

Daughter of the Siren Queen

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS • NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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*For Mom,
because you said I could write a book
instead of getting a summer job.
I love you.*



“AND THAT WAS WITHOUT
EVEN A SINGLE DROP OF RUM.”

—CAPTAIN JACK SPARROW
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End

Chapter 1

THE SOUND OF MY knife slitting across a throat feels much too loud in the darkness.

I catch the pirate before his corpse hits the ground and gently lower him the rest of the way. He is only the first of Theris's—no, Vordan's, I remind myself—crew who will die tonight.

My own crew is spread out across the cobblestone streets, dispatching Vordan's men one by one. I cannot see them, but I trust all of them to do their parts tonight.

It's taken me two months to track down the pirate lord and gather enough intel to infiltrate his holding. Vordan thought to make himself safe from me by traveling inland. We're miles from the nearest port, and though I don't have a way to replenish my abilities, I came fully stocked.

My source inside gave me all the details I needed. Vordan and his crew are living in the Old Bear Inn. I can see it now up ahead, a four-story structure with a near-flat roof and painted green walls. The main entrance is composed of an impressive archway, a large sign depicting a sleeping bear jutting out from its top.

Vordan's crew of pirates have transformed themselves into a gang of land thieves, preying on the inhabitants of Charden, the largest of the Seventeen Isles. He bought the inn and pays the wages of all the staff, keeping it as his own personal stronghold. It would seem he has no fear of living in plain sight. The men in his employ number near one hundred, and there isn't a united force stationed on this island large enough to dispose of them.

But I don't need to dispose of them. All I need is to get in and then get Vordan and his map piece out without alerting the rest of his men. His questioning and inevitable torture will happen once we're back on my ship.

I slide down the street, keeping close to the roughly constructed townhome on my right. The city is asleep at this hour. I haven't spotted a soul moving about, save Vordan's men on watch.

A tinkling sound stops me dead in my tracks. I hold my breath as I peer around the next corner, into the gap between this home and the next. But there is only a street urchin—a young boy perhaps eight or nine years of age—searching through a pile of glass bottles.

I'm surprised when he turns his head in my direction. I've

been as silent as the dead, but I suppose to survive on the streets, one must sense when a threat may be nearby.

I put my finger to my lips, then toss a coin at the boy, who catches it without taking his eyes off me. I give him a wink before crossing the gap to the next home.

Here, I wait, watching my breath fog out in front of me in the slim moonlight. Though I could use the heat, I don't dare risk the sound of my hands rubbing together. There is nothing for me to do now except to hold perfectly still.

Finally, an owl hoot comes. Then another. And another. I wait until I hear all seven of them—signaling that each crossing street and guarded rooftop has been cleared.

I watch the windows of the large inn in front of me. There's not a single candle lit, nor a silhouette of movement behind the glass. I take my chance and scurry up to the inn.

A rope already hangs down from the roof. Sorinda has beaten me here. I hoist myself up floor after floor, avoiding the windows, until my boots steady on the stone tiles of the roof. Sorinda is just putting her sword away, four of Vordan's men dead at her feet. There is nothing she excels at more than killing.

Without saying a word, she helps me to pull up the rope and reattach it so it dangles on the west side of the rooftop. Vordan's window is on the top floor, third window from the right.

Ready? I mouth.

She nods.



Holding my knife against a sleeping Vordan's throat fills me with the sweetest feeling of justice. I move my free hand to cover his mouth.

His eyes fly open, and I press the knife in a little deeper, just enough to slice the skin but not enough to make him bleed.

"Call out for help, and I slit your throat," I whisper. I remove my free hand from his mouth.

"Alosa," he says, a bitter acknowledgment.

"Vordan." He's just as I remember. A man with unremarkable looks: brown hair and eyes, an average build, average height. Nothing to make him stand out in a crowd, which is how he likes it.

"You figured it out," he says, obviously referring to his identity, which he'd initially lied about. When I was a prisoner on the *Night Farer*, he had pretended to be one of my father's men and had gone by the name Theris.

"Where's the map?" I ask.

"Not here."

Sorinda, who stands as a silent sentinel behind me, begins moving about the room. I hear her rustling through the drawers of the dresser, then picking at the floorboards.

"I have no use for you if you don't tell me where it is," I say. "I will end your life. Right here. In this room. Your men will find your body in the morning."

He smiles then. "You need me alive, Alosa. Otherwise I'd already be dead."

"If I have to ask you one more time, I'll start singing,"

I warn. “What should I make you do first? Break your legs? Draw pictures on the walls in your own blood?”

He swallows. “My men outnumber yours three to one. I’m not going anywhere, and that voice of yours will do you little good when you can only control three at a time.”

“Your men won’t be able to do much fighting when they’re asleep in their beds. My girls are already locking them in their rooms.”

His eyes narrow.

“Pity you didn’t catch my spy in your ranks, and it’s a shame you didn’t notice her switching out all the locks on the doors. Yes, they lock from the outside now.”

“They’ve been alerted. My men on watch—”

“Are all dead. The four men on this roof. The five in the streets. The three on the butcher’s roof, the tanner’s, and the supply store.”

His mouth widens so I can see his teeth. “Six,” he says.

My breathing stops for a beat.

“I had six on the streets,” he clarifies.

What? No. We would’ve known—

A bell tolls so loudly it will wake the entire town.

I swear under my breath.

“The little boy,” I say, just as Vordan reaches underneath his pillow. For the dagger I’ve already removed. “Time to go, Sorinda.”

Get up. I direct the words at Vordan, but they are not an ordinary command spoken with an ordinary voice. The words are sung, full of magic passed on to me by my siren mother.

And all men who hear them have no choice but to obey.

Vordan rises from his bed at once, plants his feet on the floor.

Where is the map?

His hand goes to his throat and pulls out a leather cord hidden beneath his shirt. On the end is a glass vial, no bigger than my thumb, stoppered with a cork. And rolled up inside is the final map piece. With it, my father and I will finally travel to the siren island and claim its treasure.

My body is already alive with song, my senses heightened. I can hear the men moving below, shrugging on their boots and running for their doors.

I pull the vial at Vordan's neck. The cord snaps, and I place the entire necklace in the pocket of the ebony corset I wear.

I make Vordan go out the door first. He's barefoot, of course, and wears only a loose flannel shirt and cotton trousers. The man who locked me in a cage does not get the comfort of shoes and a coat.

Sorinda is right behind me as I step into the hallway. Below, I hear Vordan's men throwing the weight of their bodies against their locked doors, trying to respond to the warning bell. Damn that bell!

My girls haven't reached the upper floors yet. Men from this floor and the one below spill into the hallway. It doesn't take them long to spot their captain.

I sing a series of words to Vordan in no more than a whisper.

He shouts, "Outside, you fools! It's the land king's men. They approach from the south! Go and meet them."

Many start to move, heeding their captain's call, but one man shouts, "No, look behind him! It's the siren bitch!"

That man, I decide, dies first.

Vordan must have warned them against a situation like this, because the men draw their cutlasses and charge.

Blast it all.

I expand the song, placing two more of Vordan's men under my spell, then send them in front of us to battle the oncoming men.

The narrowness of the hallway works to our advantage. The inn is rectangular, with rooms lining the edge of one side of the hallway and a railing on the other. Over the railing one can see clear down to the first floor. A stairwell zigzags up to each floor, the only way up or down except for the windows and the long drop to the bottom.

I step in line with the three men under my spell to fight the first wave. I ram my shoulder into the pirate who dared to call me "the siren bitch," sending him over the railing. He screams until he's cut off with a loud crunch. I don't pause to look—I'm already thrusting my sword through the belly of the next pirate. He collapses to the floor, and I walk over his twitching body to reach the next man.

Vordan's pirates have no qualms against cutting down their own men, but they won't touch their captain. As soon as one of the spares goes down, I enchant the next closest man, having him fill the gap, keeping three under my control at all times.

Sorinda is at our backs, facing the two men who came out

of the rooms on the very end, and I don't worry about checking over my shoulder. They won't get through her.

Soon Vordan's men realize that if they kill their own men, they will be the next victims to fall under my spell. They retreat, running down the stairs, likely hoping to change the battleground to the open first floor of the inn. But my girls, the ones who were locking doors, meet them on the second floor. Ten women, personally trained by me, led by Mandsy, my ship's doctor and second mate, prevent them from taking the stairs.

We've got them fighting on two sides now.

"Snap out of it, Captain!" the unusually tall man fighting me now shouts over to Vordan. "Tell us what to do!" After parrying his last jab, I send my elbow into the underside of his chin. His head snaps back, and I cut off his grunt by raking my cutlass across his throat.

Their numbers are dwindling, but those who were locked in their rooms have started hacking through their doors with their cutlasses and joining the fight.

Men begin jumping over the railing of the second floor, crashing onto the tables and chairs of the eating area below. Some fall only to break limbs and twist ankles, but many manage the fall and attempt to attack my girls from behind.

Oh, no you don't.

I jump over the railing, land on my feet easily, and tackle the four men approaching my girls. I dare a glance upward as I find my footing, and see that Sorinda has dispatched the men once at my back and has now taken my spot.

“Sorinda! Get down here,” I yell, pausing my singing just long enough to get the words out.

I cut at the hamstrings of one of the men I felled. The next gets the point of my dagger jammed into the base of his spine. The other two are rounding on me, finally finding their feet.

The smaller of the two meets my eyes, recognizes who I am, and makes a run for it out the main entrance, just past the stairs.

“I’ve got him,” Sorinda, having reached the main floor, says, and darts past me.

The last man in my path throws down his sword. “I surrender,” he says. I hit him on the head with the pommel of my sword. He crumples in a heap at my feet.

There are maybe forty men left, trying to force their way down past my crew. Vordan and two of his men remain at the back of the line, still under my spell, fighting against their own crew.

But my powers are running out. We need to get out of here. I glance around the room, noting the unlit lanterns hanging all along the walls, contemplating the oil resting inside.

Jump, I command Vordan. He doesn’t hesitate. He throws himself over the railing. He lands with one of his legs bent awkwardly beneath him, just as I’d intended.

I release Vordan and the two pirates at the back of the line from my spell, and instead focus the rest of my efforts on the three right in front of my crew.

Hold the line, I command. They rotate instantly, turning their swords on their own men. To my girls, I shout, “Unload the extra gunpowder for your pistols onto the stairs.”

Mandsy steps back, pulls the powder pouch from near her holster, and throws it onto the step just below the men under my spell. The rest of the girls follow suit, nine more bags of powder dropping to the floor.

“Go get Vordan! Get him to the carriage.”

Vordan swears at the top of his lungs now that he has his senses. My girls pick him clean off his feet, since his leg is useless, and carry him through the exit. I’m right behind them, pulling my pistol from my side and aiming at that pile of gunpowder.

I fire.

The blast presses at my back, pushing me faster. Smoke fills my nostrils and a surge of heat envelops me. I lurch forward, but catch my footing and hurry on. Looking over my shoulder, I take in the destruction. The inn still stands, but it’s burning apart from the inside. The wall surrounding the main entrance now lies in tatters around the road. The pirates still inside are burning husks on the ground.

I make a turn down the next street, racing toward the rendezvous point. Sorinda materializes out of the darkness and runs silently next to me.

“In and out without anyone being the wiser,” she says, deadpan.

“Plans change. Besides, I had all of Vordan’s men piled together in one location. How could I resist blowing it up? He has nothing now.”

“Except a broken leg.”

I smile. Sorinda rarely bothers with humor. “Yes, except that.”

We round another corner and reach the carriage. Wallov and Deros sit at the reins. They were the only men on my crew until Enwen and Kearan joined, but I left the latter two on the *Ava-lee* to guard the ship under Niridia’s watch. Wallov and Deros are my brig guards. They jump from their seat and open the carriage doors. A cage rests on the floor inside. Deros pulls out a key and unlocks it, letting the opening swing wide.

“Wallov, show our guest inside,” I say.

“Gladly.”

“You can’t put me in there,” Vordan says. “Alosa, I—”

He’s cut off by Sorinda’s fist slamming into his gut. She gags him and ties his hands behind his back. Only then does Wallov thrust him inside the cage. It’s rather small, meant for a dog or some sort of livestock, but we manage to squeeze Vordan inside.

I step up to the carriage door and look inside. On the seats rest two wooden chests, their locks broken.

“Did you get it all, then?” I ask.

“Aye,” Wallov says. “Athella’s information was spot on. Vordan’s gold was in the cellar underneath the false floor.”

“And just where is our informant?”

“Here, Captain!” Athella steps out from among the group behind Mandsy. She’s still in disguise, her hair hidden beneath a tricorne, fake facial hair stuck to her chin. She’s put face paint over her brows to widen and darken them. Lines around her cheeks make them look more elongated. Blocks in her shoes

give her the necessary extra height, and she wears a bulky vest under her shirt to fill out the men's clothing.

She pulls the masculine accoutrements from her body and wipes her face until she looks like herself once more. What's left is a reed-thin girl with hair that falls to her shoulders in a smooth, black sheet. Athella is the ship's designated spy and most renowned lockpick.

I turn back to Vordan, who's staring bug-eyed at the young girl he thought was a member of his crew. He swivels his gaze to me, eyes sizzling with hate.

"How does it feel to be the one locked in the cage?" I ask.

He pulls at his bound hands, trying to free himself, and my mind is pulled back to that time two months ago when Vordan stuck me in a cage and forced me to show him all the abilities I possess, using Riden to make me comply.

Riden . . .

He, too, is back on my ship, healing from the gunshot wounds Vordan gave him. I'll have to finally take the time to visit him once we get back, but for now—

I slam the carriage door in Vordan's face.

Chapter 2

IDON'T KNOW HOW landfolk do it.

Ships don't leave your thighs sore. They don't leave foul-smelling piles on the ground. Horses, I decide, are disgusting, and I'm relieved to be rid of them when we finally reach Port Renwoll a week later.

My ship, the *Ava-lee*, is docked in the harbor, waiting for me. She's the most beautiful vessel ever built. She belonged to the land king's fleet before I commandeered her. I left her the natural color of the oak she's made of, but I dyed the sails royal blue. The *Ava-lee* bears three masts; the middle is square-rigged, while the other two have lateen sails. With no forecandle and only a small aftercastle, she fits all thirty-three of us snugly.

She may be small, but she's also the fastest ship in existence.

"They're back!" a voice chirps from clear up in the crow's nest. That'll be little Roslyn, Wallov's daughter and the ship's lookout. She's the youngest member of the crew at six years old.

Wallov knew Roslyn's mother all of one night. Nine months later she died giving birth to a baby girl. Wallov assumed responsibility for his child, even though he hadn't a clue what to do with her. He was sixteen at the time. Previously, he'd been a sailor on a fishing boat, but he was forced to give it up once he had a daughter to care for. He didn't know how he was going to feed the two of them until he met me.

"Captain on board!" Niridia shouts as I step on deck. As my first mate, she's been captaining the ship in my absence.

Roslyn's already lowered herself onto the deck. She throws herself at me, wrapping her arms around my legs. Her head barely reaches my waist.

"You were gone too long," she says. "Next time, take me with you."

"There was fighting to be done on this trip, Roslyn. Besides, I needed you here watching after my ship."

"But I can fight, Captain. Papa's been teaching me." She reaches behind her too-big britches and pulls out a small dagger.

"Roslyn, you're six years old. Give it ten more, then we'll see."

Her eyes scrunch up in a glare. Then she lunges for me.

She's quick, I'll give her that, but I still dodge her blade effortlessly. Without pausing, she swings back around and

swipes at me. I leap backward, then kick the dagger out of her reach. She crosses her arms defiantly.

“All right,” I say, “we’ll check again in eight years. Satisfied?”

She smiles, then rushes in to give me another hug.

“You’d think I didn’t exist,” Wallov says to Deros from somewhere behind me.

Roslyn, hearing him, lets go and runs to him. “I was getting to you, Papa.”

I survey everyone else on board. I left twelve behind to guard the ship. They’re all on deck now, save our two newest recruits.

“Was there any trouble?” I ask Niridia.

“It was downright boring. And you?”

“We saw some action. Nothing we couldn’t handle. And we brought back some prizes.” I pull out the makeshift necklace by the cord, displaying the map for everyone to see. I have a copy of the first two map pieces already, and while we sail back to the keep, I’ll have Mandsy create a replica of the new one. Father will lead the journey to the Isla de Canta, but I want to be prepared should we get separated or tragedy befall his ship. It would be foolish to have only one copy of such valuable items.

Over by the port side, Teniri, the ship’s purser, peers over toward the carriage and asks, “What else? Anything of the sparkling, gold variety, Captain?”

Mandsy and the girls make their way up the gangplank. It takes four of them to lift each chest. Deros and Wallov have already deposited our prisoner, cage and all, onto the deck of the ship. Vordan lies there, gagged and ignored, as the girls all circle around the chests. Until everyone is divvied out their fair

share, no one is permitted to touch the gold except Teniri. She's the oldest on the ship at twenty-six. Though she's still plenty young, she has a gray streak of hair on the back of her head that she tries to hide in a braid. Anyone who dares to mention it gets a swift kick to the gut.

She raises the lids of both chests at once, revealing a hefty amount of gold and silver coins, and some priceless gems and stones.

"All right," I say. "You've had your chance to look at it. Let's get it stored safely and be on our way."

"What about him?" Wallov asks. He kicks the cage, and Vordan wrinkles his nose at him, not bothering to attempt yelling through the gag.

"I'd have you put him in the brig, but I need to stock up tonight. Better be the infirmary, then. Keep him in the cage."

"Captain," Niridia says. "The infirmary is already occupied by a prisoner."

I hadn't forgotten. I would never forget *him*.

"He will be relocated," I say.

"To where?"

"I'll handle it. See that everything else gets put in its proper place. Where's Kearan?"

"I'll give you one guess."

I huff out a breath of air. "Get him out of my rum supply and to the helm. We're leaving now." Far, far away from the stench of horse. I need a bath.

After my previous navigator lost her life during the battle on the *Night Farer*, I stole Kearan from Riden's ship. He's a

useless drunk most of the time, but he's also the finest helmsman I've ever seen. Though I'd never tell him that.

I turn toward the infirmary and stare at the door.

I haven't laid eyes on Riden in two months. Instead, I put him in Mandsy's care, trusting her to help his legs heal and see that he gets food every day. Were it anyone else, the idea of leaving her alone with him would make my blood boil. But Mandsy's never shown an inch of interest toward men or women. She's just not made that way.

So, as the ship's doctor, I ordered her to take care of him and give me updates: when she took out his stitches, when he started walking on his bad leg again.

"He asks for you, Captain," she would say before we left to capture Vordan, but I was never ready to see him.

When I was locked in that cage, Vordan threatened Riden in an attempt to control me.

And it worked.

Riden had been my interrogator while I was a prisoner on the *Night Farer*. He was a means to an end. A distraction from the tedium of searching a ship from top to bottom—albeit a very attractive distraction who also happens to be a good kisser. It was all fun. Just play.

At least I thought so. Vordan's words to Riden from the island still haunt me. *There is at least one thing she cares about more than her own justice. You.*

The thought of talking to Riden, even if it means I can lord his prisoner status over him, is unsettling.

Because he knows I let another man control me for the sake

of him. He knows that I care about him. But *I'm* not ready to know I care about him. So how could I face him?

But now, I have no choice. We need this room for Vordan. Riden is going to join Kearan and Enwen on the deck. I can't avoid him any longer.

The door swings open much too quickly, and I find Riden in the corner, stretching out his bad leg. His hair has grown some, its brown lengths reaching just past his shoulders. A couple days' worth of stubble clings to his chin, since he's only permitted to shave when he bathes. He's not any less fit than I remember, so he's been making good use of his time stuck in here.

The changes only make him look more roguish. Dangerous. Almost irresistibly handsome.

He'll need to shave first thing when he leaves the room. Otherwise the girls won't be able to focus on their work.

He looks up as I close the door behind me, but he doesn't say anything, merely surveys me from head to toe, not even caring that he's staring at me far longer than is necessary.

A spark of heat flickers low in my belly. I try to expel it by coughing.

He smiles. "You took your time coming to see me, Alosa."

"I've been busy."

"Busy catching up with your intended?"

I had a short list of all the things I was going to say to him, about why we're relocating him, or even keeping him on the ship in the first place. But it all flees my mind at his words.

"My intended?" I ask.

“That blond fellow with the curly tresses. Looks a bit like a girl.”

At my confused look, he adds, “The one who helped overpower the strength of the *Night Farer* with your father.”

“Oh, you mean Tylon? He looks nothing like a girl.” Though I’d pay a fortune to have Riden say otherwise in front of him.

“So he is your intended, then?” He asks it casually enough. A smile still rests on his lips, but one mental switch and I can see he’s swirling with a dark green. Jealousy in its deepest, rawest form.

He glares at me. “Don’t do that to me. Turn it off.”

I back up, startled by his cold look and outburst, before I compose myself. “I forgot you notice when I’m using it.”

“That hardly matters.” The smile comes back. “I thought you hated using your abilities. Aren’t they supposed to make you feel sick to your stomach? You must care a lot about what I think.”

I don’t like where he’s turning the conversation, so I divert it back. “Tylon is not my intended. We’re *pirates*.” Marriage isn’t really something we do.

“What would you call him, then? Your lover?”

I snort. Tylon wishes, but I would never let the slimy eel touch me.

Riden doesn’t need to know that, though. I’m beyond amused by his accusation. I’d much rather see how this plays out than deny it.

“Sure,” I lie, “lover works.”

This time he can't hide behind indifference. His eyes flash a dangerous black, and his fists clench slightly. I pretend not to notice.

"Am I to understand, then, that the two of you have an open relationship?"

When I don't respond, he adds, "He doesn't care that you spent the better part of a month sleeping in my bed?"

He and I both know that sleeping is all we did in that bed. Well, that and a few kisses.

"I had a job to do, Riden. Getting close to you was part of it."

"I see. And just how many men have you gotten close to in order to do your job?"

I don't like his tone one bit. Riden needs to be reminded who he's speaking to.

"I have your brother locked in the deepest, darkest cell in the pirate king's keep," I say. "He's paying for everything he did—and tried to do—to me. One gesture from me, and I could have his head. It is only by your request that I haven't killed him yet, but that's not good enough anymore."

Riden straightens. I have his attention now.

"What are you saying?"

"Keeping prisoners is expensive. They have to be fed and cleaned up after. My father rarely holds prisoners for an extended amount of time. Either they give him what he wants or they're killed. We don't need anything from Draxen. He's useless to me. You, however, are not."

"What do you want from me?"

“I’ve just captured Vordan and his map piece—the final piece my father needs before we set sail for the Isla de Canta. When the fleet departs, you will be joining my crew for the journey.”

Riden’s gaze narrows. “Why would you possibly need me? Surely His Royal Blackheartedness has enough pirates in his fleet.”

He most certainly does. More than he could possibly need. And I’ve got some of the most skilled sailors and fighters in all of Maneria aboard the *Ava-lee*. We don’t *need* Riden, but I can’t set him free. How would that look to my father? I can’t lock him up at the keep because there’s no reason to keep him alive. Father will kill him and Draxen both. The only reason Draxen isn’t dead yet is because I told my father I need him alive to get Riden to cooperate. So now that Riden is better, I’m down to my last option. He has to come with me. He has to be part of the crew. But how do I possibly explain that to Riden without making it seem like I’ve gone soft on him?

I tell myself I’m doing this because I owe him. He saved me. He took two bullets for me. I may have brought him back from nearly drowning, but that was my fault to begin with. We are not even, not yet. That is the only reason why I’m keeping him alive.

If I think it enough times, maybe it’ll be true.

Finally, I say, “I don’t know what we’ll come up against on the voyage. I might need some extra muscle. With Kearan and Enwen, the men on this ship number four. Enwen is so scrawny that I’m pretty sure Niridia can lift more than he can. And the only lifting Kearan does is when he puts a bottle to his lips. I’m

not about to recruit some random person off the keep, because I need people I can trust.”

“And you trust me?” he asks with one raised brow.

“I don’t need to. I know you’ll do anything to protect your brother. I can count on your full cooperation as long as he’s locked up. And besides, you owe me for saving his pathetic life in the first place.”

He pauses for a moment, probably to think it over. “Will I continue to be kept under lock and key?”

“Only if you do something stupid. You’ll be free to roam the ship as much as any sailor. Any attempt at escape, though, and I’ll send word to the men left guarding the keep that Draxen’s head is to be removed from his body.”

Riden turns his face away from me.

“What?” I ask.

“I’d forgotten how ruthless you can be.”

I take a step toward him and pierce him with my gaze. “You haven’t seen ruthless from me yet.”

“And I pray I never will. I’ll come with you to the island on two conditions.”

“You want to bargain with me? I hold all the cards.”

Riden stands in one fluid motion. “Going with you is pointless if you’re going to kill Draxen as soon as we get back. I want your word he’ll be freed once I help you journey to the island and back.”

“And I suppose the second stipulation is your own freedom?”

“No.”

I blink, take a step closer. “What do you mean ‘no’? You hold

Draxen's life in higher regard than your own? He's a disgusting worm. He deserves to squirm below ground."

"He's my brother. And you're a hypocrite." Riden takes his own step forward.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Your father is the most despicable man to roam the sea. Tell me you wouldn't do anything for him."

I advance farther, a mere foot from him now, deciding whether or not to clobber him with my fists. In the end, I take a step back and breathe in calmly. "What is your second condition?"

"You will not use your siren abilities on me ever again. Even if it's just to know what I'm feeling."

"What if your life were in danger and I could save you with my voice? Would you prefer I let you die?" For some reason, I feel the need to defend myself. And my abilities. To him. Why to him? His opinion of me shouldn't matter. *Doesn't* matter.

"I've survived this long without you, and I will continue to do so."

"Ah, but you've never sailed with me before. Danger is always nigh for my crew."

"With you in their midst, how could it not be?" He says this quietly to himself, but I still catch it.

"Will you sail with me or not?" I ask.

"Do you agree to my terms?"

I look heavenward. I'll have the whole voyage to figure out what to do with Riden and Draxen when we get back. For now, I can agree to this.

Riden holds out his hand to seal our bargain. I extend my own, anticipating a firm squeeze.

What I do not expect is the tingle of heat that shoots up my arm from where we touch. Though I tell my hand to let go, it doesn't listen, and my feet seem rooted to the spot.

I look up from our clasped hands, and my eyes land on the stubble along his jaw. I wonder what it would feel like rubbing against my chin and cheeks as he kissed me.

I blink repeatedly. *What the—Was I just staring at his mouth? Did he notice?*

I look up. Riden's eyes capture my own, glinting with mischief. He is the first to speak. "This is sure to be an exciting voyage. The two of us stuck together on one ship." His thumb draws circles on the back of my hand, and my breathing hitches. It appears my lungs, too, have forgotten how to function properly.

Riden starts to draw closer, and my mind finally remembers something.

He's my prisoner. Anything he does will be an act to further his goal to free himself and his brother. I cannot trust any of it. After all, did I not try to use physical closeness with Riden to further my own goals when I was the prisoner and he the captor?

His pretty face will not earn him privileges on this ship. Nor will I allow him to use it to get closer to me.

I tell my limbs to stop misbehaving and finally step away from him.

I have gone two months without his kisses. I can go the rest of my life without them as well.

“It is a very large ship,” I say at last, even though it’s a lie. And then, because I want to see him squirm, I offer him the most seductive smile I have, and wet my lips with my tongue ever so slightly.

The way his eyes move down to my mouth—and the bounce of the nob of his throat as he audibly swallows—is more than enough reward.

Yes, I am the one in control.

I turn to open the door and extend one hand toward the deck, an invitation for Riden to precede me onto the ship.

He walks perfectly out the door, no limp in his step. Good.

I watch him as he descends the companionway, surveying the crew as they go about their chores. His eyes take in the clouds, roam over the sea, and I feel bad for keeping him cooped up for two whole months.

“Admiring the view, are we, Captain?” a voice asks. Lotiya and Deshel, sisters I picked up from the island of Jinda two years ago, take up position on either side of me. “He looks delicious,” Deshel adds.

“From behind, anyway,” Lotiya says. “Can’t judge the man properly until we see the front.”

“Not to mention *naked*.”

Giggling ensues.

Riden looks over his shoulders, partly amused yet a little uncomfortable. He heard them. I’m certainly glad I’m not prone

to blushing. For I've seen Riden's front. And him naked. The sisters' talk immediately brings the image to the surface of my mind.

I glare at the two of them. "We have a new recruit," I shout for the whole crew to hear. "Meet Riden."

Many of the girls look up from their tasks. A couple drop down out of the rigging now that the ship is under way. I see a lot of curiosity in their faces. And some interest in others.

"Riden!" I shout, remembering something. He looks up again. "Go below and shave. You look haggard."

He raises a brow, but doesn't dare to disobey the first order I give him after our deal. He treads belowdecks. Lotiya and Deshel try to follow.

"Get back to your posts," I shout at them. They sigh in resignation and scatter.

"Haggard?" Niridia asks. She's at the helm. Kearan, it would seem, hasn't arrived yet. I join her. "That man is handsome as hell."

"Troublesome as hell is more like it," I say. "I don't know what I'm going to do with him."

"I could tell you what I'd like to do with him."

"Niridia," I warn.

"A jest, Captain."

I know. Niridia hasn't been able to stomach the touch of a man after what she went through before I found her, but that doesn't keep her from teasing. As my best friend, it's her job. She's able to jump back and forth between the roles of friend and

first mate effortlessly, knowing when each is appropriate. I love her for it.

“We’re keeping him, then?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Hmm” is all she says. She’s the overly cautious type, the most responsible out of everyone on the ship. She always has something to say.

“What?”

“Just remember he’s Jeskor’s son. Your families are rivals. Have you wondered if being on this ship is exactly where he wants to be?”

“Just like when I was a ‘prisoner’ on his ship?” I intended to get captured—all because I had a map to find on Riden’s brother’s ship.

“Exactly.”

“Riden’s not like that. He doesn’t have his own ambitions. The only thing that drives him is his brother.”

Niridia blows a golden wisp of hair out of her blue eyes. “I wouldn’t say it’s the *only* thing, Captain.” She looks at me pointedly.

To change the subject, I ask, “Where is Kearan?”

Niridia waves toward the bow, and I’m surprised now that I didn’t spot him sooner. Kearan is massive. His bulk is tucked into his usual dark coat, a jacket full of pockets where he houses all his flasks. The man drinks like a parched fish.

But now it looks as though he’s had a few too many. He’s pressed against the starboard side, the contents of his stomach depositing into the sea below.

I'm trying to think of a suitable punishment for him when Niridia and I spot Sorinda materializing out of the shadows near the foremast. Her raven-colored hair is just a shade darker than her skin. It's held up with a band, the ends reaching just past her shoulders. Sorinda never bothers with a tricorn. She spends most of her time in the dark and has no need to keep the sun out of her eyes. Instead of a cutlass, she carries a rapier at her side, favoring speed to strength.

Right now, however, she holds the end of a rope.

"What is she doing?" Niridia asks.

I'd tasked Sorinda with keeping an eye on Kearan when he first joined the ship. She hated it, though her job turned out to be easy since Kearan couldn't take his eyes off her. She's threatened to cut out his eyes multiple times, but I've expressly forbidden it. He can't navigate my ship without them.

Now that we're back from our mission, it looks like Sorinda has picked up right where she left off. Tolerating Kearan.

She ties the end of the rope she's holding around Kearan's waist. He doesn't even notice, merely fidgets with another wave of sickness. Since he's already halfway over the edge, it takes Sorinda very little effort to push him the rest of the way. There's a quick shriek followed by a loud splash.

And Sorinda—my dark, quiet assassin—smiles. It's a beautiful thing, but so fleeting. She composes herself before peering over the edge, the only outward sign of her preening over her victory.

Coughing and swearing ensues on Kearan's end, but Sorinda molds back into shadow without another word.

Sometimes it's so easy to forget Kearan is only a few years older than Sorinda and I are. Carrying on like a drunk will age a man considerably.

"See to it that someone helps him out of there, will you?" I ask Niridia. "He and the rest of the men need their ears covered. I'm going to stock up."

"Now?" she asks carefully. She knows exactly how much I hate this particular part of being half siren.

"It needs to be now. I haven't any song left after the fight on Charden, and I'll need it if I'm to properly interrogate Vordan." I smile then, thinking of the fun the two of us will have.

My methods of interrogation have been known to make men lose their minds.

Chapter 3

ONLY ONE CELL in the brig has cushions: my cell.

Fluffy red plush covers the floor and props against the wooden wall. I remove my boots and leave them far out of reach of the bars. Then I unlace my corset and set it atop my boots. I step inside the cell, wearing naught but leggings and a simple long-sleeved blouse. I can't wear buttons or laces or hairpins. Not in here.

I shut myself in and lock the door. With the tightest grip I can make, I yank at the bars. I know they haven't grown any less sturdy, but I always fear I might break out. I have to check each time, just to reassure myself the metal won't bend under my fingers.

Mandsy comes down with a bucket of water. She places it

just on the other side of the cell, so I can reach it through the bars. Then she collects my boots and corset. I hand her the key.

“All the men have their ears covered, Captain,” she says. “They know the drill.”

“What about the new recruits?”

“Well, Kearan is probably too drunk to be roused even by your abilities, but Sorinda made sure his ears were properly covered anyway. Enwen took enough wax for three men’s ears, saying you could never be too careful.” She laughs. “I like that one especially. He’s a funny sort of fellow.”

“And Riden?”

“He took it calmly, no questions asked.”

“You explained to him what I was doing?”

“Yes, Captain.”

I want to ask more. What expression did he have on his face? Did he seem disgusted?

He made a point of telling me I was never to use my abilities on him. Is he sickened by what I am? But then I remember I shouldn’t care. I *don’t* care.

My fingers tingle as my gaze flits to the bucket of water. Though I dread what it does to my mind, my body revels in being so close. Without another thought, I plunge my fingers into the bucket and pull the water into me.

Everything becomes heightened instantly. The creaking of the wood, the sloshing water outside the ship, a woman’s whistling from up top, boots on the deck, coughing, laughing. I can sense the breaths of all the people around me—puppets for me to play with.

Like plucking a string on an instrument, my voice tugs at the string of a human's consciousness. *Come to me.*

The human before me smiles. "Won't be following that order, Captain. I'll just take this stuff up top, then."

A human girl. I hiss at her. She's incapable of joining in the fun. Her back turns to me, and my blood boils inside me. *How dare she dismiss me!* I lunge at the bars, banging and tugging, but they will not move. They've trapped me. The disgusting humans. I can sense them moving above. I sing out to one after another, trying to find an ear to free me, but none answer my call.

Some of the power leaves me. My body itches with need. I look around quickly, and my eyes land on a bucket of water. My fingers sink in, gathering it to me, and I sigh from the pleasure of it. Far below me, I can sense the sea life. Water rushes across gills, curls over tentacles, bubbles up from the sandy bottom. A startled fish changes direction at the approach of the ship. A dolphin prepares to breach the surface. A whale hums far in the distance.

And I am queen over them all.

This cage will not hold me long, and when I'm free, I will have the men on this ship dance for me until their feet bleed.

There's a quiet groaning of hinges, a whisper of feet. A face peeks around the corner.

It's one of the men. I smile at him coyly, showing just a hint of teeth. Not enough to show him the predator I am. With one curled finger, I beckon him forward. He listens, but takes no more than a couple of steps, distancing us by several feet.

He's a handsome fellow with silky-looking brown hair. I can picture perfectly how it would look submerged underwater, the strands being brushed by the waves as his corpse bumps onto the shore.

There is a spark of fear in those rich brown eyes. They're dotted with gold. Fascinating. If I could just reach one with the tip of my nail, I could pluck it out and . . .

Those eyes firm up with determination. Is he resolved to be unafraid? Well, let me help the poor fool. I round out my mouth and let a few low notes drop from my lips. It's a slow, sensual rhythm that should bring him to me faster than he can blink.

But the man doesn't move. He points to his ears. Ah, yes. The humans think they're safe if they cannot hear me. Doesn't he know I can do more than sing?

Very carefully, I roll my sleeves up past my elbows, showing off more skin. I run my fingers slowly through my hair, letting the strands fall around my shoulders. The man is riveted, watching my every move.

At last I lean back on the cushions, arching my breasts upward, and stroke the cushions next to me lovingly in invitation.

He turns right around and walks away from me, never giving me a second look. I half scream, half sing at him to return, but of course he cannot hear a thing. All it does is force me to take in more of the water.



I stretch and yawn after waking the next morning. Niridia is waiting for me outside the cell with breakfast and boots.

“Sleep well?”

“Like the dead.”

Satisfied that I’m my usual self, she opens the cell and thrusts the tray of food at me. While I busy myself with bread and eggs, Niridia reaches for the bucket.

“Had a rough night, did we?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, wiping crumbs from my face.

“There’s not a drop left.”

The siren in me will eventually give up calling on my crew with her song. There’s usually plenty of water left in the bucket. But last night was different.

It comes back to me quickly.

“Riden,” I growl.

“What?”

“The fool came down here last night.” I stuff the rest of my breakfast in my mouth and shove my feet into the boots as I walk.

“Stars help him,” Niridia mutters from behind me.

I’m up top in an instant, scanning the faces around me. I spot Mandsy in a corner, folding some clothing she’s likely just finished mending.

“Where is he?” I snap.

Riden was her charge until he finished healing. She knows exactly who I mean by *he*.

She points near the stowed rowboats, where Lotiya and

Deshel have cornered Riden. That only makes my temper flare further.

“Allemos!” I shout. I don’t think I’ve ever called him by his surname before, but I’m so furious I can’t stand to let his first name come out of my mouth.

He looks up from the sisters, relief spreading across his features. Until he sees my face.

“Get your arse over here now!”

The girls giggle as he passes, staring at that arse as he moves.

When he finally reaches me, it’s impossible to keep my voice calm. “Draxen may have been lenient with you not following orders, but *I* do not tolerate it.”

He doesn’t look worried as he stands there. The wind blows across his hair, pressing the strands against his neck. I’m far too furious to become distracted by the slope of his neck.

“Have I done something?” he asks. The rest of the crew pretend to be focused on their chores, but I can tell they’re all listening.

“You were told to stay above deck last night, yet you deliberately disobeyed and ventured to the brig.”

He looks around at the others. “And just who claims to have seen me disobeying orders?”

“*I* saw you.” Idiot.

His eyes widen momentarily. “I didn’t realize you remembered things from when you’re all . . . different.”

“Whether you thought you’d be caught or not is irrelevant.

You're my prisoner. Disobeying orders isn't an option for you. Need I remind you that your brother's head does not need to remain attached to his neck?"

His nostrils flare, but he reins in his own temper and steps closer, speaking low so only I can hear. "I was only curious. I wanted to see you when you're all wild. I didn't take the wax out. I was careful."

I speak just as loudly as before so everyone can hear. "I don't care. You put everyone on this ship at risk with your curiosity."

"Everyone was perfectly safe."

I think of the lewd way in which I held myself, how I tried to beckon him closer by using my body as an incentive. I hate the siren.

"Do you know what would have happened if you had taken just three more steps? Let me tell you, since you excel at underestimating me. I would have been able to reach you through the bars. I'd have pulled your arm through. I'd have snapped it clean out of its socket. Then I'd have whittled at your finger bones until I'd fashioned them into lockpicks. Do you want to know what would have happened to you once I was out of the cell?"

His face has frozen. He manages a single shake of his head.

"I cannot control the siren. She is a monster, which is why we take precautions."

"I didn't realize—" He cuts off, and his voice turns firm, as if he can salvage this. "I wouldn't have gone any closer. Your siren self does not interest me."

"Niridia," I practically shout, "lock him down in the brig. Riden needs some time to think. Have the lads put Vordan

down there as well. Separate cells.” Riden hates Vordan as much as I do. He might try something.

“Aye, Captain,” she says.

I turn from them both and head for my quarters. I need to change.



When I reemerge, I’m no less furious with Riden. This ship is too small, I decide. I could have ordered him put back in the infirmary, but that’s less of a punishment. It’s only comfy living quarters. No, it’s the brig for the cocky bastard.

I am making a beeline for the hatch leading belowdecks, when I have to pause to let Enwen exit first. He’s so tall, he has some difficulty angling himself out of the hatch. With small eyes, hollow cheeks, and a perfect nose, he resembles a tree trunk.

“Enwen, where have you been?”

“Helping Teniri in the treasury, Captain. There was a lot of gold to count through.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Turn out your pockets.”

“No need. Teniri already searched me before I left. You can ask her yourself. I wouldn’t steal from my new crew. Unlike back on Draxen’s ship, I actually enjoy living on the *Ava-lee*.”

“Then why did you stay with Draxen?”

“Who else is going to keep an eye on Kearan?”

“Some job you’re doing. Why don’t you keep him out of my cellar? I’m sick of seeing him throwing up over the side of my ship.”

“I was meaning his emotional well-being, Captain.”

“You can’t be serious. Kearan has the emotional depth of a clam.”

“Well, a man can try, can’t he? I wouldn’t be doing my job as his friend if I didn’t try.”

“How many times do I have to tell you?” Kearan shouts from the other end of the ship. “We are not friends!”

“Yes, we are!” Enwen shouts back.

“Stop yelling,” I tell Enwen. “Sort it out yourselves. I have work to do.”

“Captain, wait!” A different voice this time. Little Roslyn’s. She intercepts me before I get a foot through the hatch. “I need to talk to you about having a celebration.”

“A celebration?”

“For getting the map and stealing the pirate lord’s treasure! Niridia said we couldn’t last night because you had to lock yourself in the brig for the night to let the siren out.”

“That’s true. And right now I have a prisoner to interrogate. How about tonight?”

“That works for me,” she says. As though she might have had an important appointment scheduled. “Can I help with the prisoner?”

“No.”

She crosses her arms, ready to argue.

“Have you practiced your letters today?”

She throws her head back and sighs angrily.

“No interrogating prisoners when you haven’t performed your own chores.” Not that I’d let her help anyway. She doesn’t

need to witness me torturing a man. “And no celebrating if you haven’t practiced.”

“Oh, all right,” she says, stomping off.

Wallov and Deros are playing cards in the brig when I get down there. Vordan has finally been let out of the cage, only to be placed into one of the brig cells instead. He’s unbound and ungagged, his back to us. Riden is two cells over, seated on the floor with his arms atop his knees. He doesn’t look at me.

Good.

“Your daughter is getting awfully cheeky, Wallov,” I say.

“Can’t imagine where she gets it from, Captain,” he says.

“I hope you’re not suggesting she’s getting it from me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he says. But his tone is too light to be sincere. I smile at him.

“You two are relieved for now,” I say. “I’ll keep an eye on the brig rats.”

They both scoot out of their chairs, starting for the stairs. “And see to it, Wallov, that Roslyn is actually practicing her writing and not threatening people with that dagger.”

“Isn’t it a beautiful piece of work, Captain? Won it off Deros in one of our games.”

Deros folds his massive arms. “I lost on purpose so the lass would have a way to protect herself.”

“Take it up top, lads,” I say.

I wait a few beats until the hatch slams closed behind them.

Vordan has risen, standing on one leg—the one that didn’t break during his fall at the inn—and turned to face me already.

He jerks his head toward the cell on the opposite side of the brig from him and Riden, the one filled with plush cushions. "I'd have preferred that one, but I take it that one is yours." He smiles at his own cleverness. "What is it like having to be locked up on your own ship?" he continues. "I can't imagine it—"

I cut him off with a deep, low note. Vordan holds a knife in his hand. He glances at it in fear before thrusting it down into his own leg, the one that isn't broken. He screams before changing the sound into an angry grunt. It's a rather pathetic attempt at maintaining his composure.

I halt the song, and Vordan comes out of the hallucination. He looks down at his leg, sees that it is whole, that his hand holds no knife, and fixes me with a filthy stare. His breathing has quickened. Even though his mind now knows he's not injured, it takes time to recover from the echo of pain.

"This is a dream come true for you," I say. "Looks like you'll get to experience the full brunt of my abilities after all."

His face pales, and the satisfaction I get from it is a soothing balm to my senses.

"Now, then," I say, "I want to know all of the spies you have in my father's fleet. I want their names and which vessels they sail on."

"I don't—"

Another note flows out of my mouth. A puddle of water appears at Vordan's feet, and I make him stick his face right into the water and hold it there for half a minute. I let him pull his head up for a few seconds to breathe and then stick him under the imaginary puddle for a full minute. Though his mind is

fully alert as to what's happening, I have taken his control over his own limbs. They obey me now.

When he comes up for air this time, I release him from the song.

He flops over onto his back, feeling the dry ground. No water. He hasn't the strength to stand as he sucks down as much air as his lungs will allow and coughs it back out.

I dare a glance in Riden's direction. He is watching everything, his face carefully blank. I'm not about to go back on our bargain to sense what he's feeling, though I'd desperately like to.

"I could, of course, force you to be truthful with me," I say, returning my attention to Vordan, "but I want nothing more than for you to suffer before you die. So by all means, Vordan, continue refusing me the information I want."

Once he's breathing a bit more easily, he stands, hopping pitifully as he finds a balance with the broken leg.

"On the *Deadman's Blade*, you'll find a pirate going by the name of Honsero. He's my man. Klain sails with the *Black Rage*." He pauses to catch his breath before listing several more ships and pirates, and even giving me the names of some who are stationed within my father's keep.

When he finishes talking, I utter a higher note, something piercing and throttling. I ask him if he's spoken the truth and if he's omitted any names. While under my influence, he confirms his earlier testimony.

My power slips away the more I sing. It feels similar to the way hunger creeps up on a person between meals, leaving them small and empty. It's infuriating how fleeting my abilities are.

When he returns once more to his senses, Vordan says, "You killed every man I had at the inn with me. For all I know, you killed the little boy who gave you up, too."

I didn't. I don't slaughter children. Especially when they have no fault save choosing the wrong man to accept food from. But I remain silent. Let Vordan think I'm so cruel.

"And now you know about all of the rest. You've taken everything. When you and I could have been so great together."

"No, Vordan. I could have made you great. You are not the sort of man who could ever achieve greatness on his own. You are ordinary, and you've accomplished nothing."

He laughs, a quiet sound meant for himself as he rakes his fingers through his hair.

"You're right," he says at last. "I have only one card left to play, Alosa. A bit of information to exchange for my life."

"There is nothing you know that I want."

"Not even if it's a secret your father keeps from you?"

I keep my face still, refusing to react to anything he says. He has nothing left but lies now.

"I overheard many conversations between you and Riden back on the *Night Farer*," he continues, smirking in Riden's direction. "Do you remember the talk the two of you had about secrets? You were trying so desperately to learn where J eskor had hidden the map, preying on Riden for any information he might have. You even told him some lie about hidden floorboards in your father's rooms where he keeps secret information. As if by telling him something of your father, he might tell you something of his."

Vordan smiles at the memory, and I can't believe I hadn't noticed him sneaking about more.

"But you and I both know," Vordan says, "that your father has a secret study in his keep."

Yes, I do know. It's my father's private room. The one place in the keep where only he is permitted to enter. I spent much of my childhood trying to find a way in, curiosity getting the better of me, and suffered dearly for it.

Vordan says, "I sent my best spy at the keep inside, Alosa. Would you like to know what he found?"

I open my mouth to tell him no. Lies will not get him anywhere. He cannot manipulate me. Not anymore. I am not his prisoner. He has not won this time.

But none of that comes out. Instead, I ask, "What?"

A grin takes over his face, and I get the urge to punch him. That physical manifestation of him thinking he's gotten the upper hand on me.

"Will you free me if I tell you?"

"I can get it out of you with my powers or without them, Vordan. Your choice."

He grits his teeth. "Fine, but don't you forget it was I who found out for you."

I'm about to open my mouth and start singing, but he cuts me off.

"Have you not always found it odd that your father is unaffected by your abilities? Do you know why?"

"Because his blood runs through my veins. That connection protects him."

“Is *that* what he told you?”

“It’s the truth,” I bite out through clenched teeth.

“Wrong.” Vordan seems to savor the word as it leaves his lips. “He found something on that island where he met your mother. A weapon. A device that protects him from the sirens. A device that lets him control them, should he find them again. A device that lets him control *you*. He’s been manipulating you since you were born.”

His words are ludicrous. I’ve been defying my father since I learned to control my own limbs. I don’t always listen. That’s why my whole body is covered in scars.

As if sensing my doubt, Vordan adds, “Think about it. Think about all he’s done to you. The way he’s beaten you. Tortured you. The way he hurt you just to prove a point. He’s been crueler to you than any other person alive, and yet you still serve him. You always go back to him. You always, ultimately, carry out his orders. Does that sound like something you would willingly do? You may try to rationalize it, Alosa. He’s your father. He’s only ever tried to make you strong. To make you a survivor. But do those sound like your own thoughts in your head? Or his thoughts bringing you back to him yet again?”

My blood turns cold. Air vanishes, and my vision blurs. No. It can’t be.

“You’re lying,” I snap once I find my voice.

“Am I?” he asks. “See for yourself.”

I do. I call forth a song so swept up in emotion, I can hardly

breathe out the notes. But even as I listen to Vordan's truthful response, his story doesn't change. He's telling the truth. Or at least what he believes is the truth.

His spy is deceiving him.

He has to be wrong.

I flee from the brig, needing space from the two men within more than I've needed anything.



I wish I had simply killed Vordan and not bothered to question him. His words follow me wherever I go.

He's been manipulating you since you were born.

I cannot doubt my father over one sentence spoken by his enemy. I *won't*.

And yet I cannot forget the words. Because they did not change even when I used the power of my voice to demand the truth from him. There is an uncomfortable tightness in my gut that I must ignore. Because if I were to examine it, to admit what the name of that feeling is—it could ruin everything I know. Everything I've worked for my whole life.

So I suffer silently, not daring to pull out that doubt and investigate it.

Journeying back to the keep will take a month. That should be plenty of time for the sensation to be extinguished. For me to remember exactly where my loyalties lie.

I tamp down those needling thoughts as I push myself through the rest of the day. I'd forgotten entirely about the

promise I made to Roslyn about having a celebration, but it would seem Roslyn took matters into her own hands, because the revelry starts without my having to say so.

Out on the main deck, Haeli, one of my riggers, pulls out a lute and begins playing a jaunty tune. Lotiya and Deshel dance together, arm in arm. Other girls clap along or join in the dancing. Wallov and Deros take turns twirling the girls about. Enwen soon joins the fun, but Kearan sits alone in the corner with his drink.

Roslyn, noticing this, takes a break from the dancing and tiptoes over to him.

“What do you want?” Kearan asks.

I can tell by the way she tips her head that she’s surprised he heard her. “I watch you from above sometimes. You pull out that flask a lot. Does rum really taste so good?”

Kearan turns to her then with strangely sober eyes. “Doesn’t need to taste good. Only needs to be strong.”

“Can I try some?”

Kearan shrugs and offers the flask. Before I can step forward, Sorinda is there, yanking the flask from his grasp. She upends it on his head.

Kearan sputters, “Damn it, woman! Do you delight in anything other than soaking me?”

“Idiot,” she says. “You don’t give drink to a child.”

“I wasn’t going to! As soon as it was near her nose she would have handed it back.”

“You couldn’t have known that.”

“You can’t stand to come within five feet of me because the drink is so strong.”

“I can’t stand to be near you for many reasons.”

They go on like that, lashing out at each other. If Kearan could manage to keep up with her, I’m sure it would come to blows. Roslyn wisely shrinks back from the two of them and returns to the dancing.

“Quite a pair those two,” Niridia says, stepping up beside me.

“I’ve never seen anyone get under her skin like that,” I say.

“It’s probably a first for her. I wonder how long it will be before she realizes she fancies him back.”

I let out a guffaw. “Sorinda? Fancy Kearan? I don’t think so.”

Niridia shrugs. “He wouldn’t be so bad if he cleaned himself up a bit.”

“And stopped drinking.”

“And shaved.”

“Worked out a bit.”

“And had someone right his nose.”

We both laugh. I hadn’t realized how much I needed it.

“All right,” she concedes. “I suppose he doesn’t have a chance.” We turn to observe the dancers together, and Niridia adds, “You know, it wouldn’t hurt to have one more man out here to share among the girls.”

And just like that my thoughts return to the brig. To what Vordan said.

“Has Riden suffered enough?” she asks.

I want to say no. To leave him in there until we reach the

keep. But that would be me being selfish because he overheard what Vordan said and not me punishing him for what he'd done. I was only going to leave him in there for the day anyway.

"You may let him out," I say, "but warn him that if he disobeys orders again, he'll stay in there until we reach the keep."

"Understood."

She watches my face for a beat longer. "Is something wrong?"

I force a smile onto my face. "It's nothing." And then, because I know she won't leave it alone without an explanation, I add, "Seeing Vordan again reminded me of what he did to me on that island. That's all. I'll be fine."

Her eyes fill with understanding. "Try to enjoy the celebration. Dancing always cheers you up. We could talk about it later, if you'd like."

I nod encouragingly, and as soon as she disappears I let the smile fall from my face. I debate going straight to bed, but I don't want to be alone with my thoughts. I'd much rather watch the crew having fun.

I tuck myself into a corner, crossing my legs under me while I sit atop a crate, letting the music replace the uneasiness inside me. Niridia returns with Riden in tow. Lotiya and Deshel are thankfully busy with Wallov and Deros. It's Philoria and Bayla, two of my gunwomen, who reach him and pull him into a twirling dance.

Riden doesn't miss a beat. You'd think he wasn't just thrown in the brig for the day after being severely chastened in front of the whole crew. Not to mention the fact he's only recently recovered from two bullets to the leg. Does nothing get to him?

Nothing save his brother, anyway? I stare at him openly from my hiding spot, watch the way his limbs move to the music, the way he interacts with each of the crew as though they've been lifelong friends. It's almost as if he has enchanting powers of his own.

Golden-brown eyes flit to me, as though he knew I was sitting here the whole time watching. At the next break in between songs, Riden saunters over. I tense, hoping Lotiya and Deshel will spot him leaving and capture him for once.

But no, he reaches me without anyone getting in his way and sits on the crate beside me.

I wait for him to say something. To try to convince me of Vordan's words. Has Riden not attempted to tell me since we first met that my father is corrupt and controlling? I'll bet he smiled at all of Vordan's words, pleased to have someone else confirming them. What had he called me when I told him he was ridiculous for being loyal to his despicable brother?

A hypocrite.

"You keep interesting company," he says.

My mind scrambles as it tries to tie the words to what happened down in the brig with Vordan. "What?" I ask.

"Those sisters."

I follow his line of sight to where Lotiya and Deshel are eyeing him. They take a break from their clapping hands and stomping feet so Lotiya can blow him a kiss while Deshel waves her fingers at him.

Riden shudders uncomfortably.

They're both very beautiful girls. I'm surprised at his reaction.

“They act like a couple of . . .” He trails off.

“Whores?” I finish for him. “That’s because they were. At far too young an age, they were forced into that life. I broke them out when I witnessed them fighting off a couple of men who tried to take their services for free after hours. They’re good with knives,” I add in warning.

“I wasn’t going to say whores.”

“No?” I ask, relieved to be talking about a neutral topic. “What were you going to say?”

“I honestly don’t have words to describe them.”

That prompts a little defensiveness in me. I’m glad to feel something different from the uneasiness that hasn’t left me all day. “If this arrangement is going to work, you’re going to need to remember that we’re not only women, we’re pirates.”

I remember the comments the sisters made earlier about wanting to see Riden naked. I add, “You wouldn’t give a second thought to a couple of men aboard your ship behaving in such a way or talking such talk. You do not get to judge us more harshly for being women. It’s not fair, and it doesn’t make sense. Not to mention I’ll throw your arse overboard if I catch you doing it again.”

Amusement lights up his face, but I push on as determined as ever. “I have twenty-eight excellent girls aboard this ship, and their pasts have shaped them. Just as yours has shaped you. And every single one of them, down to little Roslyn, deserves your respect.”

Riden watches me for a few more moments before looking on at the dancers. “I admire your love for your crew, Alosa, but

you don't need to defend them to me. I make no judgments because they're women rather than men. I was surprised, is all. I apologize."

I ignore his apology, yet also warm at it. I'm accustomed to defending my girls. To my father. To the men on his council. To other pirates. Women don't belong on the sea in their eyes.

But Riden is *apologizing*.

I don't know how to handle that.

"And I apologize for disobeying orders before," he says. "I won't go below again when you're replenishing your abilities."

"Good."

"They're . . . kind of terrifying."

I'm not sure whether to bristle or be amused by that.

"Alosa?" Riden asks.

I brace again for the mention of what Vordan said.

"I never did thank you for giving me and Draxen a chance. We would have been dead if you hadn't stepped in with your father. Thank you."

When I don't answer, he asks, "Why did you do it?"

And there's the other thing I'm not thinking about. Why I bother sticking my neck out for Riden and his worthless brother.

I dare to look at him. "I don't know."

He smiles then, a beautiful stretch of his lips—as though he has his own thoughts on why I might have done it.

I turn away to avoid staring at his mouth and listen to Haeli strike up a new song.

"Dance with me."

My neck turns so quickly in Riden's direction that I actually hear it crack. "What?"

"Come on. It'll be fun."

He grabs my arm and hauls me to my feet before I can refuse, which of course I was intending to do.

I'm sure of it.

It's too late now because he's already moving me in circles. To refuse him now would only cause a scene. Besides, the crew is cheering. Wallov, Deros, and Enwen grab new partners and join us. My movements are stiff, hesitant. I can feel my mind and body warring for dominance. There are so many reasons why this is a bad idea. Not to mention I have too many things to worry about to even attempt to enjoy myself.

"Come now, princess," Riden says. "Surely you can do better than that."

I shouldn't let him goad me, but I often can't help responding when I've been issued a challenge. And I do love dancing. My mother is a siren, after all. Music is in my blood.

I feel the music waft over my skin and move to help it along. I caress it with my hands, sashay around it with my hips, tread lightly over it with my feet. I make Riden follow me and my steps, but occasionally he forgets himself, stopping completely and watching me, caught up in my movements. He catches himself and starts to dance again. He's not bad at all. He stomps his feet in time. His twists and turns are sure and even graceful. Each time we come into contact—our hands, our arms, the brush of our knees—the dance grows more exciting, more electric. I am charged like storm clouds—it's ten times stronger than what I

feel when I use my siren abilities. And different. Something decidedly human.

I see the way Riden behaves around me: the focus and heat in his eyes, the way his hands linger, the way he positions his body next to mine. Normally, I would know exactly what it means. But then I remember yet again that he is my prisoner. He will say and do anything if he thinks it will help his cause.

The song finishes. Haeli starts up another, but I take my leave. “Go on, then!” I shout to the crew. “Continue into the night, but I’m off to bed.” I smile at the happy faces. They’re reddened with the joy that comes from a successful plunder.

I head for the stairs, certain I won’t actually be able to sleep with all the weight burdening me, but needing to get away nonetheless. I remind myself as I go, *Riden is my captive, Riden is my captive, Riden is my captive.*

Someone grabs my hand and pulls me under the companion-way. Out of sight and into shadow.

An equal surge of excitement and dread hits me before I even see his face.

“Alosa,” Riden says as he takes my hands in his and presses me gently against the wall.

He leans in, and I ask, “What?” As though he were about to ask me a question instead of saying my name aloud simply for the pleasure of hearing it roll off his tongue.

“You dance beautifully,” he says, and I feel his nose sidle up next to mine. My eyes have already closed.

Damn, but he smells good. Like the coconut soap we have

on the ship mixed with an earthy musk that belongs solely to him.

It would be easy to let him kiss me. Maddeningly easy.

But he wants his brother freed. He wants his own freedom. Any intimacy between us is deliberate on Riden's part.

It has to be.

"Good night, Riden," I say, dropping his hands. But as I pass him by, I kiss his cheek.

Once I get to my room, I chide myself for such a childish move.

But what scares me most is that I almost could not help it.