

# Storms of Allegiance

## Nik – Chapter 31

“Grey!” Costas leaned over, bracing his hands on his knees as he sucked in breaths.

“Grey is—” He panted again. “Delphine needs you!”

“What?” I grabbed his shoulders, pulling him upright as fear shot through me. “What are you talking about?”

Delphine was safely in the middle of the ballroom. She had to be. That’s where I’d left her when I dashed off to look for the man now in front of me. Not that I’d found him myself, despite my exhaustive search. He’d been the one to find me in the end.

“Tell me,” I said through clenched teeth. “What has Grey done? Where is Delphine?”

“In the garden,” he said, still out of breath but at least recovered enough to talk properly. “We were talking, and Grey overheard us, and—” He gave me a worried look. “She shoved me away and told me to run and find you. It looked like Grey was dragging her into the garden.”

“What?!” I let go of him and stepped back, my muscles trembling with tension. “The garden behind the party room?” I could barely hold myself in check long enough to see his nod of confirmation.

Sprinting through the mansion, I careened around corners as I headed for the closest door to the outside. As soon as I crashed through it, my pace increased even faster as I ran through the dark garden toward the section closest to the party.

There! I saw movement, the outline of three bodies showing against the dimmer light. I peered intently at them, slowing my pace slightly, but none of them were Delphine. Ignatius was at their lead, heading back to the party with two men that looked like guards—the first guards I’d seen on the island.

Was that a sword in one of their hands? My blood turned to ice, time slowing around me. I swerved, starting toward them, only to catch sight of a fourth figure collapsed on the ground behind them.

I turned again, moving even faster toward the horrible sight. It couldn't be Delphine. It just couldn't. She was a healer, a powerful one. She would never—

“NO!” The cry sounded distant to my ears although it had ripped from my own throat, deep and filled with fury. My legs collapsed, and I fell to my knees beside her.

She lay sprawled across the cold ground, her hair splayed out around her. Her clothes were torn in many places, and there was red everywhere. Too much red.

“Delphine,” I tried to whisper her name, but my voice wasn't working anymore.

How could a girl who had always been so full of life be lying there so still? Pain pierced me, like a thousand blades cutting into me at once. Everything hurt, and my vision clouded as rage fired through my veins.

I reached out a trembling hand to touch her face, so cold and lifeless. I could see her bright smile clearly in my vision, and it was impossible to believe I would never see it again. She had been everything—all I had left—and now she was gone.

I had failed her.

For a second my strength deserted me, and I slumped forward, my shoulders curling inward. But a moment later, the anger burning through me straightened my spine as I remembered the three figures walking back toward the party. Ignatius. Ignatius had done this.

I surged to my feet. Turning away from her felt like tearing something inside me, and part of me wanted to drop back to my knees and never move again. But my feet carried me relentlessly forward, my rage fueling my speed.

There was one thing still left to me. Vengeance.

My pace picked up, and as I ran, I drew my sword. Dimly, in the back of my mind, I knew I would be bursting into a party, but I didn't care. Nothing mattered now that I had failed to protect the person I loved most in the world.

The darkness receded, the lights of the party spilling out onto the porch. I crossed it in two large strides and launched myself inside.

My eyes moved immediately, scanning the room for Ignatius, but the sight that greeted me shocked me momentarily senseless. I couldn't make sense of what I was seeing.

The scene inside the large room bore no resemblance to the party I had left earlier. Almost all the people were gone, and those that remained...

I shook my head, as if what I was seeing was a hallucination and I could shake it away. But the scene before me didn't change.

There were bodies on the floor already, and the same red from the garden had been spilled inside, marring the floorboards which had minutes earlier supported chattering,

laughing people. My gaze locked onto the Constantine matriarch, standing on the other side of the room, her expression frozen in a look of shock. One of the two guards I had seen earlier stood in front of her, his arm pulled back, his blade ready to strike.

I reacted on instinct, knowing I wouldn't have time to reach them. Tearing a chunk of stone from the ceiling, I dropped it straight onto him. The man collapsed instantly, but I'd been a second too late. His sword had already been thrust forward, and his victim toppled to the ground with him.

"Kill him, too!" Ignatius shouted to his remaining guard.

I whisked my sword up just in time to meet his blade as he lunged toward me. Dancing back, I tore another chunk of stone from the ceiling, and then another. But forewarned by his comrade's fate, the guard dodged around them.

The man attacked with enthusiasm, but he had no depth of skill. In an ordinary sword fight, I wouldn't have needed to use my power. I could easily hold him off until an opportunity presented itself for me to disarm him without injury. But even as we thrust and parried, my eyes were darting around the room. Were any of them left alive, or was I too late to save anyone?

An abrupt movement caught my eye as Barnabas leaped up from where he had been huddled on the floor, dashing for the door into the rest of the house. Ignatius took off after him immediately, cold determination on his face.

I abandoned my attempts to focus on the blades and turned my attention to the floor. Sending my power sinking into the floorboards, I ripped them up in long rippling waves. There was no time for finesse.

The ground beneath my opponent's feet suddenly bucked, torn lengths of wood rising up to trip him over. He stumbled, attempting to stay upright, only to trip on another stretch of broken wood and fall backward, arms flailing.

His head hit the ground hard, and he lay still, but I didn't have time to check if he was alive or not. Throwing myself across the room, I tried to reach Ignatius before he got to his cousin, my power racing through the floorboards ahead of me.

But by the time the ground shifted beneath their feet, the two of them were already locked together, the bare skin of Ignatius's hands gripping the other healer's arm. Whatever battle they were engaged in was invisible to my eye, but just as I grabbed the back of Ignatius's clothes, tearing him off Barnabas, the other man swayed and crumpled.

One glance was enough to tell me it was too late for me to help him. Ignatius had used his guards' weapons to attack the others, exploiting a healer's vulnerability, as he had done with

Delphine. But apparently he wasn't averse to getting his own hands dirty, now that his guards were no longer able to do the job for him.

Ignatius didn't stop to savor his triumph, however. Turning on me with a feral snarl, he lunged forward, fingers reaching for any inch of my skin.

I stumbled backward, bringing up my blade. But in my horror over his actions, I had forgotten the torn floorboards. I tripped and nearly went down, only just catching myself in time to keep my feet.

The misstep had given him an opening, however, and he latched his hands around my free wrist. I reacted instantly, doing the only thing I could to stop him sending his power into me. Swinging my other arm around, I buried my sword in his middle.

He cried out once in pain, letting me go. For a moment we stood frozen, eyes locked, and then he wrenched himself backward. I cried out a wordless, unthinking protest, but it was too late. The moment the blade was removed, his eyes widened in shock and horror. Ignatius might be a healer, but he had lived a sheltered life on the island. Apparently he hadn't known what happens when an object piercing you is suddenly removed. Unprepared, he succumbed to shock and moments later fell to the ground, unable to heal himself in time.

For two seconds, I stayed in place, panting as I stared down at him. So little time had passed since I arrived in the room that I still couldn't comprehend what had happened. And overlaying it all was an awful, deadening weight—the knowledge of what I had found in the garden waiting to pounce and incapacitate me.

But thoughts of Delphine bolstered me briefly instead of tearing me down, my heart still partially numb from shock. I knew what Delphine would do in this situation, and it wasn't stand around uselessly. I didn't have her power, I couldn't help people like she could, but I had to at least check if there was anyone still within reach of assistance.

I already knew it was too late for the cousins in front of me, so I turned back into the room. Driven by my new sense of urgency, I didn't even drop my sword before kneeling beside Augustine. I pressed my free hand to the wound just below his neck with a vague thought of trying to stem the bleeding. But even as I did so, I knew it was already too late.

“Nik,” the strangled sound of my name reached my ears in the stillness of the room.

I looked up, my eyes beholding an impossible sight. Delphine. She stood in the doorway of the room, not only alive, but whole, only the mess of her clothes bearing witness to her earlier state.

Shock made me freeze, my thoughts sputtering to a halt at the impossibility of what I saw. She had been dead. I was sure she had been dead.

But clearly she hadn't been. Unlike Ignatius, Delphine had managed to use her power to claw herself back from death. She was alive. The reality of it hit me like a tidal wave. Delphine was alive.

Joy swept through me, more radiant than anything I had ever felt. I hadn't lost her after all. I might have failed her, but she had saved herself. She hadn't left me.

But while a smile was growing over my face, the relief wiping away all other thought, her face was still frozen in shock and what looked like horror. Swallowing visibly, she turned her eyes away from me. I followed her gaze, seeing the scene again through her eyes.

Looking down, I saw the red on one hand and the naked blade still gripped in the other. In dawning dismay, I realized how the scene must look to her. I had left her with rage in my heart, and now she was faced with this horror. I had even told her on the ship...

My stomach turned, and I leaped to my feet.

"Delphine." I reached for her as I crossed the room, still marveling at the sight of her alive, even as I went cold from the reality of our situation.

She stumbled backward away from me, nearly tripping on the uneven floor, and I froze. I couldn't blame her for her reaction, given how the situation appeared, but I couldn't help calling her name again.

She didn't come to me.

Instead, she did what I had known she would, visiting each victim to check for signs of life. She found none. Ignatius had been too impatient to wait for an uncertain future rule and had decided to take matters into his own hands, choosing the same night as Grey to make his move. But unlike his cousin, he had enacted his terrible plan too well. None of them had seen him coming.

A voice called for us from the garden, and distantly I registered it as belonging to Costas. He had finally come after me. A fresh surge of horror washed through me as I realized what this scene would mean to him. But there was nothing I could do to protect him from the truth.

I only half heard their words as he conversed briefly with Delphine, and from the corner of my eye I saw him flee from both us and his grief. But I couldn't look away from Delphine. The pain in her expression hit me deeply.

I had achieved nothing in this room. I hadn't managed to save anyone. Instead of coming here, I should have stayed by her side in the garden. As usual, my instincts had steered me wrong, and from the look she was giving me I didn't know if our relationship would ever be all right again. But I had seen into the depths of my heart, and I didn't know if I deserved for it to be all right.

My emotions weren't listening, though. When I saw her standing tall despite everything, choosing strength instead of weakness, and rejecting the kind of darkness that masqueraded as love, I knew she was someone worth standing beside for a lifetime. If there was anything I could do to salvage our relationship, I would do it. And if there wasn't, I would still support her to the end. Because Delphine had proven herself someone worth everything.