

# Chapter 1

I HATE HAVING TO dress like a man.

The cotton shirt is too loose, the breeches too big, the boots too uncomfortable. My hair is bound on the top of my head, secured in a bun underneath a small sailor's hat. My sword is strapped tightly to the left side of my waist, a pistol undrawn on my right.

The clothing is awkward as it hangs loose in all the wrong places. And the smell! You'd think men did nothing but roll around in dead fish guts while smearing their own excrement on their sleeves. But perhaps I shouldn't complain so.

Such precautions are necessary when one's being invaded by pirates.

We're outnumbered. Outgunned. Seven of my men lie dead on their backs. Two more jumped overboard as soon as they saw the black flag of the *Night Farer* on the horizon.

Deserters. They're the most cowardly filth. They deserve whatever fate comes to them. Whether they tire and drown or get claimed by the sea life.

Steel twangs through the air. The ship rocks from the blasts of cannons. We cannot hold out much longer.

"Two more down, Captain," Mandsy, my temporary first mate, says from where she peeks through the trapdoor.

"I should be up there, shoving steel between ribs," I say, "not hiding like some helpless whelp."

"A little patience," she reminds me. "If we're to survive this, you need to stay put."

"Survive?" I ask, offended.

"Let me rephrase. If we're to *succeed*, you really shouldn't be seen performing impressive feats with the sword."

"But maybe if I just killed a few of them . . ." I say more to myself.

"You know we can't risk that," she says. Then she adds abruptly, "More men have boarded the ship. I think they're headed this way."

*Finally.* "Give the order to surrender."

"Aye, Captain." She ascends the rest of the steps leading to the deck.

"And don't get yourself killed!" I hiss after her.

She nods before traveling through the trapdoor.

*Don't get killed*, I say again in my head. Mandsy is one of only three I trust on this ship. She's a good gal, very bright, optimistic—and a good voice of reason, which I desperately needed during our voyage. She volunteered to come, along with two other girls from my real crew. I shouldn't have allowed them to join me, but I needed their help keeping these worthless men in line. Life these last few weeks would have been so much easier if I could have had *my* crew on this venture.

“Lay down your arms!”

I can barely make out her cry through the sounds of fighting. But then things calm down. Cutlasses clatter to the wooden deck almost instantly. The men currently under my command had to be expecting the order. Praying for it, even. If I did not order the surrender, perhaps they would have given up on their own. By no means does this crew consist of the bravest bunch.

I climb the stairs, lying in wait just belowdecks, staying out of sight. I'm to play the part of the harmless cabin boy. If these men were to discover who I truly am . . .

“Check belowdecks. Make sure no one's hiding.” It's one of the pirates. I can't see him from where I hide, but if he's giving orders, he's either the first mate or the captain.

I tense, even though I know exactly what comes next.

The trapdoor lifts, and a hideous face comes into view, complete with a foul, scraggly beard, yellow teeth, and a broken

nose. Meaty arms grasp me roughly, hoisting me off the ladder and tossing me onto the deck.

It's a miracle that my hat stays on.

“Line them up!”

I stand as my weapons are removed by the ugly pirate. Then his foot jams into my back as he forces me to my knees, along with the rest of my men. I look down the line and relax as I see Mandsy. Sorinda and Zimah are unharmed as well. Good. My girls are safe. To hell with the rest of the crew.

I take a moment to observe the pirate barking out orders. He's a young man, perhaps not even twenty years of age. Unusual, that. Young men are not usually the ones giving orders, especially among crews such as this one. His eyes are alight with the victory of the battle. His stance is sure, his face confident. He's probably a head taller than I, were I standing, with dark brown hair the color of a seal's coat. His face is pleasant enough to look at, but that means nothing to me when I know he belongs to this crew. He notices Mandsy in the lineup. Her hat has fallen off, revealing her long brown hair and pretty face. He winks at her.

All in all, I'd say he's a cocky bastard.

My crew and I wait in silence for whatever the pirates have in store for us. Smoke billows around us from the cannon blasts. Debris is scattered around the ship. The smell of gunpowder leeches into the air, scratching at the back of my throat.

Footsteps sound as a man walks across the gangplank that connects the two ships. His head points down, revealing nothing more than a black hat with a white plume rising from the side.

“Captain,” the same pirate shouting orders from before says, “all the men on the ship are before you.”

“Good, Riden. But let’s hope they’re not *all* men.”

A few pirates snicker. Some of my men glance nervously in my direction.

Fools! They’re giving me away too easily.

“I’ve spotted three lasses so far, but none of them have red hair.”

The captain nods. “Listen up!” he shouts, raising his head so we can see him for the first time.

He’s not much older than his cocky first mate. I slowly take in the faces of the pirate crew. Many can’t even grow hair on their chins. It’s an incredibly young pirate crew. I’d heard that the *Night Farer* was no longer under the command of the pirate lord Jeskor—that he was succeeded by a young captain, but I hadn’t expected the entire crew to be so young.

“You have all heard the stories of Jeskor the Headbreaker,” the young pirate captain continues. “I am his son, Draxen. And you will find that my reputation will grow to be far worse.”

I can’t help myself. I laugh. Does he think he can make a reputation for himself by *telling* everyone how fearsome he is?

“Kearan,” the captain says, nodding to the man behind me.

Kearan rams the bottom of his sword onto the top of my head. It's not hard enough to knock me out, but it is enough to hurt like hell.

*That's enough of that, I think.* Mandsy's words of caution are so far from my mind now. I'm done kneeling on the floor like some servant. Bracing my hands against the wooden deck, I extend my legs backward, hooking my feet behind the heels of the ugly pirate standing there. With one yank forward, Kearan topples backward. I stand quickly, turn around, and take my sword and pistol from him before he can regain his feet.

I point the pistol at Draxen's face. "Get off the ship and take your men with you."

Behind me, I hear scuffling as Kearan finds his feet. I jerk my elbow backward, connecting with his enormous gut. There's a large splat as he collapses to the ground once again.

It's quiet. Everyone can hear the click of my pistol cocking back. "Leave now."

The captain tries to peer under my hat. I could try to duck under his gaze, but that would mean taking my eyes off him.

All at once a shot fires, wrenching the pistol from my hand. It lands on the deck before skittering out of sight.

I look to the right to see the first mate—Riden—placing his pistol back into his holster. A resulting arrogant smile stretches across his face. Though I would like to slash the look from him with my sword, I can admit it was an impressive shot.

But that doesn't stop me from getting angry. I draw my sword and step toward the first mate. "You could have taken my hand."

"Only if I'd wanted to."

All too quickly two men grab me from behind, one holding each arm.

"I think you talk far too much for a mere cabin boy whose voice hasn't yet dropped," the captain says. "Remove the hat."

One of my captors yanks the hat from my head, and my hair falls into place, reaching halfway down my back.

"Princess Alosa," Draxen says. "There you are. You're a bit younger than I expected."

He's one to talk. I may be three years shy of twenty, but I'd bet my sword arm I could best him in any challenge of wits or skill.

"I was worried we'd have to tear apart the ship before we found you," he continues. "You will be coming with us now."

"I think you'll learn quickly, Captain, that I don't like being told what to do."

Draxen snorts, rests his hands on his belt, and turns back toward the *Night Farer*. His first mate, however, never takes his eyes off me, as though he anticipates a violent reaction.

Well, of course I'm going to react violently, but why should he expect it already?

I slam my heel into the foot of the pirate holding me on the

right. He grunts and releases me to reach down. Then I jab the side of my freed hand into the other pirate's throat. He makes a choking sound before placing his hands at his neck.

Draxen turns to see what the commotion is. Meanwhile, Riden levels another pistol at me, even whilst a smile still rests upon his face. Single-shot pistols take time to reload with gunpowder and an iron ball, which is why most men carry at least two on them.

"I have terms, Captain," I say.

"Terms?" he says in disbelief.

"We will negotiate the terms of my surrender. First I will have your word that my crew will be freed and unharmed."

Draxen removes his right hand from his belt and reaches down for one of his pistols. As soon as he has it, he points it at the first of my men in line and fires. The pirate behind him jumps out of the way as the body of my crewman falls backward.

"Do not test me," Draxen commands. "You will get on my ship. Now."

He is certainly eager to prove his reputation. But if he thinks he can intimidate me, he is wrong.

Again I pick up my sword. Then I rake it across the throat of the pirate recovering from the strike to the neck I gave him.

Riden's eyes widen while the captain's narrow. Draxen pulls out another gun from his waist and fires at the second man in line. He goes down like the first.

I ram my sword into the closest pirate next to me. He cries



out before dropping first to his knees, then to the deck. The boots I wear are now sticky with blood. I've left a few red footprints on the wood beneath me.

"Stop!" Riden shouts. He steps closer, pointing his gun at my chest. It is of no surprise to me that his smile is now gone.

"If you wanted me dead, you would have already killed me," I say. "Since you want me alive, you *will* comply with my terms." In a matter of seconds, I disarm Kearan, the pirate who grabbed me from before. I force him to his knees. One hand yanks his head back by the hair; the other holds my sword steady against his neck. He doesn't make a sound as I hold his life in my hands. Impressive, considering he has seen me kill two of his shipmates. He knows I will feel no guilt at his death.

Draxen stands before a third member of my crew, holding a new pistol.

This one's Mandsy.

I don't let the fear show on my face. He has to think me indifferent. This *will* work.

"For one who asked for the safety of her crew, you sure are being callous when I kill them off one by one," Draxen says.

"But for every man I lose, you shall lose one as well. If you intend to kill them all after I'm on board, then it doesn't really matter if I lose a few while bargaining for the safety of the rest. You intend to take me captive, Captain. If you wish me to board your ship willingly, then you would be wise to listen to my

offer. Or shall we see just how many of your men I can kill as you try to force me over?”

Riden approaches his captain and whispers something to him. Draxen tightens his hold on his weapon. I feel my heart beating rapidly. *Not Mandsy. Not Mandsy. She's one of mine. I can't let her die.*

“State your terms, *princess.*” He practically spits out my title. “And be quick about it.”

“The crew is to be unharmed and released. I will come aboard your ship without resisting. Also, you will bring my accessories over.”

“Your accessories?”

“Yes, my wardrobe and personal belongings.”

He turns to Riden. “She wants her clothes,” he says incredulously.

“I am a princess, and I will be treated as such.”

The captain looks about ready to shoot me, but Riden speaks up. “What do we care, Captain, if she wants to get herself all fixed up for us every day? I for one won't complain.”

Soft laughter resonates from his crew.

“Very well,” Draxen says at last. “Will that be all, *Your Highness?*”

“Yes.”

“Then get your pampered arse over to the ship. You men”—he points to a couple of brutes in the back—“get her belongings to the ship. As for the princess's crew, get the lot of you to the

rowboats. I will be sinking this ship. It's a two-and-a-half-day sail to the nearest port if you row quickly. And I suggest you do before you die of thirst. Once you reach the shore, you will take my note of ransom to the pirate king and inform him that I have his daughter."

Men from both sides hurry about to carry out orders. The captain steps forward and holds out his hand for the sword. Reluctantly, I give it up. Kearan, the pirate I'd been threatening, rises to his feet and scurries as far from me as possible. I don't get a chance to smile at his reaction, because Draxen lands a blow on my left cheek.

My whole body lurches from the force of it. The inside of my mouth bleeds from where my teeth struck skin. I spit blood onto the deck.

"Let's get one thing straight, Alosa. You are my prisoner. While it appears you've learned a thing or two from growing up as the daughter of the pirate king, the fact remains that you will be the only woman on a ship full of cutthroats, thieves, and blackhearts who haven't made port in a good long while. Do you know what that means?"

I spit again, trying to get the taste of blood out of my mouth. "It means your men haven't been to a whorehouse recently."

Draxen smiles. "If you ever try to make me lose face in front of my men like that again, I may just leave your cell unlocked at night so anyone can wander in, and I will fall asleep, listening to your screams."

“You’re daft if you think you will *ever* hear me scream. And you’d better pray you never fall asleep while my cell is unlocked.”

He gives me an evil smile. I note that he has a gold tooth. His hat sits atop black hair that peeks under in little curls. His face is dark from the sun. And his coat is a little too big for him, as if it belonged to someone before him. Stole it off his father’s corpse, perhaps?

“Riden!” Draxen shouts. “Take the girl over. Put her in the brig. Then get to work on her.”

*Get to work on her?*

“Gladly,” Riden says as he approaches. He grasps my arm tightly, almost hard enough for it to hurt. It’s a sharp contrast to his light expression. It makes me wonder if the two men I killed were his friends. He tows me toward the other ship. As I walk, I watch my men and women drift away on the rowboats. They row at a steady pace so as not to tire themselves too quickly. Mandsy, Sorinda, and Zimah will make sure they swap positions regularly so each man can get a turn to rest. They’re bright girls.

The men, however, are throwaways. My father handpicked each of them. Some of them owe him money. Some of them got caught stealing from the treasury. Some didn’t follow orders like they were supposed to. And some have no other fault except for being an annoyance. Whatever the case, my father gathered them all together in one crew, and I brought no more than three girls from my ship to help me keep them in line.

After all, Father suspected that most of the men would be killed once Draxen took me. Lucky for them, I was able to save most of their miserable lives. I hope Father won't be too upset.

But that doesn't matter right now. The point is that I'm now aboard the *Night Farer*.

Of course, I couldn't make my capture look too easy. I had a part to play. Draxen and his crew can't suspect me.

They can't know I was sent on a mission to rob their ship.

# Chapter 2

I ENVY RIDEN'S BOOTS.

They're of a fine workmanship and black as a shark's hungry eye. The buckles look to be pure silver. The leather is sturdy and tight. The material folds around his calves in a perfect fit. His steps thud on the deck. Sturdy. Loud. Powerful.

Meanwhile, I constantly trip as Riden drags me along. My too-big boots keep nearly falling off. Whenever I hesitate so I can readjust them, Riden yanks harder on my arm. I have to catch myself several times before I fall to the floor.

"Keep up now, lass," he says merrily, knowing full well I'm incapable of doing just that.

Finally, I stomp on his foot.

He grunts but, to his credit, does not let me go. I expect him to hit me like Draxen did, but he doesn't. He just hurries me along faster. I could, of course, break away from him easily if I wanted to. But I can't seem too adept, especially when pitted against the first mate. And I need the pirates to settle down around me after my display back on the other ship.

This ship is empty except for the two of us. All of Draxen's men are over on my ship, relieving it of anything valuable. Father gave me enough coin to make the pirates happy but not too profitable. If I had been found traveling without any money, Draxen was bound to be suspicious.

Riden turns me to the right, where we face a set of stairs leading belowdecks. It's an uncomfortable trip downward. Twice I miss a step and nearly tumble all the way down. Riden catches me each time, but his grip is always firmer than necessary. My skin will likely be bruised by tomorrow. Knowing this makes me angry.

Which is why when we are three steps from the bottom, I trip him.

He's clearly not expecting it. He falls, but I didn't take into account that tight grip of his. So, naturally, he takes me with him.

The impact is painful.

Riden gets to his feet quickly, yanking me up with him. Then he shoves me into a corner so I have nowhere to run. He rakes his deep brown eyes down and up, regarding me with curiosity.

I'm something new. A project, perhaps. An assignment from his captain. He must learn the best way to deal with me.

While he watches me, I wonder what it is he gathers from my face and stance. My role is the part of the distressed and exasperated prisoner, but even when playing a part, pieces of a person's true self can sneak through the cracks. The trick is controlling which part of me I want him to see. For now, it is my stubbornness and temper. Those I don't have to pretend.

He must come to some conclusion as he says, "You said you would be a willing prisoner. I can see your word does not mean much to you."

"Hardly," I retort. "If you had given me a chance to walk to the brig without your help instead of bruising my arm, your knees wouldn't be smarting."

He says nothing while amusement lights up his eyes. Finally, he extends his arm in the direction of the brig, as if he is a potential partner presenting me with the dance floor.

I step on without him, but from behind me he says, "Lass, you've the face of an angel but the tongue of a snake."

I'm tempted to turn around and kick him, but I manage to hold myself in check. There will be plenty of time for me to beat him soundly once I've gotten what I came for.

I stand tall and walk the rest of the way to the brig. I observe the different cells quickly, selecting the cleanest one. Really, it looks just like the others. But I try to convince myself the dark substance in the corner is dirt.



At least the cell has a chair and a table. I will have a place to put my belongings. I don't doubt for a moment that the captain will keep his word. It is mutually beneficial for all pirate captains to be honest with one another, even if we're likely to kill one another in their sleep. No deals and negotiations would be possible between rivaling lords without some semblance of trust. It's a new way of life for every pirate. My father introduced the concept of honesty into the pirate repertoire. All the pirates who wanted to survive under the new regime had to adopt it. For anyone found being dishonest in their dealings is quickly disposed of by the pirate king.

I inspect the seat of the chair. Everything is too dirty for my liking, but it will have to do. I remove the large brown leather coat from my shoulders and cover the seat and back of the chair with it. Only then do I sit.

Riden smirks, probably at my clear unease in these quarters. He locks me in the cell and pockets the key. Then he pulls out a chair for himself and sits down, just on the other side of the bars.

"What now?" I ask.

"Now we talk."

I make a show of sighing dramatically. "You already have me prisoner. Go claim your ransom and leave me to sulk in peace."

"I'm afraid your father's money is not all we want from you."

I clutch the neckline of my cotton shirt as though I'm worried the pirates intend to undress me. This is part of the act. It

would take *a lot* of men to restrain me; I have no trouble handling three at a time. And no more than that would fit in this cell.

“No one is going to touch you now that you’re down here. I will see to that.”

“And who will see to it that *you* do not touch me?”

“Let me assure you, I have never had need to force myself upon a woman. They come willingly.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“That’s because I haven’t worked my charms on you yet.”

I laugh scornfully. “As a female pirate raised by other pirates, I’ve had to fend off the most despicable and persistent of men. I’m not too worried.”

“And what would you do, Alosa, if you had to fend off a man who wasn’t despicable and persistent?”

“I’ll let you know when I meet one.”

He laughs. The sound is deep and rich. “Fair enough. But now to business. You are here because I want information.”

“That’s nice. I want a clean cell.”

He leans back in his chair, getting comfortable. Perhaps he realizes this will take a while. “Where does Kalligan make port?”

I snort. “You’re a terrible questioner. You think I’m going to hand over the location to my father’s hideaway? Shouldn’t you ease into the big questions? And since he is your king, you would do well to address him with his proper title.”

“Since I have his daughter locked up, I think I have the liberty to call him whatever I wish.”

“He will kill you and everyone else on this ship. And he will not make it quick.” I felt it was about time I threw out a threat or two. That’s what a real prisoner would do.

Riden doesn’t look worried. Not at all. He wears his confidence as if it is merely another article of clothing upon his person.

“It will be difficult for us to return you if we do not know your father’s location.”

“You don’t need to know it. He will find me.”

“We will be several days ahead of your father’s men. That’s more than enough time to escape to somewhere he will never find us.”

I shake my head. “You simpleton. My father has men in his employ throughout all of Maneria. It only takes one of them to spot you.”

“We are well aware of your father’s reach. Though I don’t see how he thinks that merits his self-given title as king.”

Now it is my turn to recline in my chair. “You’re jesting, right? My father *controls* the ocean. There is not a single man who sails without paying a toll to him. All pirates must pay a percentage of their plunder to him. Those who do not are blown sky high from the sea. So tell me, fearless Riden, first mate of the *Night Farer*, if he kills men for shorting him on money owed,

what do you think he will do to the men who have taken his daughter?

“You and this crew are nothing more than a bunch of little boys playing a dangerous game. Within a fortnight, every man on the sea will be looking for me.” Of course, I intend to be off this vessel before a fortnight has passed.

“Little boys?” He straightens in his chair. “You must be younger than nearly every man on this ship.”

After everything I said, that’s what he held on to? “Hardly. What are you, fifteen?” I’m goading him. I know he must be much older than that, but I’m curious as to his actual age.

“Eighteen,” he corrects me.

“Regardless, my age has nothing to do with anything. I have a special set of skills that make me a better pirate than most men can ever hope of becoming.”

Riden tilts his head to the side. “And what skills might those be?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

His grin widens at that. “As I’m sure you’ve already guessed, this is no ordinary crew. We may be younger than most men at sea, but most of us have seen the cruelest side of life there is. The men are ruthless, each one of them already killers.” For a moment his face drops, and a hint of sadness washes over him. He’s reflecting on some former time.

“If you’re going to start crying, could you wait until you get back on deck? I can’t abide tears.”

Riden levels his gaze at me. Almost as if he's not looking at me but through me. "You're truly a heartless creature, Alosa. You kill without hesitating. You can best two men at a time in a fight. You watch your own men dying without blinking. I can only imagine the kind of upbringing you must have had under the most notorious pirate in all of Maneria."

"Let's not forget the fact that I'm a better shot than you."

He laughs, showing a nice set of teeth. Impressive for a pirate. "I think I shall enjoy our talks together over the next good long while. And I sincerely hope I will get a chance to see you shoot someday, so long as I'm not the target."

"No promises."

The faint sounds of shouting rise above deck. The ship shakes as it releases more cannons. That'll be Draxen sinking my ship. Well, it's not *my* ship, merely the ship my father gave me for this mission. My real ship, the *Ava-lee*, and most of my real crew are safe at the keep. While I miss both, I'm also thrilled at the challenge ahead of me.

The steps creak as someone descends them. Draxen comes into view not long after. Three men trail behind him, carrying my effects.

"About time," I say.

The faces of the three brutes carrying my bags are red, their breathing rapid. I smile. That probably means they got it all. I do not pack lightly.

Each one of them huffs as they drop the bags to the floor.

“Careful!” I snap.

The first pirate is rather tall. He almost has to duck in order to traverse belowdecks. Now that he’s dumped his load, he reaches into his pocket and fumbles with something there. A string of what looks like beads peeks out. Some sort of good luck charm, perhaps?

The second stares at me as if I’m a tasty morsel of food. He makes the skin at the base of my neck crawl. Best to stay away from that one, I decide.

The man at the back of the group is Kearan. Stars, he’s ugly. His nose is large, his eyes too far apart, his beard too long and unkempt. His belly hangs over his belt to complete the look.

I think that my opinion of him can’t get any lower when I notice what’s in his hand. He tosses a couple of my dresses onto the heap at the floor.

I clench my teeth. “Were you *dragging* those? On this filthy floor? Do you have any idea how hard it was to find a girl my size to steal those from?”

“Shut your trap, Alosa,” Draxen commands. “I’m still of half a mind to toss this lot overboard, my word be damned.”

Kearan pulls a flask from his many-pocketed coat. He takes a large swig. “Might keep us from sinking, Cap’n.”

“Oh, hush,” I say. “It’s not too late for me to kill you.”

He has the decency to look troubled before taking another drink.

Draxen turns around. “Gents, go above and make ready the

ship. I want to leave immediately. Kearan, to the helm with you. Await my return.”

As they depart, Draxen strolls up to Riden and slaps him on the back. “How did it go, brother?”

*Brother?*

Draxen’s hair is darker, but his shoulders have the same broadness as Riden’s. They have the same dark eyes, but Riden is more handsome. No, not handsome. Rivaling pirates are not handsome. They’re bilge rats.

“Well enough,” Riden responds. “She’s very much loyal to her father. She’s confident in his ability to rescue her, since his reach upon the sea is so vast. Her words lead me to believe he’ll be looking for us in open water, so I recommend we stay close to shore.”

Hurriedly, I think back to our conversation, realizing the all-too-revealing mistakes in my answers.

Riden’s more clever than he seems. He smirks at my startled expression, or perhaps at the look of death I send him afterward. Then he continues. “She’s got a fiery temperament that matches the red hair atop her head. She’s intelligent. I’d guess she’s had some sort of proper schooling. As for her fighting and such, I’d wager she was trained by the pirate king himself, which means he truly cares for her and will agree to pay the ransom.”

“Excellent,” Draxen says. “So the blackhearted pirate king would indeed come for his daughter.”

“Probably in person,” Riden says.

I'm careful to keep my expression the same. Let them think my father will be looking for me, rather than sitting safe in his keep, awaiting my report. However, they're spot-on about my training. My father would only trust this mission with someone he had trained himself. And he's only ever trained one person.

"Anything else?" Draxen asks.

"She's a dangerous one. She should be kept locked up at all times. I also wouldn't let any of the men be alone with her, for their sakes." Riden says that part jokingly, but then he returns to seriousness, taking a deep breath while he collects his thoughts. "And she's hiding something. More than the secrets we already know she keeps. There's something she really doesn't want me to find out."

I stand from my chair and step up to the bars, my mind reeling. He can't know my darkest secret. Only my father and a select few know it. "How could you possibly know that?"

"I didn't."

Draxen laughs.

I ball my hands into fists. I want nothing more than to strike Riden's cocky face again and again until each of his teeth fall out of his smile.

But, alas, his face is too far away. So I settle for grabbing the sleeve of his long shirt. Since he's still sitting, he flies headfirst toward the bars. He braces his hands against the bars so his face doesn't connect. That's fine by me, because it gives me the time



I need to use my free hand to pluck the key to my cell from his pocket. Once I've got it, I place it in my own pocket and back up to the wooden wall of the cell.

Riden grunts as he stands.

"Perhaps you shouldn't be left alone with her, either," Draxen says.

"I can handle her. Besides, she knows that the longer she holds on to it, the longer she'll have to enjoy my company."

I remind myself that I'm on this ship by choice. I can leave anytime I wish. I just need to find the map first.

I unlock the door myself. The two men allow me to haul my bags into my cell. They don't bother to help. They wait as I make the three trips. Not that I want their help. I'm in a mood to break bones. Riden's, mostly. Father would no doubt admire my restraint. I lock myself back in the cell once I'm done.

Riden holds out his hand expectantly. I hesitate for only a brief moment before tossing the key at him. He catches it effortlessly. A look of skepticism crosses his face. He grasps a bar of the cell and tugs. It stays firmly in place, locked.

"Can't be too careful," Riden says to Draxen. "Did you check through her things?"

"Aye," the captain says. "There's naught but clothes and books in there. Nothing of danger. Now, I think we've had enough excitement for one day. Let's go above and decide the best location to stall the ship. And it would be best not to tell the lass where we'll be. Don't need her gettin' any ideas."

Draxen makes for the stairs. Riden quirks up the right side of his lips before following.

Once they're out of sight, I smile. Riden isn't the only one to have gathered information during our little chat. I've learned that Riden and Draxen are brothers, sons of the pirate lord Jeskor. I'm still unsure as to what happened to Jeskor and his original crew for Draxen to inherit the ship, but I'm sure I will learn that later. Riden's a good shot, and he has his captain's confidence. How else did he manage to convince Draxen not to kill any more of my men? I wonder what he whispered to him back on the other ship and why he bothered to step in, in the first place. Riden's concerned for the men on this ship, not just with the normal concern that a first mate might have for the men he oversees. I think back to when he told me all the men on the ship are killers and how saddened he was by it. He feels responsibility for something. Perhaps it is tied to whatever happened to the original crew of the *Night Farer*.

There are many secrets aboard this ship, and I will have plenty of time to discover them all, starting tonight. I shake my right arm. I feel the metal slide down and slip into my hand.

It's the key to my cell.

# Chapter 3

I HAD AMPLE OPPORTUNITIES to snatch the key from Riden. The trick was finding a way to lock myself in the cell before switching the key with another one I'd brought on board with me. I guessed that the key to my own ship's brig would be about the same size. Riden couldn't have noticed the difference.

He's not as clever as he thinks. And I am far more clever than he realizes.

Big mistake on his part.

Now that I'm alone, I rummage through my bags to find something suitable to wear. I can't stomach this sailor's outfit any longer. It'll take an entire bottle of perfume to rid my skin of the stench of the last owner. Who knows when I'll be allowed

a bucket of water to wash? With Captain Draxen's cruel demeanor, I'm sure it will be quite some time.

I select a dark blue corset with wide sleeves that attach with thick ribbons. I place these atop a white blouse. The corset ties up the front, so I'm able to do it myself. I never had ladies to wait on me like land-faring noblemen's daughters. There are not many women willing to work for pirates. And the ones equipped for a life at sea are not wasted as maids. My own crew back at the keep is nearly entirely composed of women. A fact I am proud of.

I pull on a pair of black leggings and a pair of clean breeches atop that. My boots, perfectly snug and comfortable, go on next, extending all the way up to my knees. I sigh in contentment once I'm done. Looking good certainly helps to make one feel good.

Humming as I work, I grab a book titled *Depths of the Sea* from one of my bags. It's an index of all the creatures known to live in the ocean. I memorized each entry long ago, and I've spent so much time at sea that I've seen more creatures than charted in the work itself. That's why I had no problem hollowing out the binding of the book and hiding a small dagger inside.

Voices and footsteps reach my ears. I quickly place the dagger into my right boot and drop the book back with my other things. I sit down in what I hope is an inconspicuous manner as three men enter the brig.

“She don’t look like much,” one says to the others.

“But did you see what she did to Gastol and Moll?” another asks. “Dead as rocks.”

The third man remains quiet, watching me as the others do.

“Have you finished ogling?” I ask. “Or are you hoping I’ll perform tricks for you?”

“Don’t mind us,” the first pirate says. “It’s not every day you get to see the pirate king’s own flesh and blood.”

“And am I what you were expecting?”

“They say the pirate king is as big as a whale and as fierce as a shark. We weren’t expecting a tiny little thing.”

“I must take after my mother,” I say. I’ve never met my mother, so I couldn’t say for certain, but my father tells me I received my red hair from her.

The rest of the day is much like this. Pirates come and go, taking whatever chance they can get to see the pirate king’s daughter up close. After the first bunch, I stay mostly quiet.

It’s close to nightfall when my last visitor shows up. Whereas all the other pirates arrived in groups, this man comes alone.

He’s not much to look at, this one. Medium height and build. Brown hair and beard. He does look older than most of the other pirates on board. Maybe not quite thirty, but it’s hard to tell with the beard hiding the bottom half of his face. He’s got a gold coin in his right hand, which he moves over his knuckles with ease.

“Hello, Alosa,” he says. “Name’s Theris.”

I'd been leaning back on two legs in my chair, but now I swing forward, straightening myself. "I must have seen every man on board pass through here at least once today. Why should I remember you? Or care what your name is?"

"You shouldn't," he says, reaching a hand up and scratching his forehead. His fingers move fast, but the movement is unmistakable. He draws the letter *K*. "I'm not a very interesting man to know."

The *K* is for Kalligan. It's the signal men under my father's employ use to identify themselves. Theris must be the man on the ship working for my father. He would have been the one who let my father know that the crew of the *Night Farer* wanted to kidnap me in the first place.

You never know when unfriendly ears are listening in, so I keep the conversation casual. "So it would seem."

"Just wanted to catch a glimpse of the pirate king's daughter."

"And let me catch a glimpse of you?"

"Precisely. Sometimes survival isn't about what you can do, but who you know."

"Noted," I say icily.

Theris nods before retreating.

I wasn't expecting my father's man to make himself known to me. We have different jobs on the ship. Theris's is to provide my father with information about this ship and its captain. Mine is to play the role of thief. We shouldn't need to help each

other. In fact, we're expected to be able to perform our tasks alone.

But my father is counting on me not to fail. Perhaps his desire to find the map is so great that he's ordered Theris to keep an eye on me. On the one hand, I can understand why he wouldn't want to take any chances, but on the other, I'm deeply insulted. I can handle this mission on my own, and I won't be calling on Theris for help.



I have to wait until nightfall before I can start. I can tell when the sun sets because most of the pirates retire below. I can't see them from the brig, but I can smell them. They can't be far. I can imagine them sleeping in hammocks or on a straw-strewn floor. Whatever it may be, it's bound to be better than the brown-caked floor I'll be sleeping on. I cringe at the thought.

I start humming again as I shrug on my coat, which is fashioned similarly to the justaucorps men wear, but mine was made for a woman's figure. Mandsy made it for me. She can wield a needle just as well as she can wield a sword, which is only one of the many reasons why I made her part of my crew.

Though the coat will help me look like any other sailor if I'm seen from a distance, I hope I won't have much need to blend in once I'm above deck. I'm counting on the cover of darkness to mask me.

Once I've got my cell unlocked, I silence my humming. I drift around the lower areas of the ship, getting a feel for the shape of it. A storage room for food and supplies, a treasury for the pirates' plunder, a modest kitchen, and the main crew's sleeping quarters make up the space belowdecks. Easy enough to remember.

Now I need to make it into the captain's quarters without being seen. I don't have Draxen figured out yet, but if I were trying to hide something important, like a map, I'd keep it close.

There is a possibility, however, that Draxen doesn't even know the map is on board. It belonged to his father, who is a descendant from one of the three ancient pirate lord lines. (I am, of course, descended from one of the others.) Lord Jeskor may not have even told his sons about the map. No matter. The map has to be on board. Jeskor would have had it here when he died, and Draxen's quarters used to be his own. They're most definitely the first place I should look.

I peek up over the last step of the stairs, observing the deck. It's hard to see, as the moon is almost new. Naught but a sliver of light shines down upon the dark deck of the *Night Farer*. The ship was once a standard caravel ship, a type of vessel used for maritime exploration. Most pirates steal them from the land king's own armada. Then we make adjustments to fashion the ship to our own liking. I can see that Jeskor has had the rigging redone. He's exchanged the traditional lateen sail on the mainmast with a square-rigged sail. Smart, as it'll give him more



speed. I also noted, while I was back on my father's ship and watching the *Night Farer* approach, that Jeskor's added a figure-head below the bowsprit. I doubt the land king has ever had large carvings of women fashioned to the fronts of his ships. He's much too practical for that.

There are only a few men above deck. Someone's at the helm, a man sits in the crow's nest, and a couple of others roam the deck to ensure all is well. I can tell exactly where they are, because they hold lanterns out in front of them.

Draxen and Riden will already be in their quarters. Assuredly sleeping. They just made an impressive capture—they will have celebrated. Now they're likely sleeping off their drink. I anticipate tonight's venture going over smoothly.

There are two separate levels above deck at the stern of the ship. The lower level likely holds Riden's quarters. The captain's will be off the aftercastle.

All I need to do is get past the man at the helm. Luckily for me, the man seems drowsy. He lazily leans against the railing while holding the helm with one hand.

Draxen's doors are likely unlocked. He wouldn't need them locked while he's in there. Unless he's paranoid or mistrusting of his crew. He didn't seem to be either sort to me, so I should be able to get right in.

I crouch on the deck beside the stairs that lead up to the second level. I wait for the man's head to loll to the side. Standing on my toes, I carefully creep up the companionway. All is well

until I get to the last step, which creaks out a sound so loud in the silence, it feels as though I could have heard it from belowdecks. I feel my body go rigid at my mistake.

The sailor at the helm jerks awake fiercely, turning his head toward the sound. Toward me. “Blast it all, you gave me a start! Please tell me you’re here to relieve me, Brenno!”

He’s too tired, and the sky is too dark for him to tell who I really am. Quickly, I play along, lowering my voice as much as I can. “Aye.” I keep my response short. I’ve no idea what Brenno sounds like, and I can’t risk my voice being off.

“Thank the stars. I’ll be off, then.”

He heads belowdecks while I stand there. I need to hurry before the real Brenno shows up for his shift. Without another thought, I slip inside Draxen’s quarters.

I spot him instantly, lying on the bed. His face is turned away from me, but I can see the steady rise and fall of his chest. He’s out. A candle burns softly near the bed, offering the room a little light and warmth. The place isn’t filthy, but neither is it exactly tidy. This is a small blessing, at least. It’s much harder to mask thieving when tossing a clean room. It’s easier for the owner to tell if something’s been touched.

Now I get to work, starting at the desk, where he has various papers and maps strewn about.

The map I seek will be different than the others. For one, it’s older. It’ll be fragile and darkened with age. Also, the map will not bear the language of the common tongue. Its language, too, is

more ancient. There are few who know it. Lastly, the map is not complete. It is one of three pieces, separated long ago and dispersed to the three pirate lords of the time. With the three pieces united, the bearer will be able to find the legendary Isla de Canta, an island heaped with untold treasure and protected by its magical occupants, the sirens.

It's not anywhere on the desk or near it. I checked each drawer for false bottoms and hidden compartments. I move on to the cupboards where he keeps his clothes, rifling through every pocket in each garment. I feel a desperate need to wash my hands afterward, but I squelch the urge.

Instead I continue to scour the place. I pick at each wooden panel in the floor to see if anything is hidden underneath. I lightly tap the walls, listening for irregularities that hint at secret openings. I strike the last wall a bit too harshly, and Draxen rolls over in his sleep. Thank the stars, he does not wake.

Deep sleeper, that one.

Lastly I check under the bed. He's got a few things here. Thick woolen stockings, a broken sextant, a telescope.

When I want to sigh in exasperation, I swallow instead.

It's not here. It's not anywhere in this room or the adjoining washroom and sitting room. And that means it's somewhere else on the ship. But the ship is *enormous*. There are countless hiding places. And I will have to check them all until I find the map.

I'm going to have a miserable time of it.

Opening the captain's door quietly, I peek my head out. I've spent over half the night. No point in doing any more searching now. Might as well return to my cell for some sleep.

Brennol seems to have made his appearance, and he looks wide-awake. He has both hands placed firmly at the helm. How to get past him? If I simply walk out, he'll notice I'm not the captain. I'm too short.

If I could just make it down the companionway, he probably wouldn't take notice of me. But it's a good ten feet away. I tip-toe back into Draxen's quarters and search for something to use.

Eventually I find a copper coin. Perfect. Back at the door, I place the coin over the top of my thumb and flick it toward the port side of the stern. Brennol turns his head in that direction, leaning forward and squinting. Quickly, yet silently, I make for the stairs on the right and descend them, remembering to skip the step at the top.

When I hit the deck, I slam my back into the wall behind the companionway, ducking out of sight. I think I took the final step too loudly. And Brennol is bound to be even more alert now. I should wait a couple of beats before heading belowdecks.

A door to my left opens.

The door to Riden's quarters.

He looks first to his left, then to his right. "I thought I heard something. 'Fraid I'm a light sleeper. Didn't expect you, though."

I have only a moment to register the fact that all he has on are a pair of breeches before he reaches for me.

I have nowhere to go. Between the walls and the stairs, the only way out is through him. And I suppose it makes sense to simply let him catch me, even though my instincts scream at me not to.

*I want to be here. I have a job to do. It's okay to let him catch me.*

“How did you get out of your cell?” he asks. Not an ounce of sleep traces his words, though he had to have just woken. He grabs me by my upper arms, holding me in place.

I say, “I stopped the first pirate I saw and asked really nicely.”

His face is cloaked in shadows, but I swear I can hear his smile. “I’m the only one who has a key.”

“Perhaps you dropped it, then. That was careless of you.”

He touches his side as if to grab a pocket, then remembers he’s not wearing a shirt. A fact I haven’t been able to forget.

It wouldn’t be so bad if he didn’t smell so good. Pirates are supposed to stink. Why does he have to smell like salt and soap?

He yanks me forward, and I realize I should probably be putting forth at least a little resistance. So I place my hands on his chest and shove. The night air is brisk, but Riden is still warm from being wrapped in bed. Warm and solid and good smelling.

With iron-gripped fists. If he bruises my other arm, I will have to retaliate.

He hoists me to the door he came out of. It’s as dark as the end of a cave in here, but Riden seems to find whatever he’s

looking for just fine. He pulls me back outside with him and holds something up in the air for me to see.

“This would be the key I so carelessly dropped,” he says.

“Strange, that.”

He sighs. “Alosa, what are you even doing out here?”

“You’ve kidnapped me. What do you *think* I’m doing out here?”

“The rowboats are over there.” He points to the opposite side of the ship. “So why would you be lollygagging around my door?”

“I wanted to kill my captors before I left.”

“How’d that work out for you?”

“Still working on it.”

“I bet.”

Down the stairs we go, past the sleeping crew, and into the brig. Riden shoves me back into my cell. Then he tries the key.

Obviously, it doesn’t fit.

Riden observes it more closely. Surprise takes over his face. “You switched them.”

“Hmm?” I ask innocently.

He comes into the cell with me. “Give it to me.”

“What?”

“The key.”

“You have the key in your hand.”

“It doesn’t fit.”

“You can hardly blame me if you broke it.”

I don't expect him to buy any of what I say. I'm learning that I enjoy toying with him. I like the surprise and . . . not respect, but something close to it, that shows on his face when he learns something new about me. But I can't let him discover too much about my true nature. That'd be dangerous.

For him.

Because I won't fail. I can only imagine what my father would do to me if I did. But I'm not afraid. I'm doing this not only for my father but also because I want to. Because I'm a good pirate and the hunt is thrilling. Because I want to reach the siren island as much as any other pirate. Perhaps even more so. I'm determined to do *whatever* it takes to get the map. If Riden becomes too difficult, I will remove him from my path by any means necessary.

“I'll give you one more chance to hand it over, princess.”

It's brighter down here. Several lanterns are lit outside the cells. I can see Riden's face perfectly. In the getup he's wearing, I can see a lot of him perfectly.

“I don't have anything,” I say again.

He steps toward me slowly, keeping his eyes on mine as he does so. I back up until I hit the wall, but he continues to advance. His face is too close. I can see flecks of gold in his eyes. They're lovely eyes. I'd like to study them longer.

But suddenly his hands are on my hips.

I think I might stop breathing, but I'm unsure. I'm startled, certainly; am I supposed to slap his hands away or stand still?

He moves his hands up my stomach, never taking his eyes off me. Now I know I'm breathing because I think I might have just gasped. I'm pretty sure I should slap his hands away.

But I don't. Once he reaches my ribs, he moves his hands to my arms, running them up to my shoulder.

"I don't know what you're wearing," he says. "But I like it."

"Custom-made," I say.

"And then stolen by you?"

I shrug. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"You're touching me."

"I'm trying to get my key back."

"Sounds like an excuse to touch me."

He smiles and leans forward so his mouth is at my ear.

"I don't see you stopping me."

"If I had, I wouldn't be able to do this."

His eyes shoot up in alarm, but he doesn't have enough time to guess what I'm about to do until I've already done it.

Yes, I knee him. Right between the legs.

He takes some time to recover. Enough for me to exit the cell and lock him in.

He stares at me levelly. "That was low."

"I thought it was rather brilliant, actually. Besides, you said



you wouldn't touch me. I can see your word does not mean much to you." I throw at him the same words he used on me.

"And you said if we brought your blasted luggage on board, you wouldn't put up a fight."

"I didn't put up a fight. I got out of my cage fight-free."

"Lass, let me out of the cage."

"I think you're more suited for it than I am."

He bangs a fist against one of the bars. "Let me out. You know you won't get far. All I have to do is yell, and over half the crew will be upon you."

"And I can't wait to see the looks on their faces when they find their first mate trapped in the brig."

"Alosa," he says, a hint of warning in his voice.

"Answer something for me, and I will spare you the embarrassment of your crew finding you."

"What?" He's clearly agitated. I suppose I would be, too, if I had been duped by a pretty face.

"When we first met, and I was bargaining for the lives of my crew, you whispered something to the captain. Something that made him stop killing my men. What was it?"

Riden appears perplexed, but he answers. "I told him that if he wished to keep the support of his crew, he would be wise to stop encouraging you to kill them off."

"Did you care for them? The men who I killed?"

"No."

Hmm, perhaps I was wrong about how much he cares for the members of this crew. “Then why bother?”

“I answered your question. Now let me out.”

I sigh. “Fine.” Though I wonder why he doesn’t want to talk about it. Perhaps I’ve hit on something there. If it wasn’t to do with the men I killed, then wouldn’t it have to do with his brother?

The cage sings as it unlocks, and I hand the key to Riden. “You and the captain are brothers.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“What exactly happened to your father?”

Riden locks me in soundly. Then he pockets the key without taking his eyes off of it. He turns to leave.

“I killed him.”

# Chapter 4

THE FLOOR IS DISGUSTING, but somehow I manage to sleep. When I wake, a face is inches from my head.

I shriek and roll away. Even though I realize now that he's on the other side of my cell, my heart still races.

"No need for that," the pirate says. "Just needed a lock of your hair is all."

My hand flies to my head. Indeed several strands have been cut. "What are you doing? I'll kill you for that."

"It's best to leave the lass alone, Enwen," another man says. It's Kearan. "Has a thing about people touching her."

"It needed to be done," Enwen says. "I tell you, red hair's good luck. Keeps you from getting diseased an' all."

I recognize now that Enwen is the tall man who helped carry my things down yesterday.

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve heard,” Kearan says. “I hope you get sick tomorrow. You need to set your head right.”

“You just wait. Next time a plague hits, I’ll be strokin’ this hair while you all will be coughin’ and dying’ and such.”

“I need a drink.”

“Nah, Kearan. It’s too early for that.”

“If I’m to survive the day, I’ll need to start early.” He pulls out his flask from one of his pockets.

“What is this?” I ask as I stand and stretch out my neck. I can feel a couple of cricks in it. And I smell worse than I did yesterday. Blasted floor.

“We’re your guards, Miss Alosa,” Enwen says. “First mate says it’s wise to have someone watching over you at all times.”

I eye Kearan. “And I take it that neither of you volunteered.”

“That’s the truth of it,” Kearan says.

“Oh, I was happy to do it,” Enwen says. “Ever since I saw you yesterday, I’ve been wantin’ to get my hands on that hair of yours. Very rare, it is.”

“I can assure you, it has no magical properties,” I say, angrily fiddling with the patch of hair that is now shorter than the others.

“Not magical,” Enwen says. “Just good luck.”

“I get sick as often as any other person.”

“What?”

“You said red hair wards off disease. I’ve got a whole head of it, yet I get sick.”

“Oh.” Enwen looks troubled for a moment. He hunches over my lock of hair, staring at it. “Well, I suppose it doesn’t work on you because it’s your own hair. It’s got to be taken from someone else for the luck to work.”

“So if I steal it back from you, will it work for me?” I say sarcastically.

Kearan laughs, choking on the rum in his mouth. A few drops fall to the floor as he coughs. He sighs. “Bloody waste, that.”

I sit on my chair, all too aware of the grime and slime that coat everything in the cell, including me. I need to change, and I need some water to clean myself off. I’m about to ask for the latter, when I hear someone coming over.

It’s Riden, of course. He carries with him a tray of food and a dangerous smile. At the sight, I feel my stomach growl. I’m fairly certain that’s a response to the food and not the smile.

“Enwen, Kearan, you’re relieved while I question the prisoner. But you will return to this post once I’m done.”

“Aye, Master Riden,” Enwen says. Kearan nods, looking bored. The two leave.

“Hungry?” Riden asks.

“Starving.”

“Good. I managed to swipe you some eggs.” Riden unlocks

the cell and puts the tray on my table, keeping a close eye on my legs. I'm certain that's because he's wary of me kicking and not because he simply wants to stare. He shuts me back in, standing safely on the other side of the bars.

I start eating at once, cracking the boiled eggs and adding a bit of salt before chewing. I wash each one down with some water from the cup on the tray.

Riden seems to be in high spirits once again. It appears that there are no hard feelings for last night.

"So, what's it to be today?" I ask. "More talk of my father?"

"Yes."

"Hoping I'll unintentionally reveal where the keep is? You're wasting your breath."

"What you unintentionally reveal is up to you. What I wish to discuss is your father's reputation."

"Whatever you've heard, it's probably all true."

"Nevertheless, let's discuss it anyway."

"I want some water," I say, wiping a spot of dirt on my arm.

"I'll refill your glass when we're done."

"No, I want a bucket for washing. And a rag. And soap."

"Don't you think that's asking a bit much for a prisoner?"

"And," I say, practically singing the word, "I want a new one of each every week."

He scoffs at first. Then he thinks it over. "We'll see how our conversation goes today. If I like what I hear, I'll make the proper arrangements."

I cross my legs and lean back in the chair. “Fine. Let’s talk.”

Riden pulls a chair out and sits. He’s wearing a hat today. A tricorne with no feather. His hair is bound at the nape of his neck. His shirt and breeches fit nicely. White on top, black on bottom.

“I’ve heard rumors of Kalligan’s dangerous deeds. He’s said to be able to take on twenty men at once in battle. He’s traveled every inch of the sea, fought off all manner of sea demons, including a shark, which he fought underwater with his bare hands. He makes deals with the devil and encourages evil in others.”

“So far, you’re not wrong,” I say.

“He’s even said to be the only man to survive an encounter with a siren.”

I snort at that.

“He even bedded her,” Riden continues. “Used the creature’s own tricks against her. Now it sounds to me like our dear king is, at best, a manipulator and a wild storyteller. Perhaps he’s not as honest as his new laws demand.”

“He can hardly help what other people say about him.”

“And what would you say about him?”

“He’s my father. What more needs to be said?”

“There are different kinds of fathers. Those who love unconditionally, those who love on condition, and those who never love at all. Which would you say he is?”

For the first time, I feel Riden touching at something I’d

rather leave alone. “I hardly see how this line of conversation is helpful to you.”

“Hmm. You’re deflecting the question. On condition it must be. For if he never loved you, you wouldn’t hold him in such high regard. So tell me, Alosa. What sorts of things have you had to do to earn your father’s love?”

“The usual. Cheat. Steal. Kill.” I throw each response out offhandedly. I hope he doesn’t detect the distress I feel.

“He’s turned you into something. Trained you to become something no woman should ever have to be. You—”

“I am what I choose to be. You speak ignorantly. I think we’re done talking.”

Riden stands, comes close to the bars. Then, thinking better of it, he backs out of my reach. “I meant no insult, Alosa. Consider yourself lucky. It is better to have a little love than it is to have a father who never loved you at all.”

I know Riden speaks of himself now. But I’m still irritated. I feel as though I need to set him straight. “Everything my father did, he did out of love. He made me strong. He made me something that could survive in his world. Doesn’t matter what he did to get me here. I’m a fighter. The best.”

I don’t need to block the memories. That’s all they are. Memories. They can’t hurt me. They’re done. It doesn’t matter that my father would have me fight boys older and stronger than me every day while I was growing up. Now I can beat them all. It doesn’t matter that he shot me once to show me the pain



of a gunshot wound, to have me practice fighting while injured. Because now I can do it. It doesn't matter that he would starve me and weaken me, then give me tasks to complete. He taught me endurance. Now I can handle anything.

"What about you, Riden?" I ask. "What has gotten you to where you are? You claim to be the one to have killed your father, yet Draxen is captain of this ship. Was Draxen your father's favorite? Or was he simply the oldest? Either way, why would you let him take something you earned?"

Riden's face hardens. "Draxen is older. And he was Father's favorite. Not that it matters now. You were right earlier. We should have stopped talking. I don't suppose you wish to tell me where your father's keep is now?"

"No."

He nods, unsurprised. "A storm's coming, and we haven't quite reached our destination. Be prepared for a rough night."

"I always am."

I clear my mind rather than replay our conversation. I'm exhausted from being out so late, so I return to the floor and doze. It's not as though I have anything better to do.

A loud ringing sound jolts me awake, sending my heart racing for the second time today. Someone kicked at the bars of my cell.

When my eyes focus, I spot Draxen standing before me, hands at his belt, plumed hat upon his head. He watches me as though I'm some prize he's won. Or some new tool he's received.

I suppose he sees me as both. But I don't care. In the end, I will be the tool that ends his life.

My father couldn't simply take the *Night Farer* by force. The map could easily get ruined in the struggle should he gun the ship down. He had to send one person aboard to search it. But when this is all done, I will lead this ship straight to my father so he can kill them all. The pirate king wants no competition when searching for the Isla de Canta.

"How are you liking your accommodations, Alosa?"

"The floor's rough and the cell stinks."

"Fit for the princess of thieves and murderers, don't you think?"

"Still could do with a bed."

"You're welcome to ask one of the crew to share. I'm sure any of them would volunteer."

"If I'm sleeping in anyone's bed, it'll be because I've killed him and taken his property as my own. Haven't you lost enough crew members, Draxen?"

"You're too sure of yourself. I think I should order Riden to add some beatings into his sessions with you. Might do you both some good. Stars know, he could use it."

Since I doubt I'll be able to finish my nap, I rise and take the chair, though I'm far past bored with the confrontation. Draxen has nothing interesting to say. He's hoping to see me squirm with fear. He's a man who feeds off of others' pain. So far, none of his intimidations have worked.

“I’ve granted Riden permission to work on you, but should you continue to be uncooperative, I’ll give someone with less charm a chance to question you. Keep that in mind while you sit down here.”

“Better hope he doesn’t get soft on me. I’d hate to turn one of your own men against you.”

“Princess, Riden’s dealt with hundreds of women already in his life. He’s never had trouble leaving one of them. You will be no different.” His boots echo through the empty room as he leaves.

Draxen’s a real piece of work. So is Riden. They operate in different ways, but their goals are the same, which makes them both equally stupid. What morons would think to steal from the pirate king? Especially without sufficiently checking their crew for spies? It was easy to arrange my “kidnapping” once Theris provided all the information we would need.

I’m surprised when Riden comes to visit me again, this time carrying a bucket of water, a bar of soap, and a few clean rags.

I was certain I had angered Riden past the point of kindness. I almost feel bad for all the terrible things I’ve thought about him.

Almost.

“You have ten minutes before I send the men back to watch over you.”

“I’ll only need nine,” I say to be difficult.

He shakes his head before leaving.

The boat rocks a little higher at that moment. Storm's coming indeed. I've got a good pair of sea legs on me. I feel sturdier on the sea than I do on land. I'm used to her movements, her language. She'll tell you what she's going to do, if you listen.

I'm clean and dressed in a fresh corset, this one red, when Kearan and Enwen return.

"I'm telling you, it's bad luck to twist left. You should always thrust and turn right. Good luck, that is."

"Enwen, if I'm stabbing a man in the heart, it doesn't matter if I twist the knife right or left. Either way, I've managed to kill the bastard. Why would I need any luck?"

"For the next man you kill. Suppose it causes you to miss the heart the next time? Then you'll be wishin' you took the extra time to twist right the time before. You can't kill a man good and proper if you miss the heart."

"I'm starting to think that my 'next time' is very soon."

"Don't be like that, Kearan. You know I'm the only friend you've got on this ship."

"Must be doing something wrong." Kearan already has his flask out, but as he raises it to his head, he frowns. Empty. So he reaches into his pocket and pulls out another one. Now I understand the reason for all the pockets on the coat he wears. I would've suspected they were for a thief to put his finds. No, they're for holding multiple flasks of rum. I wonder how many he has in there.

“How do you fare, Miss Alosa?” Enwen asks, turning toward me, unfazed by Kearan’s words.

“For stars’ sake, Enwen,” Kearan says. “The woman’s a prisoner. How do you think she fares? Shut your trap for one blasted moment, would you?”

“The woman can answer her own questions,” I say.

“You shouldn’t be talking, either,” Kearan says. “Don’t need no noise from the both of you.”

Enwen rubs his temple. “Master Riden only said I ‘probably’ shouldn’t speak to her, on account of beautiful women have a way of playing tricks on a man’s mind. But it wasn’t a direct order.”

“He said I was beautiful?” I smirk at the thought.

Enwen looks troubled. “Probably shouldn’t have said that.”

The ship rocks faster and faster as time goes on. Coming up on a storm is like getting into an argument. There are a few warning signs. Things heat up. But then there’s a jump. The storm hits you before you’re ready. And then you’re too far in to do anything about it except get through it.

Everything is loud. There’s nothing to hear except the wind and waves. Nothing to feel except the bitter cold. I put on the heaviest coat I own to ward off the bitterness. Every once in a while, I think I catch a shout from above deck. But that could easily be an echo of the wind.

I have to resort to sitting on the floor. My chair can’t be

trusted not to tip. Enwen sits as well. He pulls something out of his pocket: a string of beads. Maybe pearls.

Kearan starts snoring. I know he must have some affliction of the sinuses, because I can hear him over the storm. He jerks awake suddenly. “Give that back.”

Enwen must see the strange look I shoot Kearan. He explains, “He talks in his sleep a lot.”

Kearan rubs at his eyes. “This is a nasty one. Might tip us over.”

Enwen extends his pearls. “No, it won’t. I’ve got our protection right here.”

“I feel so reassured.”

“You should. Storms are a dangerous time to be about. Some men say this is the time when the unpleasant seafolk come roaming out of their underwater domains.”

“You mean the sirens,” I say.

“Surely, I do. They like to hide in the waves. You can’t see them in the water when the sea is boiling and tumbling and all, but they’re down there. Kicking and pounding at the boat, helping the storm take us under. They want us. Want to eat our flesh, make necklaces out of our teeth, and hollow out our bones to make instruments to aid their song.”

“Bloody poetic,” Kearan says. “And a load of rubbish. Anyone ever tell you, you can’t be hurt by something you don’t believe in?”

Realization lights up Enwen's eyes. "That's why everything is out to get me."

I hide a smile behind one hand while Kearan tugs a flask out.

Sirens have worked up quite the reputation throughout time. They are considered the deadliest creatures known to man. Storytellers in taverns share tales of women of extreme beauty who live in the sea, searching for ships to wreck, men to eat, and gold to steal. A siren's song can enchant a man to do anything. The creatures sing to sailors, promising them pleasure and wealth if they will jump into the sea. But those who do, find neither.

Once a siren has a hold upon you, she will not let go. She carries her sailor with her all the way to the bottom of the sea, where she has her way with him. Then she steals all of his valuables and leaves him to float in the abyss.

There are many myths surrounding sirens. Most no one knows fact from fiction. But this part I do know. All the sirens throughout the centuries have carried their stolen treasures to an island, Isla de Canta. There can be found the wealth of history, treasures beyond imagination.

This is what my father seeks. This is why I'm here. This is what I've been prepared for: stealing another piece of the map.

Each of the three pieces was passed down from father to

son for generations. One traveled down the Allemos line, eventually falling into Jeskor's hands, possibly now Draxen's. Another down the Kalligan line, now safeguarded by my father. And the last belongs to the Serad family. Vordan will be in possession of that one.

With the three pieces united, the bearer will be able to find the legendary Isla de Canta. Island of Song. Also called the Land of the Singing Women.

"There aren't any sirens out there," I say to Enwen. "If there were, you'd already be enchanted to jump overboard. Do you hear any music?"

"No, because the storm's blocking it."

"So the storm's a good thing?"

"Yes—no. I mean . . ." Enwen wrestles with that for a moment.

Enwen and even Kearan seem too anxious to sleep tonight. Even a man who's spent his whole life at sea has reason to fear her when she's angry.

But not I. I sleep soundly. Listening to her music. The sea watches over me.

She protects her own.



# Chapter 5

THE NEXT FEW DAYS and nights pass in much the same way. During the day, Riden comes down to question me. We poke and prod at each other, trying to get answers. Rarely does anything come of it. He also brings me my meals, but aside from that, I'm always left alone in my cell, a couple of guards watching over me. The guards get switched out every so often, but Kearan and Enwen are by far the most entertaining.

Unfortunately for Riden, guards are not the deterrent I'm sure he was hoping for. Even they have to sleep, and once they do, I creep from my cell and poke my nose around the ship. Since the map didn't turn up in Draxen's quarters, I decide to start my search belowdecks from stern to prow and then make my way

above. I chose this order because I assumed I would be starting with the easiest places to search and making my way toward the harder ones.

But nothing proves to be quick or easy.

When there's nigh forty men belowdecks, sleeping, there's always at least one every hour who needs to piss in the night, no doubt due to heavy drinking before bed. I spend half my time ducking out of sight, squeezing between tight spaces, or holding absolutely still while they rush over to the ship's edge and then return to their beds.

My search is tedious and unfruitful, and each night I manage to finish only a small section of the ship.

On my fifth night aboard the ship, Kearan is snoring loudly while Enwen counts gold coins out of a small purse.

"Have you been gambling?" I ask.

"No, Miss Alosa, I don't like to gamble."

"Then where does your money come from?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

I look pointedly around my cell. "Who would I tell?"

Enwen nods pensively. "I suppose you're right." He looks down at the coins again. "Well, this one I got from Honis. This one's from Issen. This one's from Eridale. This one's from—"

"You're stealing them." I smile.

"Yes, miss. But only one from each man. If a man sees his whole purse gone, he'll know someone's taken it, but if he's only missing one coin—"

“He’ll assume he’s lost it,” I say.

“Yes, exactly.”

“That’s brilliant, Enwen.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re much smarter than you let on. Do you only pretend to be a superstitious fool so the crew will remain unsuspecting?”

“Oh no. I’m as superstitious as you can get.”

“And the part about being a fool?”

“I may overdo that one just a bit.”

I laugh lightly. This is the kind of man I would allow to be on my own ship, if he could manage to reserve his stealing for people who weren’t his crew members.

“And what about Kearan?” I ask. “What’s his story?”

Enwen looks over at his snoring companion. “Not much is known about Kearan. He doesn’t talk about himself, but I’ve gathered quite a bit from his sleep talking.”

“What have you learned?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Simple curiosity and boredom.”

“S’pose it wouldn’t hurt to tell you. Just don’t tell Kearan I was the one who told you.”

“I promise.”

Enwen starts dropping his coins back into his purse. “Kearan has been all over the world. He knows the Seventeen Isles inside and out. He’s met all kinds of people, performed all kinds of jobs and such. He was an adventurer.”

So Kearan not only knows his way around the ocean, but on land as well. Unusual for a pirate. Our little isles are so close together that everyone travels frequently between them. Each is rich with different food sources. Trade is frequent and necessary between the isles. As such, whoever controls the sea, controls the money of the realm.

Father tolerates the existence of a monarch over the land because he has no wish to rule over landlubbers. He prefers to keep company among the brutes of the sea. The land king pays tribute to my father yearly in exchange for letting his explorers search through the sea for new lands.

No one has ever managed such a total monopoly over sea travel until my father established his ruling. And someday all that control will be passed down to me, which is why I wish to prove myself again and again to my father. My current task is one on a large list of feats I've completed for him.

I look over at Kearan's fat body, ugly face, and overall unkempt look. "You certain he's not just adventuring in his sleep?"

"Oh yes. He might not look like much now, but that's because he's turned into a man who has lost much. Imagine if you were never satisfied with your life, Miss Alosa. Imagine that you traveled all over the world, looking for happiness, looking for thrills to pass the time. Imagine seeing everything there is to see and still not finding happiness. Well, that would give you a very bleak outlook on life, would it not?"

“I suppose it would.”

“There’s not much to do after that. Kearan makes his living on this ship. He’s an ugly drunk because it takes away the pain. He has no desire to live, yet no desire to die, either. It’s a tough spot to be in.”

“Yet you’re his friend. Why?”

“Because everybody needs somebody. And I haven’t lost hope for Kearan. I believe he will eventually come into his own, given the right amount of time. And the right motivation.”

I honestly doubt that, but I’m humoring him. “Why do you assume he’s lost much?” I ask.

“I hear him calling out a woman’s name at night. Always the same woman. Parina.”

“Who is she?”

“No idea, and I don’t intend to ask.”

Enwen spreads out on the floor, ending the conversation. He’s given me much to think about while I wait for him to sleep before starting my nightly search.

Everyone has something dark in their past. I suppose it’s our job to overcome it. And if we can’t overcome it, then all we can do is make the most of it.



“Feel like a stretch?”

Riden stands in front of my cell, tossing the key up in the air

and catching it. I've been aboard the *Night Farer* for six days now. This is the first he's offered to let me out of my cell.

"Do you like flaunting my freedom out in front of me?" I ask, eyeing the key.

"You know, I do get a strange sense of amusement from it."

"Can't be too easy for you to feel amused when you know I can get out all on my own." Of course, I'm referring to the night he caught me sneaking out and not all the nights I've snuck out since then.

Riden steps closer, dropping his voice. "I've been taking excellent care of the key ever since. And if I were you, I wouldn't mention that little mishap to anyone else. Captain'd get an idea in his head if he knew. And you won't like his ideas."

I tilt my head to the side. "You mean you didn't tell him I tried to escape?" Best to reinforce the notion. The more Riden doesn't tell his captain, the more of a wedge I put between Draxen and the crew. Might be able to use that distance later. Who knows what else will happen while I'm a "captive" at sea?

I add, "Perhaps you should get some ideas about what he would do to *you* if he knew."

"Guess I'm counting on the fact that you'll be more worried about your own skin rather than harming mine. Now, I'm giving you a break from your cell. Do you want it or not?"

I appreciate the gesture, but I can't say that I trust it. "Where are we going?"

"We've come across a ship that appears to have been

abandoned after the storm. The vessel is a little worse for wear, but we may find some salvageable goods on board. We're in the middle of the sea with nowhere for you to go should you try to escape. The captain has granted me permission to bring you aboard for the search."

I realize he could be telling me we're in the middle of nowhere, when in reality we're only a day from land. Impossible to tell. Though it doesn't matter either way. Still, I like knowing where I am. The uncertainty makes me a bit uneasy.

"I'm always up for some thieving," I say.

"Somehow I knew you would be."

He lets me out. Then he pockets the key, this time putting it in his breeches rather than his shirt. "I'll be keeping a close watch over this, so don't get any ideas."

"I've no idea what you're on about."

He grabs my upper arm and leads me toward the stairs.

"Must you?" I ask. "You've already stated I've nowhere to go. Can't I have the freedom to walk without your aid?" I can't help but add, "Or can you simply not keep your hands off me? Enwen informed me you're helpless against my feminine charms."

Riden looks unworried. "If you've been talking to Enwen, lass, then I'm sure you've learned that half of what he says is squid brain."

I smile and lean in his direction. "Perhaps."

"Quit your smiling and get your arse up those stairs."

“I wouldn’t dream of giving you such a view.”

Now it’s his turn to smile mischievously. “You don’t get the option to walk behind me. Don’t trust you. Now, up with you.”

On deck, men are tying down ropes, grabbing their weapons, scurrying about. Excitement for the upcoming adventure is almost tangible upon the air. I myself can feel the anticipation of the hunt. I am not immune to the prospect of some good fun. No pirate is. It’s why we choose this life. Because we’re good at it.

And we have no morals.

“Ah, Her Highness has decided to honor us with her presence,” Draxen says. “What do you say, gents? Should we have the lady go first?”

A few ayes and a good deal of laughter are their responses. I look around the crowd of men and spot Theris blending in with the rest of them. He glances at me but doesn’t spare me any special attention. He’s good at his job, that one.

Riden says nothing from beside me. He doesn’t look bothered either way. Not that he should. He is not here to look after me, and I don’t need him to. He’s here to make sure I don’t escape, which he might be doing too good a job of at times. Not to fear. I’ve still got a few tricks up my sleeve.

“If your men are too cowardly to venture over by themselves,” I say, “then by all means, I’d be happy to teach them how to properly secure a ship.” A challenge and an insult all wrapped into one. My specialty.



“I’d rather risk your life than theirs. Be off with you. Riden, go with her.”

I think it strange that Draxen would risk me when he knows he needs me as leverage. I suspect he’s trying to make up for what happened back on my ship. He placed teaching me a lesson over the lives of his own men. Now he’s showing that he’s putting me at risk before them. It’s a clever play. Especially since it’s very unlikely that anyone would still be over at the ship. And, as a last precaution, he’s sending Riden over with me.

We secure the gangplank between the two ships. The damaged ship before us appears to be a cargo vessel. There’s bound to be lots of food and water aboard. It’s its own kind of treasure out here.

The gangplank is plenty big to walk across without having to try to balance. I could probably do it with my eyes closed. Still, its width is small enough that I’m tempted to give Riden a slight push.

As if sensing this, he says, “Don’t even think about it.”

“I already did.”

“I could have you shot.”

“Your gun would have a hard time working once it’s wet.”

“I didn’t say I had to be the one to shoot.”

“But let’s face it, you’d like that pleasure for yourself.”

He smiles.

The ship’s mainmast has broken clean off. It lies at an angle on the ship, supported by the railing on the starboard side.

That'll lock the ship in place for sure. All the rowboats are missing from the ship, which leads me to wonder how far from land we could be. The ship still floats. It would hold the men steady for as long as their food and supplies lasted, so why row away if there's nowhere to make it to in time?

The deck is one scattered mess. Ropes lie haphazardly, some in knots, some in coils. Articles of clothing sit here and there, likely having fallen out of their owner's bags in the confusion. The wood's still wet. Everything's wet. We have to be extra alert not to trip or slip.

"Anything valuable will likely be belowdecks," Riden says.

"I know."

"So, what are you waiting for?"

I raise an eyebrow. "You're going to make me go first?"

"Can't risk you trying to jump me from behind."

"But I don't have a weapon."

"That hasn't stopped you before."

I can't help but smile. "I meant, how can you expect me to go below first without a weapon?"

"I'll be right behind you."

"That's not the comfort you think it is."

"I know." His brown eyes are alight with merriment. I think he enjoys our little spats. I think of them as part of my act. I'm playing a part. If I keep too much of myself hidden, he might be suspicious that I'm planning something. So I give him the

resistance he expects. The enjoyment I get out of toying with him is an added bonus. I could have been stuck with a worse questioner. Why he's not captaining this ship, I'll never know.

"Go now, Alosa," he says.

Water drips from everywhere it seems. Today is the first day after the night of the storm that the rain's let up. It's dark below, further suggesting that no one's belowdecks.

Riden, ever prepared, brought a lantern over with us. He lights it. Then he hands it to me. "Lead on."

We find the kitchens, where dried meats, well-stored water, crackers, pickled vegetables, and other seaworthy foods are safely secured in their cupboards. These will all be taken over to the *Night Farer*, no doubt.

We pass through the sleeping quarters. Some blankets remain. The smell is much better here than back on the *Night Farer*. Why couldn't Draxen's men show more aptitude for personal hygiene? Truly, it benefits everyone on board.

We're about to pass into the next room when the candlelight catches something on the floor.

That would be a sword. Good to know it's there. If only I could grab it without Riden noticing, but that's all but impossible. A sword would be much harder to hide than a dagger.

There is nothing else of interest on the ship. At least not anything that's visible right away. There may yet be some nooks and crannies that remain hidden. But it's also just as likely that the crew members took anything valuable with them. It's been

my experience that when a crisis strikes, the first thing that men think about are all the treasure they can take with them. Thoughts of their friends and shipmates usually come second, if at all.

“Looks all clear,” Riden says. “I’ll start looking deeper. Kindly go and hail the rest of the crew over.”

“Oh yes, I’ll just go hail the crew over. Truly, I enjoy helping the men who’ve kidnapped me.”

“Can’t leave you down here by yourself while I go fetch them. Would you rather I hauled you all the way up the deck with me? I know how much you like it when I have my hands on you.”

I huff and head up the stairs. He’s difficult to figure out, that one. One instant he seems to try to distance himself from me. The next I swear he fancies me. He’s probably keeping me on my toes, just as I try to do to him. The game of predator and prey can be a fun one. When you’re the predator, of course. It’s fun to rub the victory into your prisoner’s face. You beat them. You captured them. It’s your right. Father said once that if you can catch and imprison a man, then his life is yours to take or do with as you please. His philosophy is that if you have the power to do something, then you *should* do it.

Once on deck, I wave at the pirates, signaling that everything is all clear.

With nothing else to do, I return belowdecks. Might as well continue to walk and stretch before I get shut into my cell

again. Not that I don't intend to spend tonight moving about anyway.

"They're on their way," I say as I enter the room Riden and I last checked: a storage room.

That's when they grab me.

Riden's shoved face-first against the wall, a sword point pressed against the middle of his back while the bearer's free hand pushes against his shoulder. I can see now that a few panels have been removed from the wall straight ahead. A hidden room. Three men stand in the room with Riden and me: one keeping Riden where he is, and now two holding me.

"Blast it," I say. "You couldn't have shouted out a warning?"

"When a sword's pointed at me?" Riden asks. "I think not."

"Shut up!" one of the men holding me yells. "How many are in your crew? How many will come?"

"Sixty," Riden says, exaggerating the number by twenty.

"Stars," the man holding Riden at sword point says. "We can't hold them off. And we can't count on the others returning in time."

"Then we'll use 'em as hostages," the last man says. "We'll tell 'em we'll kill the members of their crew unless they stay back. We can buy time."

"But will it be enough?"

"It'll have to work."

"But do we need them both? The man looks like too much trouble to deal with. I say we gut him and deal with the girl."

Being underestimated always works to my advantage. But sometimes I find it offensive. That often makes me violent. It makes me question whether I should allow them to kill Riden, just so I can beat the hell out of all three of them without Riden watching. I couldn't let him see what I'm capable of doing to them. I hate that I have to hold back now.

The men continue to argue among themselves as I decide what to do.

Riden interrupts my line of thinking. "Now, Alosa, would be a good time for you to employ that same tactic you demonstrated when we first met."

"Are you certain you wouldn't like to handle this one yourself? I'm just 'the girl.'"

"Stop talking!" a sailor shouts.

But I'm not really listening to them. My eyes are on Riden. His eyes widen meaningfully, frustratingly. Then he relaxes. "Please."

"I said—"

Perhaps it's the fact that Riden remembered exactly what I did to those two crew members when they stole me from my ship. Or perhaps it's that I like the sport of it. Or it's the idea of showing these sailors exactly what I can do.

But if I'm being honest . . . it's because he said please.

This prompts me to action in a way I can't explain.

I slam my heel into the foot of the sailor on my right. Then my free hand goes to the other sailor's throat. I place one hand

at the back of each man's neck. With one choking and the other stumbling, it isn't difficult to connect their heads. Hard.

That wasn't part of my routine back on the ship. But a little improvisation goes a long way. This situation is a bit more dire. For one, it isn't one I had planned for.

There's only the man with the sword left. He stays right where he is, though his eyes have widened significantly. "Stay where you are or I'll kill him."

I roll my eyes. "Go right ahead. You'd save me the trouble."

I'm not sure whether I should laugh or not at his confusion. "What?"

"I'm being held prisoner by pirates. If you say more of your men are coming, then you can help me. We can use him as leverage as was suggested before."

He looks to his fallen shipmates.

"Sorry about that. I don't like being held against my will. Now please. Say you'll help me."

The sailor focuses on Riden, which gives me the distraction I need to reach for my boot. "Is what the girl says true?"

"Trust me. The girl's more trouble than she's worth, and you can't believe a thing she says. You'd be better off killing her now."

I see sweat drip down the sailor's face. The hand on his sword trembles. "That's enough." He turns his body toward me while keeping his sword on Riden. "I'm—"

The dagger flies straight and true, finding its place in the sailor's chest.

Thank the stars I still had it on me. The dagger-hidden-in-book trick is one I will never take lightly should I ever need to intentionally get kidnapped again. And it was a wonder Riden hadn't checked me for weapons when he found me sneaking about the ship that night.

Riden stands up straight. His mouth is slightly ajar, his eyes wide. "I thought you . . . I thought—"

"You thought I'd really turned on you. Probably should have, but oh well. Too late for that now."

I walk over to where Riden stands when others enter the storage room.

"What happened here?" Draxen asks. He looks neither worried nor upset by the bodies on the floor.

I wait for Riden to sell me out to save his own skin. He could easily tell Draxen that I left him to die, telling the pirates to come aboard when an ambush was in place. It would be a little farfetched, considering there were only three men on board. But still plausible.

"It was my oversight," Riden says. "I thought the ship was clear. I told the lass to go above and bring you over. Then they came out of a hidden room. I handled them."

"Excuse me?" I say. He is *not* taking credit for my kills. Not that I need Draxen to know I'm capable. In fact, it's probably best that Draxen thinks I'm not.

Riden ignores my outburst. "I think you'll be pleased with what else awaits in the hidden room."



That distracts me. I look over Riden's shoulder and see three chests filled with coins. There could easily be more behind other panels.

Draxen's eyes are on fire as he stares. He alone advances, taking stock of it all.

"They're smugglers," Riden continues. "Looks like they've just delivered their cargo, whatever it may have been. I suspect that after the storm, most of the crew left to go get a new ship and return here. They weren't about to leave all this wealth behind. These men were left here to guard it. I probably wouldn't have found them if I hadn't heard one of them moving through the wall."

"Yes, yes," Draxen says. I doubt he heard a word Riden said. He's still staring into the wall. "Take the girl back over. The men and I will handle this. We need to be quick before the rest of their crew returns." Almost as an afterthought, he adds, "Well done, brother."

Riden nods.

And just like that it's back to the brig I go.



Riden opens my cell and thrusts me inside.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Following orders."

"I thought we were past you hauling me around. Haven't we established that I can walk on my own?"

Riden stands at the opening of my cell. He hasn't shut me in yet, but he's not looking at me. He's looking at the ground. "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"You saved me."

"Yes, and then you took credit for it. What kind of thanks is that? That was damned insulting. I ought to—"

"That was for your benefit."

I'm too full of energy to sit. I usually am after a fight—should I not exhaust myself to the point of passing out. Father did have me do that on several occasions so I would know what it feels like to be worn thin, so I could be mindful of my own strength. It's important to know how much energy I have, in case running becomes the better option. But so far no one except my father has been able to wear me out to the point of losing consciousness.

"Just how exactly was that for my benefit?"

Riden grows very serious. "I don't know what you're doing. I do know you had an opportunity to escape from us back there, and you didn't take it. And you stopped them from killing me when you had no reason to. Now that leaves me with two notions. Either you're not so despicable and heartless as your prior actions would suggest. Or you have some sort of ulterior motive for keeping me alive and staying on this ship."

"I'm still not seeing how you claiming my kills is a kindness to me." Riden thinks I'm up to something, eh? Guess I will have to up my act. I need to rid him of the idea.

“You don’t know my brother. So allow me to explain something to you. If he thinks you’re up to something, he’ll kill you. Now I owe you my life. So consider my silence part of my repayment.”

“There’s nothing to be kept quiet. You’re overlooking a third option, Riden.”

“And what’s that?”

“I was looking out for myself. There was no guarantee I could trust those men. If they found out who I was, they could try to use me for leverage just as you do, especially if they’re smugglers, as we suspect. And if something were to happen to you, Draxen would have someone else question me. And there’s a good chance I’d hate him more than I do you.”

Riden watches me. No amusement. No gratitude. No anything.

What is he thinking?

Finally, he says, “I suppose I didn’t think of that. Of course I should have considered that your only concern was for yourself.”

“I’m a pirate,” I remind him.

“Yes. I just can’t figure out if you’re a good pirate or a *really* good pirate.”

“I’m not sure I know what that means.”

“Just know that whatever it is that you’re hiding from me, I *will* figure it out.”

Clinking metal beats a steady rhythm. Not that of swords,

but of chains. I know the sound well, as I've spent much time practicing how to get out of them.

At the sound, Riden goes ahead and locks me into the cell. Did he decide that our conversation was over, or does he not want Draxen to see him talking to me through an open door?

Draxen and two pirates—one who I've never seen before and the third pirate who helped bring my things down with Enwen and Kearan—lead two of the smugglers, who are clad in manacles, down the stairs. The conk to the head I gave them must not have been enough to kill them. 'Tis a shame for them, because death likely would have been better than whatever the pirates could have in store.

I may also be a prisoner, but they need me alive and in good health if they expect a ransom from my father. These two smugglers, however, do not need to be traded. Nor do they need information from them because the gold has already been found. The fact that they were brought on board alive, then, spells disaster for them.

“What is this?” Riden asks.

“Ulgin's getting a bit restless,” Draxen says. “I thought he could use this.”

Riden nods, though he doesn't look happy about what he knows will happen next. Yet he opens a new cell far away from mine. The pirate I assume is Ulgin leads the smugglers inside.

“And I came down to collect you,” the captain continues. “What with our fortunate find and all, I figure the men could

use a payday on land. There's lots of gold to be spent. I want you to oversee the distribution of each man's share. We should be upon the shore by nightfall."

I knew we were close to land, despite everyone's misleading. The smugglers who left their shipmates aboard their broken ship would have had to take the time to find a new ship and then find where their old one had drifted off to. It's no wonder they haven't come back to it yet. And rather fortunate for Draxen and his crew that they happened to stumble across it.

"What are we to do with the princess?"

"Nothing at all. That's why I brought Sheck down here. He'll be guarding her until we reach land."

"Is that really such a good—"

"I think she's been having too good a time of it, Riden. It's time we remind her who we are. Don't know why you chose Kearan and Enwen, of all the crew, to primarily oversee her. If they didn't have their particular talents, I would have tossed them overboard long ago. Almost bloody useless."

Riden looks like he wants to argue. Very badly. But he doesn't. "Let's see to the gold, then," he says instead.

For the first time I turn my attention to Sheck. And nearly jump away.

He's pressed up to the bars, staring hungrily at me. I feel as though rats crawl across my skin. Actually, I think I would prefer it if rats were crawling against my skin.

When I was little and faced with a new challenge each day,

I would look to my father for help. He would instruct me and then send me into the fire pit—figuratively speaking. I always got burned. And I learned quickly that turning to him for help was useless. He never assisted. I either succeeded or suffered the consequences of failing. There was no relief. Long afterward, I might be given some advice and encouragement. Sometimes even comfort. But in the moment, there was no aid. It wasn't long before I learned to stop turning to others for help. It's never an option, so I don't even think about it.

Which is why when I am faced with the hot-blooded pirate, my first response is not to look to Riden. Or to ask Draxen to have someone else guard me. No, I handle my problems alone because that is the way things are.

“There isn't a problem, is there, Alosa?” Draxen asks. His sneer is full of poison.

I say, “I've never had a problem I couldn't handle myself.”