

The Beauty of Dunwich
By Shannon Salter

Chapter 5

Tristan watched the range of emotions flit across her face as she described the fate of the city. He could tell that she loved the seaside town and felt himself moved with the same feelings as her story came to life. Her descriptions were so detailed that it painted vivid scenes in his head and he could almost believe that the city still stood, alive and bustling. He watched the sorrow fill her eyes as she came to an end, silently looking out over of the water that hid the crumbled ruins.

"I will miss this place," she sighed.

He hesitated momentarily before asking slowly. "So do I take it then, that you have resigned yourself to the thought of becoming Lady Rockwell?"

Bethany kept her gaze out over the turbulent water. "It is my fathers wish."

"Do you love him?"

She flinched slightly and raised her chin. "He is my betrothed."

"Yes," he took a step closer so he could look deep into her eyes. "But do you love him?"

Indignation flashed in her eyes as she turned to face him. "You overstep your mark! I will not tolerate such insolence!"

A small knowing smile curved his lips as he dropped his head in a nod. "I did not mean to cause offense, m'lady. Please accept my apologies." With a small bow he turned to leave.

She hesitated momentarily. "Don't go," she called softly.

He turned back to her, an eyebrow raised. "Mistress?"

"I..." she thought hastily for an explanation. "I wish to learn more of my betrothed."

"As you wish." He moved back to her side, his gaze on the ocean, and waited for her to speak.

She thought for a moment before saying, "Why does he wish to marry me? Surely he must know that I have no dowry, so monetary gain could not be his motive."

Tristan smiled. "Sir Rockwell is a man of means in his own right. He inherited the family estate when his elder brother died of influenza a few years back and with it the family fortune. I do not know the exact figure but it was a rather large sum. The King is also quite pleased with his service in His Majesty's Army and has shown him favour on more than one occasion. So I can assure you he is not lacking in that respect. The fact that you have nothing to offer monetarily is of little consequence."

"So we shall lack for nothing. That is a comforting thought I suppose," she mused. "But why should he choose me?"

"That, perhaps, is a question more suited for his Lordship. However, your beauty is well renowned and I will venture a guess that that had something to do with his pursuit of your hand." He winked at her.

She sent him a smile that did not reach her eyes. "Seems a poor reason to enter the married state. I will not always have this face and what then? Is he to turn me out for the next beauty?" Tristan watched her thoughtfully as she sighed, but remained silent. His contemplative look disconcerted her and she wondered at his

thoughts. She tried to read the look in his eyes and noticed for the first time the golden flecks that seemingly swam in the emerald green pools and she felt herself being pulled inexplicably into their depths. Catching her breath, she felt a blush stain her cheeks as she realized she was staring. Dragging her eyes away, she didn't know how long she had been caught in his gaze but she did know that his eyes were ones she could get lost in. She resolved to be more careful and chanced a glance at him and saw he was amused by her discomfort. This irritated her and she raised her head haughtily. "Pray tell, does *my* Sir Rockwell enjoy the entertainment at court?"

He did not miss the emphasis she used when referring to Jarvis as *her* Sir. He smiled and dropped his gaze. "I believe *your* Sir Rockwell does not dislike the court. He enjoys the happy atmosphere; however he does not much care for the entertainments. He considers it a frivolity he can better do without and would much prefer to sit with his men, eat and drink to his full and discuss battle techniques."

"He is a man of strategy then."

"Indeed." Tristan gave a nod.

She chewed her lip and lost her haughty air. "Is he always so serious?"

Tristan chuckled. "Regrettably, yes. There was a time when we were at court. It was not long after Jarvis had won an important battle and the King held a great banquet in our behalf. There was a girl amongst the courtiers that had caught his eye but try as he might he could not awaken an interest in her for him. He was terribly drunk that eve and I couldn't resist but to play a trick on him. I went to him and told him that the beautiful courtier was waiting for him in the rose gardens beyond the courtyard. His intoxication had befuddled his mind so much that he didn't question it. So off he staggered to the rose gardens in search of his beloved courtier only to find it was a stable boy in a dress and a wig. He didn't realize it until the wig came off in his hands. I and a few of his men were hiding in the bushes and saw the scene play out. It was a cause for merriment for many weeks to follow. Alas he did not see the humour in it." Tristan laughed at the memory.

Bethany joined in his merriment, her eyes twinkling. "You are too cruel! I must admit, though, I am surprised he spared your life after such tom-foolery."

He smiled and looked her in the eye. "Fortunately, he does not have much say in the matter of my life."

She frowned. "Is he not your Lord and Commander?"

He shook his head. "Nay, Mistress." He paused for a moment, deciding if to continue. "He is my cousin."

"Your cousin?" She frowned with thought. "If he is indeed your cousin, that would make you—"

"Sir Branaugh." He smiled softly.

She stared at him in shock as her heart fell to her stomach. Remembering her words to him just moments before and her lofty attitude, she dropped to her knees and bowed her head before him. "Forgive me, my Lord. I did not know."

He knelt in front of her and with his hand under her chin, gently raised her troubled eyes to his. "Do not let it distress you, m'lady. It is quite refreshing to meet someone with such a quick wit and who is not afraid to speak her mind. Come now," he took her hands. Her face still held some remnants of shock and embarrassment as he gently pulled her to her feet. Her heart was pounding and she found that she was

tongue tied. Memories of previous conversations flooded back to mind and she grew indignant. Frowning at him she asked, "Why did you not tell me who you really are?"

She saw the laughter in his eyes as he said, "And miss out on all this fun?" At his words her indignation flared to anger and, snatching her hands away from him, she took a step back. The angry retort that hovered on her lips died as she realized how close she was to the cliff edge and horror filled her as she felt her footing slip. The clay edge began to crumble beneath her as she flailed desperately to regain her balance. With no luck she slipped over the cliff edge, a terrified scream escaping her.

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