

ECSTASY

EXCERPT

"Shall we retire?" Kell asked his new wife.

With a gesture of his arm, he invited Raven to precede him. He escorted her upstairs to the master bedchamber and let her enter first. The room was softly lit by a single lamp, while a fire burned warmly in the hearth -- perfectly appropriate for a bridal couple on their wedding night.

As he closed the door behind them, he saw Raven stop and take stock of the huge bed with its brocade curtains. The covers had been turned down invitingly. Her glance quickly shied away to focus on anything else.

"I suppose this is where you conduct your orgies?" she asked -- whether out of belligerence or curiosity or merely to buy time, he wasn't certain.

"What would a well-bred young lady know about orgies?" he drawled.

"Several gentlemen of my acquaintance are members of the Hellfire League, and I've heard rumors.... It isn't difficult to guess what sort of wicked perversions occur at their gatherings."

The Hellfire League, Kell knew, was a notorious group of rakes and adventurers. But he had never been invited to join their distinguished ranks.

"I haven't conducted an orgy in quite some time," Kell said dryly.

"You cannot make me believe you are not a rake."

"Then I won't attempt to," he retorted. "But I will say that I prefer one bed partner at a time. And that I am not particularly fond of perversions."

When she clasped her fingers together and looked away, he decided she was simply nervous.

"If it will reassure you, vixen, I'll promise to try to control my rakehell lusts. Should I fail, you can always shoot me again."

At his deliberate taunt, her chin shot up and a frown scored her beautiful features. "I said I was sorry for that."

Kell sighed. "So you did. Let's just get this over with, shall we?"

He started to remove his cravat and found Raven staring at him again. "It is customary to get undressed before bed, madam wife."

"Must we? So soon? I scarcely know you."

"You weren't nearly this shy last night."

"But I was drugged last night. I scarcely recall anything about what happened."

Kell studied her, wondering at the truth of her claim. It was possible that in her drugged state, she hadn't been entirely aware of her actions or how passionate her response had been. It irked him that he was the only one who remembered their scorching, unforgettable night together. Yet he couldn't credit that she was as innocent as she was pretending.

"Allow me to refresh your memory then. You nearly ravished me. You weren't the least intimidated."

"That is because... I mistook you for someone else."

"Someone else?" There was a sharp edge to his voice that Kell recognized as jealousy. Raven was a virgin, he would swear to it, but that didn't preclude her from giving out other sexual favors freely. "Then you admit you've had other lovers?"

"No, not exactly. Not... a real lover."

His eyebrow shot up. "Perhaps you should explain."

"I don't think you would understand."

"Indulge me."

Restlessly she moved over to the hearth and began to pace, still clenching her hands. "I'm not at all as experienced as you think me. I have never told anyone this before, but I... I created a lover in my fantasies." Her cheeks flushed with evident embarrassment, she cast him a swift glance as if to see the effect of her confession.

"Do go on. I am fascinated. Why would you have need to create a lover when doubtless there are scores of men who would jump at the chance to fulfill that role for you?" Kell asked skeptically.

"Because... as I'm sure you know... well-bred ladies cannot take real lovers without risking disgrace." She hesitated, looking more discomfited than he'd ever seen her. "And because, well, it is much safer that way. One cannot truly fall in love with a fantasy."

"And falling in love concerns you?"

"Well, yes." She actually seemed flustered by his questions. "Love is like a potent drug. It can take over your sanity, destroy common sense and logic. A woman who loves has no power over her life." Her fists clenched. "I vowed long ago I would never follow in my mother's footsteps."

"So you invented an imaginary lover?"

"Yes," she admitted with obvious reluctance. Her voice dropped to a mere murmur. "A pirate, in fact."

Kell found himself at a loss for words; once again Raven had startled him with her uniqueness. He thought back to the previous night, remembering how she had addressed him, calling him "my pirate." She had evidently mistaken him for her fantasy lover.

"You must have a very vivid imagination," he said finally. "But I suspect there is little danger of us falling in love. Ours is a marriage of convenience, nothing more. I have no intention of joining the legions of men who have succumbed to your charms."

"I assure you, I don't wish you to succumb," Raven said rather tartly.

"What is this, vixen? Wounded vanity?"

She bristled at the edge of mockery in his tone. "I wouldn't be wounded in the least if you forgot about my existence altogether."

"I shall strive to do just that -- immediately after we consummate our union. Come here, Raven."

When she remained rooted to the floor, he moved toward the bed. "I was serious when I said the honors will have to fall to you. You will have to take the initiative."

She flushed. "I don't think I would know where to begin."

Kell smiled as he settled back against the headboard. "Perhaps you should use that vivid imagination of yours."

Excerpt from Ecstasy by Nicole Jordan
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