

Daughter of the Siren Queen

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



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

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

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ready? I mouth.

She nods.



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

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

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

"Alosa," he says, a bitter acknowledgment.

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

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

"Where's the map?" I ask.

"Not here."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His eyes narrow.

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

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

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

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

My breathing stops for a beat.

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

What? No. We would’ve known—

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

I swear under my breath.

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

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

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

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

Where is the map?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That man, I decide, dies first.

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

Blast it all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We've got them fighting on two sides now.

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

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

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

Oh, no you don't.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I fire.

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

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

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

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

“Except a broken leg.”

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

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

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

“Gladly.”

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

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

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

“Did you get it all, then?” I ask.

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

“And just where is our informant?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Riden . . .

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

I slam the carriage door in Vordan's face.

Chapter 2

IDON'T KNOW HOW landfolk do it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Was there any trouble?” I ask Niridia.

“It was downright boring. And you?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He will be relocated," I say.

"To where?"

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

"I'll give you one guess."

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

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

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

I turn toward the infirmary and stare at the door.

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

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

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

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

And it worked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I've been busy."

"Busy catching up with your intended?"

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

"My intended?" I ask.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sure,” I lie, “lover works.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Riden straightens. I have his attention now.

"What are you saying?"

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

"What do you want from me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Riden turns his face away from me.

“What?” I ask.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No.”

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

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

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

"What is that supposed to mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you agree to my terms?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yes, I am the one in control.

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

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

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

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

"From behind, anyway," Lotiya says. "Can't judge the man properly until we see the front."

"Not to mention *naked*."

Giggling ensues.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Niridia," I warn.

"A jest, Captain."

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

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

“We’re keeping him, then?” she asks.

“Yes.”

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

“What?”

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

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

“Exactly.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is she doing?" Niridia asks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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