



RUM: BROTHERS – BOOK ONE © 2010 A. JANE ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## CHAPTER 1

*The Isle of Ganos, Eastern Islands, seventeen years later...*

Ignoring the biting late winter winds the month of Nayo always produced, Rum stood at the railing of *The Argyn Ot* watching his captain, Golden Boots, converse with Suede Boots. Rum was unable to tear his eyes from the handsome pirate standing to the side of Captain Boots, staring each time his gaze fell upon Suede since their captain moved boat and crew from Argos to Ganos six months past.

Very well, he had always had trouble keeping his eyes from Suede, ever since that first brief meeting after Red Boots took he and Gin in. Suede had been eighteen at the time and full of himself, cocksure and proud, knowing that one day he would have his very own boat. Rum doubted very much that Suede even remembered him, as he had been preoccupied with the journey he was about to embark upon to the Far Western Archipelago. But then why should he remember? Why should he have even noticed the shy, red-faced lad hiding behind another, unable to form two coherent words, transfixed as he was by such masculine beauty? Even at

eighteen, Suede had been a picture of perfection.

Over the years, with each chanced and brief glimpse, the yearnings he felt for Suede only grew, but never could he find the courage to do anything about it, to dare claim the man as treasure for fear of rejection. So he watched and dreamed, but never dared hope to be noticed or approached—Suede seemed to be the sort who preferred his lovers to stand out and Rum did his best not to be noticed; old habits were hard to break.

Even now, after nearly five years of absence from Ganos, when the feelings should have long abated, they had only intensified.

Shifting his stance, Rum tried to ease the chafing tension in his breeches, hoping that his twin was not around to witness his foolishness; Gin would tease endlessly as he did each time he caught him staring.

He quickly moved away from the rail when Suede looked up, doing his best to appear busy. Under his breath he begged the High Guardians that his face turn not red, that his erection show not visible from the dock—he was wearing a shearling-lined jerkin to keep his arms free while he worked, but the garment only came to mid-hip. He suddenly wished he had on his coat for it hung down to just above his knees.

With stealthy sideways glances, he attempted to peek at the other man, his desire to keep him in sight beyond his control; he was such shiny, shiny treasure. He only wished the weather would warm up again, hating that he was unable see the way Suede's breeches hugged his legs, his buttocks, the way his shirt clung to him in the sea breeze with his winter coat on—Suede never wore a jerkin during the warmer months.

When the man smiled...

He shook his head before he started becoming too fanciful. Had he the courage, he would ask Suede to join him for a drink at the local pub. Maybe he would do more than stare into smoky eyes. Maybe he would be bold enough to touch Suede's thick black hair, play with the end of his long braid, or maybe touch their lips together.

He shuddered with lust at the thought.

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Suede scanned the area looking for the source of his admirer, having felt the eyes upon him since starting the conversation with his nephew. Actually that feeling had been plaguing him for the last several months, and he wished to know who looked, wished to finally know his admirer. He was certain that it must be admiration, for never did he sense any malevolence, only desire and lust.

He probed with his magik, desperate to know, and could tell that it came from Golden Boots' boat, but...there was none save the single crewmember busy at work. Probing further, he realized the sensation was faltering, except... Unless, it was that very crewmember staring. Narrowing his eyes, he tried to bring to mind the pirate's name, certain he was not a new member of *The Argyn Ot's* crew.

He took a step towards the gangplank, wanting a closer look, for he wished to see more of this crewmember than his profile, to perhaps speak with him if he caught his fancy. He would enjoy having companionship for the evening.

“Is there something amiss, uncle?” Golden Boots followed Suede's gaze. He barely kept the smile off his face upon seeing Rum's attempt to appear productive. He held no notion as to why the man acted in such a manner, wondering why he refused to inform Suede of his attraction. Times there were that Rum forgot he was pirate, not that he himself, could judge—he did his best to forget his own past as a Titledman, but there were times it snuck up on him and he thought it might be the same for the other man. The past was like a parasite, digging deep into one's soul and refusing to be excised.

“Ever have ye felt as if someone watches ye?”

“'Tis rare when I do not. That *is* what happens when one is an attractive man,” he offered, teasing.

Suede peered at Boots, rolling his eyes, thinking him rather arrogant for recently having his broken and scarred face fixed. The lad claimed that Zasara had done the deed, but all knew that the van Wyrn had been helping him with the realignment of bones, and so ignored the claim.

“'Tis a horrible name ye are stuck with.”

“I quite like my name, and I mind not the translation of it either.”

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“Of course ye like it, lad, but it means not ‘tis a good name. Unless ye enjoy when Leather calls ye Goldie?”

Boots narrowed his eyes. He knew what Suede was about, but it still caused his hackles to rise. “Leather cared not for my response last he used that name, doubt I do you would care for it either, and my little brother you are not.”

“Oh ho! Mayhap ye have been left unchallenged for too long, *Goldie*.”

Boots worked his jaw, rolled his neck. He *hated* being called Goldie. “Any time you desire a go, *old man*.”

Suede laughed—he was only two years older than Boots, far from old—and then swung his fist, grazing Boots’ chin. Acknowledging his nephew’s speed with a slow nod—Boots had to be fast for him to have only clipped him—he looked forward to the ensuing tussle. “Consider the challenge offered, *Goldie*.”

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Rum’s eyes widened seeing Boots and Suede circling each other, fighting, and found himself once more at the rail, gripping it, his knuckles white, trying not to rush down with an offer of aid.

“But to whom would ye offer aid, brother?” Gin looked over his twin’s shoulder at the two men brawling on the dock. He laughed when his brother nearly fell overboard, but then stepped back allowing Rum room to move.

“Mayhap I ought to take example from our capt’n and thrash you.” He had never been able to completely master the full guttural tones of the pirate, unlike Gin who sounded as if he had been born speaking the way of the seafarer. His own *yous* and *yours* were soft, the vowels still a bit rounded instead of sharp, but he did not hold it against himself since Boots spoke in a similar fashion. Nor had he been able to fully rid himself of his Lyndian brogue, or so Gin said, but Rum did not mind that either. The fact was, he held no desire to lose his brogue—he did not want to lose a single connection to his parents.

“’Twould not feel particularly pleasant were ye to strike me. Recall Auntie Peach’s curse

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upon ye.” Gin liked calling Perta by her translated name. His doing so was twofold: one it would have upset the old bitch, and two, it helped to remind himself he was pirate, not a lost little boy.

“The bitch always did favor you, but forget not that the curse betrayed her original plan.”

“Aye, ‘tis why I never offer threats of violence towards ye.” Gin looked over the railing. “So, my twin, who would ye aid, our capt’n or the one ye desire to fuck?”

“Other ways there are to cause you suffering. Mayhap I ought to tell the barkeep you desire to lower his breeches.” He watched his brother’s nostril’s flare, his hands fist, and lifted an inquiring brow; he knew Gin would never strike him and he would not strike Gin—no matter how much he wished to, or threatened to on so many occasions. Now wrestle about, that was another matter and they did that often enough—more often than not, he defeated Gin.

“‘Tis not the way of it!”

“Then why not claim the man for your own. I see you stare at him. Admit I must—though he is not to my taste—that he is quite pretty.”

“When I captain my own boat, mayhap then I will do so.”

Rum shook his head and returned to watching the fight between Boots and Suede. “We grow not younger, my brother. Reached we have the age of thirty and two, but have naught to show for it.”

“We hold not the funds to purchase our own boat and nae funds did we receive from either the Pys or the Kakes to increase those we save.”

“Aye. May both sides rot in The Firebreath.”

“And suffer an eternity of The Firedaimon’s torture.” Gin grinned, enjoying their usual epithets for their families.

After a moment Rum spoke, “Afraid I am that I would aid Capt’n Suede and not our own capt’n so I stay up here and do naught.”

“Certain I am that our capt’n would forgive ye were he to know yer feelings.”

“Bah! ‘Twould get me keelhauled and well you know it.” Rum was most pleased when Red arrived and grabbed Boots and Suede their ears, ending the fight. He wanted to kiss away the trickle of blood from Suede’s split lip, to ease the sting of pain, but again he stayed where he was.

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Suede swung his fist at Red once he released his ear, but his older brother was obviously prepared for the retaliation and ducked. “Bastard.”

“Do I grab yer ear again, little brother?”

“Why do ye care if the lad and I fight?”

Red crossed his arms over his chest. “It upsets my Flower to see the lad fighting.”

“And yet I see her not about the docks. Besides, the lad offered threats.”

Boots snarled, “You called me Goldie.”

Suede grinned. “Aye, I did, *Goldie*.”

This time Red smacked the two men on the back of their heads.

“Papa!” Boots rubbed at the sting, frowning at his father. “Nae need was there to strike me; know you do I dislike it.”

“Do ye deny yer fist was clenched and ready to swing? This is Ganos, not Argos.”

“Do you say that the pirates of Ganos are different than those who reside upon Argos, that never do they fight?”

“More civilized are we, lad. We keep our fights meaningful.”

“That he pokes fun at the name Mamé gave me is not a meaningful reason? If that is so, ‘tis the first I have heard of it, for you did naught when I took Leather to task.”

“Goldie...”

Boots rounded on Suede. “Then call me *GB* since you cannot bring yourself to call me Boots. ‘Tis what the *intelligent* members of this family do.”

“GB? What sort of name is...?” Suede poked further at his nephew.

“Enough! Too old are ye both to be arguing in such a manner.” Red turned his attention to *The Argyn Ot* before his son could argue further. “Better care ye should take of her.”

“I take fine care of my boat!” Boots crossed his arms over his chest and glowered at his father, further annoyed, then turned the angry gaze at Suede when he had the temerity to snort. “Always is her paint fresh and nae loose boards will you find; her sails never have holes and her

rope is always strong. Mayhap you would care to inspect her since you give me so little trust.”

Red patted his son’s shoulder, fighting the grin twitching at his lips, finding joy in his son’s reaction—there was pride in the lad’s eyes for his boat, ‘twas why he had given her to him. He thought it a good thing that he hadn’t trimmed his beard recently or his son would know of his enjoyment in teasing him.

Red directed his attention to Suede. “Have ye found a man ye want for husband, little brother? Promised I did our father that I would see ye settled with a family of yer own. I am most certain he would have wanted ye married with a passel of children before this date.”

When Red’s lecture turned towards him, Suede was ready to strike Boots once more for daring to smirk. “Wonder I do, *dearest brother*, what Papa would think were he to know ye nag like an old woman.”

Red glared at Suede. He had been a man grown with grown children of his own when his father, Dealer Boots, returned home from the Far Western Archipelago with baby Suede. He claimed the child son and a Boots—despite the baby having his mother’s darker skin and hair color—uncaring that he was nigh seventy-five years of age, daring any to say he should have been the child’s grandfather or even great grandfather. The randy old bastard died in a woman’s bed when Suede was fifteen. That was twenty years ago.

“Laugh again, my son, and toss ye I will into the harbor.” He looked at Boots and waited for him to dare snicker once more.

“You do tend to lecture.” Boots shoved his hands into the deep pockets of his captain’s coat; his fingers ached with the cold. Yeryl and Zasara, how he disliked winter. That he sailed further east come morn brought him pleasure, knowing that it was a good ten degrees warmer in the Far Eastern Archipelago and five degrees warmer still upon the Far Eastern Continent.

“Mayhap if ye listened to me, less need would there be for me to do so. Now...” Red turned his attention to *The Argyn Ot* once more. “Master Kake, a need I have to speak with ye.”

Rum sucked in a breath, startled by the summons, having been blissfully staring at Suede again, fantasizing about stripping him bare and running his hands and mouth over light cocoa skin.

“Wonder I do what Capt’n Red wants.” Gin shoved his brother towards the gangplank,

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trying to not see his brother's fantasies. He oft wondered if Rum was a bit into the kink, having been subjected too many times to those daydreams of his, when all he wanted was to probe his thoughts.

“Master Kake, did ye hear me?”

“Aye, Capt'n Red.” Rum rushed down the gangplank.

When Red gave *The Argyn Ot* to Boots almost five years past, he had asked them to help his son acclimate to being captain, and for Red, they would do anything, still would do anything for him. How could they not when he had saved their lives, gave them purpose?

“Mayhap, Master Py, ye should come as well.”

“Aye, Capt'n Red.” Gin ran after Rum, positioned himself next to his brother as they stood before the older man.

“Is all well, Capt'n Red?” Rum did his best to keep his eyes from straying toward Suede and he thought he was succeeding admirably well. He just wished that the heat creeping up his neck, flushing his face, would cease. To be this close...

“Aye, lad. How does my son treat ye?” He looked at the two men, pleased with their glow of health. It brought him much joy to have them once more residing upon Ganos.

He oft wondered if he had been wrong not to give them a boat of their own, for they were both skilled enough sailors to be their own captains, but he had not wished for Rum to continue to follow his brother and he would do so, allowing Gin to be the captain and he mayhap first mate or just navigator. He wanted Rum to be his own man, but he knew that were he to give them each a boat that Rum would be at a loss with the abrupt separation. So he waited for the day Rum found his courage.

“Golden Boots is a fine capt'n, sir. Does right by his crew and by *The Argyn Ot*. Is that not so, Gin?”

“Aye. The capt'n is as fine a capt'n as yerself, sir.”

“Tis good to hear, lads. And yerselves, how do ye fare?”

Gin nudged his brother and grinned. “I am well, but my brother, love sick he is.”

“Only are you saved by the curse, my brother, for my fists itch to trounce you.” Rum scowled at his twin, wishing to harm him for betraying his secret.

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Suede looked at Rum, his head tilted to the side, even more certain that he was the one that had been staring, and mind it he could not. Rum was a fine looking man, masculine, tall. His hair, the color of thick molasses with the sun reflecting through it, was pulled into a braid reaching well past fine shoulders, and the trimmed, thin-line beard and mustache added a rakish quality to his face.

He wondered how Rum received the long scar on the right side of his face. He followed the silvery line with his eyes from Rum's upper lip to the shallow nick on the outer shell of his ear. Whatever caused it, the scar held not the appearance of having been a deep wound. Suede looked down at his own arm and studied a similar scar, the perfect straight line; a shallow slice on his left forearm from wildly swung dagger. He returned to studying Rum, wishing to run his tongue over the fading scar.

“Curse or not, I speak true.” Gin continued grinning.

“A curse ye suffer from?” the thought was spoken out loud before Suede could censor himself as his mind was bellowing treasure.

Aye, Rum was definite treasure. He could only wonder why he had not seen it sooner. He recalled speaking with the one named Gin upon several occasions, but why could he not recall the one named Rum? Not even once since his nephew decided to call Ganos home.

Rum's head jerked around hearing that deep voice and found himself staring into smoky eyes. He opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out, for all he could think about was taking that full lower lip between his teeth. The earlier flushing worsened and his face turned the color of a ripe pallier. He closed his mouth and took a deep breath before trying again, hoping this time to form words without stumbling.

“Aye. Unable are we to strike the other without suffering the consequences of the other's pain.”

“Cuts and bruises as well,” Gin added. “Were I to attempt to bloody Rum's nose, 'twould be my nose that bled, not his.”

“And who would offer such a curse?” Continuing to hold his gaze, he learned the color of Rum's eyes—they were hazel, oak brown swirling with sea green. It pleased him the flushing of the other man's face, certain the attraction was mutual. But, for all of that, every pleasing

physical line of him, the most intriguing part of this man was that brogue. He was glad to be wearing his coat as it hid his rampant erection. The rolling R's and the dipping U's... He kept from grabbing Rum and fleeing to his quarters on *The Mischief*.

Gin continued speaking, knowing that his brother was struggling for words. "Our maternal aunt. Only did she mean to curse Rum, but with the way of curses, it betrayed her and cursed us both since we are twins. Never had we seen a more vivid shade of purple upon another's face than when she learned she was unable to undo what she had wrought."

Suede was shocked silent. The betrayal was not the curse, but from the aunt offering such a vile bit of magik. He wanted... Anger for his treasure filled him.

"'Tis quite entertaining. I punch him and 'tis I who will yelp." Gin brushed a bit of fallen blond hair off his forehead. He was one of very few pirates who kept his hair short, disliking the maintenance of caring for it long. He also kept his face clean-shaven, finding that wearing a beard itched. He received teasing for these two breaks in trend, but he dealt with it, preferring ease of function to long-standing custom.

"My brother," Rum gave Gin a light shove, finding his voice, "an odd notion he has of what is entertaining."

Red cleared his throat. This time he was unable to stop the grin. "Love sick are ye, Rum?"

"Oh aye," Gin answered once more for Rum, light blue eyes alight with trouble, "unable is he to take his eyes from..."

"I can still toss you in the cold water of the harbor without consequence do you dare continue speaking out of turn." Rum turned towards Gin, ready to do as threatened. "And in this moment, I care not if it did."

"I see not the problem, my twin. Would it not be a fine thing to air the secret? Mayhap..." He held his hands out in surrender when Rum advanced upon him, knowing his brother would do as threatened and was strong enough to do so with ease. "My brother is fine, Capt'n Red." But then again, what was a little cold water? "That he is unable to keep his eyes from Capt'n Suede truly is sweet."

Rum grabbed his brother and, after dragging him down the dock, threw him into the

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harbor. When Gin surfaced moments later, as Rum knew he would—Gin enjoyed the cold and, even more so, swimming in cold waters, so he held no worries—he stood with fists on his hips, glaring. “’Tis lucky you are I am unable to strike you, my twin, or trounce you well I would for the betrayal.”

“I love you too, my brother.” Gin blew kisses at Rum, laughing. He looked down the dock and was pleased by the way Suede looked with interest at Rum. In an objective view, his brother was ridiculously attractive when he was angry and he sent the thought to him just to be perverse.

“Disgusting you are, Gin,” he growled and then turned away.

Chuckling, Gin swam toward the dock. Hauling himself out, he came up behind Rum and hugged him, to pay him back for the dunking.

Red shook his head when the two brothers fell to the ground wrestling, swearing at each other. “A bad influence ye have been upon them, my son.”

“Already were they like this when you gave me the boat, Papa. ‘Tis why Argos made a fine home for them and makes me wonder if we should not return there.”

“Nae! Always has Ganos been home for the House of Boots and ‘twill always be home.”

“Mayhap, but admit I must to missing Argos. Never did I need worry about how I acted—we were pirates and so acted as such, fighting if a fight was needed. Nor did I need worry about what name I went by. Am I Golden Boots or Kino nar Zabo?”

“Ganos is a settled port, lad, with those who do and those who do not practice the trade. Quite accepting is the population of we pirates so long as we offer nae trouble.”

“’Tis an island settled by pirates!”

“Mayhap so, but it means not that we must have disorder. We have established businesses and storefronts upon Ganos and a social arrangement amongst the citizens. Also are there families with young children and even a small Academy for the children to attend.”

Suede ignored the argument between Red and Boots—it was one that all new residents pondered when confronted by the conundrum of Ganos. As it was, Suede could not tear his eyes from the man he wished to make his treasure, but did he dare do so now or did he wait until after Rum returned from his voyage? Should he at least make his interest known?

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“Methinks we should end the fight.” Suede took a step towards the wrestling siblings wanting to remove Rum from the tussle, unhappy at the thought that his treasure might be harmed in any fashion. He took another step and another, wondering if he would have to end the fight himself, but was stopped by Boots, a hand to his arm. So his nephew was aware of what went on despite his arguing with Red. Mayhap Boots’ reputation was deserved.

Boots crossed his arms over his chest, his face set in stubborn lines, and insisted, “‘Tis an island settled by *pirates*, Papa. *Pirates!*”

“And those very pirates raised families which flourished generation after generation until life began to resemble that of any other place, pirates or nae. Aye, still are there pirates in practice here, and aye, some even hide their names in translation, but that is not the point: a civilized place this is.” Red patted Boots on the shoulder. “My son, Ganos is a fine island. Too long have ye been without structure and so any amount chafes. Soon ‘twill not be a bother, I promise.”

“Yet Mamé calls you Rhys. And since your marriage, you have hidden your name.”

“Much hope do I have that soon she will call me Red, for I dislike hiding who I am—too long have I been about to be changing my ways now, nae matter how in love with the Dusalla I am. And Yeryl and Zasara know well I have tried. Though ye might be stuck with Kino, for yer mother has the son she long thought lost returned and ‘tis the name she gave ye.”

“True.” Boots watched the brothers continue to wrestle—Rum had the upper hand.

“Has yer mind settled then?”

“Nae. Still I find it odd.”

“Not so. Part of being pirate is keeping our business secret. The residents of Ganos need not know exactly what we are about and they mind not our keeping said business from them.”

“Red, ye make it complicated when ‘tis quite simple.” Suede glanced at his brother and nephew then returned to watching Rum. “Life on Ganos only appears civilized upon first, second and third glances, but most folks here, because of their pirate blood—and ‘tis rare for any to deny it flows through them—follow the very rules we, as pirates, live by. Many willingly protect us from outside meddling.”

“‘Tis...”

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“At least wait until the annual Treasure Hunt in a few months, my nephew, before judging us too harshly—’tis a fine time and cheating is expected and encouraged if ye want to win. Even the most upstanding citizens cheat shamelessly and cheat well.”

Boots sighed realizing it was a useless quarrel. He had chosen to settle boat and crew upon Ganos to be with his parents and so must learn to live in and negotiate the oddity of its residents’ attempt at being civilized.

“Mayhap, if ye like, when ye return from yer voyage, I will give ye a proper introduction to the joys of Ganos. If ‘tis excitement ye seek, I know where to find it.”

“Mayhap.” Deciding that Rum and Gin had wrestled enough, Boots stuck his thumb and forefinger in the corners of his mouth and released a piercing whistle. “Py! Kake!”

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Hearing the whistle, Gin and Rum jumped to their feet, wiping at their mouths and stood waiting for their captain’s orders. Gin stumbled to the side when Rum shoved him, teetering on the edge of the dock, arms flapping, before falling into the water. Laughter filled the air as Rum held his sides, doubled over with his glee.

“’Tis a fine expression upon your face, my brother,” he called out when Gin surfaced.

“Fuck ye, ye bilge rat. Revenge I will have and never will ye know when I strike.”

Rum kept laughing, that is until another whistle sounded. He stood straight and glanced at Boots. “Aye, Capt’n?”

“You and Gin change your wet clothing and meet us down at the pub. We will have a drink or two before we retire for the evening. Remember, we sail at first light.”

“Aye, Capt’n.” Rum started to leave, to head to the townhouse he shared with his brother. He was even colder now since Gin and he wrestled.

“Oh, and, Rum?”

He turned and looked at Boots, sneaking a peek at Suede as he did so. “Aye, Capt’n?”

Boots motioned towards Gin pulling himself once more out of the water. “’Twas a fine bit of underhandedness, that shove.”

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“Thank you, Capt’n.”