

## Journey's End

Charles took the small box from the sailor next to him and opened the lid. Isobel's cleanly shaven brother, with his richly dyed and gold-buttoned waistcoat, looked out of sorts sitting on the deck of the ship surrounded by scruffy and ragged sailors, though Isobel knew she must look just as out of place sitting in her light blue dress, the skirt of which coated around her and over her crossed legs in a cloud of silk.

Isobel saw the corner of Charles's lips tip up in an unwilling and almost unnoticeable smile as he took in the dice. She knew exactly what that barely perceptible smile meant— the sailor who had passed the dice to Charles had lied and there were not two sixes in the box. She would guess that there was nothing of value in there whatsoever. Nevertheless, Isobel's brother picked up three of the dice, careful to keep the rest of them hidden behind the lifted lid as he rolled them back into the box.

"Three sixes," he said contently as he passed the box to the sailor next to Isobel.

The sailor swallowed nervously as he opened the box, telling Isobel everything she needed to know. He picked up two of the dice, keeping up the façade as he rolled them, and Isobel had to give him credit for keeping his face expressionless as he closed the lid and passed the box along to Isobel.

"Three sixes and two threes," he told her, his gruff Scottish voice not even wavering.

"You're a liar, Lachlan," Isobel said, not opening the lid yet.

"You sure about that lass?" he asked with a smirk.

"I'm certain," Isobel replied, placing the box in the middle of their circle and opening the lid so that everyone could see what the dice said. Good-natured laughter rang out over the eight sailors that were either playing or watching, and Charles clicked his tongue and shook his head in sympathy.

"For God's sake, lass," Lachlan sighed. "You've already stolen everyone else's money. Did you have to take mine as well?" he asked but he smiled as he handed her two shillings.

"Sorry, Lachlan," Isobel said. "You can blame Charles for letting on that Richard had lied."

Lachlan turned his gaze to her brother. "That true Charles?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

"Of course not," Charles spluttered.

"You smiled when you saw the dice," Isobel explained with a grin. "It's what you do when the person before your turn lies."

"You little sneak," Charles yelled, pointing his finger at her accusingly.

"I'm not to blame for your bad lying," she told him, making the sailors around them hoot with laughter.

"Ah, lass, you're nothing like we'd expected," Lachlan said, patting Isobel on the back. He might have been trying to be gentle but the werewolf was too large for the hit not to send her tipping forward.

"What did you expect?" Isobel asked curiously as she took all of the dice out of the box and rolled them for the next round.

"A spoiled princess who was afraid to get her dresses dirty," Lachlan said honestly.

"A rich lady who stayed away from us dirty sailors," Richard, the werewolf who'd lied to Charles added with a broad grin.

"Aye, we expected you to be a real pain in the ass," Lachlan told her, earning a scowl from Isobel. "But you turned out to be alright."

"Though I would have preferred to have kept my money," a sailor who had stopped to watch their game grumbled. "When you sat down on that first day and asked how the game was played, I thought we'd be rich by the end of the journey."

Little did he or any of the other sailors know that she was planning on giving the captain five times as much as she'd won from them all, and it would be divided amongst the crew as soon as the ship had docked in Boston Harbor. Much as it had been fun to play dice with the sailors and knock the ideas they had about women being bad gamblers from their heads, they needed the money far more than she did. Charles had already paid the captain for the journey but she didn't think that what he'd charged had been enough and she wanted to thank them for being such good company on the journey over— not all sailors would have been happy to have Lycans on board their ship after all.

"I warned you," Charles told the sailor, shaking his head at the poor soul.

"And we thought you just wanted your sister as far from us as possible," Lachlan explained with a chuckle.

"I suppose you weren't entirely mistaken," Charles admitted with an embarrassed grimace.

"It's entirely improper for a princess to be sitting on the floor with a group of men. Unaccompanied nonetheless," Katherine, Isobel's lady's maid piped up as she approached the group.

"Charles is here," Isobel pointed out to the young woman who'd started as Isobel's maid but had soon become her closest friend.

"Charles is about as irresponsible as you are," Katherine replied with a roll of her eyes. "Imagine my distress when I woke to find the princess out of her bed and I now find her gambling," she explained dramatically. "If your brother wasn't the one who hired me, I would have been relieved of my duties months ago."

"Alexander, would you please tell Katherine that she needn't worry so much," Isobel asked the guard who was leaning against the railing of the ship watching them with a lovesick look on his face.

"I'm not sure if she'd listen to me," Alexander replied with a sigh.

"She would," Isobel insisted. "She loves you."

"Since she's to be my wife, I'd hope so," Alexander said, his smile widening. "But my Katherine is strong-headed. She doesn't listen to me."

"Well that's just not true," Katherine argued with a mischievous grin. "I listen to you when you have something intelligent to say. It just doesn't happen very often is all."

Isobel laughed with the others at Alex's expense but it was the guard who had the last laugh when he stormed over to Katherine andopped her over his shoulder.

"A woman must respect her man," Alexander yelled for all on the ship to hear but there was no anger in his voice.

"Put me down you brute," Katherine demanded, slapping at Alex's legs uselessly.

"Do you respect me?" Alex asked, spinning around so that an upside-down Katherine was spun with him.

"Not when you act in this manner," Katherine told him, making Isobel, Charles, and the sailors chuckle.

"That's not what I wanted to hear," Alexander told her, grinning as he spun her around yet again.

In human society, their behavior would have been seen as highly improper and distasteful, but among werewolves and Lycans who understood the nature of their bond, Katherine and Alex were free to behave like the smitten and besotted mates they were.

"Alright! Alright!" Katherine squealed. "I respect you, Alexander. I respect you more than any woman has ever respected any man."

Alex shifted his grip and Katherine's weight so that she was now cradled in his arms and no longer upside down. "I'm not sure if I believe you but I'll take it," he said to her, smiling down at her with so much love in his eyes that Isobel felt a utter of jealousy in her chest.

It wasn't that she saw Alex in that way. Not at all. Isobel was only jealous that Katherine had found someone who looked at her in that manner. The lady's maid and the guard had found out they were mates the day Katherine turned eighteen a few months earlier, and the two of them were happier than Isobel had ever seen anyone. It would be frightening how enamored they were with each other if it weren't for how sweet the two of them were together.

As a Lycan, Isobel could never expect such a thing for herself. Unless her mate happened to be of a royal Lycan bloodline, she wouldn't marry for love. She expected her situation was much the same as any princess's would be, but knowing there were humans suffering a similar fate as her didn't make it any easier to bear.

Marriage was the reason for their journey, and Isobel was dreading what awaited her in Boston. At eighteen she was more than old enough to marry, and her father had nally summoned her to the American colonies to fulfill her duty as a young woman. She was to be paraded around until an appropriate suitor, whom Edward approved of, proposed, and once married, their children would continue the Lycan royal line of whoever's family she married into. So, no, Princess Isobel Alder would not have the kind of happiness that Katherine and Alexander had found in each other, and neither would Charles.

At least in London they'd had the freedom to mainly do as they pleased but now that they were sailing to meet their father, Isobel knew that their lives were about to become a lot more miserable. Charles might receive the worst of it considering he wasn't even supposed to be on the ship to Boston— Edward had given strict orders that he stay in London and continue to see over the estate. Charles however had refused to let Isobel go alone and he'd left their mother's brother in charge of the mansion and all the servants who worked there. Unlike their father, their uncle was a good man so they knew he could be trusted to run things well and treat those who worked there with respect.

Katherine and Alexander were the only ones who had made the journey with them, and Isobel could only hope that their father would accept that the two of them would be staying on as Isobel's lady's maid and as their personal guard respectively. From what Isobel remembered of her father though, he was a cruel beast of a man. Isobel would do what she could to protect Katherine and Alexander from his wrath, and so would Charles of course, but Isobel knew that even as a Lycan, she held little power. She could only hope that King Edward had learned to control his temper, both towards his servants and towards his children.

"All men on deck!" the captain yelled from the bow of the ship. "Boston Harbor is straight ahead!"

The sailors scrambled to their positions, and Charles and Isobel stood and moved to the side to get out of their way.

"Why do I feel disappointed that our journey is coming to an end?" Charles asked his sister as they gazed over the ship's railing.

Isobel breathed in the salty sea air and smiled a bittersweet smile as a cool breeze ruffled her dress and blew over her face. She was looking forward to being on dry land again but she would miss the sound of waves lapping against the sides of the ship and the clean air that was so hard to come by in a city. The morning sun shone down on the city and she could see through steeples rising tall over what looked like a chone of brick. It was nowhere near as big as London, something that she wasn't sure if she liked or not.

"Because our destination isn't one that we would have chosen for ourselves," Isobel replied with a heavy sigh.

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'And when love speaks, the voice of all the gods, Make heaven drowsy with the harmony.'

Love's Labor's Lost – William Shakespeare