

WEAPON OF
CHOICE

SUSANNA KEARSLEY

THE STORM

“A fearful eye thou hast...
So foul a sky clears not without a storm.”
—Shakespeare, *King John*: act 4, scene 2

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HE NEVER WOULD TIRE of watching her sleep. In his boyhood, when he'd still believed in such things, he'd imagined what angels must look like. To his eyes, awake or asleep, that was how Mary looked. Like an angel. *His* angel.

His wife.

If someone had told him a year ago he'd earn the love of a woman like this, he'd have thought them insane.

Before she'd crossed his path, he'd been resigned to going through his life unburdened by entanglements and sentiment, in service to the earl he had protected since the time when they had both been younger men.

He'd done what needed to be done. He'd killed when duty had required it. When duty had required him to guard two women and a man in Paris, he had done as he was ordered, keeping safely out of sight, as was his habit. In the shadows.

He'd been watching from his window when she stepped down from the coach into the Paris street. And from that moment, everything had changed.

She'd brought him back into the light.

She stirred, curled in the berth set in the curved hull of this forward cabin of the ship. They'd shared this cabin once before, when she had neither trusted him nor liked him much, and he

had made his bed upon the floor, but now she reached for him, still sleeping, as she often did. Her hand fell on the empty blankets where he had been lying, and he watched her eyes drift open.

“Hugh?”

He’d finished dressing. In its bracket on the wall the lamp was swinging, throwing his tall shadow into motion.

She was only half-awake. “Is something wrong?”

Extinguishing the lamp, he told her, “No. Go back to sleep.”

It was a touching measure of her faith in him that, by the time he’d reached the door, her breathing had resettled in its former peaceful rhythm, and he took great care to let the latch fall gently as he left the cabin.

Up on deck, his eyes adjusting to the darkness of a night sky lit by nothing but a crescent moon against a sweep of stars, he found the captain standing by the rail.

Captain Marcos María del Río Cuerda was Hugh’s exact opposite—handsome and cultured and gallant with ladies, his coats made of velvet, his cuffs edged with lace, his dark beard and curling hair trimmed in the fashion of his native Spain. But he’d earned Hugh’s respect and, within limits, his trust.

And he didn’t miss much. Without looking around from the rail now, Del Río said, “You have just won me a wager, my friend.” He called up to the brown-skinned sailor working to make some adjustment to the rigging, “You see, Juan? It is as I told you.”

Whatever Juan answered was carried away by the wind, but Del Río looked satisfied. “I told him when we changed course, ‘Watch now, MacPherson will come up to see what is happening,’ but Juan was sure you’d stay sleeping. It was a good wager. Shall I tell you what you’ve won me?”

Hugh said nothing. Stepped up to the rail. “Tell me why we’ve changed course.”

“Ah. Because of that.” Del Río gave a nod to where the stars were being swallowed by a rising wall of blackness. “It is the time for storms here in these seas of course, but this, to me, does not

look like an ordinary storm. And always it is better to prevent than to lament. If it worsens, we may have to change our course again and seek a port for shelter. Portofino is the closest. But that may spoil your plans to be in Genoa in two days' time."

"My plans will also be spoiled if I'm drowned."

Del Rio grinned. "It's true. It's also true, my friend, that you are changed since last I saw you. You now have a sense of humor. I give credit to your lovely wife. A woman most remarkable." His grin broadened. "I can promise you, if you *are* drowned, I will take the best care of her and see she is not lonely."

Hugh reminded him, "You have a wife."

A pause. "Ah, yes, my wife, of course. And now we also have a son. Did I already mention this?"

"No."

"It is a great thing, to have a family. I can recommend it. I would have them with me, but it has not been so safe since this past summer, with so many ships mixed in all the fighting for Oran."

Hugh knew this well, because the war had delayed his own plans to journey with the earl to Spain and build a home with Mary there. Instead, they had been held at Rome.

"Since then," Del Rio said, "the corsairs have been a great annoyance. They have kept me very busy."

Underneath the offhand elegance there lay an iron strength. Del Rio once had been a pirate, before turning those same skills to a more honorable use in hunting pirates for the Spanish crown—specifically the Barbary corsairs who prowled these seas in search of plunder, making slaves of those they captured.

That the Spaniard smiled and joked and was a gallant host did nothing to erase the fact that he was as adept as Hugh at killing when the need arose, and any man who failed to see the ruthless edge concealed within the velvet scabbard did so at his peril.

As did any man who let his guard down when Del Rio asked a question that seemed innocent.

"Your wife's maid and the little dog are still at Rome?"

Hugh answered, not confirming or denying this, “They do not travel well.”

“Of course. It’s just that I’ve heard reports you Jacobites have trouble there—that all the court of your King James at Rome is under heavy guard.”

He glanced at Hugh, who kept his gaze fixed on the storm, unhelpfully.

“But maybe these reports are wrong,” Del Rio said. “The English tell so many lies about your king, to make their own King George seem more legitimate, as though they did not steal your own king’s birthright and his crown and put it on a German prince for no more reason than your James was born a Catholic. It’s a very great injustice.” He sighed, then added, “Still, these things that I have heard about the troubles of your king at Rome—they do not seem like lies. I’m told the pope himself is much concerned, and orders no one is to enter Rome without great scrutiny. As though they fear that someone may be coming who is dangerous.”

Hugh kept his face impassive, though he knew it would have no effect.

His silence did not stop Del Rio. “And if your king was sending you to Genoa because of something dangerous, I do not think that you would bring your wife. Unless,” he said, “this danger was so great you could trust no one else to keep her safe.”

The wind was rising, and more stars had now been lost behind the swiftly spreading blackness. Hugh’s eyes narrowed on the swelling waves. “Is that a ship?”

Del Rio looked, and swore.

“Corsairs?” Hugh asked.

The Spaniard raised his spyglass for a better view, and swore again. “No. Something worse.”

He handed Hugh the spyglass. From that distance, Hugh could only see the white of sails that caught the pale faint gleam of moonlight, with the dark shape of a running ship beneath it, and small glints of light like those of lanterns near the prow.

Del Rio said, "It is Vautour. We have a long acquaintance."

"French?"

"I do not think Lambert Vautour claims any country as his own, and I am sure none claims him back." He called again to Juan, up in the rigging. "Leave that. Go and get the others. I want every man on deck. We make for Portofino. Tell them it is La Sirène." And with a final quick assessment of the far-off sails now being chased toward them by the ever-growing dark, he turned his back against the rising gale. "At least we know now why there is a storm."

Hugh frowned. "A ship can't raise a storm."

"I would agree," Del Rio said. There was a grimness to his voice that Hugh had never heard before. "But La Sirène is not a ship."