked him up, heaved him over a shoulder, and carried him to the cottage. But Julian's brothers were far away, and since the stranger undoubtedly weighed more than Julian, lifting him was out of the question.

Julian considered his situation for a minute or two. It really wasn't very far to the cottage, and the entire route was smooth sand. Perhaps he could drag the man instead. So he took off his wet cloak and spread it wide. Then, grunting slightly, he prodded and shoved the inert body onto the cloak, leaving the legs hanging off the end. After gathering fistfuls of cloth, he began to pull.

He'd make a terrible draught dragon. His back ached almost immediately, his arms and legs felt rubbery, and his breaths came in painful rasps. But inch by inch and foot by foot, he dragged his burden across the beach and all the way to the threshold of his cottage. The threshold itself proved a considerable obstacle—the house's floor was a half-step higher than the sand—but once

inside it was relatively simple to tug the body the short distance across the smooth stone to the bed.

During the entire journey, the man showed no signs of waking. Which was perhaps a mercy, because the voyage would have been uncomfortable at best. But when Julian made a last mighty effort and managed to haul him onto the bed, the man groaned deeply and his eyes fluttered but didn't completely open.

Julian stood beside the bed, trying to catch his breath and get his muscles to work properly again. Somehow the man looked more *real*, here inside Julian's cottage, on his bed, even though he was wet, bruised-looking, and beginning to shiver violently. With considerable hesitation, Julian reached forward and felt his forehead. It was shockingly hot.

Well, if there was one thing Julian *was* familiar with, it was treating a fever. He moved quickly. First he threw a large handful of fuelstones in the stove and put the kettle to boil. Then he tore off his own wet clothing—blushing slightly at being naked in front of another man, even if that man was unconscious—and threw on something dry. He'd be of little use to his patient if he caught a chill as well. And then he undressed the man.

Aside from the engravings in books and a few paintings and statues in dusty museums, Julian had never seen another person unclothed. He tried to keep his mind cold and clinical, noting the many bruises and scrapes that marked the man. Some of them were particularly ugly: a deep purple contusion spreading across his chest; bloody indentations at his neck, wrists, and ankles; an angry gash on one thigh. But Julian couldn't help noticing the man's strong muscles and sleek skin, and the soft sex nestled in dark blond curls.

"You are a degenerate," Julian snarled to himself.

By then, the water had heated. Julian grabbed the box containing the considerable store of medicines his mother had packed. When he'd first seen the box, soon after his arrival at Urchin Cove, Julian had been angry at her assumption that he might take ill again. But now he was grateful for the supplies. He sprinkled a packet of dried herbs into a bowl, added the warm water, and found a soft, clean towel. He then spent a long time dabbing gently at the man's injuries. He paid special attention to the open wounds, some of

which looked infected. He smeared on ointment as well, and wrapped what seemed like miles of bandages.

The cottage had become very warm. Sweat dripped down the back of his collar, making his neck itch, and he had to pause often to wipe his face. But the man was still trembling. A harsh rattle shook his lungs with every breath. Julian wasn't sure if that was new, or whether he'd been too preoccupied to notice. It was a worrying sound. He'd made it himself during some of his more serious illnesses. It always caused Dr. Brinkett to frown.

There was a salve that the doctor often used on him. It smelled terrible, but it usually eased Julian's breathing. He was pleased to see that his medicine box contained the ingredients. He required only a few moments to mix them together and then rub the concoction onto the man's chest. He hoped the pressure didn't aggravate the bruising. He hoped he was doing the right thing.

Finally, when he ran out of things he could do for his unconscious patient, Julian bundled him under blankets, took a comb, and unsnarled the man's hair. Dry and free of sand and bits of clinging seaweed, the hair was pale yellow, like freshly churned butter.

Which reminded Julian that he hadn't eaten. He sat at his table, gnawing on bread and cheese, but his attention remained on the man who slept in his bed. Surely he wasn't a local. None of them looked anything like him. While they tended toward the short and stout, he was tall, lean of hips and belly, and broad of shoulders. The locals were ruddy and weather-worn. He was pale, fine-skinned. And Julian was no fool; he realized that some of the man's wounds had been made by bonds of some kind. Ropes or fetters. Whose prisoner had he been, and why?

Julian took his time cleaning up. He'd scattered things everywhere: bits of medicine, dirty towels, wet and sandy clothing. The man's clothes had dried a bit but were clearly unsalvageable. Still, Julian was loath to throw them away. What if they were literally the only things the man owned? Julian shook them out and left them to dry on a small rack outside his front door.

He sat down with tea and a book, but he couldn't concentrate on the story. What was the point of reading about someone else's mountain-climbing

expedition when he had his own mysterious stranger right here in front of him? So Julian fussed instead, checking bandages and blankets, rubbing in more salve, wiping sweat from the man's brow. He reminded himself of his mother and the way she'd hover over him when he was small. Sometimes even when he was quite well, he'd wake up to discover her sitting at his bedside, watching. She'd confided in him once that she was afraid if she didn't keep a close eye on him, he might slip away from her like a dream. She'd stopped keeping vigil when he reached adolescence, but sometimes he caught an odd expression on her face, and he wondered if she didn't worry about him still.

Julian's patient did not disappear. In fact, when yawns overtook Julian and his eyelids grew heavy, he realized that the all-too-real man was taking up his only bed. Sleeping in one of the plain wooden chairs was out of the question. The other cottages might have a mattress he could use, but he was far too sore and weary to consider dragging more heavy burdens. So he sighed unhappily and built himself a nest of blankets on the floor next to the bed. He doused the lanterns and laid his tired body down, feeling the hard stone beneath him. But he realized that the man's breathing had become smooth and even, and when he reached up to touch the stranger's hand, the skin seemed less feverishly hot.

Smiling with satisfaction, Julian fell asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Water.”

At first, Julian’s groggy mind thought he’d dreamt the raspy voice. But when he managed to get his eyes open, the first thing he saw was a face up on his bed, blue eyes looking down at him.

“Water. Please,” the man said. He sounded as if his throat had been scoured with sand.

Julian untangled himself from his nest and found his feet. Oh, he was *sore*! But probably far less so than the other man, he told himself sternly. “Just a moment,” Julian said. He was thankful he’d slept fully clothed instead of in his usual nightshirt.

He filled a glass from the pump and took it to the bedside. But the man didn’t seem able to lift his head very well, and his hands shook too much to hold the cup. Julian held it for him and propped his head so he could swallow a few sips.

“I think... let that settle for a moment.” He gently set the man’s head on the pillow. “If you drink too much at once you’re likely to be sick.” That was something he knew from experience.

The man nodded slightly, then closed his eyes as if the entire interchange had been deeply exhausting. But just when Julian was certain he’d fallen back asleep, the eyes fluttered open again. “Who?” the man whispered.

“Julian Massey. I... I found you on the beach. Who are you?”

The reply was so faint that Julian had to strain his ears. “Kit Archer.”

“Oh. Well... hello, Kit.” *Mr. Archer* was probably too formal an address for someone you’d been intimately attending. “You... You’re quite safe here. I can give you some more medicine for the fever. Perhaps make you some tea or broth. And then I’ll go fetch help. I imagine there is a proper doctor in the village. I shall be back in less than an hour.”

But Kit’s eyes had widened and he’d begun breathing fast. “No! Please, don’t. Can’t let them... Please. Not yet.”

Julian didn't know who "they" were, nor what Kit didn't want them to do. But there was no mistaking the fear on his face, and something twisted in Julian to see him distressed.

"All right. I won't go. But only if you're certain. It's just me here, you see, and I'm—"

"Please."

Such a simple request, so heartfelt. Even if Julian's better judgment told him otherwise, he couldn't refuse. He nodded. Relief smoothed Kit's handsome features and his lids fell shut.

Julian regretted not getting Kit to drink more water. But at least he could attend to Kit's wounds. The bruising looked worse, but what worried Julian much more was the deep cut on Kit's leg. The edges of the wound were red and inflamed, and pus had dirtied the bandage. The wound smelled terrible, too.

"All hells!" Julian swore. He didn't feel competent in treating a nasty infection, but what was the alternative? He'd promised Kit not to go for help and had to assume that Kit had a good reason for begging him not to go. But if he didn't go, Kit could die. Either way, Julian would be responsible. He'd never been responsible for anyone but himself, and it was bloody terrifying.

He did the best he could with herbs, salves, and fresh bandages. Only then did he visit the outhouse, change to fresh clothing, and consume some tea and dry bread.

He was just finishing his meal when Kit stirred again. Julian hurried to his side with more water. Kit managed a few swallows, but his brow was hot and dry and his gaze unfocused. "Piss," he whispered.

"Pardon?"

"Have to... piss." Getting the words out was clearly taking enormous effort.

Julian stood helplessly for a moment, but he didn't want Kit to wet the bed so he improvised. He fetched an empty jar that had once held Mr.

Crabbottom's pickled beets. He held the jar toward the bed. "Here. You can... use this."

But Kit was shivering so violently he could barely grasp the blankets. "Help," he moaned piteously.

Trying to swallow past the lump in his throat, Julian drew the blankets away. He held the jar firmly in one hand and with the other he gently grasped the other man's organ. Julian was trembling slightly, and it took a bit of maneuvering to get everything properly in place. "Go ahead, please," he said.

Kit moaned with relief and emptied his bladder. Julian couldn't help but notice that the urine was colored a very deep amber, which probably meant Kit was dehydrated. But Kit fell back into a restless slumber even before Julian could cover him up again.

Julian found himself somewhat at loose ends. He didn't want to leave Kit alone, and so he couldn't go on one of his customary rambles. But he still felt so very odd over his current circumstances that he couldn't possibly attend to his books. He busied himself for a while with a few minor chores, then decided to attempt to cook. He was aiming for something souplike or stewish, but the result was so vile that even the imps refused to eat it.

And so the day dragged on. Kit's fever raged. Sometimes he mumbled incoherently. Sometimes he awoke enough to drink a little water. Sometimes Julian lay cool, damp cloths on his forehead, which he knew would feel soothing. Once when he did this, Kit's eyes focused on him briefly, and a tiny smile tugged at the corners of Kit's mouth.

Night fell, and Kit was no better, but also no worse. Julian helped him urinate again. This time he felt a bit less uneasy over the act, perhaps because he'd now spent twenty-four hours looking at and touching Kit's body. But as Julian settled into his uncomfortable nest of blankets, he found himself wondering what it would be like to stroke another man's penis, to feel the organ become firm in his grip. His cheeks burned at these thoughts, but then so did his loins. He even briefly considered taking himself in hand. But he couldn't do it, not with another man right next to him—even if that man was unconscious. So instead Julian shifted about restlessly until he fell to sleep.

The next day was very similar, except this time Julian was wise enough not to try cooking stew. He was running low on food, actually, and he was worried about how long Kit could survive on only a few sips of liquid. Julian resolved that the next day he would walk into town to get supplies, and if Kit was not improved by then, he'd fetch help as well.

But by afternoon, Kit *was* better. He was still too warm, very drawn, and weak. But the shivering had stopped, and he was able to swallow several glasses of water. He could even hold the jar steady while he emptied his bladder. Julian could have sworn there was a glint of amusement in Kit's eyes over Julian's obvious discomfort.

"Who are you?"

Julian was standing at the open door, watching the shadows grow long. He turned to look at Kit. "Julian Wade Massey."

"Are you a doctor?"

Julian laughed. "No. I'm on holiday. I found you on the beach."

"I'm a strange bit of driftwood, am I not? A true disappointment to a beachcomber, I expect."

"I... There was a storm." The humor in Kit's tone flustered Julian. He'd never been good at joking about.

Kit's face turned more solemn. "There was indeed." He sighed and looked around himself. "Where are we?"

"Near Urchin Cove. It's a holiday cottage." And surely Kit must think him a simpleton.

"Who else is here?"

"Nobody. I'm... I'm quite alone."

Kit's light brows drew together and he looked about to say something, but then his head fell back on the pillow. "Bloody tired."

"I... your leg. It is quite bad off. I should get a doctor or some sort of help. If I go to the village—"

“Please don’t.” Kit turned his head to look directly at Julian. “I’ll mend. You’re taking good care of me. Thank you.”

Now Julian was flustered again, and he looked away. “You should eat something.” He walked to the little kitchen area and surveyed his meager pantry, wondering what in heavens he could prepare for Kit. Then he remembered he had a few dragonlet eggs, a gift from Mrs. Crabbottom during his last visit to town. He melted some butter in a pan, cracked the speckled green egg, and cooked until the results were soft and runny. He spooned his masterpiece into a bowl. “I’m afraid I have reached the limits of my culinary skills,” he said as he approached the bed.

Kit smiled at him. “I can barely brew tea.”

Julian had to spoon the food into Kit’s mouth. He should have felt ridiculous over it, but instead an unfamiliar emotion warmed his chest. Pride. He was proud of himself for bringing a desperate man to relative safety, for tending to him so carefully, for feeding him. He’d never before accomplished so much.

Kit didn’t possess the energy to finish the whole egg, but didn’t fall asleep quite yet. “What are you, Julian Massey?”

“I told you. I’m on holiday.”

“And when you are not on holiday?”

Julian shrugged. “I... I’m nothing much.” His brothers had professions. Two of them were barristers like their father. The third was an engineer, helping to build the transport system that would someday soon replace the city’s dragon-pulled carriages. But everyone had always assumed Julian too ill to work—including Julian himself. When he wasn’t unwell, he haunted booksellers.

“You are a bloody miracle, is what you are. My savior.” Kit smiled once more and closed his eyes.

Julian finished eating Kit’s egg and made another for himself. He still had a bit of sausage left, so he finished that off as well and then munched on some large red grapes. He cleaned up. Then he sat at his table, watching Kit sleep.

What kind of man risks his own health—his own life, perhaps—rather than have his presence made known to the locals? Probably not a good man. Certainly not just a fisherman lost in the storm. But Julian’s heart stubbornly refused to believe that Kit was a bad man. Not with those clear blue eyes, and that slightly crooked smile, and—And Julian *was* a simpleton, and a fool as well.

CHAPTER SIX

“I must go to the village,” Julian said.

“No! Please, I beg you. You—”

“I will not tell anyone you are here. I just need to get some food.”

Kit’s shoulders sagged with relief. “Thank you. If I could repay you, I would.”

Julian remembered that all Kit seemed to own were his ruined clothes. “Why don’t you wish me to tell anyone? How did you end up nearly drowned on the beach? Who *are* you?”

“I’m nothing much,” Kit replied with an expression that seemed to mock himself rather than Julian.

Julian glanced out the open door. He’d spent the morning tending to Kit’s wounds, which were looking slightly better, and washing clothing and bedding, and sweeping sand out of the cottage. He wanted to run his errand before the day grew later. “I shall be gone for perhaps an hour. Will you be all right?”

“I’ll be fine.” Kit gestured at the empty jar at his bedside. “I’m prepared for emergencies. I expect I’ll simply sleep. I’ve never been so exhausted in my life, and I’ve done nothing but lie in bed.”

“Illness is very taxing.”

Kit gave him an odd look. “It is.”

Julian hovered uncertainly near the door before doffing his jacket and hat. “An hour then.” Kit didn’t respond. Perhaps he was already asleep.

Although the sun was bright and the temperature warmer than Julian ever experienced in Greynox, he noticed as he walked that it wasn’t *quite* as warm as it had been. Summer had passed its peak already, and in a matter of a few weeks he’d be returning home. Home. The familiar old pile of bricks in Greynox seemed suddenly a bit alien. But if it wasn’t home, what was? Julian couldn’t stay in his holiday cottage forever—the winter cold would make it uninhabitable. He would return to his musty, dusty room with the perpetually

drawn curtains and the stink of medicine. Instead of walks on the beach or rock-climbing he'd have his books. He'd have the familiar, somewhat bland meals prepared by Cook, the sounds of city bustle outside his wall. He'd have his mother's fussing, his father's and brothers' scorn.

Ah, but at least he'd return with a bit of an adventure behind him. He would have the memories of finding Kit, of nursing him back to health. Of touching him.

The windows and door of the tavern were wide open, and the sounds of conversation and laughter spilled onto the street. Julian wouldn't have minded a meal there, perhaps an hour or two listening to Editha and Samuels and the others spin their tales. But Kit was waiting, so Julian went to the shop instead. He spent quite a bit of time considering what groceries might work best and whether he ought to stock up on more healing herbs.

Mr. Crabbottom raised his bushy eyebrows when he saw the quantity of Julian's purchases. "You must be hungry."

"I've run low on everything since the storm."

"Ah. Was a nice bit of a blow, wasn't it? Now the *proper* winds, they come a few months from now. Winds so fierce they can blow a man over. And the waves! Fiercer'n ogres they are, and twice as deadly." He scribbled in his ledger for a moment, then began to place the items in Julian's burlap bag. "Once when I was a lad, we had a storm so wild it washed all the boats straight through the town. My da's boat ended up at the top of that hill yonder. Took a team of eight dragons to bring it down again."

"That must have been... inconvenient."

"Aye. And another time, just a few years back it was, a storm blew through. And the next day Davey Rakens found a mermaid just outside his front door! Ah, she was dead, o' course. And she weren't no beauty when she was alive—that's just a tale they tell. Mouth full o' pointed little teeth, like a shark."

"Oh." Julian reflected that he'd been considerably more fortunate than Davey Rakens in his after-storm discovery. Although as far as he was concerned, Kit Archer seemed every bit as exotic as a dead mermaid.

The bag was heavy. A few weeks earlier, Julian probably wouldn't have been capable of carrying it all the way to the cottage.

Kit seemed tense when Julian first entered the little house, but then relaxed and gave a small grin. "You haven't brought anyone back with you."

"I promised not to."

"So you did."

Julian bustled about for several minutes, putting away the food.

"Is that a bottle of wine I see in your hands?" Kit asked. He'd propped himself up a bit with the pillows.

Julian turned around to face him. He didn't often drink wine, but the bottle had tempted him as he'd been choosing dried fish. "I don't know that you ought to drink any," he warned Kit.

"Oh, I definitely ought. It will dull the pain, I reckon. And water becomes so tiresome after a while."

Julian struggled with the cork, found two clean glasses, and poured a healthy dose for each of them. "I don't know if it's any good," he said, handing over one of the glasses.

"I'm sure it's awful. I don't care." Kit grimaced as he drank, but still emptied the glass.

"You should eat more," chided Julian. "I've bought quite a bit. What do you fancy?"

"Anything fresh would be lovely. I've been... at sea for some time."

Julian waited for Kit to give more details, but he instead remained silent, staring thoughtfully at his blanket-covered lap. Julian noticed that the quilts had fallen away from Kit's upper body, leaving his shoulders and chest bare. The bruising still looked terrible and he still wore a bandage around his neck, yet there was a raw beauty to him that made Julian's pulse pound. Kit looked up and caught Julian staring; but even as Julian's cheeks burned, he couldn't look away.

“You were going to bring me something to eat,” Kit said softly after a moment.

“I... yes.”

Kit ate an entire egg this time, and a little soft bread, and three of the fireberries Julian had picked as he walked home from the village. Kit drank another glass of wine, then smiled with satisfaction. “That was very good. Thank you.” But then he shifted his leg a bit, gasped, and went very pale.

Julian had been sitting at the bedside. As soon as he saw Kit in distress, he helped ease him flat on the mattress. “I ought to check your injury. It’s been hours since you’ve had any medicine.”

“Go ahead.” Kit gave the blankets a tug. They fell to the floor, leaving him entirely uncovered.

Julian couldn’t imagine being that nonchalant about nudity. His frequent illnesses had required a fair amount of... poking and prodding. But Dr. Brinkett had exposed only the necessary bits of Julian’s body during his ministrations, and even then Julian had generally stared at the ceiling and pretended he was somewhere else.

But Kit just lay there, and although he was tired and in pain, he seemed otherwise comfortable. He even gave Julian a small encouraging smile. “I’d like to see the leg unbandaged, please. I want to know how bad it is.”

“All right.” Julian gathered his doctoring supplies. He tried to keep his attention focused solely on his task, on the several square inches of wounded leg. But he could feel Kit’s gaze upon him. And he was very aware of the close proximity of his hands to Kit’s manhood—and he remembered well how that flesh had felt against his palm.

“It’s not so bad,” Kit said, but his face was still white.

“If I can’t stop this infection you could... you could lose the leg. You could die.”

“I have utmost confidence in you.”

Julian blinked at him. Kit’s tone was light, yet his face was quite serious. “Why would you have confidence in *me*?” Julian asked. Nobody else did.

“I haven’t died yet, thanks to you. I think I’m in excellent hands.”

Julian shook his head. Then he wrapped the leg in fresh bandages and pulled the blankets back up on the bed. “I’ll make you some tea. I’ve some herbs that should help with the fever.”

“My mother used to make me drink chamomile and griffinbane. Tasted awful, and she wouldn’t even let me add honey.” Kit’s voice sounded weak and faraway, and his eyes had drifted closed. “Made me drink it once a week...”

While Kit’s tea steeped, Julian nibbled some cheese and fireberries. He’d never harvested his own food before and he felt quite daring over it, even though any child could have done the same. They tasted sweeter than the ones the servants used to bring him with his breakfast.

He had to wake Kit up to take the tea, and Kit fell back asleep immediately afterwards. Julian took advantage of the opportunity to give Kit a quick bath with a damp towel. He knew how uncomfortable one could get if forced to remain with sweat-streaked, medicine-smeared skin.

And then once again, Julian was at loose ends. He ended up sitting in the doorway of the cottage with a book on his lap. Periodically he’d look up, past the mouth of the inlet, where he could see a boat far away. It didn’t appear to be moving. Perhaps the fisherman had dropped anchor to haul in a catch. Or something like that—he was really rather vague on the details of fishing procedures.

The days were growing noticeably shorter. He waited until the sun set before coming back inside. He went about his evening chores: preparing a meal, helping Kit eat and drink and empty his bladder, tidying up. He used the outhouse and washed his teeth, hands, and face. And then he stripped off his overshirt and lay down in his blanket nest.

“That can’t be comfortable,” Kit said, startling Julian a little. He’d assumed Kit was fast asleep.

“I’m fine.”

“But the bed is much softer.”

Julian frowned into the darkness. The bed *was* much softer, and he'd been waking up terribly sore from the cold, hard floor. He'd been disappointed to discover that none of the other cottages contained any furniture beyond a few scraps of broken wood. But he certainly wasn't going to have an ill, injured man sleep on the ground. "I have blankets," he said.

"The mattress is big enough for two. Just take care not to jostle my leg."

"You want..." Julian swallowed. "I can't share your bed."

"It's your bed, not mine. I won't bite, Julian. Please. I feel guilty enough as it is, and guilt isn't an emotion I'm used to. Get off the floor."

It was silly to be arguing over this. The mattress *was* quite wide, and it wasn't as if Julian would suddenly lose control of himself and... and molest the other man. He rubbed his face and stood. Kit was near the edge of the bed, so rather than trying to climb over him—which was out of the question—Julian clambered up from the bed's foot. When he lay down, his left side was touching the smooth wall and his right side was close enough to Kit to feel his body heat.

"Do you always sleep in your clothing?" Kit sounded amused.

Julian huffed instead of answering, and Kit chuckled. Lying in the dark, inches from a naked man, listening to the warm sound of his laughter—Julian was immediately and painfully aroused. *You are sick!* he told himself. *Attracted by a man, and a wounded one at that.* But despite his self-disgust, he remained achingly hard for a very long time.

He was almost asleep when Kit moved slightly. "Where are you from?" Kit asked quietly.

"Greynox."

"Ah. And you came on holiday all by yourself? Why not bring friends or family?"

"My doctor recommended it. He said the fresh air would do me good. My family members are too busy with their own affairs. I haven't any friends." He bit his lip, hard. He hadn't meant to say that last bit. Somehow it was easier to share confidences in the dark.

“Then I should be very honored if you’d consider me a friend. You’ve certainly earned my gratitude.” Kit sighed noisily. “Not that you should value the friendship of a scoundrel like me.”

“Scoundrel?”

“You don’t strike me as a fool, Julian. Surely you’ve worked out that there’s something amiss with me.”

After a moment of silence, Julian said, “Are you a pirate?” It was a ridiculous question, really. Not one he’d ever expected to utter in earnest. But under the circumstances, it did seem like a real possibility.

He was frozen into immobility when Kit grasped his hand and squeezed it. “I am not a pirate. But I am a man who occasionally consorts with pirates. And I’m a thief. When I am not injured, I am a dangerous man.”

“Oh.”

Kit squeezed his hand again. “But I am also a man of my word, and I promise you that I would *never* harm you.”

For no good reason whatsoever, Julian believed him. In fact, he felt daring enough to squeeze back. “How did you come to be washed up on my beach?”

“I think... I think I owe you my tale at least. But can I tell you tomorrow? I’m very tired.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Julian.”

Kit didn’t let go of Julian’s hand and Julian didn’t pull away. They fell asleep like that, side by side.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Waking up next to Kit should have been awkward. Kit had flung his arm out so it was draped across Julian's midsection, and Julian could feel Kit's bare foot against his own. But Kit smiled widely at him and Julian simply felt happy. Strange.

"I'm feeling much better this morning," said Kit. "Your doctoring has wrought miracles. Do you suppose you could help me outside?"

"Outside?"

"You do have an outhouse, don't you? I'd prefer it to the indignity of a chamber pot."

Julian sat up, taking care not to draw the blankets away from Kit. "I don't know if you should be walking yet."

"If I don't move around a bit I shall go mad. Can't we at least try?"

There was something very persuasive about Kit's expression. So after Julian fed them both, and against his better judgment, he helped Kit sit up. Kit swayed a little but didn't fall over. The bruises on his chest had begun to fade to a mottled green-yellow, which Julian took for a good sign. And when Kit pulled the bandages away from his neck and wrists, the marks looked less raw and angry. He pushed the blankets off his lap. "If you would help me stand..."

"You... your clothes were ruined. I'll find something of mine you can wear. I must have something that will fit."

"You've already seen me naked, Julian. Let's skip the bother of clothing."

"But... you're going outside!"

"I think this is hardly central Greynox. There's nobody about to be offended by my dangly bits, is there?"

Julian's face went scarlet. "No."

"Well, then let us go. My business in the outhouse will be easier this way in any case."

Julian had never blushed as often or as fiercely as he had since he'd rescued Kit. He almost felt as if he'd come upon a fever of his own, especially

since he was slightly lightheaded. But he stood next to the bed and helped Kit lever himself upright. Kit grunted and moaned a little, but managed to stand. He was several inches taller than Julian, and more heavily built. His hair fell past his shoulders and tickled against Julian's cheek. "There now," Kit said. "That was easy."

They shuffled slowly across the floor, Kit leaning most of his weight on Julian. Once or twice his bad leg almost gave out completely. But he was clearly a stubborn sort, and able to withstand a great deal of pain. They made it to the doorway and down the step to the sand.

"I didn't think... anyone stayed... in these cottages... anymore," Kit said. He had to speak in short bursts because his breathing had gone harsh.

"Nobody but me."

"It's... a lovely beach... Private."

"Quite."

The outhouse was difficult. Julian had to squeeze inside with him—a very tight fit—and help him sit. Then Julian stood outside with his back to the little building, pretending to admire the surf. He wondered what it would feel like to be nude out of doors. It hadn't occurred to him to try it, despite his secluded beach. Honestly, he was rarely nude *indoors*, except in his house in Greynox, when he bathed in the big copper tub.

Back in the cottage, Kit settled on the bed with a groan. "Well. That was an adventure."

"It was quite a lot of activity, considering your injuries."

"I suppose so."

Kit hadn't bothered to pull up the blankets. Julian told himself he was becoming used to seeing a naked man. But he wasn't sure what to do with himself. He bustled aimlessly around the cottage, moving small items from place to place. He wondered if he were brave enough to attempt another stew. Meanwhile, Kit dozed.

When Kit began to toss and moan, Julian feared that the fever had returned. Perhaps the journey outside had been too much. He stood watching

Kit worriedly for a few moments before settling a hand on Kit's brow.

Kit startled and jerked away.

"Oh! I am sorry," Julian said. "I was just checking—"

"It's fine. Just a nightmare. But maybe you could check my leg? It's throbbing terribly."

Julian unwound the bandages. The gash was still ugly-looking, but the telltale pus and stink were gone. "It's looking better, actually. I believe the infection is gone." He sighed. "It requires stitching up."

"Do you know how to do that?"

"I can try. I bought a needle and some silk thread in the village. You'll have a terrible scar, I'm afraid."

Kit grinned. "I've been wanting another scar for some time. Makes one look very manly."

Kit already looked manly, but Julian didn't say so aloud. "It's going to hurt. You might want to drink the rest of the wine first."

"An excellent suggestion. And when I am properly put back together and my tongue has been loosened, I believe I owe you a tale."

The stitching went reasonably well. Kit hissed a few times but was otherwise stoic, and Julian was painstaking in his work. When he was finished, he smeared on some ointment to prevent further infection and applied more bandages. He was almost out of bandages, in fact. His mother had underestimated his need in that respect, but then she had likely not predicted her son would end up doctoring a nearly drowned man.

"Would you like some food?" he asked when he was finished.

"Just some bread, please." Kit took the bread and tore off a small piece. He sopped up the last drops of wine before popping the morsel in his mouth. "You make a fine doctor, Julian. I can't believe you've never done this before."

"I haven't. But I've had ample opportunity to watch a real doctor work. Well, not at stitching, but at treating fevers and the like. I'm... sickly."

"You look quite well to me."

All hells. Julian was blushing again. He tried to hide his embarrassment by cutting himself some bread and slathering it with butter. But he could feel Kit's gaze on him as he worked, and Julian had the impression that Kit was amused by him.

Julian was going to sit in his usual chair beside the bed, but Kit shook his head. "I can share." He carefully shifted himself closer to the wall, then looked at Julian expectantly.

Well, Julian couldn't refuse that. Besides, if he were next to Kit he could enjoy being close without the discomfort of trying not to stare at Kit's body. Instead, he could look at the opposite wall, which was bare and boring.

"Thank you," Kit said. "And please forgive me. It's been some time since I've had a friendly set of ears at my disposal, and I don't do as well with solitude as you do."

"Where are your family and friends?"

"I have no family and my friends are very far away."

"Farther than Greynox?"

Kit chuckled, but not in a mean sort of way. "Farther even than that. My home is on Sanvia."

Julian gasped. He had read about Sanvia in some of his books. It was an island far, far to the west, surrounded by unimaginable miles of open ocean. The books said the weather there was always fine, the fauna and flora exotic. The phoenix was native to Sanvia, as were golden-furred fewbats, colorful parrots, and rodents larger than lapdogs. The authors claimed that delicious fruits grew everywhere, free for the taking, but you had to beware the carnivorous flowers that would greedily chomp off your fingers or toes.

"But you speak our language so well," Julian said.

That brought another laugh. "I wasn't born there. I was born a half a day's ride from Greynox, in an exquisitely boring little town called Dungarth. With the emphasis on the *dung*, I assure you."

"Sorry. I've never heard of it."

“More fortune to you. There is nothing there of interest to anyone. Even the dragons are dull-witted in Dungarth.” Kit moved his shoulders a bit, in the process brushing one of them against Julian. The contact was pleasant.

“How did you get from Dungarth to Sanvia to Urchin Cove?”

“In a very roundabout way. I was a hellion as a boy. Terrible disappointment to my parents, and an only child. They both died before I was fully grown, and I ran away. No farming for me! I was after adventure.” He said it mockingly, as if there were something foolish in such pursuits. But Julian envied his courage.

“You seem to have found what you sought.”

“That I did.” Kit moved again. He couldn’t seem to get comfortable. And then, to Julian’s shock, Kit toppled sideways a bit so he could rest his head on Julian’s shoulder. His hair was very soft against Julian’s cheek. “I moved here and there for a while and ended up in a war. Not one of *our* wars, but that didn’t matter. I didn’t even know what they were fighting about, but when a man offered me a salary to join his soldiers I said yes. And I found that I was skilled at it. I don’t know how—wasn’t as if I’d had much use for knife and sword in Dungarth. I expect it’s just something that came naturally to me, like doctoring does to you.”

“But I’m not—” Julian was interrupted by a sharp poke to his leg. Then Kit used the same finger to point to his own long, bare leg with its neatly wrapped bandage. Julian had to concede that he had done a reasonably good job with Kit.

“When that war was over I fought another and then another. Or sometimes wealthy men would hire me to guard them or their families or their cargos. I made quite a bit of money. I thought myself very fortunate. And then...” He paused. His fingers worried at a blanket edge, repeatedly curling it and smoothing it out. “And then someone died. Another mercenary. My partner. My friend. My lover. His name was Alexander Hodgkins. My Lex.”

Even though Kit’s voice had grown very soft, Julian knew he’d heard correctly. Kit had just admitted to having a man for a lover. Julian knew some men did this, of course—he’d read those books. But he hadn’t imagined

anyone admitting such a relationship so plainly and openly. And Kit was strong and vital despite his injuries. He clearly was not the weak degenerate that men who loved men were said to be.

“I am very sorry,” Julian said.

Kit took his hand and squeezed it. “Thank you. Death was always a risk, of course. I just... until I saw him bleeding before me, I’d somehow thought it could never happen to him. I took my money and found a ship and I sailed far away.”

“To Sanvia.”

“To Sanvia. Lex and I used to talk about it. We used to say that someday we would retire there. I bought myself a house not much bigger than this one. Spent my days sleeping and my nights at the taverns with the pretty, willing boys. And when I tired of that I took a job as a guard at the little port. I never had to kill anyone there. I simply looked frightening so as to scare away the thieves.”

Julian had read enough about Sanvia—and some of the books were illustrated—that he could picture Kit very clearly: lolling naked in bed through a balmy afternoon, carousing in lively inns, walking tall around a harbor with swords on his belt. “And then?” Julian prompted.

“A ship appeared in port. The *Dark Prince*.”

“Pirates!”

“Yes, of course. But pirates are common in those waters. And honestly, the term is a bit relative. Did you know that our own queen authorizes privateers to waylay ships belonging to countries with which we’re squabbling? The privateers keep the cargo after Her Majesty takes her share. Of course, those countries have privateers who do the very same to our ships.”

“I... I thought they were stopping spies.”

“Spies—hah. It’s a wonder that these spies are always carrying the most tempting cargos in their holds. But that’s neither here nor there. The crew of the *Dark Prince* works for no queen—they are concerned solely with their own fortunes. As are the crews of many of the ships that dock in Sanvia. But

when they come to our friendly shore, they want to spend their stolen money on ale and whores and pretty trinkets, so we welcome them with open arms.”

Consorting with pirates. It would be a tale impossible to believe, if Julian hadn't found Kit under such strange circumstances. “Did you meet Captain Booth?”

“I did. I met with him four nights in a row, in fact, in a narrow bed in a room over the White Griffin. He's a handsome man, whose tastes run a bit more specific than Sanvian boy-whores.”

Julian gasped. “You... you had *relations* with Captain Booth?”

“I *fucked* Captain Booth, Julian. And one time he fucked me. He wasn't especially good at it.”

Perhaps Kit realized Julian needed some time to process this information, because Kit grew silent. His head remained on Julian's shoulder. Julian turned his own face away, towards the door, where a pair of orange imps were nibbling at bread crusts. He liked the imps here. The ones in Greynox always seemed dirty and disreputable, skulking about in shadows and alleys.

“Julian? You *are* attracted to men, aren't you?”

“I... I...” Julian swallowed. He considered pulling his hand away and removing himself from the bed. Perhaps going for a long walk. But gracious gods, wasn't it time he admitted his true self to someone? “Yes,” he said.

“Have you ever slept with one?”

“I slept with you just last night,” replied Julian, although he knew what Kit was asking.

“An experience I enjoyed more than any of my times with Booth. You smell much better.”

Julian wasn't sure whether Kit was joking and didn't respond. He was blushing *again*.

Kit decided to continue his story. “Booth asked me if I'd join the crew. I expect he admired me more as a bunkmate than a pirate. I refused. But then he told me of a treasure he meant to fetch, a casket of gold and jewels he'd taken from a ship two years earlier and hidden from his crew. He offered to share it

with me. He was very drunk at the time, as you might imagine. He even let slip the hiding place. And by morning he'd forgotten all about the conversation. The *Dark Prince* sailed away that day.

"But I kept thinking about the treasure. I didn't need the money; I had enough to get by. But it was... a temptation. My life had grown so stale, you see. Ever since I lost Lex, I hadn't been able to find a... a purpose. And there was nothing noble about this. I didn't intend to distribute the treasure to the poor or return it to grateful owners. I wanted a last adventure, perhaps. So I returned here on the next available ship."

"You stole Captain Booth's treasure?" Julian asked, a trifle incredulously.

"I did." Kit sounded proud of himself. "It wasn't hidden that cleverly, really. He'd stashed it in an abandoned keep on the cliffs near Croftwell. I took it as easily as I might have picked fireberries. But then I made the mistake of spending a few days in Croftwell. I was a little homesick and fancied... oh, some of the old familiar foods, and the familiar accents, and people complaining endlessly about the weather. Unfortunately, Booth decided to pay a visit to Croftwell as well. And as soon as he caught sight of me, he realized what had happened. He's not a stupid man."

"What did you do?"

"I ran." This time, Kit's chuckle held little real humor. "A man like me learns early on when to stand his ground and when to flee. Booth couldn't catch me—I'm taller and faster. But he had two men with him and he sent them after me. I killed them."

"Oh." Julian wasn't sure how he felt about that. Of course Kit had killed men—he'd been a soldier.

"I didn't enjoy it, if that makes any difference. I never have enjoyed taking lives, even when it was necessary. This time it was necessary. And I knew he'd be sending more after me, so I kept on running. I stole a fishing boat and tried to sail away, but I am a poor sailor. The *Dark Prince* caught up with me and I couldn't outfight an entire crew. I was taken prisoner."

Julian glanced down at their entwined hands. He'd removed the bandages

from Kit's wrists, but the nasty lacerations were still quite visible. He imagined Kit bound, struggling. "Why didn't they just kill you?"

"Because I am also not a stupid man. I didn't have the blasted treasure with me—I'd hidden it away so that if I were captured, I would have a bargaining chip. I'd have information worth keeping me alive, at least for a while."

"I don't think I'd ever be that clever," said Julian.

"Because *you* would be wise enough not to get yourself in a situation where such cleverness was necessary." Kit patted Julian's knee with his free hand. "Booth kept me in irons on board the *Prince*, and he tried to convince me to reveal the treasure's location. His methods of convincing are... unpleasant. But he and the crew were so distracted with me—by then, the crew had become aware of the existence of the treasure, and they were *quite* interested—that they didn't notice the storm coming in. And when the storm did arrive, well, it took all their efforts to remain afloat. They temporarily forgot about me. I managed to get free of my bonds, which is a skill I'd learned some years earlier. I stole one of the ship's boats and tried to make my way to land. I barely made it. I take it my poor little boat did not."

"I think I may have found some pieces."

"Ah."

Kit shifted again, and Julian realized that he was probably exhausted. That had been a lot of conversation for an injured man. Julian doubted he himself had ever had such a long discussion before—and certainly never about such an unusual subject.

"Why didn't you want me to fetch a doctor from the village?" he asked.

"Because I stole the fishing boat from Urchin Cove. They wouldn't be pleased to see me. And if I make my presence known, Booth will hear of it and come after me. For now, he doesn't even know I'm alive."

"Were you scared, setting off in that storm in a tiny boat?"

Kit raised his head from Julian's shoulder and turned to look at him. "I was terrified. But... I was exhilarated too. Since I lost Lex, I've had no particular reason to live. That was nearly four years ago. But this ridiculous escapade has finally got my heart beating again. It feels good, Julian."

Julian knew what he meant, because his own heart had only recently begun beating. Just now it was beating very hard, with Kit's beautiful face so close to his, his strong hand still clasped tightly with Julian's.

"What will you do now?" asked Julian.

"As soon as I'm able, I'll head inland. Booth is less likely to find me there. Don't know precisely where I'll go or what I'll do, but I expect I shall find something. Another war, perhaps."

"You won't return to Sanvia?"

"No," Kit replied mournfully. "It's no longer safe for me."

"And the treasure?"

"The treasure can rot where it lies. I don't want it. It'll only burden me."

They remained silent for some time after that. Kit lay down flat with his head on the pillow—still holding Julian's hand. Julian didn't know why. But he watched as Kit closed his eyes and slipped into sleep. He imagined Kit falling asleep in the arms of another man. What had Lex looked like? How had they met? How did they become lovers? And how did it feel to watch someone you loved die?

Perhaps most importantly, how did it feel to be loved?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kit dozed for most of the rest of the day, waking only long enough to drink water and tea and nibble a bit of food. Julian knew a healing body required lots of sleep, so he disturbed Kit as little as possible. Mostly Julian read, but he also made a second effort at stew. This one was edible. Not delicious, but probably not toxic.

As the sunset neared, he sat in the doorway, watching a clan of imps gambol in the sand. Sometimes one of them would creep close and peer at him with bright, beady eyes. When he didn't produce any food, it would scamper away. "I am sorry," he said after disappointing the creatures again. "I shall find you something after supper."

"Now that you've fed them you'll never be rid of the little monsters."

Julian turned his head to look inside the cottage. Kit was sitting up in bed, a glass of water in his hands. "Are you hungry?" Julian asked.

Kit laughed. "Do you think I am an imp as well?"

"You are very tall for an imp. And your hair is the wrong color."

"Ah, you *do* have a sense of humor, when you're not preoccupied with saving a fool's life."

"My sense of humor is very rusty." Julian stood and stretched his muscles. He was less sore today, since he'd slept on the mattress the previous night. He walked to the stove and ladled some stew into a bowl. He added a hunk of bread and carried it to the bedside.

Kit set the water down and took the bowl. "Thank you."

"If you don't like it I can give you something else. We've some cheese and—"

"It's fine." Kit swallowed a spoonful and didn't even pull a face. "It'll be nice to have something more substantial in my belly. I haven't had a decent meal since I left Sanvia."

“I wouldn’t call this one decent.” Julian sat beside the bed and watched Kit eat. He couldn’t say why, but it was satisfying to see someone consume food he’d prepared, even if it was hardly a gourmet repast.

“You like to read,” said Kit, waving a hand in the direction of Julian’s pile of books.

“I do.”

“My parents didn’t wish me to learn how. No point in it for a farmer, they said. But after I was grown, I spent several months with a university student who taught me how—and I taught him a thing or two in return.” He winked. “I can read and write a little, but I’ve never become very good at it. No patience.”

“I... I could read to you. If you liked.”

“I’d like that very much. It would give me more chance to hear your voice. It’s a nice voice, but you use it so little.”

“I’m not accustomed to having... companionship.”

“Well, it’s a shame to waste you on imps. And you’re very good at keeping your face expressionless too. Most of the time I haven’t any idea what you’re thinking.”

Nobody had ever been interested in what Julian was thinking. “You have only to ask and I will tell you.”

“Good.” Kit ate a few more bites of his stew and then cocked his head. “After what I told you earlier about me, do I disgust you?”

“I... I told you... I admitted that I am... like you. A deviant.”

Kit shook his head. “I was *not* referring to that. Julian, what Lex and I had, there was *nothing* degenerate about that. What we had was as unstoppable and as natural as an ocean wave. It was as beautiful as the sea itself, when the setting sun dips just below the horizon and sets the water ablaze. Loving Lex was the wisest thing I ever did, the best thing. The only thing of consequence that I have managed.” He set the bowl down and grasped one of Julian’s hands in both of his own. “Do not be ashamed of this, Julian. And for the sake of all the gods, don’t smother what is within you. You are a good man! A charitable

one, a thoughtful one. A beautiful one. Find someone who is worthy of you and allow him to love you.”

“I...” Julian stood abruptly. He took the dirty dishes and carried them to the sink. He pumped enough water to rinse them. He could scrub them more thoroughly later.

“What about the rest, Julian? Does it not disturb you that I have been a sword for hire? A ruffian. A thief. A consorter with pirates. A man of no account.”

Julian didn’t turn around. “You have been very kind to me.” Without saying anything else, he went outside to use the outhouse.

Julian read to Kit by lantern light. It had taken some time for Julian to choose a book; surely a man who had lived such adventures as Kit would find Julian’s stories silly. Finally he picked a volume with a battered red cover. It was one he’d read so many times he could recite passages by memory. It told of a young man who was cast out by his family and town after being falsely accused of a crime. The man fled to a faraway land where he eventually met a river naiad. He saved her and her sisters from a disaster and in return was allowed to join them in their underwater home forever. The story was meant for children but the language was almost like poetry.

When he came to the end of a chapter—the hero had just caught his first glimpse of the naiad—Julian paused to drink some water. He glanced at the bed and was startled and a bit disturbed by the intensity of Kit’s gaze. Then Kit reached up and stroked his fingertips ever so gently across Julian’s cheek.

“When you read, you truly come alive,” Kit said, his voice slightly husky. “All those emotions come to the surface. You’re beautiful.”

Julian had no notion how to respond to that. His body had frozen even as heat bloomed under his skin. Kit’s eyes were like the sea, he thought. A man could drown in them.

Then Kit let his hand drop and gave Julian a wry smile. “Please. One more chapter?”

In fact, Julian read three more. His throat felt raw and he couldn't stop yawning. He put the book aside and helped Kit—still nude—to the outhouse. Kit still had to lean very heavily on him, but was a bit steadier on his feet. Back in the cottage, he helped Kit with nighttime ablutions before conducting his own. And then he hovered uncertainly near the bed.

“You're not thinking of sleeping on the floor again, are you?”

“No.” Actually, Julian had been dithering over what to wear. Feeling daring, he shed his breeches and overshirt, and he climbed under the covers wearing nothing but a soft undershirt and cotton drawers. Which was still, of course, considerably more than what the man beside him wore.

After a long silence, Kit cleared his throat. “May I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“When I am with you... I feel this sense of peace. It's quite extraordinary. I've never experienced it before.”

“I... I don't... There's nothing special about me.”

“I beg to differ. If you'll forgive the nautical metaphor, you are like the cozy little bay you have here. A bit hidden, so a passerby might not notice it. Might not see how charming it is. But if that passerby were to sail into the bay, he'd feel so very safe.”

“Safe? I have never handled a sword in my life and can barely pare vegetables without cutting myself. I couldn't protect you from a sprite!”

“But you have protected me. You saved my life, remember? And in any case, there's more to safety than wielding a big weapon—as lovely as big weapons can be.” Kit chuckled at his own double entendre, then laughed outright when Julian snorted at him. “You have strengths of your own, Julian Massey. You ought to recognize them.”

Julian didn't answer. But he lay awake for a long time, staring into the darkness, thinking about what Kit had said.

CHAPTER NINE

When Julian woke up, Kit was grinning merrily at him. “You snore.”

“I certainly do not!”

“You do! Like a drunken sailor. Like this.” Kit flopped dramatically back onto the pillow, closed his eyes and dropped his jaw, and emitted a loud, grating sound. He peeked at Julian to judge the effect of his performance.

Julian kissed him.

He didn’t mean to. In fact, he was as surprised as Kit when their lips met. Maybe even more so. And Julian was completely inexperienced at kissing so had no idea whether he was doing it right. But, well, it *felt* right. Kit’s lips were very soft and his cheek was scratchy from beard stubble. And his hand had made its way to Julian’s head, so that Kit’s palm cradled the curve of his skull.

After an eternity, Julian pulled back and looked solemnly at Kit. He wondered how Kit would react. He wasn’t sure what his own reaction was—apart from an aching erection and an urge deep within for *more*.

Kit smiled widely. “Good morning.”

“Erm... good morning to you.”

“Best morning I’ve had in ages, actually. I’m feeling almost lively.” He took Julian’s hand and guided it to his groin, establishing that he too was hard. Julian had touched Kit’s manhood before, but in a clinical sort of way, and then the organ had been soft. Now the skin was still soft, but beneath that was a solid core, hot and vital.

Julian was suddenly taken with the irrational urge to *taste*.

But no. Reluctantly, he drew his hand away. “I... we can’t.”

Kit’s face was serious and a little sad. “You’re right. My stupid leg would get in the way and you... you deserve more than this. *My* first time was a drunken grope in a barn that smelled of dragon shit. I didn’t even know his name. Just a farm boy I met while I was passing through—a farm boy very like me. You should have rose petals and a sirens’ choir.”

“I am not a girl!”

Kit reached over and gave Julian’s erection a firm squeeze through the fabric of his drawers, making Julian gasp. “No. No question about that.” He moved his hand to Julian’s face instead, gently ghosting his fingers along Julian’s jaw. “But when you allow yourself to dream, I’ll wager you dream something from your books. The bit that happens after the narration fades away, yes? Not sandy bed sheets and a smelly, banged-up ruffian.”

Julian glared at him for a moment before scrambling gracelessly off the bed. He was bloody tired of people telling him what he should do and what he should want. None of them *knew* him. He barely knew himself.

He stomped outside to use the outhouse.

He couldn’t avoid Kit altogether, of course. Kit still needed feeding and doctoring, and when he begged for some water and soap, Julian helped him clean himself and comb his hair. At least there was no more sign of fever, and while the stitches were ugly and uneven, the wound appeared to be healing nicely.

“I’ve always mended quickly,” Kit remarked. “My mother claimed that her great-great-great-grandmother was an elf. Nonsense I’m sure, but that side of the family was remarkably healthy and long-lived. My mother had me at quite an advanced age and was fit as could be until a team of dragons spooked and ran her down.”

“Oh! I am sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Well, you should be ambulatory soon.”

Kit looked less pleased at this news than Julian would have expected.

Julian walked to the village that afternoon but didn’t tarry at the tavern. Inside the shop, he strained his ears to overhear the conversations, just in case someone might discuss the *Dark Prince* or a stolen fishing boat. But Mr. Crabbottom was deep in discussion with two women over the best way to prepare bottlefish, a man was chiding his teenaged son over carelessly-done

chores, and an elderly couple was deciding whether they'd buy green fabric or blue for their new curtains. Julian made his purchases, waited for Mr. Crabbottom to scribble in his ledger, and then walked back toward the cottage.

He passed sprites as he walked, and more fireberry bushes. A few people waved at him from yards and fields. But his mind was set firmly on Kit: on the way he'd felt as they kissed, on the sound of his breaths so close to Julian's ear, on the smooth rigidity of his sex against—No. On the smooth rigidity of his *cock* against Julian's palm. Julian blushed just to think the word. But gracious gods, he had kissed another man, and instead of being disgusted the man had been aroused, hard and wanting. If Julian could do *that*, he could bloody well stop using the clinical terms and swooning euphemisms. At least in his mind.

Kit smiled broadly as soon as Julian entered the cottage. "Your imps were looking for you. I expect they'll be pleased to discover you've collected more supplies."

"Yes." Julian frowned as a thought occurred to him. "I haven't made them too dependent on me, have I? I shall be leaving soon and I wouldn't want—"

"They'll be fine. Imps are resourceful little creatures. But this lot will be telling stories for generations to come of the handsome great provider who fed them so very munificently."

"Handsome?"

"Caught that, did you?" Kit's laugh was rich and warm, sending pleasant shivers down Julian's back. "Has nobody ever told you before?"

"My parents complain at my lack of robustness. Mother used to call me her little flower and Father has been known to mutter that I look more like a girl than a man."

"Devils' balls! Just because you're no brute doesn't mean there's anything feminine about you. In fact, I can attest from first-hand knowledge that you are decidedly masculine. *Generously* masculine, in fact." He wagged his eyebrows.

Julian suffered his hottest blush yet, but couldn't stop his mouth from quirking into a grin.

But Kit wasn't yet finished. "Julian, you have the sort of face a painter would pay to memorialize. Your hair is the color of glowing embers and your eyes are like deep forest pools. You are on the small side, it's true, but you're sublimely put together and when you forget to doubt yourself you move with perfect economy and grace. And your smile! Well, I've not seen it often, but when you treat me with it, it's as if I've been given an evanescent jewel. It's a treasure rarer than anything in that damned box, and a good deal more valuable."

Julian realized that his mouth had dropped open and he'd been rendered speechless by Kit's words. He would have accused Kit of jesting, but Kit's face was set so earnestly—almost fiercely, as if daring anyone to question what he'd said.

"Thank you," Julian whispered.

Kit nodded as if the matter were settled.

There was supper to be made, dishes to be washed, wounds to be tended to. Julian did all of this, but as he worked Kit talked to him, spinning tales of his many adventures. Julian didn't know how much of what Kit said was factually accurate, but then that didn't much matter. It was wonderful to listen to him. And even better, when Julian spoke, Kit *listened*, even if it was nothing but a boring account of his brothers' drinking habits or a description of his staid neighborhood in Greynox. Very few people had ever listened to Julian before, or had asked him much of anything beyond the symptoms of his current illness.

Evening fell and Julian read again until his throat was hoarse. Then he stripped to his drawers and climbed into bed beside Kit. It nearly killed him to be so close... and yet not quite touching. He would have skulked away to masturbate, perhaps in one of the empty cottages, but the bed was very comfortable. And besides, he suspected that Kit would know *why* he was leaving and might even tease him about it, which was possibly more than Julian could bear. It took ages for him to fall asleep.

Over the following several days, Kit continued to convalesce. His bruises faded away, the smaller scrapes were replaced with pink new skin, the lacerations from his bonds faded. The wound on his leg began to knit nicely. He was able to move about more, using Julian only for balance as he limped his way to the outhouse. And his appetite returned with a vengeance, so Julian was kept busy preparing them food.

An easy companionship built between them, the sort of camaraderie that permitted fond teasing and comfortable silences. They built their own routine, with Kit sharing his boundless stories and Julian reading to them every night.

Julian touched Kit less often, now that Kit needed little doctoring. But Kit still hadn't asked for clothing and seemed perfectly comfortable lolling nude. Julian didn't mind.

Julian hurried his daily trips into the village. "We haven't seen ya at the tavern lately," Mrs. Crabbottom remarked one afternoon. "Are ya tired of hearing us blather or is it the bad ale's put you off?"

"No, no, you're all... you're lovely. It's only that I've grown so fond of the delights of my cottage and my little bay. I'm afraid I've become selfish of my remaining time there." That was nothing but the truth.

Her mouth split in a wide, slightly snaggle-toothed smile. "See? I told ya, didn't I? Finest holiday home ya could ever want. And yer lookin' as fit as can be. You've lost some o' that tightness about yer shoulders, if ya don't mind me sayin'. There's nothin' like some time by the sea to cure what ails ya, body or soul."

"Thank you. I am feeling much stronger."

"Maybe ya want to stay longer. That holiday cottage won't be so nice once the winter storms come in, but I can find ya a cozy place right here in town. We've a room right in our own house, in fact. We'll have plenty o' rain 'n bluster, but that's still a long sight better'n spending the season cooped up in that dirty old city."

"That is very kind of you. And tempting. But I must return to Greynox."

She shrugged. "Suit yerself."

He thought about her offer as he walked back. Nothing was waiting for him in Greynox aside from his dreary old room. But he couldn't stay in Urchin Cove indefinitely, not while everyone there bustled about with their fishing boats and their farms and their kitchen gardens. And he would do... what? Lay about like an invalid?

Perhaps when he returned home he would find a purpose—something to do with the rest of his life. He seemed to have a bit of a knack for medicine and he wasn't too old to attend university. He could become a doctor. He could help those in need. His mother would no longer worry over him and it was even possible that, for the first time, his father might be proud of him. Julian might go out in the world more, find acquaintances, even friends. A lover... no, *that* was too much to hope for.

And Julian reached a decision.

CHAPTER TEN

“You have an extra spring in your step,” Kit remarked when Julian returned to the cottage. “Was Urchin Cove particularly fascinating today?”

“There was a fresh catch of squid just arrived in. Mr. Crabbottom showed me how to clean them, and he said I should fry it in a bit of olive oil. He gave me a packet of spices as well, and some vegetables.”

“Sounds delicious. But I didn’t know you found seafood so stimulating.”

Julian tried what he hoped was an enigmatic smile. “You do not know everything about me, Kit Archer. It may be that I have a few surprises in store.”

“Oh. Well, I do like surprises.”

Kit watched carefully as Julian prepared the meal. Julian had become accustomed to Kit’s constant scrutiny. At first it had discomfited him, but now he rather fancied it. It made him feel interesting. Of course, there was little else in the cottage to keep a man’s attention. But Julian was flattered anyway.

Julian brought bowls to the table and Kit made his slow way there, unaided. They sat on the hard wooden chairs. “I suppose you think I have the worst manners ever, coming to a meal naked,” Kit said with a chuckle.

“Well, I do not think we have instituted a dress code here.”

“Maybe you should try it yourself when you return to Greynox. You could tell all those society yobs that it’s the latest thing. It’s really quite practical, you see. Far fewer stains upon one’s clothing this way.”

“But potentially dangerous if one were to spill hot soup in one’s lap.”

“Well, maybe we shall save it for dishes that are less like to drip, then. Like this lovely calamari salad you’ve made.” Kit took a healthy-sized bite, chewed and swallowed, and licked his lips appreciatively. “Wonderful! Mr. Crabbottom deserves a medal and *you* should be knighted.”

Oh, Julian loved to watch Kit eat! There was his obvious enthusiasm, which was a sort of testament to both Julian’s doctoring and his cooking. But there was also the way his tongue darted out to swipe at his lips—lips Julian

had kissed—and there were the little moaning noises of pleasure he made when he tasted something especially good. Kit's meals would have been sensual activities, *erotic* activities, even had he been attired in the thick layers of cotton and wool required at the Massey family table.

Julian finished his own bowl of squid but barely tasted it.

The washing up seemed to take forever. And then Kit refused to get into bed. "I've been imprisoned long enough," he complained. "A prison with wonderful company and delicious food, but still confining. I miss the *sky*." They ended up sitting side by side in the doorway. Kit leaned a bit on Julian, who'd brought over a lantern so he could read. But even after the book was finished and the lantern doused, they spent a long time watching the waves glow in the moonlight and the stars twinkle overhead. Sometimes a small gust of wind blew a faint snatch of music in their direction, and Julian wondered if there were mermaids singing somewhere nearby.

The night grew chill, and even with Julian's body for warmth, Kit shivered. "I don't want you to take ill again," Julian said sternly.

"Hmm. I suppose not." Kit used the doorframe to pull himself to his feet. Julian remained sitting, watching as Kit made his way to the bed. Julian hadn't had much opportunity to admire Kit's backside, which was as pleasing to look at as his front. His shoulders were so broad, his waist and hips narrow, his buttocks rounded and muscular. His skin showed a few lingering marks, souvenirs of Captain Booth's questioning and the rough rocks in the little bay, but in a way the scars only added to his appeal. They made him more interesting, more *real*. Julian wanted to trace them with his fingertips—not for the purpose of healing Kit, but to learn him, to know him.

Kit got into bed. He spent a few moments adjusting the pillows and blankets, and then settled down. Only then did Julian stand. With his back as straight as possible, his manner as confident as he could manage, he walked towards the bed. He removed his overshirt and his undershirt, then unbuttoned his breeches. There was nothing unusual in this—it had been his routine for several nights now. But tonight he also took a deep breath and stepped out of his cotton drawers. He knew Kit could see him, backlit by the moonlight through the open door. Julian stood there, waiting.

“Have you decided to follow my fashion?” Kit asked.

“Perhaps.”

“Good. Clothing is so confining. There is nothing better than the sensation of air on bare skin.”

“Nothing?” asked Julian. Then, very quickly, he climbed onto the bed, between the covers—and close against Kit’s long, firm body.

“Julian? What are you—”

Julian kissed him again.

It was better the second time. Perhaps because now Julian was slightly more experienced, perhaps because he’d been anticipating this moment for days. Perhaps because there was nothing at all between him and Kit, their skin pressing together as tightly and intimately as their mouths. And again Kit cupped Julian’s skull—this time with both palms—and again the world dropped away until all that mattered was the two of them.

“You’ll be the death of me, Julian,” Kit whispered. Their lips were no longer quite touching, although he still held Julian’s head very close. “I’m not a man used to resisting temptation, and you are so very tempting.”

“Then why resist?” Daringly, Julian pressed his groin into the hollow of Kit’s hip, knowing Kit would feel the hardness of his cock. Feeling Kit’s hardness grind into his belly.

Kit groaned. “Gracious gods! I told you, your first time should be different. Special.”

“This is not a drunken grope in a barn and I know your name, as you know mine. And this... Kit, this *is* special. To me, at any rate.” He was seized with a moment of self-doubt. “To you it may be nothing much, and of course I am new to this and probably quite awful at it, but—”

“Awful! Believe me, you are anything but.” Kit moved his hands down to Julian’s shoulders and gently kneaded. “I thought I had convinced you already how extraordinary I find you, but apparently I haven’t spoken often enough of your charms.”

Julian dropped his head and nuzzled against Kit's neck. Kit's hair seemed to twine around him like a living thing, stroking him. Kit's pulse throbbed beneath his mouth so Julian gave into temptation and licked at it.

This time, Kit shuddered beneath him. "Julian... gods, Julian. That's... You have to stop."

"Why?"

"Because it's me! Because I am not the man you deserve. I am only—"

"You are my friend. My first friend, my only friend. I have never desired anyone the way I desire you. Please. We have so little time left together. Be my first lover." And, quite probably, the only lover Julian would ever have. But Julian didn't say that bit.

Kit made an animal sound deep in his throat and slid his palms still lower, down Julian's back and to his ass, where they cupped and squeezed. His palms and fingers were hard with calluses, not soft like Julian's own. And his hands were large and strong. Julian found himself arching back into their caress and then thrusting forward to slide his cock along Kit's skin. A drop or two of fluid had escaped already, slicking his movements. One of his hands was fisted in the bedclothes but with the other he gripped Kit's free hip.

"Are you *certain* you haven't done this before?" Kit gasped.

"I admit I have been imagining it quite vividly of late."

"You're right. You are full of surprises."

This time, Kit initiated the kiss. And this time his tongue tickled at the seam of Julian's lips until they parted, and then Julian was being penetrated, which should have been awkward and a little strange but turned out to be neither. Julian felt as if he were made of three distinct bits—his mouth, his cock, and his ass—and sparks were flying between them as if there were fuelstones in his veins. He squirmed and rocked and tried to remember to breathe—And Kit pushed him gently away.

"What?" That single word was the most Julian could manage.

"Let us... let us slow down a bit. Because if we don't it will all be over quite soon for both of us, and that would be a great pity."

Julian had to admit the wisdom of Kit's words. "All right. What shall I do?"

Kit brushed his lips against Julian's cheek, then dotted a kiss on the tip of his nose. "Whatever you want, my love. What *do* you want?"

"I... I'm not sure."

"But you must have some ideas. Are you aware of the possibilities between two men?"

Julian thought briefly of some of the books he'd snuck peeks into. "Not *all* of the possibilities, I daresay, but some of them."

"Well, then. That should be enough for tonight. What do you dream of?"

"I want... What do *you* fancy?"

"I fancy you, however I can have you. Although we shall have to take some care of my leg."

"Of course. But what do you prefer?"

Kit seemed to consider for a moment. "Truth be told, I am a man of varied tastes. But all things being equal... I should very much like to fuck you, Julian."

Julian's breath caught. "Good," he managed to choke out. Not that he would have minded playing a different role, but ever since he'd held Kit's cock in his hand, he'd been wondering how that hard flesh would feel entering him, filling him.

"Then we are of a mind. We shall need something to ease the way. Have you some kind of lubricant in your medicine kit? That ointment you used on my wounds, perhaps?"

"It's gone." Julian thought. "Would oil work? I've some left from dinner."

Julian's entire body shook when Kit laughed beneath him. "Do you suppose that I am a bit of calamari? Your own fresh catch of the day? Yes, I think that ought to suffice."

Padding across the floor to fetch the little bottle of oil, Julian could feel Kit's gaze on him. He was self-conscious about it. Not just about his nudity—

although that was bad enough—but also the smallness of his frame; the narrowness of his chest; the pale, freckled expanse of his skin; the lack of muscled bulk. But when he turned back to the bed the moonlight was shining directly on Kit's face, and what Julian saw there was raw desire. He shed his insecurity like a cloak.

“Here,” he said when he reached the mattress.

Kit took the bottle from him. “Lie beside me, love.”

But Julian had formed an idea. “May I turn on the lantern? I wish to... I want to see you. Please?”

Kit looked as delighted as a leprechaun given a gold coin. He spread his arms and legs wide across the mattress. “Be my guest.”

It wasn't only that Julian was unlikely to again have the chance to give such close scrutiny to a beautiful, naked man—although that was part of his motive. More than that, however, he wanted to discover every nook and cranny of Kit, to explore him the way an adventurer explores an exotic new land. And not only with his eyes.

Julian lit a single lantern and hung it not too far from the bed. It cast a soft warm glow, an interesting counterpoint to the moon's sharp light. Little pools of bright and shadow lay across Kit's skin, shifting slightly as he twitched a muscle here and there. His cock still rested stiffly against his taut belly, and even as Julian looked, a tiny pearl of liquid appeared at the tip. “You're looking at me as though you're starving and I am a feast,” Kit said.

“But that's it exactly.” Julian climbed beside him and spent a moment or two lightly brushing his fingertips against some of the more tempting bits of skin. He grinned when he saw how Kit reacted with twitches and gasps. It was rather like playing a very sensitive instrument, and very satisfying.

Not *entirely* satisfying, however. Julian wanted more. He straddled Kit on all fours—unmindful of the indignity of the position—and touched his lips to Kit's neck, right where the pirates' irons had left their mark. The skin was rough, so he kissed it better before working his way down to the collarbones. Those he licked. He considered nibbling on them as well, just very gently, but then he became distracted by Kit's nipples, which were tightened into brown

buds. When he flicked his tongue against one of them, Kit moaned. “You are a more adept torturer than Booth’s entire crew. Are you sure you have never done this before?”

Julian answered by taking the nubbin of flesh between his lips and sucking lightly. Kit tasted good. Salty like the sea, and warm. And he was thrashing his head on the pillow, his fingers carding through Julian’s tangled hair.

With a final kiss, Julian pulled his mouth away. He skipped the center of Kit’s chest, because although the bruising was now very faint, he suspected there was lingering soreness deep in the muscles and bones. In any case, that meant he could concentrate instead on Kit’s taut belly, which now glistened slightly from the droplets of moisture. Like Julian, Kit was not very hairy. But this close up, Julian could see that Kit’s body was dusted with very fine blond hairs. He blew on them, causing Kit to shiver.

Kit had removed his hands from Julian’s hair and now stroked Julian’s shoulders and the back of his neck. His breathing had gone a bit ragged—but it stopped altogether when Julian kissed the very tip of his cock.

“Gracious gods, Julian! You’ll—I should be the one worshipping you now. You should know how this feels. It’s like all the heavens and hells at once.”

“This is what I want,” Julian said firmly. Then he licked at the rosy head. The skin was slick and saline and smooth. He licked another time, just so he could savor the taste. But Kit was making desperate little noises, and there was still so much left to enjoy. So Julian traced the veins of Kit’s cock with one fingertip. Kit’s erection was slightly less long than his own but had greater girth. It was quite certainly big enough, considering that soon it would somehow fit inside Julian’s body—a notion that both scared and exhilarated him. He stroked it again and it leapt under his touch. He liked that, so he did it a third time.

But then there was the wonder of Kit’s wiry blond curls, so springy to the touch. And his bollocks, sweet and malleable within their lightly furred sack. His thighs were wide with muscle. Julian avoided the bandaged bit, compensating with extra attention to the other leg. He licked Kit’s knees, and

when Kit obligingly allowed him to raise one leg, Julian licked the tender skin behind the knee, although stroking it made Kit jerk and laugh. "I'm ticklish."

Julian would have liked very much to investigate *that*. But there were simply too many choices and too little time, so he petted the hairs on the shins instead, and sucked on both great toes.

"Do not take this the wrong way, Julian, but even the accomplished boy-whores of Sanvia might learn a thing or two from you."

Julian looked up at him. "I expect that professionals are rather more in a hurry." And less invested in their subject. They would have no shortage of naked men to explore, whereas Julian had only the one, and that one was so extraordinary.

And now Julian had a decision to make. He wanted to ask Kit to turn over so that Julian might touch and taste his back side. Those glorious muscles, those magnificent buttocks. But the position might be uncomfortable for Kit with his bruises and lacerations. And besides, Julian's cock was throbbing urgently between his legs, reminding him that there were other pleasures to be shared as well.

He moved around on the mattress until he was again beside Kit. Kit smiled softly at him and reached up to stroke his face. "In all my travels, I have never met anyone as amazing as you."

That had to be untrue, Julian thought. But he smiled back. "How shall I...?"

"Just... lie flat. Like so. We shall avoid the more gymnastic activities in light of my convalescence and your inexperience. Simply relax."

Julian did try to relax as Kit caressed his body here and there. But every muscle in Julian's body felt taut and ready, and his heart was beating very fast. When Kit grasped Julian's cock and gave it a few long, slow strokes, Julian arched his hips upward, off the mattress.

"Beautiful," Kit purred. "Now spread your legs for me, my love. Yes, that's it." Clever fingers made their way beneath Julian's scrotum, delving into that most private spot of his body. But when one fingertip nudged ever-so-slightly *inside*, the intrusion proved most welcome.

“Are you all right?” asked Kit.

“I’m... yes. Please.”

Kit chuckled. “Good.” Turned away, but only long enough to reach for the bottle. The fruity scent of olive oil wafted into the air as he poured a bit onto his fingers—and onto the bedclothes besides, but that hardly mattered. He returned his hand between Julian’s legs, and to encourage him, Julian bent his knees and settled his feet flat on the mattress.

After a bit of repositioning, Kit proved himself capable of two tasks at once: one hand moving the length of Julian’s cock, while first one finger and then two from the other hand gradually opened Julian up. Julian didn’t know quite what to do with his hands. They were fisted so tightly that the fingernails were digging into his palms, but the pain didn’t register. It took him some time to realize that the string of inchoate noises was coming from his own mouth, and even then he couldn’t stop it.

“Are you ready for me, love?”

“Yes!”

Julian nearly sobbed when Kit took his hands and fingers away. But then Kit was gently urging him onto his side and was settling himself behind. Kit poured a bit more oil, this time spreading it onto his own cock. “Lift your leg for me, please. Like this. Very nice.”

The tip of Kit’s cock pressed between Julian’s buttocks. It felt enormous. Julian went very still.

“Are you certain now, Julian?” Kit whispered into his ear. “We don’t have to do this. There are many other ways—”

“I’m certain.”

“Oh, thank the gods!”

Kit guided himself into place. At first he was just against Julian’s entrance, and then, slowly but insistently, inside.

There were no words to adequately describe what Julian felt. There was a bit of pain at first, and a brief moment of near panic when it seemed as if he were being stretched impossibly wide. But there was also the sensation of

being filled, and more confident strokes of his cock, and Kit's breathy moans against the nape of his neck.

"Gracious gods, Julian, you feel... It's as if you were made to fit me. So... gods, so good!"

And by then, Julian had to agree, although he couldn't make his mouth form coherent words to say so. Then Kit rocked his hips, the slow drag out and—thank the gods—back *in*, and again, and again, and then some part of Julian's insides was rubbed just so and he cried out.

All at once, Julian wanted more and harder and deeper. He stretched his arm behind himself and settled his hand on Kit's hip, urging him to keep on doing *that* only more so. For the first time in his life, Julian lost all sense of himself, and all but the most primitive parts of his brain simply shut down. He couldn't tell whether the pounding he heard was the blood in his body or the surf outside. He writhed and gasped and perhaps even sobbed, and when Kit called out his name—"Julian!"—a glorious tightness seized Julian's entire body and then a blessed, blessed release.

Kit must have achieved his own release as well, because he grunted and froze. As they both relaxed—Kit's softening cock still inside Julian—Kit mouthed tender kisses against Julian's neck and shoulders.

They had to separate at last, which was a shame. But when Julian rolled over to face him, Kit gathered him in his long, strong arms, and that was bloody wonderful.

"Did I meet your expectations?" Kit asked, nuzzling at Julian's hair.

"Far exceeded."

Kit hummed with satisfaction and smoothed a palm over Julian's buttocks.

Julian was very sleepy. But he had been hit with an epiphany, and he wanted to share. "You were right, you know," he said.

"About what?"

"You said there was nothing wrong or degenerate about one man loving another. You said it is a beautiful thing. And it is. It is as natural as life itself."

“I am so glad to hear you say that. Because when I am gone—” His voice caught and he cleared his throat. “When I am gone, you shall find a man to love you, a man who deserves a treasure like you. You shall find this beauty with him, Julian, and you shall be happy.”

The words sounded a bit like a benediction, a prayer. Julian wondered how much of the sentiment was a hope Kit held for himself as well. Julian drifted to sleep in Kit’s embrace, sated and content. But even as the warm blanket of slumber enveloped him, he knew two things. Julian had already found the love Kit spoke of, for he had lost his heart to Kit for good. And no matter how much his attitude had changed, Julian would never again find someone for whom he would have such depth of feeling.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Julian woke up exactly how he'd fallen asleep: in Kit's arms. His head was pillowed on Kit's chest, and Kit was humming to himself while he untangled Julian's hair with his fingers.

"Was I snoring again?" Julian asked sleepily.

"No. But you drooled on me."

"Oh. I am sor—"

"Don't be. I like to watch you sleep."

And, unexpectedly, Julian liked the idea of Kit watching him sleep. It made him feel protected. Which he knew was silly, but emotions were like that. "I never used to sleep very soundly. Not until I came to Urchin Cove."

"The sea air is good for one."

"So everyone keeps saying."

They were silent for a while, Kit playing with Julian's hair and Julian tracing lazy circles on bits of Kit's skin. "Are you sore at all?" Kit asked eventually.

"No." Which wasn't absolutely true. There was a bit of a twinge, but he welcomed it as a souvenir of the previous night. "But I do seem to be rather... messy."

"And you smell like dinner. We both do. Perhaps we ought to bathe today."

"Hmm. And wash the bedclothes."

"But since they are dirty already and so are we, why not take advantage of the situation?"

Julian looked up at him quizzically, just in time to receive a heated kiss.

This morning their movements were slower than the night before, lazier. But although there was less frenzy, there was more passion. They switched roles, with Kit teaching Julian just how exquisitely torturous it was have someone explore one's body, touching every bit carefully but never quite

enough. This time it was Julian who prepared Kit's entry, watching his lover gasp and groan, discovering with his fingertip the little bundle of nerves that made Kit plead for more. When Julian sheathed himself inside Kit, he marveled at the heat and tightness and knew that he'd always consider this to be the most intimate of embraces.

They spent the entire day—and the three or four days afterward—making love, cleaning up, eating, talking, making love again. It was decadent and glorious. And it was ephemeral, as they both well knew, but they didn't speak of that. Kit grew stronger. He claimed that all the exercise in bed was the key to his quick convalescence. Soon he was able to go to the outhouse unaided, and he took slow walks with Julian down the beach. Kit still hadn't put on a stitch of clothing, which would have seemed silly except Julian was now spending most of his time barely dressed as well. There were many reasons why Julian dreaded his return to Greynox, and the inevitable layers of scratchy, uncomfortable clothing added to his unhappiness.

"Anything special you'd like for supper?" Julian asked as he readied himself for his walk to the village.

Kit wagged his eyebrows. "More olive oil?"

"I meant something you'd like to eat."

"So did I." Kit had the most wonderfully lecherous smile. Just the sight of it and Julian had to adjust his breeches.

"I shall be back in an hour."

"And I'll be waiting." Kit returned to reading one of Julian's books. It was a laborious task for him, but he'd been practicing a bit these past days.

Julian walked briskly. Some of the trees had acquired a blush of autumn color, and when he reached the little stone house near the edge of the village, the elderly couple were busily harvesting vegetables. They waved.

Mr. and Mrs. Crabbottom were both in the store today. He was dusting shelves and she was standing behind the counter, working on some broken bit of machinery. "Yer in a hurry again this mornin'," she said.

"I... I..."

“Ah, it’s fine. Know how it is. A place grows on ya and ya don’t wanna leave it. Tell ya what. I’ll give ya first grab at reservin’ the holiday home for next season. I’ll even give ya a bit of a discount, on account of me likin’ ya so much.” She winked.

“I shall have to discuss the matter with my family.” He wouldn’t, though. Most likely, his parents wouldn’t mind sending him away next summer. But if his plans went well, he’d be at university then. And he knew that a return to Urchin Cove would only stir memories of what he’d had so briefly and could never have again.

He selected a few items, including a small bottle of oil, which made him blush. But when he looked in the case where Mr. Crabbottom normally kept the morning’s catch, it was empty. “No fish today?”

Mr. Crabbottom waddled over and made a sour face. “Ah, there’s plenty o’ fish but no one to catch ’em.”

Julian glanced out the open door. The harbor was full of little boats bobbing peacefully. “Have the fishermen all disappeared?”

“Nah, they’re all in the tavern, drinkin’ and whingin’.”

“Well, why aren’t they fishing?” Perhaps today was some obscure aquatic holiday.

“It’s them hell-blasted pirates.”

A cold chill shivered down Julian’s spine. “Pirates?” he squeaked.

Mrs. Crabbottom made the sign to ward off devils. “The *Dark Prince*. She’s been trolling the waters nearby like a shark since yesterday. Don’t know what that lot’s after, but none o’ us wanna get mixed up in it.”

Julian must have looked as terrified as he felt, because Mr. Crabbottom patted his arm reassuringly. “Don’t ya worry yerself none, boy. Pirates have no truck with a city man from Greynox, I’m sure. They’ll find whatever it is they’re lookin’ for and be on their way quick as a flash. Come back tomorrow and I’ll wager I’ll have all the fish ya could want.”

With a sickly smile, Julian collected his small purchases and placed them in his burlap bag. He might have muttered something to the Crabbottoms; he wasn't sure. But as soon as he was outside, he fairly ran the entire way home.

He was breathless by the time he reached the cottages, and he had a terrible stitch in his side. He'd half expected to find a ship anchored in the middle of his little bay and was immensely relieved to see nothing but sand and water and a group of gamboling imps.

He burst into the cottage. "Kit!"

Kit was sitting at the table, carving a bit of driftwood with a kitchen knife. He had begun to smile, but as he took in Julian's face, Kit's expression turned to alarm. "What is it, love?" he asked, leaping to his feet and dropping the wood and knife on the table.

"Booth!" Julian panted.

"What? Where?" Kit's hand went to his hip as if he were reaching for a sword. He was still naked, of course, and the action would have been amusing under other circumstances.

"Offshore. The people in the village say the ship appeared yesterday and has been staying nearby."

"But they haven't made land?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Blast. He may be trying to use a divining spell."

"Aren't those terribly expensive? Is the treasure really worth that much?"

Kit shook his head. "At this point, it's more likely to be me he's after. I've been a blow to his pride, I'm sure."

"Kit, you must—"

Kit grasped Julian's shoulders. "I must go at once. I can't fight them all with kitchen knives. I can't protect you from them."

"Protect me?" Julian hadn't even thought about that issue.

"If they find me with you, do you think they'll just let you go? At the very least they'll take you hostage and demand payment from your family. At the

worst they'll realize what you are to me and then..." He tightened his jaw and looked away.

"Come with me to Greynox then. Surely they won't follow you there."

"Love, I can't come with you anywhere. I *told* you! I can't protect you." He backed away and looked around. "I'll need my clothes..."

"You don't have to protect me! I can—"

"You can what, Julian? Fight a band of pirates? Have you ever fought anyone at all before? Have you any idea how to handle a weapon?"

Julian looked down at his feet. "No."

"I'll leave at once, before the spell tracks me here."

"You're going to... act as bait? Lure them away?"

"I'm the one they want. You're a good man who never deserved to be involved in this bloody mess. Now, *please*, love! Where are my clothes?"

Julian tried to think quickly, tried to reach some other solution, but his mind was not used to working in such ways and he could feel his own rising panic. He pushed past Kit and hurried to one of the trunks he'd ignored since his arrival. "Your clothing was nothing but rags," he said as he opened the clasp. "I threw it away. We shall have to find you something of mine that fits you."

"Yes. All right."

They sorted quickly through the luggage. It was simple to find drawers and stockings that worked, but the rest was more of a challenge. But then Julian found a small stash of clothing that must have been put in his bags by accident: finely made breeches, a cotton overshirt, a richly embroidered waistcoat, and a long velvet-lined cloak. It was an outfit that would have been appropriate for an important meeting. "These belong to my brother Robert, I believe. He's as tall as you, but fatter."

Kit grabbed the piles of fabric and began pulling them on. "They'll do. I can cinch the waist with a bit of string."

"But I don't have boots for you."

“I can go barefoot for now.”

Really, Kit looked magnificent in the clothing. He’d have made heads turn at any society event in Greynox. But Julian preferred him naked.

Kit bit his lower lip. “I must—”

“Wait.” Julian went to another bag and fetched a small purse. His mother had pressed it into his hand when he’d left. “For emergencies, dear,” she’d said. It contained several silver coins. Julian hadn’t had a need to spend them before now, but present circumstances certainly counted as an emergency. He tore a blank end page from one of his books—he hadn’t any other paper handy—and scribbled on it with his only pen.

He handed the paper and purse to Kit. “Take these. It’s more than enough money to get you to Greynox comfortably. And that’s my address. I’ll be returning at the end of the week—please meet me there. I’ll tell the servants to expect you.”

“And then what?” Kit asked. His gaze was heavy with sorrow.

“Then... I don’t know. You’ll be safe in the city.”

“Perhaps I would. Or perhaps Booth is angry enough to track me even there. But Julian, even if he did not, what would I do in Greynox? There’s no place for me in a great city.”

“We’ll find a place! I have—my family has money. We can—”

“And your parents would be pleased to support your lover, would they? Your disreputable fugitive male lover?”

Julian wanted to scream with frustration. “I don’t know! But you can’t run forever, Kit. You’re not even fully healed. Please!”

Kit shook his head slowly. “If you want to find that cursed treasure, it’s in one of the caves on the north side of your bay. It’s not really hidden all that well.”

“We could get the treasure and then—”

“And then you’d spend the rest of your life on the run with me? Until we were caught and killed, or until you grew to hate me for stealing you as well.”

Kit tucked away the purse and the bit of paper. Then he closed the space between them and took Julian's face in his hands. "Oh, love. This is what I am, you see? What I've made of myself. I'll never have a bright future like yours, Julian. Julian. My jewel." He tried to smile but his eyes glittered. "I've never wished so badly that I were a better man. Because if I were, I would love you more fiercely than the moon loves the sea. I would breathe your air into my lungs, I would taste you with every meal. I would tie our hearts together with unbreakable bonds."

He dropped his hands and took a step backwards. "But I am not a better man."

Julian held fast to his dignity. He didn't beg or cry. "I love you just as you are."

Even as a single tear escaped Kit's eye, his lips spread into a wide and beautiful smile. "Thank you. I shall remember that."

And then he turned, walked out the door, and was gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Julian did not chase after Kit. He didn't even stand in the door to watch which way Kit went. Instead, he remained inside the cottage, sitting at the table. He felt as gutted as one of Mr. Crabbottom's fish.

He tried to think what he could have done differently, if there had been more time to consider. But even now there were no easy solutions. Kit wouldn't go to Greynox. Julian understood that; he couldn't picture his bright lover trapped in that dreary city. And Kit wouldn't take Julian along with him. He said it was because he feared for Julian's safety, but perhaps he simply didn't want to be weighted down. As Kit had pointed out, Julian would be no use at all in a fight—no use at all for much of anything, as a matter of fact.

He sat at the table until the night crept in. The imps appeared in the doorway a few times, chattered at him, and then went away. His stomach growled but he wasn't hungry. He was simply... empty.

He didn't bother to remove his clothes before climbing into his lonely bed.

The morning dawned bright and warm, and there were dolphins leaping in the bay. He drank some tea, ate a bit of cheese. He scattered some crumbs for the imps.

He'd known this was going to happen, he reminded himself. He and Kit had come together only by sheerest happenstance. Objectively, they had nothing in common. And what would someone like Kit want with someone like Julian? It was like a phoenix falling for a sparrow. Besides, Kit had his very serious problems with the pirates, problems which Julian could in no way ameliorate. Julian had been blessed with his brief days of bliss, and his parting from Kit was inevitable.

That didn't make his heart hurt any less.

And oh, he was worried about Kit. What if Booth had captured him already? Kit's leg was still not fully functional, and he possessed no weapons. And what could Julian possibly do to help him? Yes, he could search for the treasure and, if he found it, find some way to offer it in trade for Kit's life and

freedom. But if Kit was correct, Captain Booth's damaged pride was now worth more than the treasure anyway, and he would never give Kit up. For years the entire Royal Navy had been unable to stop Captain Booth and his crew—what possible effect could one small, sickly man hope to have?

Julian was accustomed to feeling useless, but that feeling had never before been so bitter.

The cottage was a mess; clothing and luggage were scattered everywhere. He began to pack everything away. When he was done he would go into the village and see if Mrs. Crabbottom could take him to Bythington in the morning. That was several days ahead of schedule, but Julian could likely exchange his return train ticket or simply buy a new one. There was no longer anything for him in Urchin Cove.

He wasn't skilled at packing and didn't pay much attention to what went where, and so he had a great deal of difficulty fitting everything back into the trunks and bags. He saved his books for last. But after he picked up a few of the well-read volumes, he stood a moment, looking at them, and then put them down again. Those tales of bright adventures with their falsely happy endings had lost their appeal. When he returned to Greynox, he would constrain his reading to medical texts. His father would be very pleased.

A brisk breeze had blown up while he was packing. As he began his walk, he wished he'd worn a coat, but the exercise soon warmed him. When he reached the stone house with the vegetable garden, the old lady was sitting on the front porch, knitting something enormous. There was no sign of her husband. She waved and smiled at Julian as usual, but he thought she looked a bit preoccupied. He hoped her husband hadn't taken ill.

The crowd in the tavern seemed especially raucous this afternoon. He could hear raised voices when he was still well down the road. He went into the store instead, where Mr. Crabbottom greeted him with a smile. "Fraid there's still no fish fer ya today, lad."

A thrill of pure relief washed through Julian. "Are the pirates still here then?"

“Aye. Pesky lot. Whole town’s discussin’ what to do about it. ’Cept for me—I’m just gonna mind my store and that’s it. But yer welcome to join them.”

“Oh. Well, I’m not really a resident...”

“Ah, but we like ya well enough. I know I do, anyway. You’ve been a good customer. Don’t know how a wee thing like you manages to put away all that food you’ve been buyin’.” Mr. Crabbottom patted his own very ample belly.

“Erm... what do you think you’re going to do about the pirates? What can you do?”

“Might could get our wizard after ’em. But he’s old now, says he doesn’t have much magic left in him. Mostly a lot o’ them sparkly doodads, like making colored lights dance or charmin’ pixies into playin’ a song or two. Nice enough fer passin’ a few hours but not much good against pirates.”

Well, that was disappointing, but then Julian hadn’t really expected the villagers to have a miracle solution. At least the *Dark Prince* was still here, which meant Booth hadn’t yet realized that Kit had fled, and so he wasn’t yet in pursuit. With over a day’s lead, maybe Kit stood a real chance of getting away.

“Is Mrs. Crabbottom here?”

Mr. Crabbottom jerked his thumb towards the window. “At the tavern. Yer needing somethin’?”

“I was hoping she could drive me to the train tomorrow.”

“Aw, yer not lettin’ them pirates scare ya off, are ya?”

“No. I... I just have to return home.”

“Well, I’m sure it ain’t a problem. Can ya be ready just past dawn? You’ll be wantin’ an early start to get there in time for the train.”

“Of course. That shall not be a problem.”

Mr. Crabbottom nodded and scratched his chin. “And will ya be wantin’ anythin’ fer yer supper tonight?”

“No, thank you. I have enough food to tide me over until tomorrow.”

“Right then. Well, it’s been a real pleasure havin’ ya here.” Mr. Crabbottom stuck out his hand and Julian shook it. “Hope we see ya back next summer. I’m tellin’ ya, just a few weeks here’s worked wonders fer ya. Yer hardly the same man.”

Well, Julian wouldn’t argue with *that*. He mumbled his goodbyes and left the shop.

He was slightly tempted to pop into the tavern, just to listen to the conversation. But he was afraid that his reactions might give away his rather personal interest in the matter, so he walked back to the cottage instead.

There was an unusually large group of imps near his cottage, and they seemed agitated about something. They were running back and forth in short bursts and chattering shrilly. When he approached his door, instead of scattering and then returning after a few moments, they came so close to his feet he nearly tripped over them. Maybe they had seen him packing his things and knew their food source would soon be going away.

“Don’t worry,” he said to them. “I’ll have plenty of leftovers to give you before I leave.” He stepped carefully over a particularly noisy green-haired imp and into his cottage.

He knew food wouldn’t fill the emptiness inside him, but he’d eaten very little today. He prepared himself a meal with his last egg and the last of the fireberries, as well as some tomatoes that might have come from the village wizard’s garden. They were very good tomatoes. After he ate, he spent a very long time sitting in his doorway, tossing crumbs to the imps and watching the waves. The ocean was a marvelous thing: you never knew what surprises might appear from its depths. Dolphins. Delicious fish. Beautiful shells. Handsome, half-drowned men.

Night arrived and the imps disappeared. Julian wrapped his arms around himself but still shivered. He heard some creature calling, far away. It sounded mournful.

Perhaps he would return to the sea someday. Not *here*. Too many memories. But there was a long, long coastline, and surely he could find

someplace hospitable to stay, somewhere he could watch the surf and smell salt in the air.

His eyelids grew heavy and he trudged inside. As he did most nights, he left the door open. He'd have to pile on several blankets—especially now that nobody else was there in bed to keep him warm—but he liked the fresh air and the noise of the pounding waves. Gods, he could still smell Kit on the bedding.

He fell into fitful slumbers full of dark dreams. He kept waking up with the blankets twisted around him like ropes. He would untangle himself, straighten the bedclothes and rearrange the pillows, and fall back to sleep.

At first he thought the voices were part of a dream. But when he blinked his eyes open and cleared a bit of the fog from his brain, he could still hear them. Male voices, rough and loud, and coming closer.

“Oi! Blasted little beastie!”

“Ooh, look at you, afraid of an imp.”

“The little bugger *bit* me!”

“Aw, it was overcome by your many charms, Charlie.”

There was a round of harsh laughter.

Julian scrambled out of bed and darted for a kitchen knife, nearly tripping over his luggage as he ran. There was nowhere to hide in the little cottage, and no way to escape: there was only the one door, and the windows were too tiny even for him. So he did the only thing he *could* do, which was to stand straight, grip the knife firmly, and wait. His heart was beating a rapid tempo, but his mind felt surprisingly calm.

A number of people burst into the cottage. He couldn't make out the details very well, as they were backlit by the moon, but they were large. Their bodies and their earthy reek filled the little house to bursting.

“Leave at once! You are trespassing.” Julian was proud of the firmness in his voice; it didn't hold a hint of quaver.

“Ah, trespassing we are? Forgive me, your lordship.” The man who spoke executed a deep, mocking bow. “Our invitations must've got lost in the post.”

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“We want t’other one, little man. Where is he?”

“I do not know what you are talking about. I am here alone. I have rented this holiday cottage for myself.”

The man took a step closer, then another, until he could have almost touched Julian. He towered over him, and was twice as wide. “Tell me where he is,” the man said.

“You can see for yourself. There is no one else here.”

The man growled and reached for Julian. Julian tried to slice him with the blade, but the man batted the attack away effortlessly. The knife flew out of Julian’s hand and went skittering across the stone tiles. And then the man grabbed a handful of Julian’s shirt and lifted him off the floor. “Where!” the man demanded.

Although a part of Julian was terrified, another part was thrilled that they clearly had no idea of Kit’s location. And it occurred to him that, although his own chances of survival were now very slim, he might be able to buy Kit a little additional time. “I wish to talk to your captain,” he said, using the precise tone his father used at restaurants when the food was not satisfactory. More than one proud chef had been nearly reduced to tears by Mr. Massey’s cold fury.

The pirate was not so easily cowed. He snarled and then threw Julian to the floor. It hurt. Julian sprawled on his back with an enormous boot planted firmly on his chest. The pirate withdrew a sword from his belt and pressed the tip against Julian’s neck just barely hard enough to draw a drop or two of blood.

“Tell me or die.”

Julian had never in his life laid a wager. His brothers sometimes went to the gaming house—much to his mother’s and their wives’ dismay—but Julian had never accompanied them. He hadn’t the constitution for it, everyone assumed. But now he realized that he was more than willing to gamble if the stakes were right. And here he had his life, not worth much and likely already forfeit, to wager against Kit’s freedom. “I will speak only to your captain. Kill

me if you like, but then you shall never find the man you seek. Or the treasure. I know where that is too.”

The other men muttered amongst themselves and the pirate lifted his sword a bit. “You’re lying.”

“First you would not believe that I am unaware of your quarry’s location, and now you will not believe that I *am* aware. Which is it, sir?”

Julian was heartened when a few of the other men laughed out loud. Better laughter than a blade through his throat.

“If you’re lying, I’ll gut you meself,” said the pirate.

“Fair enough.”

The man gestured impatiently at him to stand. Julian did, wincing a little at the new ache in his back. He had a small hope of running away from his captors once they got outside, but before he even reached the door, two of the men came forward and wrenched his arms behind his back. His wrists were manacled together. They also clapped irons on his ankles, leaving him barely able to hobble. And then, to his mortification, the biggest pirate heaved Julian up and over his shoulder as if Julian were a sack of turnips.

“Search his bags,” barked the one who seemed to be in charge.

“There’s nothing here but clothing, and none of it will fit any of you.”

The man who carried him hit him hard across the buttocks. “Shut up, you.”

So Julian was dumped on the sand outside the cottage—with one bearded pirate as guard—while the others went through his belongings. He didn’t care about the clothes, but he winced when he heard them tearing his books. He shivered in the cold night air. “Can’t I have a cloak, please? And some stockings and boots?” His guard ignored the request, leaving Julian in the same clothes he was wearing when he fell asleep: his breeches and a tunic. At least he hadn’t decided to sleep nude.

The hunt through his belongings took quite a long time; his mother truly had packed far too much. But Julian didn’t complain. Every minute meant another minute for Kit to get farther away. It meant another minute left of Julian’s short life.

The pirates were not in a good mood when they finished. “Twice-damned poncy bastard, needing more kit than an entire crew o’ men,” one of them grumbled, then spat in the sand beside Julian.

Julian was again hoisted onto a shoulder and had to suffer the indignity of being carried like that across the beach. He was dropped heavily into the bottom of a little boat. Then the men climbed in around him and began to row. He had never been on a boat before. Not even the little rowboats that young lovers liked to paddle about the pond in Jayne Park on a fine summer day. He didn’t much fancy the motion of it, and he hoped he wouldn’t be sick.

The pirates said very little, so the only sounds were the ocean itself and the quiet splash of oars. They passed through the narrow mouth of the inlet, between the towering rocks. Julian didn’t even look up at them, but he couldn’t help but wonder where exactly the treasure was stashed.

Quite a long time passed before the *Dark Prince* loomed over them. Julian couldn’t tell if the ship was flying the famous flag. Someone threw ropes down to the little boat and the men bundled Julian in them like an animal about to be slaughtered. The process of being lifted onto the ship was uncomfortable and slightly terrifying. He landed with a *thump* on the deck.

A small crowd gathered around him, and he curled into a ball on his side and pretended they weren’t there. But he couldn’t ignore the boot that kicked him in the back.

“Cap’n says it’s too late at night for games,” said the man with the beard. “Says you can stew fer a few hours.”

Julian had to hide a smile. A few hours. Kit could get very far in that span of time.

Two men picked him up, one by the feet and one under his arms. They carried him across the deck and dropped him down a hole, knocking the wind out of him and jarring his arms painfully. He was still trying to catch his breath when someone kicked him into a tiny space—a cupboard that smelled of mildewed cloth—and slammed the door closed. He was left in almost complete darkness, with just a tiny sliver of light through a crack in the door. He couldn’t stretch his legs out all the way and could sit but not kneel or stand.

His arms and shoulders and back hurt. The rope was still tied around his upper arms, digging into his skin through his thin shirt. He was cold and scared. He was being held captive by pirates! But for now he was alive, and that counted for something.

Despite his discomfort, exhaustion overcame him and Julian fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Two men dragged Julian from his cupboard. He couldn't walk—couldn't even stand—so they carried him to a ladder and passed him up through a hole. He was deposited roughly on the deck, squinting in the bright morning sun. His arms ached terribly, but an even more urgent matter was worrying him.

"My bladder is full," he said to the nearest pirate, a hulking man with a bald head.

"Whassat?"

The man with the long beard—it was braided, Julian could see now—pushed the bald one roughly. "He means he's gotta piss, Charlie."

Charlie glared at his colleague. "Knew that." He dragged Julian upright onto his feet and held him until he could stand, albeit unsteadily. Charlie jerked his head at a third man, who brought a bucket over. Julian realized with horror what was about to happen, but could do nothing to stop Charlie from unbuttoning his breeches and pushing them and Julian's drawers down past his knees. An audience of seven or eight men watched curiously as Charlie hiked up Julian's tunic and lifted the bucket to just beneath his cock.

"Piss," Charlie ordered.

Gracious gods. Well, if Julian could manage captivity and impending death, he could certainly manage to urinate with an audience. He narrowed his eyes and emptied his bladder. Despite the humiliation, it was an enormous relief and he had to suppress a groan.

"I take it that you are enjoying your morning entertainment," he said to nobody in particular.

Charlie set the bucket down and roughly replaced Julian's clothes. "You'll entertain us plenty today, me lad," he said, breathing rancid puffs of air into Julian's face. "You'll be dancin' and singin' real soon." He pushed Julian until they were near one of the ship's masts, shoved him down to the deck, and affixed his wrists to some rope. Then he walked away.

Nobody brought Julian any food or water, which didn't surprise him. He licked his dry lips and tilted his head up to see the blue, cloudless sky. A very

large bird banked and glided far overhead. All around him were boisterous conversations as men engaged in various chores. Chickens were clucking somewhere. Not such a bad life for a man, maybe, aside from the murdering and pillaging. Plenty of fresh sea air.

Julian was thankful that he'd become accustomed to the sun over the past weeks; otherwise he would have ended up with a nasty sunburn because the captain didn't appear for hours. At first Julian was puzzled by this. If the man was so eager to find Kit, why didn't he begin questioning his prisoner at once? But then Julian realized that this must be a tactic to gain his compliance. The captain probably assumed that the longer Julian sat in discomfort and anxiety, the more eager he would be to talk. In fact, although Julian grew increasingly thirsty and sore, his fears eased with each passing minute—another minute for Kit to get farther away.

When the captain finally did make an appearance, the afternoon was well in force and Julian was parched. He could identify the captain at once by his demeanor, although his looks were a surprise. Julian had expected another hulking brute, but in fact Booth was a short man, delicately built, with fine, aristocratic features. He was probably even smaller than Julian. But he kept his back very straight and he wore fine clothes, and he had the air of a minor potentate.

But it was Captain Booth's eyes that made Julian's chest feel tight. They were a deep, clear blue, but they bore little resemblance to a summer sky. They shone with a cold, malevolent intelligence that reminded Julian of the basilisk at the Greynox Zoological Gardens. The basilisk was kept in a special mirrored enclosure so that visitors could safely look at it, but even still, its gaze was mesmerizing and terrifying. When Julian's mother had taken her young sons to see the creature, even Julian's brothers had fled almost at once, clamoring to see the monkeys instead.

Julian could not flee now.

"Well. Look at this rare find." Booth's accent was as refined and cultured as any lordling's. He peered down at Julian as if Julian were the one on exhibit in the zoo. "I sent my men after a shark and they brought back a doilyfish instead."

Julian's mother kept a doilyfish in a glass bowl in her parlor. It was a colorful little thing with a billowy tail fin, and it was fond of tiny bits of cracker crumbs. She had trained it to stick its head out of the water and sing a song when she snapped her fingers. Perhaps Booth expected Julian to sing as well. But Julian didn't say anything.

"I understood you wished to speak to me," Booth said almost pleasantly. "Do proceed."

"Let me go."

"No, see, it's much too soon to start begging."

"I've never done you harm. I've never done *anyone* harm. I came to Urchin Cove for a holiday, to improve my health. That is all."

"Sometimes our plans change, do they not? I was meant to be an alchemist. Can you imagine? Spending my days in a stuffy laboratory full of reeking chemicals? Not I." Booth gestured expansively, as if indicating that the entire sea was now his instead. "So here I am, and here *you* are, and thus spin the strands of fate. If you would only tell me where Kit Archer is and where my stolen goods are, then our little tale shall be complete."

"I do not know," Julian said.

Booth didn't react with visible anger. "I see. Then the story you told my men was intended only to prolong your life a little longer."

"Yes."

"Yet you seem strangely unaffected by the current imminence of your death. Most men in your position plead desperately, or offer bargains, or simply cry."

Julian didn't want to think about exactly how many men Booth had witnessed in such straits. He gave a small shrug.

Booth peered at him for a moment. "Are you attempting to demonstrate your bravery and stoicism?"

"I am not brave. I am very frightened."

“The two are not mutually exclusive. Not at all. But no, there is more to this tale, I think.” He cocked his head and stroked his chin. And then comprehension dawned and his lips widened into a smile. “Ah! Kit captivated you with his charms!”

When Julian didn’t respond, Booth nodded. “Of course. He is very beautiful, and I expect even his roguishness would be intriguing to someone like you. He has quite a reputation, our Kit. He fucks every pretty thing he can get his hands on.”

Julian raised his chin. “Like you.”

The captain’s smile didn’t falter, and he didn’t seem to mind that several members of his crew were listening in. “Yes, like me. And he is very skilled. You’re not protecting him because you imagine you are in love? Because I can assure you, while he may have enjoyed you when you were nearby, he has certainly already moved on.”

“I never thought he loved me.”

“But you think you love him. You are a romantic. That’s delightful... erm, what is your name, doilyfish?”

“Julian Massey.”

“Pleased to meet you. And now that we have the social niceties out of the way, you can tell me where Kit is. And my property.”

“I do not know.” Julian narrowed his eyes. “You said it yourself—he doesn’t love me. Why would he tell me where he’s going or where he put your treasure? He simply left.”

“You do raise an excellent point, Mr. Massey. You are a clever man. And if you are telling the truth, there is no reason for you to remain alive any longer. But if you are lying... Well. I might as well keep you alive a bit longer, just to see if I can persuade you to tell me more. I don’t see any harm in it. In fact, if you are still alive when I find Kit—which will be very soon—I could arrange for some interesting entertainment. You can watch what I do to those who betray me before you experience your own unpleasant end.” Booth nodded. “Yes. That’s perfect.”

If there had been any food in Julian, he would have become ill. As it was, his stomach lurched and he felt his face go pale. “You do not have to do this,” he said quietly. “You do not have to be like this. A man can change.”

Booth laughed. “Are you trying to reform me? Well, that is an original tactic.” Then all traces of humor suddenly disappeared from his face. He looked barely more human than that basilisk. “I do *not* have to be like this. I choose to.” After turning his back on Julian, he pulled one of his men a short distance away and said something to him. The man glanced over at Julian and nodded.

And then... nothing happened, at least not to Julian. The members of the crew moved about on the deck, sometimes nearly stepping over him. It was as if he wasn't there. He could tell the ship was moving, but to where he couldn't tell. His arms ached terribly and his mouth felt filled with sand. He was relieved when the sun began to set; the cooling temperatures eased his discomfort a bit. But not for long, because soon he began to shiver. His head swam dizzily.

He might have slept. He wasn't certain. Sometimes he had moments of lucidity when he could wonder at how fast a body could be weakened, and he could almost smile at the irony of being so very thirsty while surrounded by so much water. He'd lost much of the feeling in his arms and hands, and during these clear moments he speculated as to whether he should feel worried or blessed by that. But then he'd lose track of his thoughts. He'd hear voices calling his name: his mother, his father. Kit. He'd decide that his entire episode in Urchin Cove was nothing but another fever dream. In reality, he was lying in a sweat-soaked bed in Greynox, Dr. Brinkett fussing with ointments and powders. Outside his curtained window were the calls of hackney drivers and wheels clattering along the cobbles.

During one of his coherent times, he decided that it was better to die tied to the mast of a pirate ship than in his sickbed, and he smiled.

A bit past dawn, someone poured a little water into him. Julian choked and sputtered on it but managed to swallow a bit. Later he was given a few more drops, and this treatment continued for what may have been hours. He was never given enough to slake his thirst—not even close—but, he supposed, just

enough to keep him alive. When he was forced to urinate in his clothing, he was both ashamed and surprised that there was any moisture left for his body to give.

Nobody spoke to him. He caught a glimpse of Booth now and then; the captain didn't even glance his way. But there was no sign of Kit, and that was a very good thing.

Julian was so tired. He imagined his body becoming less and less substantial, until it was nothing but a scattering of sand on the *Dark Prince's* deck.

Boots appeared next to him. They were black and very well polished. Julian slowly tipped his head back, allowing his gaze to follow the legs upward.

"Enjoying your holiday?" Booth had a glass of red wine in one hand. He was swirling the liquid slowly.

Julian didn't bother to reply. He wasn't sure his mouth could manage speech, and in any case he was finding Booth tiresome. But perhaps the captain was disappointed with the lack of response, because he crouched and dribbled some of the wine into Julian's mouth. It was not very good. Too sweet. But Julian licked his lips to catch every droplet.

Booth stood straight again. "I could beat you, you know. I probably shall. I could permit my crew to use you. I could pluck out your eyes and feed them to the gulls."

"You could," Julian rasped. He didn't recognize his own voice. He knew he should be frightened, but he was far too disconnected to feel much of anything.

"Why so much loyalty to a beast who seduced you? Took advantage of you?"

Julian actually laughed a bit. "In point of fact, I seduced him."

"That is ridiculous. He stole from you and you are too much a fool even to realize it."

"He took nothing but what I willingly gave."

“Kit Archer would never do for you what you are doing for him. He would never risk his safety or his freedom or his life for you.”

“That does not matter.” And it didn’t, because his decision to remain silent had little to do with Kit, and much to do with Julian himself.

Booth pursed his lips, and for the first time Julian saw genuine emotion on the man’s face. Booth was jealous. Not jealous that Kit had slept with Julian, but rather, Julian suspected, envious of Julian’s devotion. And although Julian remained a prisoner, and although he would surely die a miserable death at the pirate’s hands, this knowledge of Booth’s feelings gave him a kind of power.

“Why are you smiling, doilyfish? I believe you are too much touched by the sun.”

Julian hadn’t been aware that he was smiling, but now the expression didn’t fade. He knew something about himself now. He wasn’t a weakling, a deviant, a sickly disappointment. He was a man who was capable of loving another—and capable of seeing the beauty in that love.

“You will never be happy,” Julian said.

“Is that a curse? Or are you an oracle to make such predictions?” Booth was attempting his usual blithe sarcasm, but Julian saw the flash of real pain in his eyes.

“It is a statement of fact. You may torture and terrify and kill, you may fuck, you may steal all the riches in the world. But you will never have what you want.”

“Says the man in rags, who no longer owns even himself!”

Julian shook his head. “I have the greatest treasure a man could want. I have a sure knowledge of my own self-worth.”

“You’re worth *nothing*!” Booth roared. The nearby men took alarmed steps back. But Julian remained calm, not flinching even when Booth tossed the remaining wine in his face. Then the captain whirled and stomped away like a petulant child.

Julian leaned his head against the mast and tried to sleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The night was cold and endless. Julian stopped feeling the difference between hunger and thirst and pain, and he lost all sense of time. He saw the stars dancing overhead—complicated waltzes and minuets—and couldn't be sure whether he was hallucinating. Again he heard familiar voices calling his name. His mother was crying over his death. Mr. Crabbottom was telling him how to prepare fish while Mrs. Crabbottom praised her team of dragons. Sprites frolicked in front of him and imps chattered somewhere just out of sight.

The entire world disappeared and all that was left was him and the ship, floating forever.

He heard a hoarse cackle and thought it was a bird. But birds don't fly at night, he realized—the sound was his own laughter. Whoever would have predicted such a fate for Julian Wade Massey?

“Jewel.”

Yes, it all started with jewels, didn't it? Shiny baubles men would kill for, die for. Even had he possessed all the jewels in the world, he would have traded every one of them for his brief time with Kit.

“Ah, jewel, my love.”

Yes, love was the true jewel. He'd had only a taste of it, but enough to know its value.

“Wake up, Julian. Please.”

Only when a hand stroked his face did he realize that the voice he was hearing was real, not a dream or hallucination. He peeled his eyelids open—they were so heavy!—and saw a pair of brown boots.

“Go 'way,” he said. His tongue wasn't working properly. “Bugger off.”

There was nothing cold or cruel about the soft laughter that resulted. “I've been a poor influence on you, I'm afraid. Now, wake up, Jule. We must fly.”

“Not a bird. Not a fish.”

“No, you’re not.” The caress of his cheek became firmer, although still far from harsh. Then the hand moved behind him and fumbled at the rope that attached him to the mast. Julian nearly toppled over when the rope was freed, but the hands caught him.

Finally, Julian looked at the face of the man. “K-Kit?” He must be hallucinating after all.

“Of course. Can you walk, do you think?”

Julian’s brain was as sluggish as his tongue. “Walk?”

“Let’s try, shall we?” Kit tugged Julian to his feet, but Julian would have fallen if his weight hadn’t rested against Kit’s body. “Ah, this is going to be more difficult than I had hoped. Please do your best, Jule. You can rest soon. It will be my turn to doctor you.”

Somehow it was the scent of Kit that convinced Julian this was no figment of his fevered imagination. He’d come to know that personal, wonderful odor so well. Kit Archer was here in the flesh, was holding him and whispering urgently into his ear. But how could that be?

“Kit?” Julian tried to stand, but his legs wouldn’t hold him. “You must go! If Booth finds you—”

“Exactly. That’s what I’ve been saying—we must go. Just let me free your bonds.” Kit maneuvered them both slightly closer to the mast, then leaned Julian back against it.

With considerable effort, Julian managed not to collapse. He blinked his eyes to clear his sight, but still there was Kit in Robert’s fine clothing, only now he wore dun-colored boots and wielded an impressive sword. His face was tight with worry, yet he spared Julian a small smile. “Stand still, love.”

Julian did as ordered. Kit touched the sword to the ropes binding his arms—just touched it, didn’t swing it—and the ropes parted like tissue paper. They fell to the deck with muted thumps. Kit looked as if he were about to strike Julian’s ankle irons, but Julian cried out hoarsely, “Watch out!” Two pirates were approaching fast.

Kit moved so fast Julian couldn't track him. Kit grabbed Julian and dragged him closer. As Julian collapsed, Kit gathered his arm around him and dropped to one knee, holding his sword up protectively. For the first time, Julian got a true sense of what Kit had told him in stories: Kit was a formidable warrior.

The next bit got confusing, especially since most of what Julian could see was the embroidered waistcoat Kit wore. There was a lot of shouting. One of the pirates lunged forward, swinging some kind of heavy blade, but Kit thrust the sword forward and the pirate gave a bloodcurdling scream before falling heavily. The second pirate roared.

"Stand away!" yelled Kit.

"I'll gut ye both!" the pirate shouted back.

This pirate had a throwing knife. But Kit deflected it almost effortlessly with his sword, and when the pirate swung his huge arms to grab at Julian, Kit simply sliced off the man's hands as easily as Mr. Crabbottom gutted a fish.

Julian should have been terrified by the mortal danger he was in. He should have been horrified by the blood spurting from the man's severed stumps. But he was neither. Irrational as it was, he felt perfectly safe in Kit's grip—as well as gratified, surprised, and thrilled that Kit had come to his rescue. He hoped they both survived long enough for Julian to ask him how and why.

More voices were sounding from 'neath decks, and running footsteps were heading their way. Kit seized Julian around the waist, hoisted him over a shoulder, and ran. "Glad you're petite, Jule," he said breathlessly.

Julian was rather wishing people would stop treating him like a sack of turnips. But at least such treatment was vastly preferable when it was Kit doing the carrying.

They came to the ship's hull, the crew still in noisy pursuit. Kit shoved the sword into his belt. "We're going to get wet, Jule. Hold on."

Before Julian could protest that he couldn't possibly hold on to anything—his numb hands still chained behind his back—Kit leapt over the railing. Julian began to scream but got his mouth closed just before they plummeted into the water. He had a moment of sheer, blind panic. He couldn't see anything, he

couldn't breathe, and he couldn't move his hands and feet to regain the surface. In fact, the weight of the irons was dragging him downward.

But strong, sure hands seized him under the armpits and pulled him up. He broke the surface of the sea with a noisy gasp. Kit held him close as he treaded water. "All right, my love?"

"I... I think so."

Swimming awkwardly, Kit took them both closer to the *Dark Prince's* hull. They bumped up against a small dinghy that Kit must have tethered there. Getting Julian into the little boat was not an easy task, but somehow Kit managed it. He began to row quickly away while Julian shivered violently at his feet.

"K-K-K-Kit, h-h-how—"

"Shh. Save your strength. I am sorry for the rough treatment. I shall make up for it later." Despite their somewhat desperate situation, there was a note of good humor in Kit's voice. Of course, he was used to life-threatening adventures. He was probably accustomed to nearly dying twice before lunch on Sundays.

Julian was not used to such things. He was dizzy, tired, and cold. He was both sopping wet and desperately thirsty, which wasn't bloody fair. He hurt. And the dinghy seemed to be moving much too fast—he had to bite his parched lip to keep from retching. But Kit was here, and Kit had stolen Julian from the pirates as neatly as he'd stolen the treasure. And if Julian turned his head and squinted up, he could see Kit's beautiful face lit by the full moon.

"You're safe," Kit said.

And Julian believed him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Julian woke up in his overwarm room, buried under quilts. He ached terribly. His mother was bustling about. He could hear cups rattling on a tray, and she softly sang a ribald tune about a sailor and an octopus, and—

Wait.

His mother would sing no such song.

He peeled his eyes open and discovered Mrs. Crabbottom smiling down at him. She wore her gray hair in neat braids, and if Julian wasn't mistaken, she was sporting her husband's workman's coveralls.

"Ready for some tea and soup?" she asked brightly. "It's some lovely chowder."

"I... I... How...?"

She shook her head fondly. "Yer all right, lad. Addled yer head a bit. I'll call yer boy fer ya."

Before Julian could ask her what she meant, she clomped to the doorway. "Kit Archer! He's wantin' ya!" She had a very loud voice.

Julian tried to take in his surroundings. He was in a neat little room with a sloping ceiling and whitewashed walls. A colorful if slightly ragged quilt hung on one wall. The furniture was mismatched and somewhat shabby, yet the overall atmosphere was cheery and warm. Bright sunshine poured through a small round window.

And then he realized two things at once. First, that although his arms were weak and shaky, they were unbound and he could move them a bit. And second, that he wore not a stitch of clothing. He was heavily cocooned in blankets, but blushed anyway when Mrs. Crabbottom turned his way.

"Where—" he began. But he didn't finish because Kit came bounding into the room.

He rushed to the bedside, bent down, and pressed his lips firmly to Julian's sweaty forehead. "What can I get you, Jule?" he asked.

Julian was having trouble finding his voice. He glanced at Mrs. Crabbottom, expecting to find her glowering at them both. Instead, she beamed. "I'll be downstairs if you need me, boys." And then she left.

Julian felt as if his old predictable world had been replaced by a new one, an odd place where pirates kidnapped you, daring and handsome rogues swept you away, and nobody minded if one man kissed another. "Where is this?" he whispered pathetically.

Kit chuckled and sat on the mattress. He cupped Julian's cheek in a warm palm. "Urchin Cove. The Crabbottom estate."

"But..."

"Tea and soup first. I've been pouring things down your throat for days. I wish to see you eat on your own."

But *eating on your own* apparently meant opening and closing one's mouth like a baby bird, while Kit fed him spoonfuls of chowder and sips of strong, medicine-tasting tea. Kit frowned in concentration as he worked, making sure to get every drop inside and stopping now and then to wipe Julian's mouth with a coarse linen napkin. Kit's hair was bound loosely with a leather thong, and he wore a simple tunic and breeches, new but very plain. He wouldn't let Julian ask any questions until the soup bowl and teacup were empty.

"Erm," Julian said. "I have to, erm..."

Kit grinned at him. "Love. I know every inch of your body, as you know of mine. There is nothing to be ashamed of. Do you need to piss?"

"Yes."

Kit's grin widened as he produced an empty jar from the bedside. "Useful, aren't they? All right, love, one moment." He pulled the blankets back, grasped Julian's cock in one hand, and put the jar into place. "Go ahead."

There was nothing sexual about the way Kit was touching him, but Julian couldn't help a small shiver at the feeling of familiar calloused fingers. Then he emptied his bladder, which was a relief. Kit used a damp towel to clean them up before replacing the quilts. "I'm not nearly as good at doctoring as you, I must admit. I've had considerable assistance."

“I don’t understand.”

“Those bastards captured you, mistreated you. Do you remember that bit?”

“Of course. And then... you came.”

Kit stroked Julian’s face. “Of course I did. You wouldn’t think me so cold-hearted as to leave you in their hands, would you?”

“But you were running away.”

“I came back.”

“Why? Did you decide you needed the treasure?”

“I needed *my* treasure—my Jule. I was a great fool to leave you in the first place.” He shook his head grimly. “Unwisest decision in a lifetime of unwise decisions.”

“Why?” asked Julian. He was hoping for a particular sort of answer, but he couldn’t quite believe he’d receive it.

“Because I cannot breathe without you. Without you, food has no taste, flowers no color. The morning birds cannot carry a tune. I have never—I loved Lex. I would have traded my life for his. But I never felt the same pull to Lex as I feel to you. It’s as if I’m a ship and you’re my home port. I’m a snail and you’re my shell. I’m an imp—Well, you get the idea. You are my *home*, my heart, my all. I’d rather die than go on without you.”

It was a beautiful speech. But Julian couldn’t help but ask, “Why? I’m nothing special.”

“Of course you’re special! Look what you have done! Rescued me. Loved me. Stood up to ferocious pirates. Survived when others might have given up.”

“And you came back for me.” Julian was beginning to feel warm, and not from the blankets and soup.

“I did. I came to my senses and returned and I found you gone. Taken. The very thought that they might have harmed you... killed you... But then I hoped they’d kept you alive as a way to find me.”

“I didn’t tell them anything. They don’t know where you hid the treasure.”

“I know, love.” Kit stroked a thumb across Julian’s cheekbone. “And in any case, I’ve retrieved it. After I discovered you were gone, I considered my options. I had no way to find you by myself, to help you. So I got the blasted treasure and took it into Urchin Cove. I hoped they’d hear me out before they hung me.”

“What did you tell them?”

“The truth. That I love you and you’d been kidnapped by Booth. I offered to pay for the boat I’d stolen many times over if they’d just help me rescue you. Offered to give them the entire damned treasure.”

“For me?”

This time, Kit rolled his eyes. “You really do need a great many reassurances. For you. And it turns out that the locals are quite fond of you. ‘A good ’un, for a Noxer,’ they say. They wanted you rescued as well.”

There was something pleasing in knowing that the residents cared about him. Nobody in Greynox ever had. Julian moved his arm—with some difficulty—and grasped Kit’s hand.

Kit continued his story. “They’ve a wizard here, you know.”

“He grows tomatoes.”

“Maybe so. But he also had an enchanted sword to give me, and he did a locating spell for you. He gave me a small cloaking charm as well, so I could sneak up on the ship. He’s not the most powerful wizard I’ve met, but he still has abilities. It took me some time to get to you because the *Prince* had sailed quite a distance down the coast. But I found you and brought you back here. You’ve been convalescing for days. I’ve been doing my best to care for you. You were in poor shape.” Kit frowned and squeezed Julian’s hand.

“And Mrs. Crabbottom doesn’t mind... us?”

“Course not!”

Startled, Julian turned his head to look at the doorway. Mrs. Crabbottom was standing there with a fresh pot of tea steaming in her hand. She entered the room and placed the pot on the bedside table. “I’ll fetch more honey if ya like.”

“But... but... Kit and I...”

“Lad, there’s little enough love in the world. If that boy loves ya enough to brave pirates fer ya, who’m I to say that’s wrong? Besides, the two of ya make the prettiest pair I ever saw.” She winked.

Despite everything that had happened, Julian still possessed the ability to blush.

He wanted to bask in the heady knowledge that he was worthy, that he was loved. That not everyone would condemn him for loving a man. That even a middle-aged woman from Urchin Cove might see the beauty in that love. But as wonderful as these things were, he was not foolish enough to believe all their problems were solved.

“Booth,” he said. “And his crew. They’ll keep searching for you, Kit, and if he was angry before—”

“He’s seething with rage now. I know.”

“You have to leave! At once! You said it’s been days already, and—”

“I won’t leave you again!” Kit interrupted angrily. “And I won’t allow you to spend the rest of your life being dragged along like flotsam, constantly in danger from Booth’s wrath. I’m going to stay here, Jule. I’ll stay here and make my bloody stand.”

“*We* will,” said Julian firmly. “I don’t know how to fight, but as soon as I can stand, it’ll be at your side. We shall make our stand.”

“We all will.” That was Mrs. Crabbottom, and her voice was filled with certainty. “We’ve had enough o’ them now. Bad enough they scare innocent people, and the seaguard not thinkin’ we’re important enough to watch over. Our wizard wore himself out keeping scum like them away. And now they take ya, our own Mr. Massey, and they nearabout kill ya. We’re nothin’ but a lot of fisherfolk and farmers, but we’ll be standin’ with ya.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Julian and Kit's short time in the holiday cottage had been all about the two of them. Now, their world expanded. Not all at once; several more days passed before Julian could spend more than a few moments on his feet. But soon enough he was walking, first around the Crabbottom house and then as far as the tavern. Kit was always at his side, often holding his arm.

Julian sent word to his family in Greynox that he intended to remain in Urchin Cove a while longer. He didn't explain why.

Mrs. Crabbottom drove her wagon to the cottage and retrieved Julian's luggage. But it looked absurd when it arrived in the village, all those trunks and bags for one small man. So Julian chose a few of his most practical outfits—one trunk's worth—and offered the rest to the townspeople. He smiled when he saw bits of his former clothing adorning the residents of Urchin's Cove.

Every night, Kit and Julian shared the bed in the Crabbottoms' top floor room. Oh, that was wonderful! To have thought that he'd be denied the delights of Kit's embrace forever, and now to wake up each morning in those strong arms.

The first several evenings, Julian was too weak to do more than partially drape himself over Kit's solid frame and fall asleep listening to Kit's heartbeat. Kit ran his fingers through Julian's hair and whispered filthy poetry into his ear. That was lovely. And finally, when Julian felt Kit's skin against his, his body was strong enough to respond.

Kit noticed Julian's cock hardening against the hollow of his hip and chuckled. "You recover nearly as quickly as I. Perhaps one of your ancestors was an elf as well." He smoothed his hand over Julian's hip and onto his ass and gave a friendly squeeze.

"Gods," Julian moaned. "Don't."

"And why not?"

"Because we can't..."

“You’re feeling entirely capable, love. We needn’t do anything particularly exuberant. I’ll take care, as you did for me when my leg was mending.”

As Kit spoke, he continued his firm caresses. Julian had to restrain himself from rutting against him like a wild beast. “But the Crabbottoms.”

“We shall be very quiet. Besides, it was Mrs. Crabbottom who gave me this.” Kit reached for something on the bedside table. Julian couldn’t see the item in the dark, but Kit pressed it into his hand. It was a small glass bottle.

“Is this...? Gracious gods, Kit.”

“Oil,” Kit confirmed cheerfully. “Rose scented. Our nether regions shall smell like a garden.”

Julian was still trying to process the fact that Mrs. Crabbottom not only suspected her two male guests would be having sex, but had actually encouraged it. Floral sex at that. “Are you certain, Kit?”

“Jule, if you’re not comfortable about this, I’m content just to hold you. But gods above, I want you. If you feel the same, then by all means let me know.”

After a few more moments of indecision, Julian made up his mind. But instead of saying so out loud, he simply slithered under the bedclothes, rubbing himself along Kit’s body until his head was even with Kit’s groin. He’d become fascinated with this bit of Kit’s body. He loved the contrast between wiry hairs and smooth skin, between soft flesh and hard. He liked to kiss the wrinkles of his scrotum and tongue gently at the foreskin. He liked to bury his nose in the folds of Kit’s body, drinking in his sweet, musky scent. He liked to ease a fingertip just barely into Kit’s entry, making his lover squirm and gasp. He liked to brush his cheek against Kit’s smooth upper thighs. And he liked to take Kit’s cock into his mouth. He liked that *very* much.

Soon Kit had broken his promise to remain quiet. He thrust gently upwards into Julian’s mouth, groaning and half uttering loving blasphemies. His fingers tightened in Julian’s hair—hard enough to nearly hurt. “J-Jule,” he panted. “I w-won’t last...”

Julian was overtaken with the urgency of the moment. He wanted to forget a lifetime of illness and denial, and he wanted them both to erase the pain and

fear of their captivities. He wrapped a hand around his cock and fisted himself in rhythm with the motions of Kit's hips. He could feel his orgasm building in his core, a bank of burning coals that would soon burst into flames.

"Julian!" Kit pushed him away. But before Julian could protest, he was being hauled back up Kit's body, damp skin rubbing deliciously against damp skin. When they were face-to-face, Kit grasped Julian's head with both hands and pressed their lips together. Before he'd met Kit, Julian had never imagined how intimate a kiss could be—as intimate as sex, really. And he'd never dreamed that a kiss could send fiery sparks running down his spine, making him shudder and writhe with need.

"You taste like me," Kit said when their mouths parted. There was a hint of a growl in his voice.

"Yes."

"And you're truly mine? Even though you know what I am, what I've done?"

"I am yours because I know *exactly* what you are."

Kit kissed him again, possessing him fully. Gracious gods, to be valued by such a man was far more than Julian had ever hoped for. But Julian moved his head back just a bit so he could speak. "Please. I want you to fill me."

With a moan, Kit arched up against him. Their cocks were lined up, slick and hard, and Julian very nearly fell over the edge just then. But he managed to just barely control himself, and he reached for the little bottle of oil. It *did* smell of roses, and also of some spices he couldn't place. It was thicker than the olive oil they had used in the cottage, and when Kit slowly—far too slowly!—worked it inside Julian, the oil proved to have slight warming properties.

"Oh," Julian said as Kit used two fingers to stretch him. He was aware that the sound was more like a whimper than a manly groan, but frankly he didn't care. Didn't care about much of anything, really, except hoping that Kit would hurry things along a bit. But Kit was also biting at him, licking and sucking at small patches of skin on Julian's neck and shoulders and chest. Feasting on him.

Eventually, Julian grew too impatient and decided to take matters into his own hands. He raised up on his knees, straddling Kit, held Kit's pulsing cock firmly in one hand, and lowered himself down onto it until Kit was completely sheathed. He couldn't see Kit's expression—the room was too dark—but he could hear the catch in Kit's breaths and feel the bruisingly tight grip of Kit's hands on his hips.

Julian was still slightly weak, yet he had no problem finding the strength to flex his thighs, moving himself slowly up and then more swiftly down. Kit tilted his hips upward, and whether by intent or good luck, with every thrust he angled himself perfectly and rubbed his cock against that delightful bundle of nerves. When he unclenched one of his hands and wrapped it around Julian's cock, Julian forgot all about Mr. and Mrs. Crabbottom and the entire town of Urchin Cove, and he cried hoarse and garbled declarations of love.

His release rushed through him like wildfire, bringing his loudest shout yet. He was still shuddering when Kit came as well, adding his voice to the din.

Julian collapsed onto Kit like a puppet with its strings cut. They rearranged themselves slightly but never broke contact. Julian could hear Kit's heart rushing, then gradually slowing.

"Do you forgive me?" Kit whispered.

"I hardly need forgive you for *that*," Julian said with a laugh. "Although I shall be somewhat sore tomorrow."

But Kit was quite serious. "I left you, Jule. There you were, a man enjoying his holiday, and I disrupted everything. And although I should have known you were at risk, I left you alone and they *hurt* you and—"

"Kit. First, I was not enjoying my holiday—I was enduring it, just as I've endured nearly everything in my life until you. And you brought me the first true happiness I've ever experienced. You made me *feel*, Kit! Second, it didn't occur to either of us that Booth would come after me. But even if it had, I'd have told you to leave. And finally, you came back. You came back for me, and that is all that matters."

Kit sighed noisily but didn't argue the matter any longer. Julian realized that although he might appear confident, even brash, deep in his heart Kit

doubted himself as deeply as Julian ever had. Well, Julian would just need to work on removing those doubts. He kissed Kit's cheek. "I love you, Kit Archer."

It was Kit's turn to whimper, and he hid his face in the crook of Julian's neck. His hair was so soft, brushing like strands of silk against Julian's skin. Julian began to consider whether he might have the energy for a second round. Perhaps if Kit did most of the work.

He ran his fingertips along Kit's flank. Soft skin and, underneath, hard muscle and bone. So many contrasts in one man. So many surprises.

"He will return," said Kit.

Julian's thoughts had been elsewhere. "What?"

"Booth will return. Soon. And now I'd wager his grudge against you is nearly as great as his grudge against me. He must be very angry at having so badly underestimated you."

"So let him be angry. How many gentlemen in Greynox can boast that they have raised a famous pirate's ire?"

Kit pushed Julian's hand away from his hip. "This is not a joking matter. You must have some sense already of what he's capable of. I do not think he is quite sane."

"I agree. Kit, you needn't convince me that he's dangerous. I am convinced."

"Good. Then you understand why you must leave."

Julian's chest felt tight. "What?"

"Leave. Return to Greynox immediately. First thing in the morning, Mrs. Crabbottom can take you to Bythington in time for the early train."

"Without you?"

Kit shook his head against Julian's shoulder. "I'm responsible for bringing the *Dark Prince* here. I won't abandon the town. We've been planning a defense of sorts, and when Booth arrives—"

"When Booth arrives I shall fight at your side."

“You can’t.”

Furious, Julian pushed Kit hard and scrambled out of bed. He turned the switch on the bedside lantern and didn’t even blink at the sudden pool of warm light. He stood naked, arms lifted at his sides. “Look at me!” he demanded.

Kit sat up slowly and blinked at him. “Yes?”

“What do you see?”

“A beautiful nude man yelling at me.”

Julian stomped his foot. “What do you *see*?” When Kit only frowned in puzzlement, Julian shook his head. “Look at my body. Until recently, I would have been far too shamed to show myself to anyone. But I stand here unblushing. I have my seed on my belly, your seed and scented oil wetting my thighs. I have your teethmarks here and here, and here on my chest you’ve sucked the blood to the surface. See my wrists and my ankles? I still bear the marks of Booth’s chains. I am not the same Julian Massey who first arrived in Urchin Cove. I may not be a warrior like you, but I will not run.”

For several minutes, they both remained still, their gazes locked. Finally, Kit nodded slowly. A tiny smile tugged at the corners of his lips. “You are wrong, my love. I believe you might be the fiercest warrior I have ever met.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sitting in the Urchin Cove tavern was not so strange. Julian had done it before. But then he had been a bystander, an eavesdropper, the silent man sitting alone. Today he was seated in the center of a long bench, with Kit pressed hard against his right side and Mrs. Crabbottom on his left. And people were talking around him, but they were also speaking *to* him, most definitely including him in the crowd. That was new.

Even stranger, nobody minded that Kit's arm was draped around him, or that Kit had twice in the past hour turned his head to lay a quick kiss on Julian's cheek. Oh, there was a certain amount of laughing and teasing, but it was all good-natured. "Quite a catch you've reeled in," Editha said to Kit with a cackle. "Quite a catch indeed."

Julian didn't really understand why the villagers had taken to him so, not even after Kit had tried to explain. "You're a good man, Jule. Humble and unassuming. They like that you're not greedy. You're kind enough to save a stranger's life and brave enough to stand up to a shipload of pirates. How could anyone *not* fall in love?"

Julian had snorted at him, but was secretly pleased.

Now Samuels waved his tankard in the general direction of the tavern keeper. "M' parched to the bone, man. Parched!"

The tavern keeper was busy ladling bowls of fish chowder. "Ye'll stay dry 'til I'm ready," he answered cheerfully. His business had been booming these past few days.

Actually, the entire village was in a strangely ebullient mood considering pirates were on the way. Kit thought his shared treasure was the explanation, as well as the fashionable clothing Julian had given away. But Julian suspected there was more to it than that. Urchin Cove was a sleepy fishing village in which, as far as anyone could tell, nothing whatsoever of note had happened since the dawn of time. Now, however, the town had been given romance, adventure, and excitement, not to mention enough gossip to last them for years.

The tavern keeper brought the soup over and set a bowl in front of Julian. It was Julian's third. Kit was insisting that he needed to eat to rebuild his strength, but Julian thought that if he consumed much more, all he'd be good for was rolling into bed.

"I've readied the arsenal," announced a small man named Peters, who was apparently the town constable. "Everything's stored at the harbor."

Kit shook his head slightly. He'd already confided to Julian that the contents of the arsenal hadn't likely been used since the Periwinkle War—over two centuries ago—and had not been well-maintained for many decades. But the villagers clapped Peters on the back and someone bought him a drink, and Kit simply stole a spoonful of Julian's chowder.

Julian was mopping up the last drippings with a hunk of bread when a young man with wild black curls came rushing into the tavern. "They're here!" he yelled breathlessly. "The *Dark Prince* is less than a dozen leagues out and coming in fast!"

Conversation and drinks were instantly abandoned as the villagers sprang to action. The plan had been discussed at great length over the past days, and its implementation began well. Mrs. Crabbottom and two others hurried off to harness their dragons. Julian and a half-dozen villagers ran out into the street. Their task was to go door-to-door, ushering the children, the elderly, and the infirm to the wagons that would carry them to hiding places well away from Urchin Cove. Everyone else headed for the harbor, most of them pausing on the way to gather whatever weapons they could manage.

Kit already had his sword belted at his hip. It was the only decent blade in the entire town, the one the wizard had enchanted to slice through even the thickest metals. He grabbed Julian by the arm just before Julian ducked into a house. "Please, Jule. Be... I love you."

Julian tugged at his hair until he bent down for a kiss. "I know. And we've just found each other, so don't let them take you away from me."

For just a moment, Kit nuzzled at his neck. "Never," he whispered. And then he was off to the harbor, and Julian was into the house to search for the Carlyle children.

It didn't take long to collect those who were unable to fight; Urchin Cove was a very small village. Soon Julian was helping the wizard's wife into a packed wagon, while the dragons snorted and stomped their feet. Once she was settled, Julian turned to give the wizard a hand. But the wizard wouldn't take it. "I'll be with you in the battle," he said firmly. He reached behind his head to tie his long gray hair with a bit of twine.

"But you're, erm..."

"Ancient. Yes, I know. But I've still a bit of magic in me, and I won't miss this today. I fought at the Battle of Porridge Hill, you know. Killed three dozen trolls. I have a medal."

The Battle of Porridge Hill had occurred when Julian's grandparents were infants. He smiled wanly.

The wizard patted Julian's shoulders with his skinny, gnarled fingers—fingers still stained with soil and tomatoes. "I've had a long life, Mr. Massey. I wouldn't mind a bit more of it. But at this point, I'd rather die quickly in a fight than slowly in my bed."

Julian could understand that, and he nodded. He waved to the wizard's wife and the other passengers as the wagon rolled away, then turned and ran to the waterfront.

The entire able-bodied population of Urchin Cove waited at the harbor. They held farmers' tools—axes, rakes, shovels, and scythes. They clutched fishermen's gutting knives, hooks, and poles. A few had rusty swords, long spears, or ancient halberds. Kit clasped the wizard's blade; it glittered dangerously in the afternoon sun.

Kit and Julian had engaged in an extended discussion about Julian's weapons. They had agreed that a sword would be a bad idea. Julian's arms would tire too easily under its weight, and he was as likely to chop off bits of himself as to injure an enemy. Julian had rather fancied a flanged mace he'd found in the town armory. Underneath the grime were elaborate carvings, and Kit said it had once been a fine weapon. But he also insisted that Julian lacked the strength to wield it properly. So in the end, Julian held a short knobby club

with a handle worn smooth long before he was born. A pair of daggers were sheathed in his belt. “Your size might actually be an advantage in close fighting,” Kit explained. “You can squirm in and do loads of damage with a sharp little knife.”

Julian didn’t feel like a warrior—he felt faintly ridiculous, in fact. But like the others, he bounced anxiously on the balls of his feet as the sloop came into view. The red flag with the crowned devil flew proudly atop the tallest mast, and the sails bellied with the brisk wind. Julian’s hands ached from gripping the club so tightly.

Although the *Dark Prince* was clearly sailing quickly, it seemed to take forever to reach the harbor. It was odd for Julian to realize that he’d been held captive on that very ship, had spent an eternity bound to one of those masts. From here, there was nothing sinister about the craft—it was a jaunty thing, sleek and brightly painted.

The ship pulled alongside the main pier, where it butted against the dowdy little fishing vessels. Very soon, men began to swarm over the sides and land on the dock. Booth was at the forefront in a pair of mirror-shined black boots and a short overcoat that exactly matched his flag. Despite his men towering over him, he managed to seem very large as he marched toward shore.

The villagers didn’t back away, so the pirates were confined to the pier. The townfolk outnumbered the pirates two to one, but the pirates were better armed and much more experienced at fighting. Every one of the crew members looked as if he would delight in mayhem. Booth was smiling coldly, the most murderous of all. He stopped at the foot of the dock, nearly within reach of Kit’s sword.

“I’m quite disappointed you didn’t pay me a visit when you stopped by my ship.” Booth’s voice carried well, perhaps because he was used to ordering his crew about.

“If I had seen you, you would not have survived the night.”

“Our time together always was exhilarating.”

“Go away, Booth. Never come back.”

Booth laughed like a party-goer pleased with a witty joke. Then he turned his head slightly and raised his voice even more. "I've no quarrel with you, the good people of Urchin Cove. Allow me to take Archer and his doilyfish and I shall trouble you no longer."

Julian felt a brief moment of doubt. Why wouldn't the townspeople simply walk away?

But nobody did.

In fact, Mr. Crabbottom actually moved a half step closer to the pirates. He carried the long hooked staff that retrieved objects from the top shelves of his shop. "We stand by our own!" he shouted.

Another of those blood-chilling laughs. "Your own? This is a thief and his sniveling little catamite. They have nothing to do with you."

"They're ours. And the whole tubload of ya bastards in't worth an ounce o' their spit."

Despite his fear, a warm glow suffused Julian's body. He was valued by an entire town. He stood up very straight and glowered at Booth. "You shall *never* have what I have," Julian said, just loud enough for Booth to hear.

And then everything happened very rapidly.

Booth unsheathed his sword and lunged at Kit, who parried neatly. The rest of the pirate crew roared and surged forward, brushing past Kit and Booth and bearing down on the villagers. Julian had been standing quite close to Kit and so took the first rush of the invaders. He swung his club at the nearest pirate, but the pirate deflected him almost effortlessly, knocking Julian off his feet.

Julian's first instinct was to roll away to avoid being trampled. Instead, he dropped the club, drew one of his knives, and sliced deeply into the nearest leg. He was immensely satisfied when the pirate screamed and fell.

But there was no time to celebrate his small victory, because someone kicked viciously at him, causing him to expel all the breath from his lungs in a pained grunt. It hurt terribly to draw in more air. He stumbled to his feet and darted back into the fray.

He'd often read about battles in his books, but none of those stories had accurately portrayed the terrifying confusion, the heart-wrenching screams, the iron smell of blood. Weapons thudded against—and into—bodies, and the mortally injured fell into the sea with sickening splashes. Julian's body seemed at once too slow to react and too fast, and he lost all track of what he was doing.

Later, he would decide that fighting was like the dark reflection of sex: all thought lost in the pure physicality of one's actions.

Now, he simply tried to do as much damage as possible and still remain alive.

Sometimes he caught glimpses of Kit, who seemed caught in an endless duel with Booth. Once he saw Kit stagger when a pirate with a shaved head hit him from behind. Booth struck his sword at Kit, connecting with his shoulder and drawing a fountain of blood. Julian screamed and tried to get closer. But one of the villagers was there first—Peters thunked a staff very solidly into the other pirate's skull. The pirate crumpled, Kit regained his balance, and Booth retreated several feet under his fresh onslaught.

Someone cried out very close to Julian. He spun around to see Editha's tall daughter—whose name escaped him at the moment—trying to fight off an even taller pirate. She was waving a long-handled scythe, but he had a sword. Her tunic was bloody. Julian couldn't tell whether the blood was her own, but she looked to be weakening. So he squished between two men and stabbed the pirate in the back. The pirate roared, spun around, and ran his blade through Julian's body.

It didn't hurt like he thought it might. It was a heavy pain, like a blow, rather than a sharp one. But his legs simply stopped obeying him. He fell to the ground. His blood was rushing loudly in his ears and his limbs were numb, but he wasn't afraid. He tried to catch a last look at Kit, perhaps call out to him one more time, but there was far too much chaos around him, a moving forest of feet and legs.

Other bodies lay on the ground not too far away. One of them was dressed in a fine shirt he remembered his mother buying for him.

The villagers were losing. The battle had moved inland as the pirates gained ground, and the townspeople had lost the small advantage they'd held when the pirates were grouped near the pier. There was a tremendous crash as a window shattered. Was it one of Mr. Crabbottom's shop windows?

There were Kit and Booth, still steel against steel, but both seemed to be tiring. And Kit was distracted, casting his glance around in search of Julian. Booth struck him again, this time on the arm.

"Oh, my love," Julian sighed. He hoped that Booth would not take Kit alive.

Kit caught sight of Julian on the ground and screamed. "Jule!" He started in Julian's direction but then nearly fell when Booth slashed at his leg.

Julian's eyes were wet with tears.

And then the imps appeared.

Julian didn't see where they came from; suddenly they were simply there. A great many of them—swarms of them—all cackling and screeching and chittering at once. Probably the pirates didn't notice them at first. Probably nobody noticed except Julian and the other conscious wounded lying on the ground. Even had the imps been noticed, the pirates likely wouldn't have paused in their actions. Nobody was afraid of imps.

Except now there were hundreds and hundreds of them, and they were armed with what appeared to be oversized thorns. They scrambled up the pirates' legs, stabbing and biting. When they made it to faces, they went for the eyes.

The villagers fell back in bewilderment as the pirates shrieked in helpless agony.

And as if that weren't enough, just then the wizard bellowed something in a language Julian didn't recognize. The wizard tossed a glowing ball of fire in the direction of the *Dark Prince*. The throw seemed an easy one, like a parent lobbing a ball for a young child. But the fire flew across the water and landed on the ship's deck, and a moment later the entire ship roared into flames.

Kit and Booth had fought all the way to Julian. Kit was flagging and looked badly wounded. “Jule,” he panted as he parried another blow. “My love.” He fell to one knee.

Booth’s lips were spread in a death’s head grin. He kicked Julian, who could barely grunt in response. Booth’s sword flashed as it came down towards Julian’s belly—

Kit sprang to his feet and sliced Booth’s head cleanly off his body.

For a frozen moment, the headless body remained upright. The head bounced onto the ground, Booth’s eyes and mouth round with astonishment. And then the body toppled.

“Jule? Julian? Gods, answer me!” Kit dropped his sword and clutched hard at Julian’s hand.

Julian blinked up at him and tried to smile. “What an adventure!” he whispered.

“By all the demons in hell, don’t you die on me! Don’t you dare!”

“You’d only come drag me back to life.”

Kit pressed his forehead to Julian’s and sobbed. “I would at that, my love. I would at that.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A half-dozen blue-haired imps chattered as they lugged away a particularly large hunk of cheese. The imps were growing fat.

Kit pressed more firmly against Julian's back. He'd carried three quilts onto the beach—one to spread on the sand and two to pull over them, blanketing them against the chill. But it was Kit's body that truly warmed Julian, the entire length of it wrapped around him like the shell on a snail.

Kit's lips were very soft against the nape of Julian's neck. "You haven't fallen asleep, have you?"

Julian yawned and then laughed. "Not yet."

"Good, because I'm not certain I could carry you the whole way back to the cottage."

Wiggling back against him, Julian said, "I have faith in you."

"Hmm. Perhaps we should just sleep here tonight."

"And miss a night in Urchin Cove's finest holiday home? I think not."

They were silent for a while after that. The waves crashed against the beach like the pulse crashing in their bodies, and far overhead the stars spun in a slow, elegant dance.

"We're healed enough to travel," Julian finally said.

He felt Kit tense slightly behind him. "What did you have in mind?"

"Greynox."

A message had arrived from Julian's father that day. It was as unsentimental as expected, mostly demanding an explanation for the broadsheets' insistence that Julian Wade Massey had helped save Urchin Cove from Captain Booth and his men. "Is this some elaborate jest?" his father had written. But instead of sending the message via rail and wagon, Mr. Massey had made the speedy but extravagant choice to post it by wyvern. The residents of Urchin Cove had gaped in astonishment when it arrived; most of them had never seen a wyvern. But Julian had smiled, knowing his father would only go to such great expense for something he deemed very important.

“What will you do in Greynox?” Kit asked carefully.

“What will *we* do, you mean. You can withstand the dreary place for a time, can’t you?”

“I could withstand all the hells with you at my side.”

“Well, Greynox shouldn’t be so bad as that. Not quite.” Julian laced his fingers with Kit’s, which were splayed across Julian’s bare belly, just below the brand-new scar. “I wish to introduce you to my family.”

“As your friend?”

“Of course. And as the man I love.”

Kit inhaled rapidly, then the air puffed out across Julian’s neck. “What will they do?”

“I do not know. They will be angry, I expect. They may... they may disown me.”

“Why would you take that risk?”

“Because we have endured far too much for me to lie about us. And because I love you too deeply to want to hide it.”

More kisses on his neck and shoulders, each of them searing him like a brand. Julian shivered in Kit’s embrace.

“And how long shall we remain in Greynox?” Kit asked.

“I am not certain. I was thinking... if you were willing... I could study medicine there. It would take two years for me to finish.”

“You will not need a profession, not even if your parents reject you. We’ve plenty to live on from the bits of treasure I kept.”

“I know. But experience suggests that the ability to doctor might prove very useful.” Julian freed his hand and used the fingers to trace the new scar—one of several—on Kit’s thigh.

“You do have a point,” Kit replied with a chuckle. “But what shall I do while you study?”

“Charm everyone in the city with your wit and good looks. Men and women will find you as irresistible as I. They will hang on you like barnacles.”

“Ah, but I will have eyes only for my Jule.”

“And hands only for me.”

Kit gave Julian’s belly a small tickle. “All my body parts, only for you.”

“Good.”

Another group of imps appeared from the direction of the cottage, this one holding a half loaf of bread aloft. They eyed Kit and Julian as they passed, and made a few demanding squeaks before moving on. Possibly they were asking for more ale, but Julian was not eager to do *that* again. Drunken imps outside one’s cottage did not make for a restful sleep.

“We won’t remain in Greynox forever?” asked Kit. He sounded a bit worried.

“No. I think... I might like to build a house here, just as the villagers have been asking. I would enjoy spending our summers here.”

“Ah. I would as well. And the rest of the year?”

“Take me to Sanvia. Take me... take me anywhere.” Julian pushed back even more firmly, feeling the lovely comfort of Kit’s soft cock against his ass, the thudding of Kit’s heart against his back.

“Will you be eager for more adventures by then?”

“I will.”

“And will we be like the people in your books, love? Will we live happily ever after?”

“We will write our own stories, Kit, and we will live happier than any of the people in those books.”

The clean, chilly wind blew across the beach, carrying the scents of salt and life. The moon had the luster of a pearl. And Kit held him tight in his arms, loving him. Treasuring him. Julian closed his eyes and smiled.

THE END

Author Bio

Kim Fielding lives in California and travels as often as she can manage. A professor by day, at night she rushes into a phone booth to change into her author costume (which involves comfy clothes instead of Spandex and is, sadly, lacking a cape). Her superpowers include the ability to write nearly anywhere, often while simultaneously doling out homework assistance to her children. She has published many m/m romance novels, novellas, and short stories. Her favorite word to describe herself is “eclectic” and she’s currently considering whether to get that third tattoo.

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