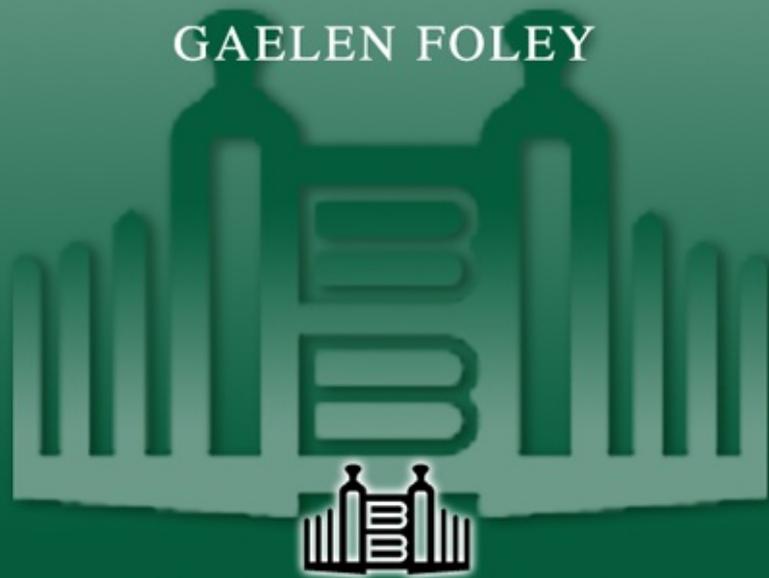


THE PIRATE PRINCE

GAELEN FOLEY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

THE PIRATE PRINCE

Gaelen Foley

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To Eric, who saved me.

Thanks also to my dad, sea-captain extraordinaire, for guidance on matters nautical.

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GAELEN FOLEY!



“This Prince of yours,” he said confidentially, “shares with me the same name, similar coloring, and we are of an age. The only difference is that he is dead, and I, you see—I am alive.”

“That you are,” she said, feeling a trifle feverish.

“So, my little dreamer, why don’t you simply put this vivid imagination of yours to use, and pretend I’m he? I would so like to fulfill your fantasies, and perhaps,” he murmured, “exceed them.”

“It won’t work,” she forced out breathlessly as he edged closer and deliciously closer still.

“Why not, my darling girl?”

“Because.” She faltered. “You kiss like a pirate.”

“Not always,” he whispered, smiling a little at first when he kissed her. The dizzying pleasure of parted her lips slightly, then he lingered, breathing her breath, giving his own to her....

CHAPTER ONE

May 1785

He took a faceful of sea brine, flung the stinging salt water out of his eyes with a furious blink, and hauled back on the oars again and again with all his strength. All around him, the swirling, bucking surf smashed itself in silver plumes of foam, drenching him as it sought to dash his longboat against the shark-tooth rocks guarding the cave. Arms and shoulders burning with the strain, he held the boat steady by sheer bloody-mindedness until at last, with a barbaric cry of exertion, he fought his way past the towering, jagged boulders. Passing under the low arch of rock, he ducked his head as his longboat glided into the cavern's mouth.

Meanwhile, leagues behind him on the moonlit bay, seven ships waited at anchor.

Once under the pitch-black granite dome, he wiped the sweat off his brow with his forearm, slowly catching his breath. He lit a torch, for there was no one to note his invasion now but the legions of bats hanging and screeching and fluttering overhead. Finally, he maneuvered the longboat to the landing and jumped off onto solid ground.

Fifteen years.

It had been fifteen years since Prince Lazar di Fiore last set foot on Ascencion.

Almost half his life, he mused, or this underworld existence that was no life at all.

He stared at the soft, sparkling sand beneath his scuffed black boots, then crouched down on one knee, scooping a fistful of it into one sun-browned, rope-callused hand. With a bitter, faraway expression, he loosened his grasp and watched the sand slip through his fingers as easily as everything else had.

His future.

His family.

And, with the dawn, his soul.

The sand whispered to the ground until all that was left in his hand was a hard, black little rock. This, too, he let fall.

He wanted none of it.

He stood, shrugging the shoulder strap of his sword back into place. The wet leather had been

chafing his chest for an hour now, vexing the tender strip of skin where his black vest fell open. He took another swallow of rum from the silver flask hanging on a thin kid strap inside his vest, wincing as it fired his belly, then he put it away again.

Lifting his torch, he looked around the cavern until he spotted the entrance to the secret underground tunnels. They had been hewn from the mountain centuries before exclusively for his family. Strange to think he was the last one alive who would ever know that they truly existed, he mused, and were not just another legend of the great House of the Fiori.

When he reached the rough-cut entrance to the tunnels, he thrust his torch in ahead of him warily peering into the shadowy gulf. It was damned claustrophobic in there for a man accustomed to the open seas.

“Ach, get on with it, quake-buttocks,” he muttered aloud just to break the ponderous silence.

He forced himself in.

The black walls of the secret passageway glistened with trickling water and slime by torchlight. Shadows cast by the flame made fantastical shapes that writhed across the sharp-knuckled fists on the rock. Beyond the sphere of his torch's glow, all was black, but somewhere far above him, he knew, his enemy was congratulating himself at a ball he had thrown in his own honor.

Lazar could barely wait to wreck the party. Soon the tunnels would admit him inside the sealed citadel walls, under all of Monteverdi's painstaking efforts at security.

After half an hour's laborious hike up the steep grade, the tunnel branched, the left fork leveling off while the right continued upward until, he knew, it reached the cellars of Belfort, the fallen castle on top of the mountain.

He would like to have seen the old place, but there was no time for sentimentality. Without hesitation, he took the path to the left.

At last cool tendrils of fresh air trailed against his cheeks, and the upward slant of black ahead became a diamond-dusted midnight blue. The torch hissed as he extinguished it in a small, primordial pool collecting water from the leaking walls. In darkness, he crept up to the tunnel's narrow exit.

A formidable macchia made up of thorny vines and weeds hid the cave entrance from the outside. His heart began to thud as he picked his way out of the brambles, trying not to make any noticeable rift, until at last he stepped out into the clearing. He slipped his curved Moorish knife into his belt, moving slowly, welling with a kind of wonder as he emerged. Unaware he was holding his breath, he stared about him.

Home.

Everything was tinged with silvery moonlight. The terraced fields, the olive orchards, the vineyard, the orange grove on the next hill. Fine, earthy fragrances ribboned through the night breeze to him. And here, behind him, the solemn old Roman wall still stood, its great stones hoary with moss, protecting the heart of the kingdom as it had for a thousand years. Memory sighed through the chinks

in the rock.

We are the cornerstone, boy, we, the Fiori. Never forget....

He took a few, faltering steps forward, surrounded by the music of fields, of crickets and frogs, with the souging of the surf in the distance. Just as it had been forever.

His heart wrenched, and for a moment he closed his eyes, tilting his head back, remembering all too clearly things he could not bear to face again.

A cool breeze crept over the landscape, stirring the leaves on the vines until the whole orchard, the citrus grove, the grasses, murmured to him like the voices of beloved ghosts sweeping out of the haunts to greet him, lost generations of dead kings and queens. They rose and floated in spires above him, urging him on with ghost whispers, *Avenge us*.

Yes. He opened eyes that suddenly blazed with muted pain made into rage.

One man alone was to blame for stealing the life that should have been his. He had a score to settle by God, and that was the only reason he'd come. He had no further business in this place. *Signore* the Governor had seen to that. But now the don would pay.

Aye, legend said it was not on Sicily, not on nearby Corsica, but here on this isle that the ancient tradition of *la vendetta* had been born. Monteverdi would soon come to know it.

The waiting, the scheming, the biding his time for a full fifteen years, would be over. By dawn he would have his enemy in his grasp to mete out to him the measure he deserved. He would slay his king, take his life, lay his city to waste.

But the most exquisite torment must come first.

The traitor must suffer as he had suffered. The blood justice he had hungered for, for so long, would be complete only when Monteverdi stood by in chains and watched him snuff out the life of the one creature he loved best in all the world—his innocent young daughter.

When it was done, Lazar would sail away, and he would never lay eyes on his kingdom again.

Even if it broke what remained of his heart.

Hands clasped behind her back, a polite, attentive smile fixed by willpower on her face, Allegria Monteverdi stood in the ballroom with a small group of guests, wondering if anyone else could tell that her fiancé was slowly getting drunk.

It was rare for the governor's right-hand man to succumb to intemperance, or any other vice for that matter. She was merely glad he wasn't being loud or sloppy about it—but then, the Viscount Domenico Clemente was incapable of doing anything with less than impeccable grace and elegance.

Must have had a spat with the mistress, she thought, eyeing him askance as he stood talking with some ladies, and emptying his wineglass again.

With detached admiration she noted how his pale gold, lightly powdered hair gleamed in its new queue under the crystal chandeliers.

The wine was having an interesting effect on him. *In vino veritas*—in wine, truth, the old adage said, and she was curious to catch a glimpse of the inner man the polished viscount hid, for the wedding was just a few months away and she could not escape the feeling that she still did not know him at all.

Furtively, she studied the man whose children she would bear.

When Domenic noticed her gaze, he excused himself from the ladies and crossed the room to her with a cool smile.

Rather than turning him sentimental, the wine brought out an edge in him, Allegra thought. There was a sullen, pouting tilt about his mouth. The crisp, aristocratic angles of his face became sharper and his green eyes glinted like the points of emerald blades.

Arriving at her side, he flicked a speculative glance over her body, and bent to kiss her cheek.

“Hello there, beautiful.” He smiled at her blush, brushing her bare arm with his knuckles, the Mechlin lace of his sleeve tickling her.

“Come, young lady. You owe me a dance,” he murmured, but just then the guests’ conversation grabbed Allegra’s attention.

“Rabid dogs, I say,” one venerable old gentleman declared, speaking loudly over the music. “They’re rebels! Hang ’em all, if it’s the only way to make ’em mind.”

“Hang them?” she exclaimed, turning to him.

“Whatever is the trouble with the lower orders these days?” his wife complained, a persecuted expression on her doughy face while blue diamonds dripped from her neck and earlobes. “Always complaining about something. So violent, so angry! Don’t they see if they were not so lazy, they’d have all they need?”

“Lazy?” she demanded.

“Here we go again.” Domenic sighed. Beside her, her betrothed bowed his head, covering his eyes with one hand.

“Quite right, my dear,” the old man endeavored to instruct her. “As I always say, they need merely to put their backs into their work and stop blaming everyone else for their troubles.”

“What about the latest round of taxes?” she replied. “They haven’t bread to put in their children’s mouths.”

“What, taxes? Oh, my!” the fat lady exclaimed, peering at her through her monocle in a mixture of puzzlement and alarm.

“There is talk, you know, of a peasant uprising,” another lady told them in a confidential tone.

Allegra drew breath to explain.

“Darling, please, don’t,” Domenic murmured. “I am so weary of smoothing ruffled feathers a night.”

“They will kill us all if we don’t watch ’em.” The old man sagely nodded. “Like rabid dogs.”

“Well, pay them no mind,” Allegra said gaily. “ ’Tis only starvation makes them cross. Would you care for some cakes? A marzipan? Some chocolates, perhaps?” Eyes sparkling with anger, she gestured one of the footmen over, then stood back and watched them feed like high-priced pigs.

Coiffed and powdered, bewigged and brocaded, her father’s guests cooed over the exquisite display of confections, sweets, and pastries on the servant’s silver tray and began consuming them, powdered sugar sprinkling down the front of their satin finery.

Domenic looked down at her with a long-suffering expression. “Darling,” he said, “really.”

“Well, it’s true,” she tartly replied. These elders of the *ancien régime* were past reforming, their heads hopelessly muddled under their white wigs, their hearts shriveled like dried prunes. The spirit of the age was change—bold youth—glorious new ideals! Their kind would be swept away like dust.

“How about that dance?”

She couldn’t help but smile at him. “You’re just trying to distract me so I won’t speak my mind.”

He gave her a slight, narrow smile in answer and leaned down toward her ear. “No, I’m just trying to get my hands on you.”

Oh, dear. Definitely must have quarreled with the mistress. “I see,” she said diplomatically.

Meanwhile she noticed the doughy duchess whispering to the woman beside her. Both women sent pointed looks her way, eyeing the green-and-black sash she wore with her high-waisted gown of frothy white silk.

If they didn’t comprehend her gown in the new pastoral style inspired by the ideals of democracy, then the fact that she was wearing the green-and-black must utterly, she supposed, confound them.

She lifted her head, unwilling to be intimidated. Perhaps no one else in this room gave a fig whether or not the peasants were starving outside the palace walls, but she did, and if the only voice she was permitted to give her protest was the wearing of the old Ascencion colors, she would do it and be proud.

She had taken the idea from the glamorous and savvy salon hostesses to whom Aunt Isabelle had introduced her in Paris. They wore red-white-and-blue sashes to express their sympathies with the

American Colonials during their war with England. Upon arriving here six months earlier, Allegra had adapted the practice to suit Ascencion's situation, but here, she found, women with political opinions were frowned upon, especially when those opinions ran counter to the established government power.

Her father's government.

"Governor!" someone cried pleasantly just as the man of the hour came ambling into their midst.

While her father was greeted by a chorus of cheers, Allegra tensed, knowing he would be displeased with her if he, too, noticed her green-and-black sash.

On second thought, she told herself, why worry? Papa never noticed anything she did.

"*Salute*, Governor! Here's to another fifteen years," the guests chimed, raising their wineglasses to him.

Governor Ottavio Monteverdi was a brown-eyed man in his middle fifties, of medium height, sturdy rather fit except for a respectable paunch. Though his manner was always slightly tense, he handled his guests smoothly, seasoned by decades of civil service.

He nodded thanks to one and all in his restrained way, then nodded to her and glanced up at Domenic.

"Congratulations, sir." Domenic shook the hand of his future father-in-law, the man whom he was being groomed by the Council to one day replace as Governor of Ascencion.

"Thank you, my boy."

"Are you enjoying your party, Papa?" she asked, touching his shoulder fondly.

Instantly his posture stiffened. Chastened, Allegra lowered her hand in embarrassment.

At Aunt Isabelle's cozy, elegant house in Paris, where she had been raised for the past nine years since her mother's death, everyone was demonstrative of family warmth, but here she was still trying to learn that displays of affection only made Papa uncomfortable.

Ah, he distressed her so, this nervous, gray-haired stranger, she thought sadly. Such a tidy, meticulous man, held together by the tenuous knowledge that all the odds and ends on his desk were in their exact, proper order. After the thrill of finally getting to live under the same roof with her only remaining parent, she found her father only wanted to keep his distance from her, she supposed because she reminded him too much of Mama. She felt his suffering, though he never spoke of it. Somehow she had to reach out to him. That was the reason she'd gone to such lengths as his hostess to make his civic anniversary a happy occasion.

He offered her a tense smile, but when his gaze homed in on her green-and-black striped sash, she froze, paling.

Allegra turned red but offered no excuses. Domenic withdrew, leaving her to fend for herself there.

time.

Her father gripped her arm at once and turned her aside. “Go to your room and remove that immediately,” he whispered harshly. “Damn it, Allegra, I told you to burn that thing! If you were anyone but my daughter, I could have you jailed for insurrection.”

“Jailed, Papa?” she exclaimed, taken aback.

“Have you no sense? Your little show of rebellion is a slap in the face to the whole Council and to me!”

“I meant no insult,” she said, marveling at the intensity of his anger. “I’m only expressing my opinion—I *am* still entitled to my opinion, aren’t I? Or have you made a law against that, too?” She wished she hadn’t said it the moment it slipped past her lips.

His brown eyes narrowed. “Would you like for me to send you back to Paris?”

“No, sir,” she said stiffly, lowering her gaze. “Ascencion is my homeland. I belong here.”

His grip eased. “Then mind when you are under my roof, you will follow my rules, and while you are on Ascencion’s soil, you will abide by Genoa’s laws. Charitable efforts and good works are a very well, but I’m warning you, lately you have been verging on acts of open civil disobedience, and I am losing patience with it. Now, go change that thing, and *burn* it!”

With that, he turned away, his whole demeanor metamorphosing back to that of the pleasant host. Allegra simply stood there, stunned.

Jail me? she thought, watching her father exchange the usual social blandishments with the cluster of guests. *He’d never jail me—surely!*

Domenic glanced down smugly at her as if to say, I told you so.

She turned away from him with a scowl. “I’m going to my room. I’ve got to *change* my sash,” she muttered with furious sarcasm. She was certainly not going to burn the royal colors of the Fiori.

“Allegra.” Domenic captured her wrist softly.

She glanced up and found him watching her, his gaze strange with that too-keen focus, his eyes the overpowering green of the steamy woods after a hard summer rain.

“Your father’s right, you know. Perhaps he doesn’t appreciate your intelligence and your spirit as I do, but I agree with him completely that your youthful fervor is...well, let us say misguided. Get it out of your system now, because I won’t tolerate it either.”

She glared up at him, a tart rejoinder on her tongue, but by force of will she swallowed it. If she was truly going to serve her country, she needed to marry Domenic. She could put up with his mistress, his smooth condescension, his belittling of her work disguised as harmless teasing. She forced an obedient smile instead, biding her time, promising herself she would teach him some respect one day if they were wed.

“As you wish, my lord.”

Gratification flickered in his green eyes.

“Go upstairs, my pretty bride,” he whispered, tracing her bare arm again, though Papa was still standing right there. She blushed, glancing over to see if her father had noticed, then she looked back up uncertainly at Domenic.

He was getting quite drunk, she thought, noting the empty wineglass in his hand.

“Go,” he urged her softly. There was something predatory in his slight smile as he nodded toward the door.

Furrowing her brow, she turned and walked away, wary, puzzled, and still stewing about his high-handed manner. *Youthful fervor is misguided*, she thought, mentally mimicking his condescending tone.

She stopped to check on the chamber orchestra in the corner. The musicians were presently taking a short break and tuning their instruments. She praised their performance and cheerfully reminded them to have something to eat before the night was done.

In the hallway, she breathed a sigh of relief at the feel of the cool draft wafting along the marble floor. Rather than go up to her room directly, however, she went down the dimly lit servant hall to the kitchens. The ovens had finally cooled, but the familiar smell of garlic roasting in olive oil always hung in the air.

She reminded the weary staff to package the food left over from the party for the pension houses and orphanages she regularly visited, then she ordered a portion brought to the jail, though she knew Papa would be angry if he found out.

This done, she turned to leave, but something made her pause. She crossed the kitchens to the wine supply door, which had been propped open with hearth bricks to admit the cool night air.

Silks billowing softly in the languid breeze, she came to stand in the doorway, where she gazed down longingly at the square. The festival she had designed for the rest of the populace was gradually winding down.

Oh, she yearned to go out there and be with her countrymen, with their rough-and-tumble way and their loud laughs, their sparkling dark eyes. Perhaps they were crude, she thought, but at least they were genuine.

Over the centuries the mixed blood of Greeks, Romans, Moors, and Spaniards had created a breed of southern Italians as volatile and intense as the hot, rugged land they inhabited. Ascencioners were considered even more dangerous than the shiftless Corsicans, but to Allegra they were warmhearted, robust, and passionate, hopelessly romantic as they fed themselves on old stories and dreams, such as the legends of the great Fiori. She loved them, just as she loved this strife-ridden, poverty-stricken island situated like a clod of manure about to be kicked by the boot of Italy.

True, she mused, the winds of change blowing a bold new age into the world had yet to ruffle

curtain here, but she intended to use her position as the governor's daughter and the future governor's wife in service to her country, no matter how insufferable both men were.

She would be their conscience.

Then perhaps one day, she thought, with proper loving care Ascencion might finally begin to heal for the loss of the royal family, and King Alphonse in particular, was a wound from which the island had never recovered.

Nor did Mama.

From this vantage point, Allegra could hear lively music and see some of the performers, a man breathing fire, acrobats. She smiled, seeing a few young couples dancing the fiery, whirling Sicilian dance called the tarantella, and shook her head to think of the dull, decorous minuets in progress in the ballroom.

With a wistful smile, she gazed at the rows of colored lanterns hanging over the square, each candle lit to her faith that surely the warring classes and families and factions could set their differences aside and let there be peace, if only for a few days.

She lifted her gaze higher to the starry onyx skies, then closed her eyes as the balmy breeze caressed her cheek. The Mediterranean night was pure seduction, worlds away from the cold and drizzle of Paris. It whispered to her senses, luring her with hints of jasmine and pine and the faint scent of the sea.

It made her think of *him*.

The one even Domenic could never compete with, the one who lived nowhere but in her heart, in her fantasies, perfect and impossible as the utopias she envisioned.

Her secret Prince.

His name was Lazar, and he came to her in her dreams. Prince Lazar was a knight and a scholar, warrior and a rogue; he was everything and nothing but moonbeams and fancy.

Actually, he was dead.

Yet there were those who claimed he was alive, somewhere, somehow....

She opened her eyes again, saddened, yet smiling at her own foolishness. She gazed up at the full moon lounging on her cloud like a vain golden queen.

When there was a shift in the mob below, Allegra saw that the bishop had come out and was walking about, shaking hands with people here and there, trailed by his eternal retinue of pious widows, deacons, and nuns. Seeing them, she decided all of a sudden that she was going to go down there and say hello.

She was not a prisoner in her father's house, after all, though she often felt like one. Papa and Domenic could not control her every move, she told herself in defiance. Surely she need not take her

bodyguards just to go chat for a few moments with dear old Father Vincent.

Without a backward glance, she left the wide doorway, startling the kitchen staff.

No one would question her if she acted as though she knew what she was doing, she thought as she marched off, heart pounding. At first she walked away from the house, then she picked up her pace crossing the landscaped lawn toward the tall, spiky wrought-iron fence that surrounded the front section of her father's property. Beyond it was another fence made of men, blue-uniformed soldiers who lined the perimeter of the palazzo.

Allegra strode faster, every step filling her with rising tension, almost a desperation to escape, as she would suffocate under all the hypocrisy and greed if she remained inside the palazzo one minute longer. She was almost running by the time she reached the edge of her father's property, her face flushed, heart racing.

Most of the soldiers knew who she was, of course, and would surely find it highly irregular for the governor's daughter to leave the palazzo unattended, but she reminded herself these men were trained to take orders. If any of them questioned her, she would make some excuse and put him in his place if necessary. Somehow she would brazen her way past them.

As it turned out, the task was easier than she'd hoped.

Perhaps in the darkness they didn't realize who she was, merely thinking her one of the guests. Trying to act perfectly natural, she went out the small side gate. Here the wrought-iron fence met the ten-foot wall that surrounded the back of the property and the garden.

All nonchalance, while inwardly her heart pounded, she passed the men and made her escape into the cobbled side street, unquestioned. She was so amazed she had succeeded that she wanted to throw her hands up and shout, *Freedom!* Instead, she hurried the short distance down the narrow, shop-lined street until she arrived at the square.

Pausing breathlessly under the cluster of palm trees that graced the corner of the piazza, she stared about her in joy, barely knowing where to go first.

She glanced toward the young couples dancing the scandalous tarantella, then looked toward the bishop.

It occurred to her that if she went straightaway to say hello to Father Vincent, one of those shrewd hawk-eyed widows of his coterie was sure to ask where her chaperons were.

Perhaps, she thought, she could steal just a peek at the sinners before she rejoined the saints.

Skin tingling with the seduction of the Italian night, she followed the sound of the wicker chairs and irresistible music.

With lethal grace, Lazar stalked through the olive orchard toward the twinkle of lights that was the small, new city the usurpers called Little Genoa.

It would be charred ruins by tomorrow, he thought with a narrow smile.

He checked his rusty timepiece by the light of the full moon as he walked. It was midnight now. His first priority was to break into one of the two heavily guarded gate towers. He wasn't exactly sure how he was going to do it, but he trusted he'd figure something out. He slipped the fob back into his small vest pocket, content that he had two full hours for the task. At precisely two o'clock, he would open the massive gates, allowing his men in to storm the city.

When he reached a field of tall, waving grasses, he could smell the bonfires, hear the distant music of the governor's anniversary feast where all those marked for death were gathered.

He narrowed his eyes as he gazed toward the square. The Genovese nobles were attending the ball at the gleaming marble palazzo, he knew, but it appeared Monteverdi had opened his coffers to provide the common folk with a more rustic festival in the piazza.

Bloody hell, he thought. These people were going to be underfoot. God knew he would not have one hair harmed on any Ascencioner's head. He concluded that if the festival crowd was still there at two in the morning, he'd find some way to clear the square. He was rather resourceful when it came to creating chaos.

He walked on, intent on sizing up the gate towers.

As he neared the crowded square, once more Lazar brooded upon the prospect of being recognized, then he brushed off the idea as absurd. Nothing remained of the swaggering boy he had been. After fifteen years, his people could not be expected to know him. Besides, Ascencion thought him dead. And for all practical purposes, he reflected with a morbid sort of humor, Ascencion was right.

When he reached the square, he faltered as he gazed about him, almost without the heart to go on for it was exactly like the festivals his mother used to delight in arranging. He smelled the traditional foods, heard the old songs the guitarist was playing for a small crowd at a nearby fire, earning his coin. He stared at the peasant faces of the fun-loving, earthy souls who had loved his father so well and who might have been his own subjects, if not for Monteverdi's treachery.

It was strange even to think of it.

He took a few lost steps onto the warm flagstone, his soul in shreds as he stared about him, certain he was caught up in another aching dream of his childhood. The anguish of it he had borne so long made him want to lie down and die.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed two young girls looking at him, pretty creatures with flowers in their long, unbound hair, ruffled aprons, and bare feet. The dark-haired beauty ran a hot gaze down the length of him, while the blonde hid behind her, peeking at him shyly. He turned toward them with a raw sense of relief, for nothing eased his suffering like the feel of a woman's soft arms around him, the taste, the smell, the welcome of the female body.

But he held himself back, making no move toward them, even though, voyaging here from the West Indies, he had been weeks at sea.

No, he thought a trifle bitterly, he could numb his mind in a debauch of wine and unbridled sex later. There were always willing women to be found.

Tonight all that mattered was destroying Monteverdi.

He looked resolutely away from the girls and walked on, prowling silently through the crowd. He and there people eyed him, especially his weapons, but they quickly looked away when he met their furtive glances with a stare meant to intimidate.

At last he reached the far end of the square. Hitching a thumb in the front of his black cloth belt, he sauntered with seeming idleness toward the gate towers.

The two towers were as high as mizzenmasts, squat, fat, and bulky, with slick stone sides and a few unglassed windows. Between them, the formidable city gate stretched two wagon widths across, nearly two feet thick, of solid wood reinforced with iron. God knew Monteverdi took every precaution with security, for all the good it would soon do him.

He counted twelve soldiers outside, and Lord only knew how many were inside. He considered climbing up onto the gate itself and going in through one of the windows or setting a fire or causing some other distraction that would bring the squadron inside charging out to restore order. Of course, it might be amusing simply to bang on the door and challenge them all single-handedly, he thought wryly. Fifteen, twenty to one? It had been a while since he had faced those odds. Perhaps he should brush up on his skills.

He stopped nonchalantly to pet a stray cat, all the while keenly eyeing the west gate, when he noticed one of the soldiers peering belligerently at him.

“You there! Halt!”

Lazar looked over with an innocent expression as the plump sergeant started marching toward him. In a glance, Lazar picked out the large key ring jangling from the man’s belt.

One of those keys surely opened the iron doors that gave access to the towers, he thought.

The little red-faced sergeant stomped over and glared up at him. “Hand over those weapons! No arms inside the city walls tonight. Governor’s orders!”

“I beg your pardon,” Lazar said politely. Straightening up to his full height, he held the purring cat in his arms, scratching it under the chin.

“How’d you get past the guards? Everyone was searched at the gates! Weren’t you searched?”

Lazar shrugged.

The little man narrowed his eyes. “Young man, you’d best come with me for questioning.”

As the sergeant moved around to his side, Lazar watched him curiously, but when the little man reached to take away his guns, Lazar felled him with an elbow in the face.

He looked down almost regretfully at the unconscious man lying belly-up on the ground, another mere tool of the corrupt Council. He couldn't blame these men for soldiering for Monteverdi if it gave them a living. When a man got hungry enough, he would serve any master, as he himself well knew. The cat jumped out of his arms and vanished into the shadows. Bending down, Lazar took the sergeant's key ring and strolled back to the square, one thumb hooked idly in his belt as before.

Biding his time, he watched everything around him, especially Monteverdi's dozen or so mounted guards patrolling the edges of the piazza. One was riding a giant black horse that did not like the crowd. Perhaps he could spook the big, fiery animal, Lazar thought. That would give a few dozen people a good scare and allow him to begin clearing the crowd that way.

Nah, he thought.

He riffled through the twenty keys on the sergeant's key ring, realizing belatedly there had been no point in stealing it. They'd drill him full of lead before he had time to figure out which keys opened which locks. He was going to have to find another way, but he kept the keys just in case, jangling them idly in his hand as he strolled through the crowd, keeping an eye out for something he could safely set afire.

Meanwhile, he pondered Monteverdi's guilty conscience. The Governor obviously lived in terror for there was absolutely no reason for so many soldiers and so many guns to mind a crowd half made up of old ladies, such as the two walking so vexingly slowly in front of him, blocking his path.

Just then he noticed a stir in the mob ahead. Excitement surged through the crowd, and the people shifted to make way for someone's approach. He felt an inward pang, half expecting to see Father come striding along, what with the way the people had suddenly become so animated.

He heard someone say it was the bishop.

He was about to move away when one of the old ladies in his way exclaimed, "Beatrice, look! There's the governor's daughter with Father Vincent. Such a lovely, good-hearted girl. Reminds me of myself when I was twenty."

The remark stopped Lazar in his tracks. He went very still, then forced himself to look at her just as he would be prepared tomorrow.

He saw her, and his heart sank.

He picked Allegra Monteverdi out of the crowd as easily as a diamond cast upon a pile of rocks, though she was still twenty feet away. She was bending down talking to a group of peasant children. She wore a white, high-waisted dress of an airy, delicate material. She had a slender, elegant figure and chestnut-colored hair in an upswept arrangement, and as he watched her for that instant, she burst out laughing at something one of the children said.

He looked away, heart suddenly pounding. He closed his eyes for a second, hearing that laughter like clear silver bells.

So she is not an eyesore. So what? he snarled inwardly. She was still a Monteverdi.

She was also, he realized suddenly, the perfect means for getting him into the gate tower. Indeed, ~~and if she were his hostage, she could prove invaluable. No one would dare get in his way if he had her in his power.~~

She was moving freely through the crowd, he saw, narrowing his eyes as he watched her. All he had to do was slip in close to her and persuade her to come with him, using soft words or weapons whichever sufficed.

But instead of going after her at once, he held back, torn. He did not want to touch her.

He did not want to talk to her. He did not want to smell her perfume or see what color her eyes were. He didn't want to go near her at all.

The plain fact was that he had never killed a woman before. In fact, he had a grandiose sort of rule for his own conduct, in that he refused to kill in front of women. He could not imagine any sin worse than destroying one of those creatures whose wondrous bodies could make new life, but his duty required it. He had come here to destroy Ottavio Monteverdi, and the traitor's punishment would not be nearly complete until he knew how it felt to stand by and watch one's family massacred before one's eyes, helpless to stop it. The daughter must die.

When he saw a group of soldiers moving into the crowd from the direction of the alley where he had left their unconscious sergeant, he realized he might soon have no choice. Self-defense might swiftly require it, for Monteverdi's supply of soldiers appeared inexhaustible. If Lazar allowed himself to be captured, he risked the lives of the thousand loyal men waiting for him just outside the city gates.

No, he thought, it was going to be torment, but he could spare himself no such nicety of feeling. Allegra Monteverdi would be his human shield.

His mind made up, he began stalking her through the crowd. Keeping a wary distance, he looked first for the bodyguards she would surely have on hand to protect her. He scanned the crowd around her, but for all her father's paranoia, it seemed Miss Monteverdi had not bothered to bring her guards out with her.

Interesting.

Following her, he decided to approach her from behind and at an angle. Continually he glanced over her over the heads of the peasants and townsfolk that stood between them. He saw her leave the children, stopping to talk with people here and there. Everyone seemed to like her, a fact that struck him as remarkable, for the Ascencioners hated her father, the petty dictator.

Drawing ever closer, he watched her wander to the triple-tiered fountain in the middle of the square, her hair brilliant under the colored lanterns. When she half turned to reach her hand out under the a of water, Lazar saw her in profile. She curled her wet fingers around the nape of her graceful neck, letting the water cool her. Tilting her head back, she closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the water on her skin in the heat of the night.

Something in her fleeting rapt expression instantly fired every male instinct in his blood.

Stay away from her, the hardened anger in him warned, but he ignored it, tilting his head slightly

he watched her in increasing fascination.

It was at about that moment she began to sense she was being followed.

God, she was easy to read, he thought, amused. Her sudden apprehension was obvious in the way she stiffened, paused, looked around her just like a wary little cat.

Lazar leaned into the shadows of the wine seller's stall as Allegra cast a worried glance over her shoulder, then turned toward the sound of some music near the edge of the square. She hurried off in the direction of the bonfire, where the guitarist was playing the old ballads. Lazar followed, sauntering along, perversely enjoying the thrill of the chase.

The peasants here lounged around the fire, swigging from bottles of the local wine, exchanging jokes and lewd stories, while the fat bard paused to count the few, grimy coins strewn in his battered guitar case.

As Miss Monteverdi stepped up to the fire, Lazar approached slowly, very slowly. He found himself seized with an awful curiosity to see her face in the light, the face of this innocent whose life he would take, whose death would consign to him, finally and irrevocably, as a force for evil in the world.

The ragtag bard hushed the waiting crowd and began plucking his guitar strings.

She was staring into the flames almost pensively while Lazar rounded behind the small crowd watching her all the while. He slipped into position behind some people directly across the fire from her.

Gazing at her, he watched the firelight twine itself in gold through her hair and tinge her ivory skin with wine-pink light, like the allover blush of a woman's skin during lovemaking. As the slight breeze moved her skirts around her like fine silken sails, the firelight suggested to his practiced eye the long beautiful legs and slender hips the silk concealed.

What a waste, he thought ardently. And a virgin, too.

Allegra Monteverdi had a childlike smattering of buttery freckles and large, expressive eyes, honey brown, with lashes tipped in gold. Though she had been raised in decadent Paris, as his spies had told him, the pristine air of the convent school still surrounded her, and that glow of untouched purity enticed something dark in him.

There was a fineness in her bearing that commanded his instant respect, a gathered, focused grace that made her shine, and already he had no idea how he was going to pull the trigger when the time came.

He only knew that he would. He had failed his family fifteen years ago, but he would not fail them this time.

As her gaze traveled over the group around the fire, the people standing in front of him walked away. The movement drew her attention, and before Lazar had time to slip away, she saw him.

Her stare slammed into him.

Her eyes flickered, widened slightly. Her lips parted on a quick intake of breath. Her glance took his weapons, his all-but-naked torso, then flicked up to stare at his face.

Lazar did not move.

He was not sure he could have if he tried, for he saw her lovely face illumined by the golden glow of the fire and by another, brighter fire within—her spirit.

Her expression changed, so lucid, so transparent. At first she liked what she saw, it seemed, but seconds later fear set in, and she began to withdraw, staring at him as if she sensed his intentions.

Lazar never moved.

Before his eyes, the girl backed away, whirled around, and fled.

CHAPTER TWO

For a long moment, Lazar could only stand there at the fire.

He lowered his chin, rubbing his mouth. Then he adjusted the black silk skullcap he wore complete the look of the murdering outlaw—he had cultivated it well to keep his victims properly terrified. It had certainly worked on Allegra Monteverdi.

Do not go after her.

Those eyes. *My God, those eyes*, he thought.

He stepped toward the fire and crouched down, uncertain how to proceed. He uncorked his flask, ignoring the curious glances of the people around him, and took a long, long drink. He could not get the image of her face from his mind.

That light. He would snuff out that light from the world. He resolved to make it painless for her and, lowering his head, blamed a sudden sense of nausea on the rum.

When he glanced up again, the old, frail farmer on the other side of the fire was staring at him as if trying to recall some dim fact from his senile brain. That steady, searching gaze made Lazar uncomfortable.

“Hey, *paisan*,” one of the peasant men said to him with a sideward wink. “Governor’s girl caught your eye, did she?”

He stared at him.

“Go get her, man!”

“Ho, ho, that’s asking for the gallows!” another declared, laughing.

“She’s a pretty piece,” a thin, hungry-looking man said, then looked evilly at the others. “Maybe you ought to send Monteverdi a message tonight.”

“I’d be interested in that,” another mumbled.

“Are you mad? He’ll stretch all your necks!” a robust fisherman scoffed.

“So what? He means to hang all of us sooner or later,” the first retorted.

Others took interest.

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