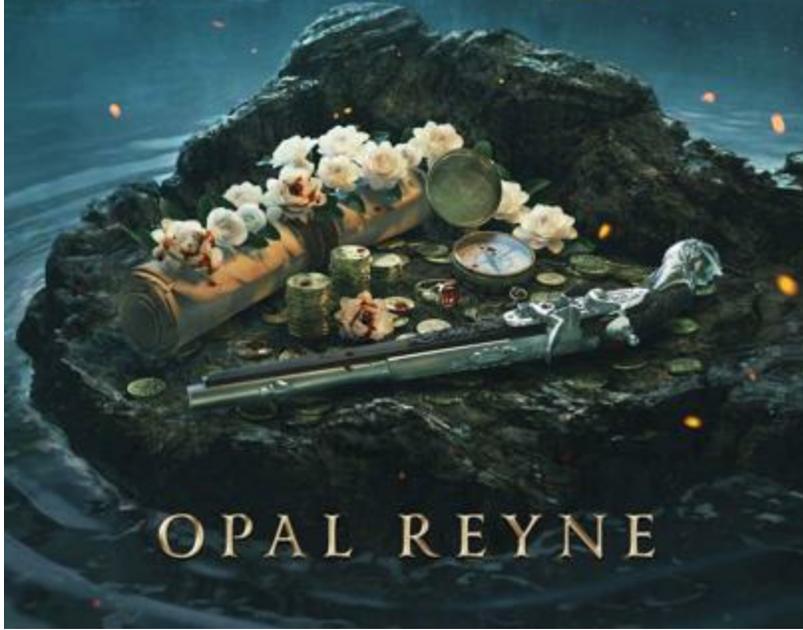


SEA OF ROSES

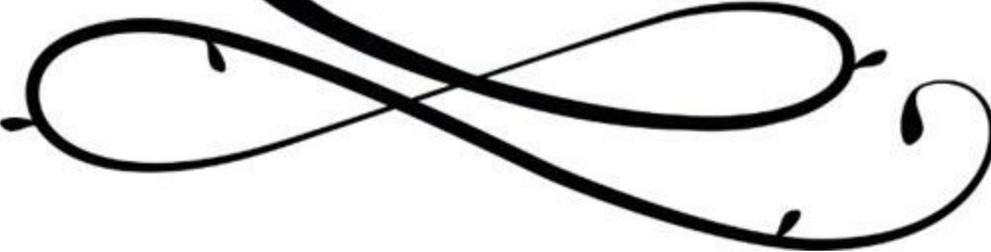
OPAL REYNE

SEA OF ROSES



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A large, elegant, black decorative flourish consisting of a long, sweeping curve that loops back on itself, ending in a small scroll.

A Pirate Romance Duology

Book One

OPAL REYNE

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This book is a work of fiction. Any names, characters, places, and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Inspired by the TikTok App

This duology is dedicated to all the creative people on TikTok who were inspired by the copious amounts of Sea Shanty music covers in 2021.

All of the cosplays, the costumes, drawings, and animations people did inspired me to write this book. Artists find inspiration from anywhere and everywhere, and everyone's collective joy in spreading pirate and sailor fun helped me visualise this story; especially one video in particular.

Thank you.

CHAPTER ONE



Beautiful clear skies, tranquil rolling waves, and strong steady winds to fill his sails, what a perfect day to get completely fucked over. Not that Captain Alistair Paine, one of the most notorious pirates on the seven seas of

Old Gaia, knew that treachery was on the horizon.

No, instead he lowered his nautical telescope from his good eye with a confident, beaming grin. He closed its bronze tapering segmented layers with a deep chuckle, his gaze narrowing on the horizon to focus on what was coming towards them miles ahead.

Placing it in the fixed wooden box on top of the navigation table next to the helm of his ship, he could feel a familiar rumble of excitement and lust for death rising in his chest.

“Raise the jolly roger lads!” he yelled with mirth, palming one of the eight handles of the steering wheel in front of him.

Men sprinted at his command, immediately doing as they were told with cruel smirks. They already knew exactly what was going to come.

Within moments, a black flag, with a white skull facing forward and two long swords crossing underneath it, began to rise through the worn and patchy cream-coloured sails of his ship.

He knew, the entire crew knew, that it would be seen rising by the ship to which they were coming into range of, like an angel of death flying in preparation to clutch at their souls. If they didn’t surrender, they would greet Davy Jones’ locker at the bottom of the very ocean they were sailing over.

If they did, they may spare them – they also may not.

Watching it flap in the steady wind with a twinkle of glee in his good eye, he lowered his gaze so he could narrow it back on the ship sailing towards them.

One of his brows raised when it didn’t steer its course to run away, nor did it raise its own flag in communication.

They aren’t running, he thought.

“Pierre!” he shouted to his first mate – one of the very few pirate ships that actually had a one.

“Yes Captain?” he answered, his lean frame running up the steps to the quarterdeck two at a time.

Although the crew often called him by his name when they were merely sailing, they called him ‘captain’ when he was in charge of a takeover.

The man, only half-way through his twenties, grabbed the corner of the railing to swing himself forward with his own grand smile – yet there was a serious glint to his features. His green eyes were filled with the same brightness as Alister’s. His long blond hair swished around his shoulders and

would have been in his face if he didn't constantly keep it tied back in a high, yet messy, ponytail.

His skin was heavily tanned, many days out at sea could do that to most riding these waves, but he still managed to keep some of his paler complexion.

"Get Derek," his quartermaster, "to man the wheel." He took his eyes away from Pierre, his grin widening as he watched the enemy ship sailing closer. "This is not going to be a chase."

"They plan to fight?"

"Oh aye, lad. They plan to fight."

"Do they not recognise our figurehead?" Pierre's own eyes widened while his face turned from Alister to the oncoming ship.

"Does it matter?" he laughed. "Whether they do or not, doesn't matter to us."

"If they want to feed the fish..." He trailed off, his look of concern fading to something more malicious.

"Then we feed 'em," Alister finished for him.

With a nod, Pierre swung himself back around the corner of the railing to sprint down them, shouting for Derek to man the wheel.

It didn't matter if the enemy knew his ship or not, they were knowingly heading towards pirates.

They're either mad... or they thought they could best them, which was a hilarious notion to him.

They wouldn't know Alister had a large crew of sixty-six good men. All of them seasoned sailors. Most of them ruthless pirates for a minimum of a decade – even himself.

His quartermaster came bounding up the steps, a peg leg thudding against the distressed timber.

Somehow, regardless of the fact the man had one normal leg and the other made of wood, it never hindered his speed nor made him any less formidable as the rest of them.

His leg was cut off just below the knee. It wasn't completely useless since it wasn't stiff and he could still bend it at the knee. He often liked to kick people with it, something Alister had witnessed regularly with humour.

He was a short, older man with boundless energy. It was hard to tell if he was frowning or grinning with his long brown scraggly beard, but his eyelids

often crinkled at the sides, making his hazel eyes seem to twinkle.

They were meant to be laugh lines but Alister often thought it made him appear conniving.

“Aye Cap’in?” He wiggled his long-haired eyebrows up and down, not seeming to notice a few hairs were trying to poke him in the eye. “They lookin’ for a fight, are they?”

Derek was only eighteen years older than Alister’s twenty-nine, but with the short length of life most of them lived on the seas, it meant he was the wisest of them all. It didn’t make him any less deadly with a weapon.

He was one of his best men and he trusted him explicitly.

“Aye, you old seadog.” Alister moved out of the way so Derek could take the helm in his wrinkled, dry, and calloused hands. It often looked as though they were dried with salt from the ocean. “And if you let any of them take my ship, I’ll gut you myself.”

“Oh ho!” he exclaimed. “I’d like to see ye try.”

With a laugh, Alister patted him on the shoulder.

Then he started calmly making his way to the front of the quarterdeck, the level he was on, to stand between the railing and the helm.

His type of frigate warship was one of the largest, the sturdiest, and, proudly, the fastest, on the seven seas. He’d commandeered it from pirate hunters with an artistry he hoped was a popular tale on land. To instil fear into all about the roaring grim reaper – the figurehead at the bow.

He and his crew never had to run from another ship.

It was made of cedar wood, giving it a deep reddish colour in comparison to ships made of oak. It was bleached by the sun and dirtied to look a dark brown on the outside by the waves that often hit the hull.

His beloved ship had seen better, cleaner days, but was in perfect working condition.

Below him was the main deck where he could see his crew rushing around to man the many sails and rigs. Two tall thick masts stood before him – the main mast and the foremast. Each had three white sails bowing forwards to lead them steadfast for battle.

There was a third, smaller mast, called the mizzenmast, behind him on the poop deck, the highest deck of this ship. It sat behind the quarterdeck on which he currently stood.

Underneath the poop deck was the navigation room; it was also where

Alister slept. It gave way for his first mate and quartermaster to share the large room beneath the quarterdeck on the long main deck of the ship.

On a ship like this, they tried to share the few cabins available for the crew to sleep more comfortably. A crowded crew could often lead to disease and sickness.

Although he was captain, and therefore spoilt, he tried to be as little an inconvenience to his crew who could rise up and mutiny against him. He'd gotten into his position by an overwhelming vote, and he could find himself walking the plank with another one.

He doubted his loyal crew would ever commit such a heinous act against him, but that was because he made concessions like this. They also knew he wouldn't go down without a fight, and they feared that.

"All hands on deck!" He threw his right arm forward and swiped it to the side like a blade cutting through air. "I don't want to see a single man standing still!"

The wind cut through his loose clothes and long black hair as they approached, exhilarating him with cold energy.

"Aye captain!" some of them yelled, telling him he'd been heard.

"Gunmen!" He pointed to the right of the ship. "I want those gun ports open on the starboard side, and the cannons filled with powder. The rest of you, prepare yourself to board. They want to fight, then let's give them a fight!"

Not many moments later, the figureheads of both ships came into near colliding range. If it wasn't for each steering starboard side to come side-by-side with each other, they would have collided.

The enemy's ship was much smaller, and from what he could gauge, it only had eight cannon ports available. None of them were open like his were in preparation.

The sound of cannon fire boomed. Eighteen balls were released at the same time, since this was a thirty-six cannon ship. Half smashed into the smaller ship's side; the rest caused explosions of water to rain when they hit the ocean's glittering surface.

Splintering wood flew in every direction as the ship concaved from the weighted cannonballs and tilted away momentarily. The thunder of them hitting the timber was enough to explain just how damaging they were.

But there was no return fire.

No, and instead of Alister and his crew boarding the ship, men swung from ropes... to theirs!

His gaze found Pierre's wide-eyed stare across the small distance between them as Alister made his way down the steps to assist.

"Captain!" one of his men shouted, pointing at the skies.

A heavy gust of wind seemed to resonate with the heavy emotion that came from his chest. It flew his long hair back as he unsheathed his large, curved cutlass sword from his scabbard attached to his hip.

A curved weapon was perfect for slashing, going with the swing of an attack from above rather than the embedding swing of a straight blade. It's why Alister had chosen this kind of sword.

They're trying to take over my ship!

He watched one man knock into one of his crewmen, landing on top of him to stab him in the chest. *Brutus!*

Another landed on top of his crew mate next to him, slicing his throat from ear to ear. *Hammond!*

There were also grappling hooks attaching to the railing so they could swing across from below and climb the side of the hull.

A shadow blocked the sun. He looked up to see a man with a face of determination, his eyes gleaming with calculation. Men were falling from the sky like terrifying rain with their swords pointed to strike, and Alister was next.

Gnashing his teeth with unyielding rage, he prepared himself for impact. He pointed his blade upwards.

At the last second, he stepped forward to narrowly miss the enemy's sword and sunk his own into his stomach. They both went tumbling back.

Alister kicked him away, and off his blade, so he could roll back to his feet with a swiftness despite his large, muscled frame. Turning just in time towards the thud he heard, he slashed side-ways to gut the man who landed next to him just to make sure he was truly dead.

A roar of yells sounded from below the deck. His gunmen were charging to greet the enemy on the surface. *Any moment now.*

Any moment and he'd have dozens of men prepared to fight the crazed flying enemy. *Like a swarm of fucking monkeys.*

The *ching* of multiple swords crossing filled his ears. Yells. Shouts. Gasps. His men were violently defending his ship after the enemy landed. The

pungent smell of burning timber from the other ship and blood on his own also invaded his nostrils.

A yell caught his attention and he turned to a man running straight for him with his own curved cutlass blade raised. Alister blocked it by using the swing of his sword to direct it, then he punched the man in the eye. He stumbled back, giving him an opening to slash him across the throat.

A small boom echoed. A cannonball grenade made men fly across the main deck, surprising him since none of his crew had such careless weaponry. He quickly had to turn to avoid his face being hit by flying sharp splintered wood and metal shrapnel.

Shit. The last thing he needed was for his other eye to go blind.

Alister wore a black eyepatch on one side of his face. He'd be useless if he needed bloody two!

The turned position meant he was able to see Derek manning the helm cut down his own enemy trying to take the wheel. *Good man.*

But they were being overrun. *Where are my gunmen?!* And the rest of his crew who had been below deck?

He turned his gaze towards the stairs, watching as an enemy ran over the top of his rowboats that were upside down and strapped to the deck, to leap onto Pierre. *No!*

The blond-haired man stepped to the side, slicing his sword beside him to cut into the enemy who instantly crumbled.

Relief washed through him.

Once more, he tried to find the stairs that would take them below deck, to find someone had closed the hatch and turned the locking mechanism.

It was stopping all those below from coming to the surface.

"Get the hatch open!" he yelled, stomping his way in that direction.

Stepping over dead bodies, both his crewmen and the enemy, he cut the ropes of the grappling hooks. He heard men, who had been climbing them, shout as they fell into the sea.

He couldn't let anymore reach his ship, not until he had more men on the surface. Otherwise, at this rate, they'd circle the small crew who had been manning the sails!

Pushing a tumbling man out of his way, who had a dagger protruding from his jugular, he finally greeted the hatch just as one of his crewmen was stabbed in the back for trying to open it.

Richard! He was one of Alister's best men!

He must have understood, just as he had, why they were being overrun.

Despite his fondness for the man, Alister booted Richard's dying corpse out of the way before the enemy could take out his sword.

Then he reached out and grabbed one of his crewmen by the collar of his tunic to protect his back. He crouched down to move the heavy locking pin by himself and slid it open.

The hatch flew open so fast he stumbled back. A mass of angry, sword-wielding men emerged from it.

He pointed to the top of his main sail. "Take back my ship!"

The roars grew louder in response and he turned to watch them circle the outside of the main deck near the railing to surround them.

Within moments, enemy men realised their predicament. There was a shuffling pause.

The tips of their blades moved from side-to-side to clink against different sword tips pointed at them as if they were unsure of which of the many men around them to attack.

"No mercy?" one of his crewmen shouted.

Alister stomped his heavy frame through the crowd, the fighting halted for now. "Nay. I want answers."

He also knew he'd lost many of his men and this ship required a large crew to function properly.

They fought well. Now he would make them work like slaves under his employment, by force.

"And search their ship before it sinks!"

Some of them backed away to swing onto the enemy vessel at his command.

He could hear the sounds of fighting in the distance but it didn't last; most of them had already jumped from it. When he'd been cutting the grappling hook ropes, he'd noticed some of them had released their rowboats and had been climbing into them.

It was probably to be fished out from the water once they had taken over his ship.

"Who is your captain?" he asked the group of men frozen with their swords poised.

None of them answered.

“I will start tossing you, one-by-one, into the depths until you tell me.”

Silence followed but he noticed their eyes narrowing into squints. Glares deepened with every second that passed.

Swiftly, he stepped forward and slashed his sword sideways, cutting the front of a man’s throat. Two of his crew grabbed him as he fell back and tossed his dying body over the railing before he even had a chance to touch the ground.

The sound of crashing water filled their ears.

Nobody spoke, and he gave a grunted laugh.

“I will gladly do this all day, lads.”

They began to shuffle their feet, their eyes darting to each other as the white of their eyes became more noticeable.

With a tsk, his tongue clicking the roof of his mouth, he stepped forward once more.

His target dropped his sword and raised both his hands. “Wait.”

“Captain!” someone yelled from behind him.

Alister’s head swung to the voice. “What is it!?”

Dale, another one of his men, started pushing his way through the crowd hurriedly.

He was huffing, his chest rising and falling quickly as he pointed back to it. “Captain, there is a woman on board their ship!”

He rolled his eyes as though the answer was obvious. “Then get her off it!”

He focused his gaze back on the man who he thought may have been about to spill who the captain was in fear.

Good gods, it isn’t hard to get a woman off a sinking ship! She could be trying to flee it. And what are they doing with a woman anyway?

They rarely sailed with women; they caused too many issues. There were also apparent myths about how sailing with one could bring on terrible luck.

Alister wasn’t so superstitious.

“She’s barricaded herself in the captain’s room. She sounds terrified.”

His head shot to the side once more, his brows creasing into a frown. “A captive?”

“Aye, seems like it.”

A captive woman... with a crew of what he could tell were pirates like themselves. *That only means one thing.*

It was a scared, traumatised woman who had been kidnapped.

Why should I care for her wellbeing? If she didn't want to get off a sinking ship, why should Alister care? *I would be doing her a favour letting her drown.* She wouldn't remember whatever misery she had been faced with for goodness knows how long.

Just as he turned back to the man in front of him with his sword raised, he paused.

Whatever you do with your life, Alister, a feminine voice in his memory softly echoed. *Fight the strong and help those who cannot help themselves.*

His lips thinned as he thought about that gentle voice and the words that had been spoken to him years ago. A growl-like sound of irritation emitted from his throat through clenched teeth.

Curse this bleeding heart! The pirate thought, right as he cut down the man in front of him with his hands raised without mercy.

“Move!” he yelled at his crewmen as he entered the crowd, pushing them to sides. “And keep them where they are!”

Sheathing his sword at his hip, he grabbed one of the ropes attached to the main sail by twisting it around his hand and ran for the side of his ship. He jumped from the main deck railing and flew in the air.

With a distinct thud against the thick timber, his boots landed on the enemy's ship that was sunk halfway down.

He didn't have long.

It didn't take a genius to know where the captain's quarters were. He immediately headed for the closed door.

Turning the handle while at the same time ramming his shoulder into it, it refused to budge. He pushed off it so that he could boot the door right where the lock was with a thick muscled leg.

His first powerful kick made it cave in. The second flung the door wide open with a loud boom as it hit the wall and nearly broke off its hinges.

His head flinched backwards when something was thrown at him. It copped him in the bridge of his nose.

He looked down. *A candlestick?*

Looking up, he saw the woman cuddling herself into the ground next to a bed. It looked as though she was trying to hide between it and a small, mounted table.

“Not more pirates!” she cried, blindly reaching to grab something from the side table behind her.

“Aye, more pirates.” He stepped forward, and a book was thrown at him. He swiftly dodged it. “Look lass, this ship is going down.”

“Then let me drown!” He watched her clutch at her frilly pale-yellow dress with one hand, while reaching behind her again. Unfortunately for her, there was nothing left on top of the little side table. “I won’t go through it again!”

Blue eyes stared at him, obviously terrified. Her dirt brown hair was tussled around her head, knotted and windblown. She looked frail while she sat there trembling and shaking.

Water sloshed around his dark brown leather boots, small waves of water reaching further and further inside the room with each swish.

I don’t have time for this shit! He stomped forward, despite her cries and screams, and grabbed her around the wrist to drag her to her feet.

As she was attempting to pull away, bashing on his arm, he used it to flip her onto his shoulder.

“Put me down!”

She kicked her knees into his broad chest while slapping him in the back. Without a care for her soft attacks that barely dented his muscles, he continued to cart her over his shoulder.

Waddling in almost knee-deep water, he walked up the stairs that would lead him to the poop deck. It put him at the highest point of this sinking ship.

Holding onto her legs tightly, he brought his free hand to his face to place the tip of his thumb and middle finger to his lips.

A whooping whistle sounded.

Catching the rope that was tossed to him, he twisted his forearm around it. With the kicking, bashing, and screaming woman, his men hoisted them up the side of his own ship.

Only one thought came to his mind. *This is annoying.*

CHAPTER TWO



After giving the woman to his crewmen to take so he could climb over the railing himself, Alister grabbed her wrist and started dragging her to his chambers.

“Unless those men want to fight to their deaths, tie them up,” he told his crew as he dragged her up the steps by force.

He could feel her staggering and tripping over her own feet behind him.

Once he opened his door, he tossed her inside so he could make his own way in. He closed it behind him. She stumbled but stayed upright on her feet before quickly turning to him.

“Stay away from me!” Her voice was high pitched like a screech, making him wince.

“Calm down, lass,” he sighed, swiftly making his way to her. He placed his hand on top of her head, bending over to be more eye level with her. All the while, she uselessly punched the bottom of her fists against his chest. “I ain’t gonna hurt you.”

She froze at his gentle touch, and his words.

Her eyes trailed from where her hands were on his torso to search his face. There was a stark fear to her features.

“I don’t know what you’ve been dealt with but we won’t harm you, and the next time we port, we’ll drop you off.”

“P-pardon?” Her brows crinkled and he noted the wild freckles splattered across her sun-kissed face.

“We may be pirates but, on this ship, we don’t take unwilling women.”

It wasn’t his way, and he refused to allow his crew to do the same under his watch.

A flash of emotion crossed her face, one of confusion... and strangely, thought. Then her face screwed into a tight crinkle as she leaned her head against him... and started pathetically weeping. Alister rolled his eyes.

Great, he now had a sobbing, fragile woman on his fucking ship. *Where the hell is she going to sleep?*

He wouldn’t let her have his quarters. He’d have to ask Derek and Pierre to empty theirs so she could rest on her own. He grimaced; the men would hate that.

“Yo.” He shook her. “Stop your weeping.”

It did nothing but irritate him since he felt little pity or sympathy for anyone, regardless of what they’d been through.

She clutched his tunic tightly with little fists. He could only imagine what she had been through if she was so desperately clutching him, a stranger, like this.

“I-I want to go home,” she whispered with a tremor in her voice.

“Where’d they take you from?”

“D-Dunecaster port.”

“Ha!” he laughed. They’d taken her from a port regularly used by many pirates and criminals. “Looks like you’re in luck lass, we’re already heading that way.”

Alister had been sailing his ship to port after running low in supplies and not greeting many ships to raid in the process. He rarely ported if he had to.

He noticed her crying had started to settle already.

“So, would you like to point out which men have hurt you so you can watch them drown?”

“Excuse me?” She stepped back to once more frown up at him and he noted her cheeks weren’t a tear-shed red. *Must be one of those women who are pretty criers.* “Aren’t you going to keep the crew?”

“Oh aye.” He folded his arms across his chest, turning his head to the side. “But I don’t want those who think it’s fine to hurt the weak. We may be lawless but we aren’t dubious on my ship. Men like that turn on others easily. Last thing I need is a crew who will try to mutiny against me.”

Now that they were apart, and she wasn’t screaming and struggling, he was better able to take in her features.

No wonder they took her. She was a pretty little thing.

Her wild freckles across her skin made her look feminine and innocent, almost like someone had thrown a handful of brown sugar across it. Her hair looked like mud but it was long and waving around her face.

Her blue eyes were light like when the sunlight hit the shallow waters of an island.

She looked as though she had a medium bust under her pale-yellow frilly dress that bore elegant stitching. It was obviously a high-quality garment and he figured since she was taken from Dunecaster, a generally poor area, the previous crew must have given it to her after finding it in their spoils.

She came to his chin, and her frame under that frumpy dress looked small.

But Alister hated women like her. Women that were frail, broken, in need of saving. One that would shy away from a man like him in the throws.

He was ill-tempered on the best of days and he knew, looking at this kind of woman, she’d flinch if he was to even raise his voice in her direction.

“If you don’t want to watch them die, I can figure it out on my own.”

Perhaps her heart is too gentle.

He turned to step away, realising he'd offered to a meek woman to see men die.

"No." She grabbed his wrist to stop him. "I-It was only the captain."

Figures, he thought, she must have been a prostitute he fancied.

"And I do want to watch him die, more than anything. Please, please don't leave me by myself in here. I-I don't want to be alone."

He nodded, walking forward to open the door and led her outside. *At least she has some resolve.*

Once they were on the main deck, he noticed she grabbed the back of his black canvas doublet coat that had thick brown cuffs and seams. It was the most expensive thing he wore and it came all the way down to the backs of his knees.

He figured she was afraid and didn't want to be separated from him. He sneered at the idea of being treated like a knight in shining armour when he was nothing but a blood-thirsty criminal. He hoped she didn't come to idolise him; he hated clingy women.

When he tried to enter the crowd, she pulled on the back of it. She didn't want him leading her into the middle of it.

Sighing defeatedly with a shake of his head, he stood on the edge of it. His crewmen stepped out of the way to reveal their captured prisoners.

They were bound with their hands before them. All of them were standing in two neat rows along the deck.

"I'll ask you all again, who is your captain?" He eyed them over. "Otherwise, I'll start slitting throats."

"Who says ye won't once we tell ye?" one of them snapped.

He gestured to the sails of his grand warship.

"If you haven't noticed, this is a frigate and you've killed much of my crew. You will either join it, or you will find yourselves at the bottom of the ocean. Thank the sea gods I'm offering to spare your lives." Then the skin on bridge of his nose crinkled tightly in aggression. "Since you broke the code."

Pirates didn't attack pirates.

It was an unspoken code, but they all had the same goal and respected that. If they had raised a black flag, Alister wouldn't have attacked and would have diverted his direction completely.

"You attacked my ship under your captain's command, therefore only *he*

has to die.” He placed his hand on the hilt of his sword to seem more menacing. “Unless you want to join him. I don’t keep prisoners.”

Too many useless mouths to feed. He wouldn’t waste his supplies for such a stupid reason.

“So, I’ll ask one last time.” He opened his mouth to continue, but they all stepped away from one man.

A thin but strong looking brown skinned man was left by himself.

He wore a brown doublet coat similar to his own black one. Like many who sailed, he wore a tricorne hat to shield his face from the harsh sun that often bared down on them from above. He could see the drops of sweat coming from beneath the hat, glistening against his dark skin.

The man greeted his gaze with a glare before spitting on the ground near Alister’s black boots. “Betrayers.”

“Nay. They’re just smart enough to throw you to save their own necks.” With a large grin filling his face, Alister shouted, “Alright, get him onto the railing.”

He bumped into the woman behind him as they all shuffled out of the way. A bigger space was created so they could watch the man jump to his own death with glee. It was one of their favourite sources of entertainment and would be spoken about with much humour later.

Did they scream? Did they cry? Did they toss themselves with courage or did they eventually get pushed off because of their cowardliness?

Much about a man could be deciphered in his final moments.

Alister could cut his throat, but he knew this would be a much better way to make him suffer. He’d spend days out at sea, alive, starving, dehydrated, and burnt by the sun, before either eventually dying or being eaten by something swimming in the waters.

It was cruel, and it would show just how sinister he could be as a commander of his vessel. It should ensure the newcomers understood him.

Alister unsheathed his sword and pointed it at the man forced to stand on the railing, his hands unbound so he could hold onto the netted rope of the shrouds.

“Now jump,” he chuckled loudly, poking him in the belly with the tip of his cutlass blade.

The man smiled wide with white teeth. “I think not.”

Something cold and round pressed against the back of Alister’s head. His

eyes widened while gasps of surprise echoed from multiple mouths around him.

We missed one?

How could his crew not notice one of the men standing around them wasn't one of their own!?

Just to make sure they all knew the holder of the gun pressed to his skull was serious, they cocked back the hammer with a click sound that resonated in his ears.

"If anyone moves," said the man on the railing. "She'll blow your captain's brains all over the deck."

She? He tried to turn his head to the side to look over his shoulder with his good eye, but the barrel of the pistol was shoved against his head, pushing it forward once more.

"Get off the railing, Naeem," the woman said behind him. "Before I have to fish you from the sea."

This Naeem threw his head back with a jolly laugh, grabbing the hat with his free hand so it didn't fall from his head.

"Aye captain."

He nodded, before stepping down to the safety of the deck. His feet thudded against the timber.

"*Captain?*" Alister asked with disbelief.

There couldn't be... There was no way this weeping, crying, fragile woman, was actually a pirate, less so a captain of them.

"So, boys," she said to them with a hint of humour in her tone. "This is what is going to happen. My crew and I are taking over this ship. If you wish to stay on it, you will follow my command – unless of course you don't care for your sweet, gullible captain. Then I am more than happy to blow a hole in his skull before you get to me."

Naeem stepped forward to take Alister's cutlass from him. He surrendered it willingly. More in shock and confusion than in weakness.

"Why should they care if you shoot me if you are going to kill me in the end?"

"Who said I planned to kill you?" She shoved it closer against his head while Naeem backed away to start cutting at the ropes binding her men. "I have no intention of killing you if you do what you're told."

"You don't plan to kill him?" Pierre asked.

Alister found him in the crowd of frozen men who were unsure of what to do.

He may be able to be voted out as captain, but Alister had a history with his crew. They respected him and were very loyal to him. They would never betray him.

If there was a chance to spare his life, he knew they would take it. Which meant... she had them by the balls.

“No. Actually, I plan to proposition you all. But first, tie his hands, I don’t trust how much he is twitching.”

Shit. She noticed he was going to make a move to overtake her – and hopefully not get shot in the process.

With a disgruntled curl to his upper lip, he let them bind his hands behind his back, forcing him to turn around to face her.

The smirk she gave him was devilish.

She tricked me. Played the part of tortured damsel in order to get behind him with a gun. She’d gained enough of his trust in such a tiny amount of time in order to get him into a vulnerable position.

He thought he’d seen a few moments of calculated thought but he’d mistaken it for thoughts of confusion in his kindness. Why would he, a pirate, be so considerate of a woman? It was what he’d thought she’d been thinking.

It was also while he was facing her that he remembered he’d never actually seen her face gooeey from crying real tears. *She’d falsely wept.*

Even though he had seen had tear or two, he now knew they must have been forced.

“That’s better!” she exclaimed with delight once he was bound and unable to do anything to change his predicament.

She kept the gun trained on him though, while the rest of her crew picked up their weapons to point them at his own. Naeem had Alister’s sword pointed at his throat as an extra precaution.

One of her men also came to stand back-to-back with her. He saw she was able to see behind Naeem as he was able to see behind her.

This was obviously not the first time they’d done this.

“I will give you all a choice,” she started. “Sail with me, follow my command, and you will share in the booty we find, the treasure we steal, and the kills we take. Or, you can be imprisoned with your captain and dropped off at Dunecaster when we arrive; alive, unharmed, and free.”

“You’re soft hearted for a captain,” Alister bit, wiggling his wrists, which tossed his shoulders side-to-side as he struggled. “My crew won’t follow someone like you.”

They liked him because he was ruthless. She was offering to spare his life, giving his crew a choice – it showed her weakness as a commander.

“And we won’t follow a woman!” one of his men shouted, raising his fist in anger towards her.

Her gun pointed away from his direction. The bang that sounded was loud and deep as she shot the man in the head with accuracy.

No hesitation. No fear.

She reached into, what he could now see, was a tear in the skirt of her dress. She pulled out a new bullet from a hidden pouch, pushing it into the barrel before filling it with gunpowder.

Her men looked prepared to fight while she was seemingly distracted, but he could see her eyes trailing across them all. She was ready to defend herself within a moment’s notice.

Once it was loaded, she pointed the pistol at Alister’s head again.

“I am aware my sex is an issue for many, which is the only reason I am giving you this choice. Rather than killing you all for your idiotic views, I am showing mercy. Be thankful I am giving it at all, but like your captain already mentioned, this ship requires a large crew to man and many have died this day.” She turned her head towards everyone with a bored expression. “Make your choices. Fight us and watch your captain die before the end of the first swing. Drop your weapons and put your hands forward so that they can be bound and you can be dropped off in Dunecaster with him. Or, sheath your weapons and follow me, a woman, as your captain.”

Her eyes found him once more and he squinted his into a hate-filled glare.

“You,” she said to him, cocking the hammer of her pistol. “Help them make their decisions.”

After a few moments, he nodded upwards silently.

Some of his men dropped their swords, those that would follow him anywhere, even to the grave. Others sheathed their swords, but they eyed him as they did, knowing what he would do in the future.

None fought, none willing to risk his life after watching her actually shoot someone.

“Bind those that have their hands forward and put them in the cells of this

ship!” she commanded. “Who else is in command?”

“I,” Pierre said, stepping forward with his hands already tied.

“I,” Derek seconded as he was shoved down the stairs.

“Two? Well aren’t you a lucky man,” she said while raising her nose up at him, as though he was some inferior creature. “Tie them up to the main mast with their captain. We can’t have them together plotting with their men. Everyone else, you will answer to my crew and will not be unsupervised until you have shown your loyalty.”

Finally she stopped precariously aiming at his head with a cocked gun, and pulled the handle of a sword through the tear in her skirt so she could easily reach it to defend herself.

How did I not notice that when I was carrying her?

“Naeem! Get me out of this god forsaken ugly dress!”

She turned her back on them to make her way up the quarterdeck steps while Alister was being gagged and then tied to the thick mast pole. Naeem quickly followed behind her and Alister realised he was her next in charge.

“If any of you try to mutiny against me, you will quickly find a bullet in your teeth. My men don’t care that I am a woman, and they won’t tolerate it if you try to turn against me.”

She spoke as the ties at the back of her dress were loosened. They both shoved it off her, revealing the clothing hidden beneath it.

Whereas Alister wore loose breeches with buttons clasping it to his hips, she wore high-waisted black tights tied up by corset laces over her stomach. A simple white tunic with frilly cuffs was tucked into her tights, the top three buttons undone and showing her obvious cleavage like she didn’t care she was on a crew of unloved men. Plain brown boots came half-way up her calves.

Alister then watched Naeem take off his brown doublet coat and put it around her. It was baggy, loose, but she rolled the sleeves back so it would fit better yet didn’t close the front of it.

He also gave her the tricorne hat from his head, disclosing his short, curly afro hair it had been hiding.

Now that she was dressed, with a sword belted to her hip, she actually looked like a pirate.

She placed the bottom of one boot against the railing of the quarterdeck while Naeem took the handle of the helm in his hands.

“If any of you come close to me, I will, without a doubt, shoot you in the cock. If you point your swords at me, I will cut you with my own. Until you can be trusted, you are to relinquish your guns to my men and earn them back. If you are found with one, or they are in your belongings, I will hang you from the railing of this ship as a warning to others. Know that I sleep light, I test what I eat and drink, and you will all be watched carefully.”

Then she rested her forearm across the knee that was bent from the railing upon which her foot was leaning. A grand smile crossed her pale pink lips, revealing even white teeth.

“And you may call me Captain Rosetta Silver.”

CHAPTER THREE



Rosetta pointed to the small map currently pinned to the table next to the helm.

She was speaking to Mr Smith, a trusted crewmember, about their current

path through the ocean pacific. He was the only person besides herself and Naeem who she would allow to touch the helm.

Mr Smith would also follow her around the ship to protect her back and forward her commands to others.

With the many strangers on the ship, she had to be cautious.

His full name was Mr John Smith but she only called him John when she wanted to. The rest of the time, she knew the man liked to feel like a noble gentleman.

She called most by their last name for this reason.

He was a tall man in height, who had once been fat but had lost much weight after being out on the sea for many years with her. He was still a usually happy chap, enjoying the fact he could climb the shrouds without his gut getting in the way.

His dark hair was peppered with white while his well-shaped, short beard hid the fact he had a roundish baby face. His small circular glasses made him appear sophisticated despite all that hair.

“No, this is a shallow hull frigate, Mr Smith.” She shook her head, before fingering the path she was intending to take them. “We won’t have to worry if we come into contact with any shallows near the Sthrill Islands.”

She may never have commanded one of these ships, but she knew about them well enough to be able to direct them safely.

Naeem was overhearing their conversation to know of the plan.

“I want to stay our course. It’s the fastest route and I want those men off my ship as soon as possible.”

“I know you’re impatient but we can’t be reckless. We took this boat by a miracle.”

“Ah hem!” Naeem cleared his throat dramatically. “I do believe what you mean to say is, ‘she stole this boat with a brilliance that even the gods would applaud her.’”

A heart-felt smile filled her features as she looked up to Naeem.

“Look, I know you want to get back onto the sea to hunt for the head fleet, but I don’t think it’s wise for us to throw those men overboard without stopping to restock.”

With a sigh, Rosetta pushed off from the table, holding the hilt of her sword as she made her way down the steps.

“Show me how bad the supplies are.” She knew she was being stared at by

the three men currently bound, gagged, and secured to the main mast of the deck. She didn't spare them a glance as she walked past them. "Did we happen to get all our own supplies?"

They had tied barrels of grog water and food to the row boats of that useless ship she had been steering.

"Yes. We grabbed everything, even our gold, but this ship barely had enough supplies for themselves."

"They must have been heading to port in desperation." She rubbed the round point of her chin as she bounced down the steps that would lead her into the lower decks. "They may have tried to trade with us had we raised our own black flag."

She could have used that to her advantage to trick them rather than the tear-filled act she had played with the captain.

I'm still rather surprised by his response. It wasn't what she had been expecting.

"You there." She nodded her head to a man she didn't know, one of the previous captain's crew. "Take us to your supplies."

He squinted his eyes at her, his nose crinkling on one side in distain, but he did lead the way. In every corner, she saw her men watching over the others with a suspicious eye.

Hostile takeovers. She shook her head.

It'd be a while before the tension went down.

When she entered the large room below deck, dim of light and smelling musky like mould, Mr Smith and the man spoke about the state of their supplies while she overheard everything. She didn't join in, preferring not to speak to a stranger if she didn't have to.

There were only a handful of barrels secured to benches that could support their weight, while there were a small number of crates on the ground. They contained odd bits of food that wouldn't make good meals.

Most of the crates were half empty, and stacks of empty ones had been carelessly dumped into a pile in the furthest corner.

"It seems me overtaking this vessel has allowed me to help them," she said as she and Mr Smith walked back together. He went through the math so she could have a count of the barrels of food and grog they now had. "With the estimation of men we now have, plus the prisoners, we will have just enough supplies to make it to Dunecaster. Then, if we divert straight away to Vinil

port, we should be able to restock before we run out.”

“You plan to feed the prisoners? It’ll be two days before we make it to Dunecaster.”

“Yes, but we will be leaving them without money. We can spare to at least feed them once a day before we abandon them on that island.”

It was a large piece of land that took nearly a whole day and night to circle around, but most people stayed near the only section of the crescent moon-shaped island that would allow ships to port all the way into the land.

The rest of it had long sand banks, meaning they had to row in.

“Feed our goat to the crew.” *Poor Reginald*. She had been rather fond of her long-bearded, stubby-horned goat. He used to bleat in joy whenever he saw her. “It’ll help to gain their favour if we feed them well.”

It was the last big chunk of fresh meat they had, and the easiest animal they originally had on their old boat to transfer to another. A cow was too big, and chickens... well they had one left.

“I want that chicken cooked, and a small feast of smoked meat prepared in my new quarters, enough for a few bellies.” She eyed him from the side before they reached the lower deck stairs to reach the surface. “And then meet me in the navigation room.”

She had to go through the information and maps on this ship, adding them to her own collection she had brought over. She needed to map their direction and then their future plans.

“Yes Rosetta,” he said, before breaking away to stay below and find their chef hands. They were just general men who knew how to cook, nothing special.

She held the hilt of her sword as she, alone, walked across the worn timber. The sun shone in her eyes so she lowered her head to let the front point of her hat shield them.

Paranoid, she listened out in case someone suddenly approached her to attack. Her eyes may have slowly darted around, but she kept a calm and unbothered expression.

“What are you all gawking at!” she yelled at the hands on deck. There were only a few that weren’t doing their duties – those that weren’t her usual crew. “I want this deck shipshape by the end of the day and this boat going at full wind strength in the next ten minutes or I’ll flay your skin and use it to patch any holes I find in these sails!”

There were still plenty of blood puddles from bodies they had already tossed into the water. They were sticky under her boots and left a pungent smell in the air she couldn't stand.

Immediately men rushed to action, scrubbing harder with slop sea water and detergent, their wide, two-handed brushes scraping against the reddish timber.

Others began climbing the shrouds to check on the sails and to secure any loose rope.

"Captain!" A voice sounded from above in the crow's nest, a small lookout section for someone to keep watch in above the sails. It didn't escape her attention that she wasn't the only one who responded to that particular call, even though he was currently bound. "Sail, ho!"

Another ship?

"Naeem!" She waved her hand forward. "Keep an eye out. If they direct to us, avoid. We aren't prepared for another battle yet."

She barely even knew the damn ship!

"Aye captain!" He gave her a lazy salute with one hand.

I don't even know the cannonball stocks yet. She may need the supplies on that ship but she wouldn't take such a risk.

Not yet at least.

After passing Naeem at the helm, she finally entered the navigation room behind it for the first time. She placed her hands on her hips as she looked at the large bed off in the corner with a hammock swinging above it.

There was a large desk made of cedar wood covered in maps with a chair behind it. Navigation devices, such as a drawing compass, a magnetic compass, and an astrolabe, were messily scattered across it with vials of ink and other writing apparatuses.

What surprised her were the extensive maps of constellations, stars, and the changing day length cycles with their occurring seasons. The octant above those pieces of paper drew her attention. She fiddled with the tool before placing it back down when she realised she didn't know how to use it.

The only other items of furniture were a chest of clothes and a small table with three chairs that would most likely be used as seating for food and drink. Cupboards were mounted into the walls as permanent fixtures.

He made room so that more of his men could sleep comfortably. There was no other explanation for him sleeping in this space.

It was something she had never thought to do, but a good idea nonetheless.

Like the rest of this ship, it had a funny smell to it. It smelt of wet timber and mould but it wasn't as terrible as the rest of the ship.

The sunlight was dim coming through the murky and dirty gridded windows at the back of this relatively spacious room. She made her way to the fitted cabinets inside the walls and started going through the drawers and opening their doors.

Rosetta wanted to know all about her new sleeping quarters and planning station.

Mr Smith eventually joined her and together they mapped their course for the next two months. They might have to make some alternations depending on the weather, but they should be where they wanted to be by then. *Hopefully.*

Rosetta had big hopes, and an even bigger goal to reach. It was why she had decided to take this ship when she'd first seen it on the horizon. A warship like this frigate was the perfect weapon she needed.

While they were talking, people brought in food and placed it onto the spare table in the room. She'd gone out of her way to tell everyone she would be staying in this room since it was already prepared. She'd change the sheets though, if they were available, since she didn't know how long ago a *man* would have changed the bedding.

Then again, she'd probably sleep in the hammock since it was more comfortable to go with the swings and sways of the ocean waves rather than to fight them in a rigid framed bed.

"That looks like a lot of food just for yourself," Mr Smith laughed, giving her a hard pat on the back. "Good to see you eating properly."

"It's not just for me," she answered, reaching into the pocket pouch that constantly hung from her waist.

Usually it held gold coins, of which she had a few, but it also held one other item.

He raised an eyebrow at her, straightening his back as he adjusted the round glasses on his face by using his index and thumb to hold the edges.

"Are you inviting me to dinner, Rosetta? I'm sure the other men will be rather jealous."

She gave a laugh in return. "As handsome as you are, no, but I do intend to play with someone else tonight."

“I can only imagine what you mean by that.” He wagged his finger up and down at her, a special gleam to his eyes. “Since I know how you can be.”

Without truly caring how it looked, she applied bright red lipstick to her lips. She hated the colour but it was all she had.

“Yes, well, I will be expecting you to be watching out for me; since we have a new crew I don’t trust on board.”

With a nod, he followed behind her as she stepped out onto the quarterdeck. The darkness falling upon them from the setting sun was brightened by multiple flame lanterns.

She patted Naeem on the shoulder. “How’s that other ship Keat saw?”

“Haven’t seen any sign of it for quite some time. This girl’s pretty fast.” He patted the wheel he was holding. “Once we got the wind in our sails, the other ship just fell off the horizon.”

“Excellent. Once I’m done with my supper, I’ll take the wheel while you get some sleep.”

“You sure?” He lowered his head to bring it closer to hers. “I don’t like the idea of you being by yourself since old Johnny boy there will need to sleep as well since he manned the old boat before we took this one.”

She shook her head.

“You know he doesn’t like that name,” – since his name was Mr John Smith. “But, I’ll be fine.” She patted her side, knocking her pistol and sword against her outer thighs. “I have these, and if anyone tries to come up those steps, I’ll yell out for you two – since I expect you both to be sleeping in the chamber below me so you’re nearby. There’s two beds already.”

Although Naeem was her main man and Mr Smith was just a normal crewmember, she tried to not show favouritism for Naeem. Many new people were distrustful of him because of the dark complexion of his skin.

He had once been a slave, but Rosetta had freed him when she first set sail. They’d been a bonded pair of friends ever since.

And, just as she had won over her crew to the point they would literally die for her, even though she had a set of decent sized tits, he had managed the same thing as her second in command.

A slave and a woman, commanding a ship together. They were an odd pair, doing an odd thing, and she was sure the rest of society would be shaking their heads at them. *But there is no one better at my side.*

“Now, it’s time for me to play a game.”

“Try not to poke the bear too much.” Naeem nodded his head forward to point with his chin. “He already looks angry.”

Her eyes found the man he was referencing. He was facing them with his hands bound by metal shackles behind his back, cloth tied around his head, and rope coiled around his torso that tethered him to the thick pole to which he was fixed with two others.

His legs were in front of him, slightly bent into a relaxed position whilst the rest of him was slumped forward comfortably.

The way his arms were stretched back opened his doublet coat, revealing the plain white tunic beneath it. It also showed just how broad his chest and shoulders were, near bulging against them.

He’s manned the wheel through many storms.

With a black eyepatch covering one eye, the other one was narrowed on them with a glare she hadn’t seen fall once since he’d been placed there.

Her lips pestered with a smile she couldn’t contain.

“I would say he looks rather jolly.”

Rosetta descended the stairs with an echo of steps following behind her. Mr Smith gave her some distance.

He never followed behind her too closely since they didn’t want to give the impression she was afraid.

Now how to get what I want? Her eyes fell on the older gentlemen tied down.

Since he had been manning the helm before they’d taken over, she instructed Mr Smith to grab him. She followed behind as he pushed the man towards her bedchamber. He grunted and gave barks even though he had cloth between his teeth.

After shoving the man into a chair at the eating table, Mr Smith left so she was alone with him.

Rosetta wasn’t afraid to be alone with one man, whether he was unarmed or not.

She was quick with her pistol, willing to shoot a man dead, and she had a knack for sensing when they planned to launch. Her eyes were greedy to watch their muscles twitch with anticipation of a move.

It was a skill she’d developed.

“If you want to walk out of this room still breathing, I expect you to keep your hands to yourself,” she told him while using the key she’d taken from

Mr Smith to unlock his shackles.

Then she walked to the other side of the table and took her own seat.

She leaned against an armrest while crossing one knee on top of the other, grabbing her chalice to drink from it. This ship had only one bottle of wine and she was determined to savour every drop of it tonight in celebration.

“Ye a silly one, little lassie,” the long, messy bearded man said after ripping the mouth gag from between his teeth.

He narrowed his coal black eyes on her.

“For what?” She gestured to the food between them. “Inviting you to dinner?” She smiled around the rim of the chalice before she took a sip. “You can’t hurt me.”

“Do you not know whose ship this is?”

She gave a small shrug with her shoulders, leaning her cheek against her fist after she folded her arm on the available rest.

“Was,” she rebuffed. “And why should I care who it belonged to when it now belongs to me?”

“He is Cap’in Alister ‘One Eye’ Paine, the Bloody Storm of the Seas!”

She gave him a grand smile, her eyes twinkling with humour.

“Am I supposed to give a fuck about who that is?”

“Are ye not a pirate? Yer should know ‘bout our crew. He got his name by sinking ships and killing almost everyone he’s come into contact with.”

She swirled the tip of her index finger into the wine, giving it a stir before bringing her finger to her mouth to suck on it.

“Yes, but I don’t often care speak to other pirates, or to hear their tales. They are often myths, or egotistical stories to pretend a man’s achievement cock is so large, when, in fact, it’s quite small.”

“Then ye are a stupid girl.” He shook his head, his long scraggly beard swaying side-to-side as though it wanted to tickle the table. “He will take this ship back.”

Rosetta stabbed her fork into the chicken in the middle of their table and began to cut herself a slice of breast.

“He can have it back.” She placed her white meat on her plate before going for a bit of smoked... she wasn’t sure what it was but she’d eat it regardless. “Once I’m done with it. Let’s just say I’m borrowing it for now.”

“Well ye won’t have it for long.” The way he said it made a small shiver roll through her.

His coal eyes were on her, but it felt like he was looking into her own future with how much unwavering doubt he held in them.

Could the person who used to captain this ship really be that dangerous? She'd heard of more famous pirates.

"Every word you speak pushes me closer to slicing his neck." She looked up at him through her eyebrows while she was leaning over the table, her lips downturned into an irritated frown. "Refrain from continuing unless you want his last moments to be watching me doing it."

His lips must have puckered because she watched the hairs around his mouth draw in.

She nodded to the food. "Eat, tell me your name and position."

He was quick to manhandle the poor cooked chicken with bare hands and rip a leg and wing from it. Then he grabbed the smoked meat and a bit of the bread that had been prepared.

"Me name is Derek Von'tuken, and I am the quartermaster of this ship."

"Were," she corrected, her smile returning. "Currently Naeem is the quartermaster while you are nothing more than our prisoner. If you are what you say you are, who is the other man who came forward when I asked who was in charge?"

"He is Alister's first mate."

That made Rosetta frown. "We don't usually have first mates."

"Aye, girl, but ye do if ye command a complicated ship like this one."

She stabbed the point of her knife into the wooden table with a booming thud, startling the man. It caused him to drop the chicken leg he was about to bite into back to his plate.

"Call me girl one more time, and I'll stab you in the back of the hand with my eating knife."

He gave a snort of laughter. "What are ye? Sixteen, seventeen? Wee lassie like yeself shouldn't be on these seas."

"I'm twenty-one! And I have been sailing these seas and managing a crew for three years, you ill-mannered piece of shark bait."

"Still young." He shrugged like he didn't care that he'd angered her. "What do ye want from me?"

"Join my crew," she huffed.

The belly jiggling, bellowing laugh he gave was enough to surprise her, and make her eyes relax from their squinting glare.

“No miss, I don’t think I will.”

“Why not? It will be easier for me if I keep one of you in charge to control the crew I’ve just obtained. They won’t like the new authority.”

“Because where me cap’in goes, I go.” Then he gave her a grand face, bright with a smile that she could barely see with all that hair. “And there ain’t not’ing you can offer me that’ll change me mind.”

“Fine.” She drank from her chalice. Then she nibbled on her food in thought. “Where is the key to the safe?”

“I won’t tell ya nothing you want to hear, missy. Ye better off putting me shackles back on.”

She gave a grumble. She knew he was telling the truth. *Stubborn man*; he reminded her of her father.

“Finish eating, because I *won’t* be feeding you tomorrow.”

She was going to dish out punishment.

While he was eating, and being quite messy at it, Rosetta got up slowly after finishing her chalice. *Time to poke the bear.*

She didn’t *need* to, she just really, really, really *wanted* to.

Derek willingly allowed her to shackle his hands and then stood for her.

“Aye! Lassie, what are ye doin’?” he asked in outrage when she unbuttoned his faded brown breeches to the point they were almost falling from him.

“Mr Smith, I would like for you to take him now,” she yelled, knowing he was just on the other side of the door.

But not before she used two fingers to smear her red lipstick across her own face and then applied it to his lips – mainly his beard. His head reared back as if he was trying to escape her.

With a pat on the cheek, she pressed the gag back between his lips and shoved him so he would walk out.

Once Derek was placed back against the mast pole, Rosetta stood in front of the blond man with hair so long it was tied back into a long, messy ponytail that did little to restrain it.

He was seated in the middle of the two other men, and all three watched her like a hawk.

“Well, well, well,” she smiled, crouching down over him. She gripped him by his clean-shaven pointed chin, moving his head around to examine it. “Aren’t you a pretty boy.”

Leaning closer while placing her other hand against the mast pole, she noticed he raised his brow at her. Then his eyes dipped to her cleavage she had placed in his face for a reason.

“I bet all the women have gotten hurt at all the ports you’ve been to.”

Even in the firelight of the lanterns, since the sun was gone now, she could tell he had those green eyes women could lose themselves in. They reminded her of a large forest, easy to get turned around and lost in.

His cheek bones were high, his brows arched predominantly, his jaw sharp and not wide.

He almost looks like a woman, if it wasn’t for the thin, white scar running from under one nostril and down his lips to end at the side of his chin.

He may be a man, but his features were so pretty it would be easy to mistake him if he wore a dress. He even had a beauty mark under his right eye near the corner and long dark eyelashes that fanned above it.

“Promise not to break my heart if I bring you into my bedchamber this evening?”

She gave a cute pout, which would look promiscuous with the lipstick smeared across her mouth.

He did something that made her brow twitch to a frown and her eyelids flicker. He leaned forward and nuzzled the tip of his softly pointed nose against her own.

“Ha ha! I like him.” She rolled back to get to her feet. “Bring him Mr Smith, he’ll be good fun.”

“Looks like she’s really hungry tonight, boys!” Naeem shouted from the helm, making a few of her crew chuckle wildly.

The best part of the entire interaction was the dumbfounded face on the so-called Captain Alister Paine’s features as he watched the whole thing.

The man was taken and brought into her quarters. Seated in the same spot Derek had been placed in, she gave him the same warning as she unshackled his hands.

Rosetta refilled her chalice and sat in the opposing seat, folding one knee on top of the other.

He was much slower to lower his gag, but he had one of his blond brows raised at her.

“You’re a strange woman, aren’t you?” he asked, noticing the empty plate in front of himself.

She'd gotten a new one before she'd left.

"Strange to some, but most like to say I am unhinged."

He nodded like he was trying to comprehend that.

"So." He gestured to the food. "You give me dinner and then will have your wicked way with me, like old man Derek?"

"Perhaps," she smiled. "Depends on how much you please me beforehand."

He placed his hand over his heart. "Why, my sweet, beautiful rose, I believe you'll be quite entranced."

Her lips curled into a small smile of humour. "You're a sweet talker. How many women have you made cry?"

"Endless." He waved his hand to the side as if he were gesturing to a painting. "Can you not hear them weeping as we speak?"

She gave a giggle, a mocking snort ending it as she brought her chalice to her lips to hide it.

"What's your name?"

"I am the great Pierre Price, first mate of the infamous Howling Death warship."

"Oh my!" she gasped, her eyes growing wide as she placed her hand against her chest. "I've heard of you!"

His smile widened; one that would have made most weaker women's heart throbbed with tenderness.

"Really?" The cheer in his voice was delightful.

"No." She let her hand fall against the arm rest.

His smile fell.

"Eat Pierre." She nodded to the food.

He obediently started heaping food onto his plate like a man who hadn't eaten in weeks. *Big stomach for such a skinny man.* But she could tell he had steered many ships in his time. He wasn't as broad as the captain but he had defined muscles peeking out from his barely buttoned white shirt, one button at the bottom holding it together.

"I want you to join my crew."

"Depends on how well you please me," he answered. "Or if you promise to invite me back to this chamber in the future."

She squinted her eyes while taking a sip of her wine. "Perhaps."

"Come now, I am no fool." He spoke with food in his mouth, chewing

loudly and obnoxiously. He even shamelessly licked at his lips while smacking them. “Derek wouldn’t have betrayed Alister, in his deranged mind, by bedding you. What are you really intending by doing this?”

“You’re quick to catch on.” There was a silent pause between them as she mused on telling him the truth. “It will help me keep control if I have one of you by my side. The old crew of this ship will respond better if one of you has declared loyalty to me.”

“Ah, and Derek, I’m guessing, said no?” It was spoken as a question, but the way he said it was like he already knew the answer. “That old salt is like Alister’s dog. He will only bark and bite for his master.”

“And what about you?”

Rosetta leaned forward and cut herself more chicken before this brute decided to eat everything on the table.

“As enticing as you are as a captain, my answer is the same.” Then he gave her a wide grin with his teeth showing. “Plus, the idea of being dropped off in Dunecaster is agreeable to me. Haven’t gotten my cock wet in months.” He gave a chuckle as he said, “and the prostitutes do so love me there.”

Her lips pursed into a thin lip. *He has found men that will follow him anywhere.* Just like she had.

It was rare for pirates like them to garner this kind of loyalty. Rosetta had thought she’d always been a special case. *Figures I was wrong.*

“Where is the key to the safe?”

“In my pants. You might have to fish around in it for a while, you know, really rub around in there.”

“You’re the first mate. That would mean you actually know its whereabouts, or have it on your person.”

There was a mischievous twinkle to his green eyes as he brought a brown bit of smoked meat to smirking lips. “Come and find out.”

“I will, in due time.” She nodded to his half-finished plate. “Finish eating first.”

“If you really didn’t take Derek to bed and don’t plan to take me to it, although I would be most willing, what is your plan here? Why are you doing this?”

The smirk she gave was broken.

“Green is a wonderful colour on men. It makes them unbelievably stupid.”

“You’re trying to make Alister jealous?” The laugh he gave was almost her

undoing. It even caused her smirk to fade. *He is mocking me.* “Good luck with that. He’s too pissed to be anything but disgusted.”

He brazenly reached across to grab the stem of her chalice so he could drink from it.

“Perfect,” she answered, using the tips of her fingers to grab the rim of her cup, stopping him from taking it. “It means what I do next will be even better.”

Once more, he raised his brow at her, but with worry this time.

CHAPTER FOUR



Rosetta held a glass window firelit lantern as she followed Mr Smith and Pierre as he was led down the quarterdeck stairs to be retied to the main mast. The difference was, he was no longer gagged, but his pants were

unbuttoned as she had done to Derek. Both their faces were smudged in bright red lipstick.

She may have done it more enthusiastically to him since his face was clean shaven.

This time though, she had also removed her doublet coat and undone a further button of her tunic. It would mean someone could easily see into her shirt.

I hope my tit doesn't fall out.

Once he was fixed to it, and Mr Smith stood away to watch over her, she stood in front of this so called 'Bloody Storm of the Seas'.

She raised the lantern above his head to see his shadowed face completely with an expression of arrogant swagger. Mean looking, but arrogant.

The jewellery he'd adorned himself with, like he wanted to appear richer than an emperor, glinted and shone in the light she held up to him. One golden ring hanging from his ear and the silver locket around his neck sparkled.

From memory, she knew each of his fingers bore a ring besides a single pinkie.

A certain silence filled the ship. All that could be heard was the sloshing waves of the ocean hitting the hull, the creaking of the rigging, the flapping of the sails.

Nobody shuffled their feet. Those above the surface were transfixed, watching what she would do. She'd been making a good show this afternoon so far.

It was the first time she'd truly met eyes with him since she had him placed there, and the way the light hit his eyepatch, shadowed his face, and made his good eye gleam, made something lance her chest. The scar running from his forehead, under that patch, and down his cheek in a deep line, made his appearance seem more villainous.

Was that fear she felt? No, it couldn't be. Rosetta could never be afraid of a helpless bound man.

But there was something he was saying with this look, a promise. A deadly one, a frightening one.

He looked like a murderer.

Dark, and evil, and... sinfully wicked to someone like her who liked a man who seemed a little twisted, bent, and cold enough to not ask too many

questions. Perhaps she felt a hint of appreciation since he was bound, helpless, and unable to do anything but grunt at her with that cloth shoved between his back teeth.

Like a hunter inspecting their prey while licking their lips.

She fell to her knees directly on top of his lap, straddling him intimately, closely. His legs had been spread into an unfinished crossed legged position. It put her knees beside his hips while her ankles came back to rest over his legs in the space between them.

The haunting look disappeared as he reared back.

Rosetta then proceeded to reach above his head to hang the lantern on an available hook above him. It pushed her nearly exposed breasts right into his face and she could feel his breath fanning against her chest.

After hooking it on, she lingered for a little, keeping her breasts pressed so tightly against him that they slightly moulded around his head.

She sat back and leaned her elbows onto his shoulders, finding his look of confusion had vanished, returning to his sneering glare.

Being this close to him, she could see the bridge of his strong pointed nose was crinkled with anger.

The lantern above allowed her to see that his brown eye actually turned nearly bright yellow in the light. The black eyepatch was convex shaped, giving her the impression that he actually still had an eye under it rather than just a basic skin-hugging patch.

“So, Alister Paine,” she said, gently using the tips of her fingers to gingerly push his black hair from his face that had fallen. The top half was tied back into a folded bun, while the bottom was loose. It was long, the loose hair coming to rest over his shoulders and reaching the top of his chest. “Apparently I am supposed to be afraid of you.”

His eyelid crinkled on the side, making his cheeks lift as he gave, what she could tell with the gag in his mouth, an arrogant smirk.

“Unfortunately, I cannot be afraid of a man I do not give a shit about.” His smirk fell, and she grabbed his entire jaw with one hand in a firm, cheek squishing grip, to move his head around to inspect him. “You are rather handsome, aren’t you?”

He exuded masculinity. Dark chest hair, harsh features.

With strongly defined features, like his wide jaw and his cheekbones, he looked like a man who had the kind of physical formidability that he’d never

broken a bone in his life. Coupled with his large defined muscles, she knew he could probably kill a man with a simple punch.

She released his face to stroke his black stubble beard, caressing his cheek. “Sorry about stealing your ship,” she said oh so sweetly.

His eye narrowed at her insincere apology. She was certain he was unsure why she’d even falsely apologised considering the squinted look he gave her.

“I thought it was a shred of luck when I saw a warship coming my way. You can only imagine my surprise when a pirate hunting ship flew a jolly roger.”

Teasingly, she stroked a single finger over the side of his face, and he shook his head to get her to stop. Which she didn’t.

“I was expecting to dupe some idiot pirate hunters, playing some broken damsel in need of saving.”

She raised her hands to gesture to the sails while looking up.

“I needed a bigger ship you see, and I do so love how frigates have so many cannon ports.”

She brought her gaze back down, to see his expression had not changed. She started to gently stroke his entire face with a fingertip. She even caressed the long edges of the scar that ran from his forehead, down his eye hidden away, and then down his cheek.

When she tried to lift the patch to see underneath, he evaded her enough that she couldn’t. After the second time, she didn’t do it again.

He doesn’t like people seeing, that much was obvious.

She wouldn’t undo what she was trying to right now by revealing it. She decided to just keep touching the rest of his face, and he kept trying to run away from her chasing finger, moving his head about.

She refused to let her captured prey escape.

“When I saw the flag, my intention was to get you, the captain, to take me to your quarters. Perhaps fish me out of the water if someone didn’t come for me.” Rosetta gave a grand smile. “And, like most filthy pirates, when you tried to rape me just as I pretended had already happened to me, I planned to shoot you in the head once you finished lifting my skirt to reveal what I was truly hiding underneath it.”

She tapped the tips of an index finger and middle finger of one hand against his temple.

“In one shot, no more captain.”

She noticed his glare deepening, even his upper lip curling back.

Rosetta pursed her lips into a thoughtful pout.

“But then you were just so... sweet.” Just when he frowned in confusion, she said, “stupid, but sweet.”

He glared once more.

“How could I kill a man who was willing to avenge me after just moments of meeting me? I decided then that I wouldn’t kill you and would release you in Dunecaster.”

He tried to speak around the gag. It was too tight and deep in his mouth for him to actually make any sense.

She reached around his head and untied it, slowly bringing it away from his mouth.

“Get off me you wretched sea snake!”

She spread her arms as far as the ends of the cloth would take her and shoved it through his teeth. It shut him up once more.

“Well that was rude.”

He started bouncing her on his lap as he struggled against his bonds. He was trying to kick her away.

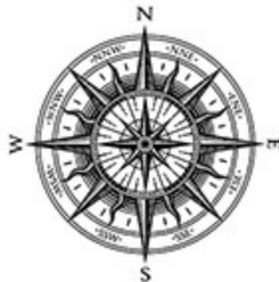
“And here I was about to invite you to dinner.”

She gave him a sultry smile and he halted.

She removed the cloth once more when she could see he wanted to speak.

“I’d rather drink sea water, you insidious bitch.”

She could see he was about to spew more insults as he opened his mouth, but she grabbed his jaw and forced it shut.



Alister couldn’t believe the gall of this devious, deceitful, fiendish whore who had managed to take his precious ship from him!

She tricked me! Played broken to get him to lower his guard in order to enact treachery. This was the most shameful way his ship could have been taken from him. *I let a woman take over my ship!*

The legends around his name would fade and he'd be turned into a laughingstock. He wouldn't be able to make port again without being mocked.

And now the coy snake was coiled on his lap, stroking his face and complimenting him. He knew there was venom behind her benign words.

She was up to something, and he wanted her off his lap before she continued to tarnish his reputation.

She grabbed his face. Then she hooked her index finger into the side of his mouth to inspect his damn teeth – like they had anything to do with what was happening.

“Oh Ho! Mr Smith!” she yelled with glee before she started pulling his lips to the side. “This one has all their teeth.” She tilted her head back to look at the older gentleman. “You do know how much I love it when they have all their teeth!”

He tried to shake her away as she moved to the other side of his mouth to inspect it. He felt like an attack dog being examined to know if it was useful, or about to be killed to make space for a better hound.

“Oh wait, never mind. He's missing one.”

Yeah, I am. He was missing a tooth at the back of his mouth on the top. He'd lost it after being punched in the face when he'd been younger.

Get your fingers off me! He snapped his head forward.

She made it snap to the side. His eyes grew far and wide in shock, both of them even though he was completely blind in one.

He couldn't believe the blistering stinging sensation he felt on the side of his face.

She'd struck him. Him! Alister fucking Paine, one of the most dangerous pirates of the seven seas. Someone who had killed so many men that it bordered on hundreds.

His anger boiled and he turned his head back to her with his nose crinkled tightly. “You–”

She slapped the same cheek again, the pain worsening the second time.

“If you try to bite me like a dog, I will punish you like one,” she told him.

He brought his head back to face her.

He didn't know how tight his face was screwing up, but he knew he'd never been this rage-filled before. It settled everywhere. It tightened his skin, pulsated in his muscles, and even clutched into his bones.

I'll kill her. He didn't harm the weak, only the strong, and he didn't care if it had a dick or pussy.

And this woman was strong in cunning, body, and emotion. *When I get free, I'll kill her dead!*

"Nngh!" A strangled noise came from him, his eyes widening once more.

She was kissing him!

It wasn't a gentle kiss either, but a forceful one. His lips caved under hers as they demanded he take it even if he didn't want it. She was smart enough to not give him her tongue, but she gripped the back of his hair and made his head tilt back while also keeping it still so he couldn't turn away.

She did it to make the kiss even deeper.

What the in the seven seas is going on?! What game was she playing? She even gave him a small moan like she enjoyed the way his lips felt.

He was too stupefied to respond when she pulled back, blatantly licking at her lips as if she'd enjoyed the taste of him.

The lipstick that was on her face was almost gone now. He was sure she had just spread it all over his face with the way her lips had moved over him.

His nose crinkled with disgust. He'd just watched both his men walk out with their pants loose and lipstick on their faces.

"Haven't you had your fill of men today?" he spat at her though his clenched teeth.

"I've never had my fill of men." Humour seemed to make her blue eyes brighten in the light. "What's one more?"

He leaned forward so he was almost nose to nose with her.

"I'd rather be fed to the kraken."

He'd rather not take a hole that had been taken by his men already this day. He didn't mind the prostitutes in the ports as long as it was only him they shared their bed with that night.

"Pity," she tsked, but she didn't look particularly upset. "I was hoping my sincere apology might soften you towards me and we could become... friends."

"An apology is only sincere when you try to rectify your actions!"

"I won't be giving you back this ship." Her eyelids tipped with long dark lashes dropped into a light scowl. "So bark and yell to your heart's content, but you are just wasting your breath. Do you want to eat or not?"

"I'd rather starve."

She licked her lips once more as she twirled a few strands of his long hair, and spoke like she hadn't heard him.

"I may be willing to offer other things." He felt her free hand grip his flaccid cock through his, deliberately, baggy breeches. "Your men will tell you just how much fun I am."

The shameless confidence on this woman was enough to make his body stir once she, thankfully, had removed her hand before she noticed. Unfortunately, he was too disgusted by her harlot attitude and too angry about the fact his ship was overrun, to actually grow fully hard.

She dipped her head forward while cupping the side of his jaw. Leaning forward and slightly to the side, he felt her grab his singular golden looping earring with her lips and teeth.

She tugged on it.

"Bite me, and I will do it back," she warned, since her neck was right in front of his teeth.

He sighed defeatedly, knocking the back of his head against the wooden mast. *Why is this mad woman doing this?*

"Just tell me what you want so you will get the fuck off me."

Now that he was acting calmly, although still seething with rage he was unable to leash, he realised she smelt sweet.

She was wearing a perfume. *How long has it been since I smelt a woman?* He expected her to smell haggard, like the brine of sea water.

But there was something about the scent of it.

He tried to remember where he knew it, and why it made his chest feel heavy. *Where do I know this...*

He shook his head when the memory of white gardenias sitting on his mother's bedside table came into recognition. Little flowers that bloomed compact together on a small shrub, almost appearing like a bouquet on their own.

He immediately stopped fixating on the way she smelled, and barged her with his shoulder to get her to speak.

"State your business so you can get your fat arse off me."

It wasn't. He'd stared at it enough with the tights she wore to show it off for everyone to view.

He'd been watching her all day, scheming. He'd been hoping to eventually get one of his crew to release him but she didn't have many of them on the

surface and they were constantly being watched by her own men.

“Where’s the key to the safe?”

She sat back and he saw the playful hint to her eyes was still present.

Is that truly what she wants? Then why pester him like this?

“Can’t find it, sweetheart?” He leaned forward with a grin. “Good. That booty is mine and my crew’s, and when I take this ship back and wring your neck before tossing your dead body into the sea, I expect every bit of treasure to be inside it.”

Sweetheart, it was a pet name he gave to women he felt nothing but contempt for.

She brushed her fingertip over the curve of his nose. She bopped the tip of it.

“Couldn’t help but try.”

She ruffled his cheeks with both hands like she was ruffling the head of a cute puppy she found.

Then she finally raised herself from his lap, smiling all the while at him. Her body was dipped, like she wanted his eyes to find her cleavage, her free unstrapped breasts visibly swaying against her tunic before she stood up straight.

As soon as she was standing, her flirtatiousness fell like it had all been an act to begin with.

He realised he’d given her something. That, or she was just merely done playing with him.

“Oh Walter!” she shouted with a giggle to somebody above.

A thin, coal-covered looking man came sliding down one of the securing ropes of a sail. He continued to hold onto it, swinging in the air as he spoke without touching the ground.

“Ye called captain?”

“Tomorrow, how would you like to blow something up? Something big, and heavy, and full of treasure?”

“I can make something go boom?” He put his hand over his heart. “That’s worth more than the treasure!”

My poor ship! “Don’t you dare!”

She ignored him, not even sparing him a final glance as she walked away to the helm. She dismissed the man who had been steering it.

It took him a long time to notice... but she’d never covered his mouth, or

Pierre's either.

He was too stunned, too disgusted with his mouth slightly ajar, too everything, to speak as he stared at her.

"What a woman!" Pierre sighed next to him. "I think I'm in love."

"Have *fun* did you?" Alister sneered back, regaining his composure.

Whore; he was thinking about Pierre this time. The man was promiscuous, a lady's man, always had been. Then again, she must have something worth offering if she'd managed to even get Derek to lower his breeches for her.

"Seems like you're the only one that had fun," he chuckled back.

He turned his head to the side, barely able to see the man in the peripheral of his good eye.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Did she kiss you as well?" He knew Pierre must have been speaking to Derek with how quiet his voice was. "And I know you well enough old man to know the rest." His voice grew louder when he turned back to Alister. "Looks like you're the only one she got on top of."

He opened his mouth to disagree, accusing them both, and then immediately shut it. *Wait a second.*

"So neither of you actually fucked her?"

"Nay, but she seemed earnest with you! I wonder what would have happened if you'd actually said yes to her offer of dinner, because that's all I got." The man then loudly gave a rolling burp that echoed into the night. "Sorry, been holding that in for ages, didn't want to disturb you two."

"I'm surprised you didn't try to convince her otherwise."

"Oh I did, she flat out refused. Said she just wanted to make you green, don't really know why." Alister didn't know what that meant. "Anyway, I think she was probably bluffing, but she is a rather odd woman."

"Aye, you can say that again." *What's her game?*

They both quietened when one of her men walking past them overheard them speaking and told them to shut up.

I'll have to figure out how to take back my ship before we arrive at Dunecaster.

Alister started playing out different scenarios in his head.

CHAPTER FIVE



As much as Alister fought the want to, sleep had overcome him while he was watching the woman steer his ship.

He didn't know why some of his disgust had faded at hearing the truth of

what had happened between her and his first mate and quartermaster, but it had. Unfortunately, he was still bubbling with anger at the fact she had taken over his precious crew and warship.

He had been mulling over it, scheming on how to get free and take them back before he'd fallen asleep.

When he woke, he hadn't expected to see her still at the helm.

The bright morning sun bearing down on his face was the reason he'd woken, and his brows drew together when he turned his head up to see her still there.

She manned the wheel the entire night?

The hands who had taken care of the sails had already retired and a new crew had rotated in.

Only when the sun was nearing its highest point, did Naeem finally come to take the wheel from her.

Even Alister could tell that her shoulders and arms immediately slumped in relief as she let go. Holding onto her right shoulder with her left hand, she rounded it as though it was injured.

Mr Smith came to her side when her boot met the bottom step of the quarterdeck stairs.

"Take me to what loot they have stored that we might be able to trade and sell at the next port where we actually stop."

Alister struggled against his bounds in protest. *That loot is mine!* He'd stolen it; it was his to sell and bargain for.

Pirates weren't always hoarders of gold and jewels. Alister was a trader, and a bloody good one at that.

He'd got top dollar for every bit of fabric he stole, every block of soap he'd taken, and every candlestick he'd commandeered. Then, all the gold coin he won by bargaining, he'd share with his crew as their share of wages.

They'd been at sea for almost eight months. He refused to believe they'd all worked hard and tirelessly, fighting ships, losing valuable men, and spilling blood, just for some little girl to take it!

"Rosetta," Mr Smith said with a worried tone. "You must rest, you've been at the helm all night."

She shook her head, her long brown hair knotted and tangled swaying from side-to-side as she gave Alister her back.

"No, I will rest tonight. There is still far too much to be done while there is

daylight and I won't waste time just for a few hours of restless sleep." She turned to the side, allowing him to see her face as she nodded her head towards the helm. "You will be taking over at night like usual. Naeem will do most of it today, and then tomorrow he and I will take our normal shifts."

"You're as stubborn as an ox." He ruffled his short hair, combing it back in frustration. "You never listen."

"Leave me be, John," she snapped with a dark tone. "I still need to know what firepower we have on this ship, and I need to be taken on a tour of it. I didn't get the chance to yesterday considering how late the hour was when we took it."

A bright smile took over her features, softening them from the tired and exhausted state Alister could see she was in.

"How did the men like the feast I ordered for them?"

It was obvious she worked hard, just like he did. Being a woman, he expected her to run to her bed for a much needed nap, not continue her duties as a captain regardless of her state.

He was watching her, gauging what kind of person she was so he could figure out how to best take her down.

Mr Smith gave a small chuckle.

"You sure do know a way to a man's heart. Their bellies were full of good goat meat and the tension on the ship is not as high. Although, I still suggest you don't go below deck on your own."

"I will go where I please on this boat." She pointed at the man's chest, deliberately poking him. It caused his shoulder to dip back. "Our men will watch over me, and I will just gut anyone who tries to attack."

"You're a new captain of this crew, Rosetta, and you may not know who Alister Paine is, but I do."

His head shot up more at his name being spoken, and then further when their gazes trailed to him. His face was screwed into a silent snarl.

Mr Smith ruffled his hair once more.

"If I knew whose warship we were heading towards, I would've advised not going ahead with this."

"It's too late for that," she cut in, her eyes falling away from Alister with boredom.

She really doesn't give a shit who I am. She was a fool then!

"Yes, but you don't understand. The crew are used to a fierce and

merciless man as their captain, one who has many famous exploits. If every tale and story I've heard is true, then we have just pissed off a bad man who will most likely chase after us with vengeance. He's a criminal, Rosetta. One of the worst kind."

This brash woman had the hide to stomp over to him like a troll and kick her leg forward with her hands on her hips. She slammed the bottom of her boot dangerously close to his head.

He didn't flinch.

No, instead he calmly looked up to her with a grin as she leaned on her bent knee to be closer to him.

"Got something to say to me?" he said.

There wasn't a shred of fear in her features as she examined him, tilting her head to the side. "Is it true? Will you come after me with revenge leading your path?"

"Oh aye, sweetheart."

And he wasn't sure what he would do when he got his hands on her, but he knew it would be harsh.

"Then I might burn this ship when I abandon it," she warned, her eyes squinting into a foul glare at him. "Don't test me."

"Abandon it?"

"Yes, Mr Paine." His upper lip curled back in a cringe at being called something like that. "I have my eye on something bigger and better than your glorified rowboat."

Better? What could be better than his warship!? It was in perfect condition and filled to the brim with cannons. There was no other boat that could give her the freedom and speed this one could give her.

Does she not realise how hard it is to take over a frigate in the hands of pirate hunters? What he'd had to do, how much blood had been shed, to simply obtain this vessel was one of his greatest achievements.

"And once I complete my goal, there is nothing anybody in this entire world can do to me that will make me regret what I have done." She gripped his jaw, pulling his head forward as she bent over him more. "You could rape me, flay me, burn me, gouge out my eyes. You could even tie me to the outside of the hull so that I can feel the waves crashing over me as I little by little breathe in sea water until I eventually drown, and I will take it all laughing."

“You seem determined for a foolish woman,” he spat. “But you will think differently when the time comes.”

No one is impervious to pain.

She gave him a cruel smile.

“You may be able to pierce my body, but you will not be able to pierce my soul.” She threw his head back so hard the back of his skull hit the mast behind it. “Until then, I doubt you will find me before I have left this ship to sail, by itself, on these seas.”

She stood back to walk away from him. “It’s a large world out there. Good luck finding me.”

“You should kill me if you want to live!”

She turned her head over her shoulder to look back at him as she strutted.

“Your crew won’t follow me if I do. They made that obvious yesterday when they didn’t fight mine to simply save your life, like you *actually* matter.”

Smart woman. So that’s why he was still alive.

“Mr Smith, show me the rest of the stocks,” she demanded, leading him below deck.

The day passed long and slow with him stuck where he was to the main mast pole.

Alister was thankful for the shade cast across him by the sails when the sun finally started to drop. She once more emerged to the surface.

Both her hands held the bottom of two plates as she walked across the deck and then up the stairs to speak with Naeem at the helm. He could tell the man laughed when Alister watched her place one of those plates on the table bolted down next to the wheel.

The man reached over and took some of the food, quickly shoving it into his mouth. Mr Smith followed behind her with chalices and he placed one in Naeem’s hands. He took large gulps before he set it down.

They spoke for a short while before she patted his shoulder and made her way back down the stairs. To his annoyance, she came to stand before him once more.

He thought she would glare down at him, as he did up at her, after how their last conversation had gone.

Instead, she knelt into his lap like she had done the previous day, straddling his waist in an intimate position he didn’t appreciate.

“Get off me,” he said with a guttural tone, his lips thinning.

What is it with her and sitting on me?! If his hands weren't bound, he would throw her with so much force he didn't care if she went tumbling over the railing.

“If you bite my fingers, I will make you choke,” she threatened, before she reached onto the second plate she'd been holding.

She grabbed a bit of smoked meat and raised it to his lips. The moment the aroma of food entered his nostrils, his stomach grumbled like a wild beast.

He turned his head to the side in refusal.

“You missed out on chicken yesterday.” She nodded her head in the direction of Pierre. “He ate most of it though. For a skinny man, he eats like a horse.”

Alister couldn't help snort, *she's right about that.*

“Eat Mr Paine, I will not be feeding you again.”

“Don't call me that,” he demanded, turning his head back to her with gritted teeth. “My name is Captain Alister.”

“A person must have a ship to be called a captain, and currently you don't own one.” Her smile was sweet, but her words had been filled with lethal venom. She pressed the meat to his lips once more in offer. “Now eat.”

He bit back the string of insults he had and willingly took it, chewing with distain.

Being hand fed like some child. Oh, the embarrassment!

“I was going to proposition you over dinner.” She placed the plate onto his lap, precariously brushing his crotch with the backs of her fingers as she did. “But I knew after speaking with you yesterday that you would deny it.”

She picked up the bread on the plate and dipped it in the honey available. It was one of the few things that would keep for a long time if stored correctly.

“And what would you have propositioned me with? What could you possibly offer me?”

He took the bread she presented with his teeth, his eyes squinting at her while he waited for her answer.

“You'll be surprised what I can offer.”

She watched him with calm features, seeming relaxed in the position she was in, but he noted just how dark the circles under her eyes were. She looked exhausted, and her voice was cracking like it was getting so tired it'd stop working.

It reminded him of the deep voice a woman would get after a night of screaming and moaning from sex.

Just as he was contemplating these thoughts, he watched her dip more bread into honey, and eat it herself! It was as though she was mocking him, and his poor hungry state, as she stole from the plate she'd apparently had prepared for him.

She giggled at his dumbfounded face, and he cleared his throat to regain his composure.

"Ah yes," he sounded purposefully. "I do believe I got a taste of what you can apparently offer."

"I may be seated over your lap but you are still treating me as a woman, rather than the person who had the wit and power to steal your own ship from you. You lack the power here to continue being condescending. I have much to offer."

"Come," he chuckled. "Do let me hear your idiotic idea."

"No."

His jaw dropped a little at her defiance. She shoved the bread into his open mouth without his consent. He still took it, but chewed it with irritation.

She raised her hand behind her and Mr Smith placed the second chalice into her waiting palm. She tilted the rim of it to Alister's lips and allowed him to take a sip of the grog water.

They added rum to their stale water in order to make it bearable to drink; most sailors did.

"I realised yesterday you would reject it, and that if I removed your shackles to allow you to eat by your own hands, you would try to attack me." She gave him more meat with a dull expression as if they were speaking of nothing but the weather. "Which is why we have to do it like this instead."

"So yesterday--"

"Men are stupid when they are angry." She quickly gave him a smirk, one of cunning and pride. "They reveal things they shouldn't in order to hurt, without realising they've showed their intentions."

His eyes widened. "You tricked me!" *Again!*

She tossed her head back and gave a horrid bellowing laugh. This Rosetta didn't have a feminine sweet laugh, but rather an annoyingly deep one.

She leaned over to the side to face Pierre. "I told you it would work, didn't I?"

“Marry me, please,” the blond-haired man laughed back.

“Why should I? You wouldn’t give up your port girls to be faithful, and you would most likely give me a disease in the process.”

“That’s not fair.”

Alister could tell by his tone that Pierre was pouting. He couldn’t help think, once again, *she’s right about that.*

She turned back to Alister.

“So, if you had just shut up and behaved, I probably would have tried to speak with you over food, hoping to gain your trust so we could be of use to each other, and you could have tried to overpower me.”

She attempted to give him the last of the food, but he just stared at her, realising why she had tried to tease him the previous day.

And why she had purposely let Pierre and him speak.

It was so that he could see that act right after it was played without realising why. She had tried to incite jealousy, or anger, or any emotion that would have made him foolish, and succeeded.

“You took away your own chance to get at me by being foolish.”

“You... You!”

He wracked his brain for the worst insult he could come up with. All he could think of was, *you brilliant annoying woman!* She’d pulled the wool over his eyes, and that was rare for him.

She shoved the chalice against his lips and forced him to drink, before shovelling more food into his mouth. Then she got off him, pointing to both he and Pierre and demanding that they be gagged for the remainder of their trip.

She disappeared into her chambers just as the sun was finished bathing them in the last of its orange light.

The following day, he’d awoken with the sun in his eye and her already at the helm.

It wasn’t long after he woke that he heard someone shout from the crow’s nest. “Land, ho!”

For the first time in months, he heard the squawking of sea birds that only ever flew near land. It indicated they’d arrived at Dunecaster Island.

Prisoners were ushered from below the deck and told to climb down and board the rowboat prepared for them. Multiple guns and swords were pointed at them as they did.

Rosetta wasn't taking them to the port inside the middle of the inner crescent of this large island, but rather to one of the many sandy banks on the outer edges of it. He could see trees swaying in the distance, poking out from the hills and hiding the very few houses that were this far from the port.

Mr Smith came out of his chambers to take the wheel while she and Naeem called out commands to the crew.

Once everyone was in the boat except for Derek, Pierre, and himself, they were finally unstrapped from the mast and taken to the side railing of the main deck.

The tips of swords were pointed at them as Derek was unshackled and told to climb down the side of the hull to get into the rowboat currently floating next to the ship.

"What about me leg? Ye think I can climb down the side of a hull with a wooden one? Are ye cruel?"

He eyed Alister as he spoke. He returned his look with a subtle nod of his head. *He's going to be a distraction.*

There was no way Rosetta, a woman who was being kind enough to let them live, would let a crippled man do something most would consider impossible. *She will fall whim to his lie.*

Alister had to stifle the urge to grin.

Derek had been a one-legged man for over ten years. He could climb anything, swim, run, jump, and do everything anyone else could. He knew how to use his body to the best of his advantage, despite such a large part of him being missing.

It made him appear weaker to those who didn't know him, since there was always a negative light cast upon him. People judged him immediately for it, despite not knowing he was stronger and faster than most.

He often used his arms to assist him. It was one of the reasons he was so bulky and strong.

"I don't care if you fall off my ship just so long as you get off it." She folded her arms and tilted her nose up at him in a snubbish manner.

"What if it falls off while I'm climbin' down? I'd lose me own leg to the sea!"

"Then give it here," Naeem said, holding his hand out while stepping forward. "I'll toss it down to you once you're in the water so you can catch it."

Shit. They weren't falling for his trick.

"Nay," he grumbled, turning to the railing. "I don't trust ye lot. I'll just do me best."

He started climbing over the edge, giving Alister a glare. *You tried, old salt.*

But he was still without a plan and it was getting closer to him being told to climb off his own ship.

Pierre was next to be pushed forward. He climbed over the railing without hesitation.

"I will miss you, my sweet, elegant rose," he said to Rosetta from the other side, reaching his hand out to her as if he wanted her to take it. "I hope our paths meet so we may wallow in our passionate sorrows when you see my beautiful face again."

She gave a laugh in return, and he began to climb down, shaking his head with humour at himself. Pierre often thought he was the funniest man on Old Gaia.

Alister was left standing alone.

He had more men surrounding him, as though they were aware now would be the moment he would try to do something.

I'm alone. As much as it pained him to realise it, he knew there was nothing he could do. *I've failed.* He hadn't come up with a single plan to escape.

"I'm sorry, but I don't trust you enough to unshackle you," Rosetta said as she came closer.

She emptied the coin bag tied around his waist into her palm to steal them, before pushing the key for his bindings into it.

He noticed, for the first time, the differences in their height since she was standing in front of him. He hadn't thought he was almost a foot taller than her.

How did such a small woman get the better of me?

She lowered his gag so he could speak.

"Then how the fuck am I supposed to climb down?"

The smile she gave him was haunting as she came even closer and reached up to hold both sides of his jaw.

Her lips found his, a hard pressing kiss like before. A demanding one. He tried to retreat from her, his feet shuffling back.

Within moments, the backs of his legs found the railing and her hands slipped down to his chest. She shoved him over it and he went tumbling back. His body flipped through the air before he crashed headfirst into the water.

Pierre was still climbing down and watched him fall.

The man must have dived after him because, after he hit the water and sank, uselessly kicking his legs since his arms were strapped behind his back and of no use, Pierre yanked him to the surface.

“Hoist the sails!” he heard her yell from the distance while he was shaking water from his head. “I want all hands on deck to get us as far away from this wretched island as fast as the wind will take us!”

His prize warship was already on the move, and Alister could do nothing to chase after it. He knew she would maroon him on this island, but his jaw still dropped as he watched his own ship sailing away.

I bloody failed!

“That was quite the farewell,” Pierre told him as he dragged him towards the rowboat by the back of his jacket.

He must have seen her kiss him.

“She stole my fucking ship!”

“I think she likes you.” Alister turned his head to him so sharply and so swiftly, that he felt his own neck crick painfully. “I wish she would have kissed me farewell.”

He huffed menacing quick breaths. “I’ll kill her for this!”

“Oh aye, I know you will if given the chance. But first, let’s get to shore.”

Alister started kicking his legs to help, his dumbfounded state snapping away to be filled with determination.

“Silly woman,” he laughed, almost throwing his head back as he was dragged through the water. “We’ll be back on that ship by the month’s end.”

Pierre grinned at him knowingly, while Derek grabbed him by the shoulder of his coat and carelessly dragged him into the rowboat.

On his knees in the small, overcrowded boat with nineteen other men, he watched the stern of his ship, the Howling Death, catching the wind and fading away faster.

If they had been able to see the front, he would have seen the figurehead sculpture. The finger bone of the cloaked figure of the grim reaper would be pointing the way with its hand outstretched wide while the other held a lantern. With a howling, screaming like face, its hollowed eyes would have

been watching the way.

The sculpture at the front of his boat sent fear into all who saw it coming upon them, and had been a source of pride for him since the day he'd obtained it.

Alister knew, deep down in his bones, he would go after that woman.

He would never forget her remarkably striking face. Her blue eyes filled with cunning and annoying wit. The smell she gave off that reminded him of his mother's bedside table, and the way her mouth tasted.

He would also never forget what the bitch had done to him.

And once he had the handles of his wheel back in his large, calloused hands, he knew his outrage would fade.

He would make that woman pay for what she had done.

He gave a grin, surprising his crewmen who were staring at him since he was sure it was an expression that appeared pure evil.

And I can make her pay in many ways.

CHAPTER SIX



Rosetta peeked under the rim of her hat up at the sails as the men worked at furling them away.

The crew worked tirelessly to yank on ropes through rigging to pull them

up towards their holding rods, before they neatly tied them securely. They climbed shrouds, crossed those wooden beams.

Not one of them feared falling, all too experienced to make such a rookie mistake.

Others were on their hands and knees scrubbing the main deck, while more were in the lower decks pumping out water that had leaked in. Even more were on the outside of the hull, suspended by ropes supporting their backsides, cleaning it while also scrapping off the barnacles they could reach without careening the vessel.

As much as she thought the ship could do with a thorough cleaning by beaching it and exposing its sides to rid it of rot as well as the barnacles cleaving to its base, she couldn't waste that much time.

They were also currently replacing frayed rope, dodgy rigging, and removing damaged timber slats to hammer new ones in.

Everyone was moving, not a soul resting.

"I expect you all to keep working," she shouted to them all. "We only have a few more hours until sunset."

Then Rosetta finally walked down the stairs to take her further below.

She no longer had Mr Smith on her tail constantly. After this many weeks, an assassination attempt should have revealed itself by now. It hadn't, all her new crew keeping their blades and hands to themselves.

That didn't mean one or two of them hadn't gotten their throats slit at the mention or rumours of a mutiny trying to uprising. With the fear that her crew, who were truly set on having her as their captain, would hear of it, they stopped trying to have her voted out.

They didn't want to risk their own swift death.

Tension had eventually faded, and everyone worked together as one big team.

It helped that they'd recently attacked a bountiful trading boat. They'd stolen everything worth taking from onboard and she told the men that, once they found port again, she would sell it and give them a share of the wages – just as she had done with what had already been on this ship when she'd commandeered it.

She'd spent what she'd needed to in order to resupply the ship with food and tools, before handing out the majority of the spoils to the old crew. She gave a handful of her own coins as payment for helping her.

Rosetta had taken very little. She had bigger goals than glittering gold.

Making her way further into the bowels of the frigate, she found the room she wanted, with the man she needed to see inside of it.

“Mr Darkley,” she greeted as she came into the dimly candlelit kitchen, taking the older gentlemen by surprise.

“Yer got light feet, Silver,” he replied, chopping his cleaver through the head of a fish to remove it. “Yer shouldn’t startle men like me, we tend to swing first before we ask questions.”

Then he turned his large frame towards her.

Mr Glen Darkley was a tall man. He towered over her with a large, muscled gut and wide shoulders. He sported a well-maintained moustache that curled at the edges as if he’d managed to gel the tips. The rest of his face was shaved.

His grey hair was over an inch long at the top, but the sides were surprisingly neat.

She couldn’t find a better word than stern to explain his features. His jaw was stern, his black eyebrows stern, and even his wide nose was masculine, and stern.

His eyes were usually barely open, as though he showed little care about anything to open them fully. His bottom lip, the only one she could see, was always in a grumpy downward turned position.

He wore a white tunic, rolled up to reveal his thick forearms covered in hair. It was buttoned to his collar bones, one shy of being all the way done up. He wore brown breeches and a brown apron over the top of everything.

“You are just too busy in your activities to listen to anything around you,” she rebuffed, taking a seat on one of the long tables available in the room.

She placed her feet on the bench running down the length of it to make herself comfortable.

“Alister had a cleaver thrown at him once,” he told her, grabbing another fish to cut its head off as well. “If I’m willing to throw one at *him*, ye better hope yer are just as quick to avoid it.”

She leaned her hands back to rest on straightened arms, tilting her knees to the side in a way that spread her legs apart. She didn’t care to sit in a lady-like fashion.

Mr Darkley was a calm man, strict, but calm.

He was the chef for the previous crew and she had come to learn he was an

excellent cook. Since his food was better than anything her own could make, she'd placed him in charge of feeding the entire crew.

"Where's your boy?" she asked, searching around the dim kitchen and finding him nowhere to be seen.

Clint Darkley was a young boy no older than fourteen. He had messy black hair that didn't know if it wanted to be long or short. He often tied it back from his face with a faded red bandana so he could see beneath its mop.

Rosetta often found him peeking around at her, and she figured the young teenager had a crush on her. She was the only woman around and they were always so full of... annoying urges at that age.

"Who knows? Lad's probably off climbing the shrouds when he ought to be down here with me, helping." Then he nodded to a barrel. "We got fresh lettuce from that trading boat, I needed him to help me peel it."

She'd come to learn that he'd opted to stay on the Howling Death because of his son. He thought it'd be safer if he stayed on it rather than joining Alister on whatever journey he would be forced to go on because of her.

As much as she needed all the crew, the idea that she could be putting the young boy into a very dangerous situation that could get him killed, weighed on her. She'd tried to get them to hop off when she'd stopped at Vinil port, but he'd refused to leave the ship and she didn't press him to.

It wasn't her place.

With a silent sigh, she hopped down from the table and reached into the barrel next to him, bumping him with her hip. He was about to ask her what she was doing but, when he saw her peeling the lettuce, he understood and focused on seasoning the fish.

"We've just finished setting anchor so we'll be staying in these shallows for the night." Rosetta grabbed a second lettuce and began to peel it as well. She was glad the men were getting some greens; it would help to stave off the potential of sickness if they ate well. "I want to set up a big feast for the night. You'll be required to cook more than you usually do. I want it to be rather generous in a show of appreciation for everyone's hard work."

"Shall I have a plate made up to be brought up to yer quarters?"

"I've decided to join."

His moustache twitched, and he turned his eyes, as dark as ink, towards her.

"That'd be a sight."

Rosetta had never eaten with this new crew before; too apprehensive of them. His surprise didn't come as a shock.

Her gaze fell to the spices he had available instead of responding. "You've got quite the collection."

Mr Darkley gave a huff of, what she guessed, was pride.

"I make sure the crew collect them when they go through other ships and I often spend my wages buying them whenever we port. I keep a large stock. It helps with the tastelessness of the smoked meat and dried beans."

She nodded like she understood, currently on her fifth lettuce, before he handed her a knife and told her to cut up the smoked meat she'd much rather not touch. As much as she'd eat anything, it didn't particularly have the grandest smell to it.

"You should get nutmeg. It's sweet but can be added to almost anything."

"Don't know what that is, Silver. It sounds like something for the tastes of women."

She'd long ago realised that he'd call her by her last name. She didn't mind it, conceding to let the crew call her whatever made them comfortable.

Depending on what it was, of course.

She clapped her hands together. "Then you, sir, will soon learn the wonders!"

"Yer seem to know much about the kitchen." He turned to place the multiple fish he'd prepared into pots so they could cook. "What were ye before yer became a no-good pirate?"

"A stupid girl," she grumbled back, turning her darkening gaze to the food in front of her. "What I was before I became a sailor is of no importance."

She peeked at him from the corners of her eyes, to see he raised a dark bushy brow at her.

"Hey pa!" a boisterous young voice shouted from outside the room. "Have ye seen Captain Rosetta? I cannot find er."

They both turned their heads to the doorway, and Clint froze at the sight of them. A blush immediately brightened his cheeks and she gave him a blank look in return.

She wouldn't encourage a foolish young boy's desires.

"Now that you are here, Clint," she started, placing everything down on the bench to step away from it. "You can do the job you are supposed to when it's time to prepare the meals."

“A-aye, Captain,” he stuttered, coming forward to take over for her so quickly he almost tripped.

“Ha!” Mr Darkley laughed. “He doesn’t listen to me or Alister, but he’ll listen to ye.” Then he slapped the boy across the back of the head. “Yer were climbing the shrouds again, weren’t ye?”

“I wasn’t, I swear!”

Rosetta, with a silent laugh, left father to scorn his son.

She went to check on all the tasks she’d handed to the crew while they were stationary. Everything was cleaned to the best of their abilities and all the stocks and supplies were organised the way she’d told them to.

Although everything had a place when she’d taken over the ship, it was messy and terribly organised. That was one of the first things she’d changed.

She was just thankful everyone was adjusting to the new ways she did things. They’d learnt she could be cold and harsh, but everything she did had a reason to it.

She would lash out when she needed to, but she wasn’t needless about it. *Have I gained enough of their respect though?* She thought some of them had begun to see her differently, perhaps even liked her.

It disheartened her that some refused to acknowledge her, or speak to her unless absolutely necessary. They refused to let go of their bitter resentment.

With another, louder sigh, she took the stairs to the surface, no longer needing to be below deck.

“How goes it Rosetta?” Naeem greeted when she walked across the timber, giving her a large smile like he usually did. “You did well getting us here on schedule.”

She never had a doubt that she wouldn’t.

This was a scheduled stop on their trip. She’d always planned to drop anchor and have the entire crew rest on these shallow shores for the night.

“Of course. The crew must rest before we head out to open ocean for the next month.” Then she placed her hands on her hips. “Are you doubting me, dear Naeem?”

“Not at all, was nothing but a compliment.” He placed his hands up in surrender, his smile never fading. “Jonny boy told me you were thinking of dining with the crew this evening.”

“Yes, well, I want to see their reaction this time since I ordered them a feast. We did well with that last trade boat, and they have worked so hard

since then.” Her eyes swept up to the sails that were rolled away, most of the men gone now that there was little to do above the surface. “And today as well.”

“Good idea,” Naeem said about her feast, nodding his head as he placed his hand on his chin in thought. “I’m sure they’ll appreciate it.”

The only ones that remained on the surface were those who were relaxing.

Some were sitting and speaking with each other. Others were leaning against the railings with their forearms to watch over the horizon as the sun began to give an explosion of colour against the sky. Reds, purples, and the remaining blues.

She was sure they were trying to see the green flash of light that would spark when the last of the sunlight faded away. It wasn’t that rare of an occurrence to see it if one spent long months at sea, but there were many fabled myths about it.

One of the men she could see was even carving into a piece of wood to whittle at it, creating a carved statue. Many of the crew who had been on this ship before she’d taken it engaged in this activity as something to do in their downtime.

She’d come to enjoy watching them, often praising them on their skills. They shyly smiled at her for the compliment and she figured they’d rarely received soft words. Rosetta knew encouragement was a good way to gain their favour.

She waved Naeem forward so he would move.

“Come, let us speak of the next route of our endeavour and what is to come. Do you know where Mr Smith is?”

“He’s in his quarters, having a grandpa nap.”

Rosetta wacked him in the stomach. “Stop picking on him, you know he hates it when you talk of his age.”

“But Rosetta, I fear he will die of old age at helm.”

The chuckle he was trying to stifle made her turn away before he realised she was smiling with humour.

One of the reasons she enjoyed Naeem’s company so much was because he was a rather gay man. He was quick to laugh and often tried to share that with others. But he was also caring and kind towards her. *He’s like a brother to me.*

After waking Mr Smith, all three of them entered her chambers, which was

also the navigation room, to speak about the rest of their trip and how and where they would sail.

They did this often, making sure they were on schedule and taking the best route possible that matched the approaching weather they could predict.

They rarely shared much about their plans with others. Her original crew knew what she was after, and why, but it was protected information she didn't want to share it with the new men who had come under her command.

Only when it was on the horizon, would she tell them what was to happen.

Before long, night fell and a knock sounded at the door to say the feast was ready.

Rosetta put an arm around each of their shoulders, giving a large smile.

"I hope you're both hungry, boys. I've instructed Mr Darkley to cook a large feast to fill your gluttonous bellies."

Naeem and Mr Smith nodded and they made their way below deck to join the many others already down in the dining area.

Men were seated on the benches available in front of long tables. Others were seated already on the floor with their food, digging in with hungry hands.

It was a large area, but fairly cramped with the number of men inside it. Mr Darkley was working to bring more food to the table and taking away plates that were already emptied of their contents.

"You're joinin' us Captain?" one of the men asked, pausing with a forkful of fish and lettuce at his mouth.

A string of eyes found their way to her when she entered.

"You bet ya," she answered back. "So move your bony arses down."

She used the tip of her boot to make the men shuffle down so that she and Mr Smith could be seated at the end of the bench. Naeem took the end of the bench on the opposing side of the table to face her.

"The chickens are all gone already, you selfish pigs!"

She reached forward to grab a section of fish, some dried beans, and fresh lettuce, piling them all onto her plate.

"It's fast hands down here," someone said down the table. "If you wanted chicken, you should have ordered to eat in your quarters."

Her lips thinned at the prudent tone.

"I'm not bothered." She'd been joking after all. "Eat well, boys, you all deserve it after the past few weeks." Then she searched the table. "Now,

where's the rum?"

A bottle suddenly slid down the table and she quickly had to catch it before it fell off the edge.

The tension that had thickened the air after her entry eventually settled. Men ate comfortably, talking amongst themselves.

Chatter was constant, the bellows of laughter frequent. The sounds of crisp food crunching, mouths chewing, and utensils clicking, filled the area. Lanterns lit the outside by hanging on the walls while candlesticks melted carelessly onto the wooden tables.

It was a mismatched mix of men. All ethnicities were present, which was common with their profession. No one cared too deeply about the colour of skin when they were more worried about surviving on the harsh seas. Even more so when they were fighting for their lives.

Someone stood on the table, holding their hand out like they were gripping an invisible sword. He was telling a tale of an old fight they'd had attacking a ship and overrunning it in the past.

Both the crews liked to tell stories of the heroics they'd done before they'd met. They were often the villains of the story, but they spoke like they were swashbuckling heroes.

She didn't care that it was a story about the previous captain's endeavours, not when she could see the entire crew were bright eyed while they listened. *This is quite the tale.*

"You're forgetting how Pierre lost his sword so he stole the scurvy dog's peg leg from him when the man was on his back," one of the men butted into the man's, who was still standing on the table, tale.

Apparently the two men had been fighting back-to-back but were being overrun. The crew had eventually come together to save them, but it had almost been a defeat.

"Derek was furious with him for weeks!" another piped up. "Even tried to get the captain to nine tails him!"

Nine tails were a kind of whip that could be used to achieve high amounts of damage when giving lashings. She'd seen them in her quarters when she'd gone through all of its possessions.

She'd never seen them before and she could tell they were well used. Alister had obviously punished his men with them.

"Reminds me of the tale of Rosetta and myself when we took over our first

ship,” Naeem chuckled in. “Minus the whole peg leg thing.”

“You almost got me killed, you daft twit,” she chuckled back, kicking him under the table.

“I was trying to save you!”

“What?” a man down the table nearly growled. “Didn’t try to trick the opposing ship with your pussy?”

The words were spoken like someone wielding a dagger, quick and sharp.

Some were still rather upset with how she’d deceived her way into taking over the Howling Death.

Mr Smith smacked the bottom of his fist onto the table, a loud thud stealing everyone’s attention. “She is your captain and you will show her the respect she deserves!”

She threw her hand up to silence him before he continued into an angry ramble that would only make him grow beet red in the face.

“Let’s be real, boys.” She gave a laugh, gesturing both her hands forward. “I will use what I have available to me. As you saw from my takeover, I am more than willing to pick up a sword, but my greatest skill will always be my wit.”

“You say you have wit, but you don’t know what’s coming for you.”

A sigh fell from her lips.

“I am a woman, whether I want to be seen as one or not.” She let her eyes fall over the men in the room. Silence had overcome them as they turned their gaze to her. “Only a foolish woman would believe she can outdo the brawn of a man.”

She made a show of grabbing Mr Smith’s meaty bicep muscle.

“I will always use my skills to my advantage, but I am strong enough when it counts.” Then she pointed to the man who spoke ill against her. “I’m not some weak helpless woman who sits in port, sewing needlepoint tapestry while she waits for her Jolly Sailor Bold. I have my strengths.”

“Ye say yer strong, but yer got pissy little arms,” someone else chimed in. “I bet yer wouldn’t even be able to beat tiny Clint in an arm wrestle.”

“I’ll take that bet!” Clint exclaimed with a grin, raising his arm into the air like he’d been called upon by a teacher.

“No,” she giggled. “I’d rather not steal the poor boy’s coin.”

“I’ll pay his wager,” a different man offered, throwing a silver coin onto the table near her. “Since I know I’ll be reaping the reward. You’re weak;

you wouldn't be able to beat a fourteen-year-old."

With narrowing eyes, she nodded for Naeem to move and Clint took his seat.

With a childish grin, the blue-eyed boy raised his pale arm and wiggled his fingers. He was taunting her.

She took his hand with her right, and Naeem came to place his hands on top of their clasped fists.

"You'll be doing double duties with your father if you lose," she told the boy, whose grin fell immediately. "I think Mr Darkley would like that."

She peeked over to the chef who was standing to the side.

He folded his arms across his meaty chest. "I hope she wins then."

She and Clint turned back to face each other. Naeem counted down from three, and then released their hands. Within a second, Rosetta slammed the boy's hand against the table. She knew she'd win, and cheers rung out.

"He didn't even stand a chance!" someone yelled.

Laughter followed.

"Double duties, Clint. For a week," she told the bright red-faced boy.

Naeem patted the fourteen-year-old on the back. "They forget she mans the helm. She has her strength."

"I'll take yer on," a voice said calmly.

She raised her brow at the large man who climbed his way over the bench where he was seated. He brutally pushed the boy out of his way and plopped himself into the seat instead.

Hitting his elbow against the table, he held his hand out.

"Unless yer afraid to pay up."

Kent was the man's name, and he was a brown haired, darkly tanned man who almost looked like he had the shape of a gorilla. He liked to keep his face shaved, but his hair was never the same length, as if he often sheered it precariously with a dagger.

"You're twice the size as her!" some yelled. "That's not a fair bet!"

"Who gives a shit?" he spat, his grey eyes squinting. "She thinks she's got something because she can overpower a little boy." He wiggled his fingers. "How 'bout yer take on a man. That'd shut yer pretty mouth up."

"No problem," she said with a smile, placing her elbow on the table. She confidently grabbed his big fist with her smaller one. "What's the bet?"

"Ye show us yer tits."

“Rosetta...” Mr Smith warned.

Her smile grew wider. “And if I win, you will wear my lipstick every day, for a week, to show us just how much of a big, ugly girl you are.”

With a grunt and nod, they tightened their hands to curl around each other’s thumb.

Naeem came to place his hands on theirs.

“One. Two.” He moved his hand. “Three!”

Just as their hands started pushing, and Rosetta felt her arm starting to fall against her protests, she grabbed her fork.

She stabbed it into the man’s bicep right near the crook of his elbow. A yelp sounded. She smacked his fist against the table.

He stood, slamming both his hands flat against the table. “You cheated!”

“Of course I did!” She gave a laugh at his snarled-up face. “I’m a pirate! We don’t play fair.”

“In this game we do!”

“I used wit against brawn. That is what I do, that is how I win, and that is why I am captain.” But Rosetta knew what she had to do now and stood, turning her head to the side to nod it. “Clint, step out for a moment.”

With a whine, the boy did as he was told. Rosetta worked on untucking her tunic from her tights.

“What in the seven seas are yer doing?” Kent asked as he cradled his elbow.

“I cheated, so I will pay up my part of the bet.”

Rosetta lifted her tunic and exposed her breasts for all to see, taking them by surprise. Some whistled at her, others bashed on the table. Of course, there was the overwhelming amount of cheering.

Her face was dull as she stared at the wall. *One. Two. Three. Four.* She lowered her tunic and tucked it back in again.

Then she reached into the small pouch attached to her hip and pulled out her red lipstick.

“But I still won.” She threw it at the man and he skilfully grabbed it with his right hand. He inspected what she’d thrown at him with a shocked expression. “Every day, you will be a little girl for us all.”

His mouth drew open, his flabbergasted expression so precious she found it was worth exposing herself. He was a stupid man, an arrogant one who wasn’t charming.

“You may start now.” When he looked unsure, she added, “Do you need me to do it for you?”

“Farkin’ damnit!” He couldn’t refuse her, not when she had indeed won, and paid her debt of cheating by paying up her side of the bet.

He applied the lipstick to his mouth, doing a terrible job of it.

“Oh Kent! You look like such a pretty woman,” one of the men laughed. “Will you suck my dick with your bright red lips?”

More insults and teases were thrown at the man, who grumbled as he took his seat, plopping into it defeatedly. He continued to eat in silence, huddling around his plate with shame.

“So, does anyone else want to wear lipstick?”

No one answered her.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Like she did most nights, when Rosetta returned to her quarters to sleep, she jumped into the hammock in her tights and tunic.

She'd removed her boots and doublet coat, hanging them over one of the

chairs to the eating table. She put the hat on top of it.

Inside the hammock with her was a pillow and blanket to keep her warm throughout the cool night.

As much as she tried, it was hard not to think about the man who had once slept in what she was sleeping in. Everything smelt like him; musky and masculine.

There was the lingering smell of salt that covered every nook and cranny of this vessel, but she could also smell a hint of sweet wood and bark in this room that she found some men smelt like. Like strong warm trees she wanted to cuddle into as they shared that intoxicating essence of sweetness with her nose.

It was heady and often made her miss being curled under a warm body.

Where are you now, Mr Paine? she asked the ceiling as she stared up at it with her hands folded behind her head.

She had one foot inside the hammock, while the other swayed back and forth outside of it, making it shift side-to-side.

She could only imagine where he could be but she thought he might still be stranded on Dunecaster. Then again, after meeting him, and what the men had told her about him, she thought he might already be trying to follow after her.

Good luck, she snorted.

The ocean was vast and finding her was near impossible.

Within a month, she was hoping to have completed her goal and then she doubted he'd ever find her again.

Which... was a shame.

His voice, although filled with obvious rage, had been rather a deep baritone and husky. The kind that would have been like a stroke over her mind if it'd spoken naughty words, or given soft grunts of pleasure.

She'd liked the way he looked.

Long black hair. She twirled a strand of her own in thought before rubbing it over her lips to tickle them. *Eye that looked like the sun in the daylight.* She'd found it quite spell-binding to stare at it when she'd been feeding him, despite paying careful attention to their conversation.

A big wide body. He was covered in muscle and she'd bet he'd crush her if he laid on top of her, which she was no stranger to adoring.

He'd had black chest hair she would have enjoyed running her fingers

through as she admired the bulky strong muscles beneath it.

He was covered in so many scars she doubted he'd mind if she added to them. *Strong men don't mind being clawed at.*

Rosetta disliked soft men that gave a small cry if she dug her nails in too deep. *They always stop thrusting when I'm climaxing when I do.* It always stole the intensity of their lust-making, forced to lie still like a virgin maiden.

She gave a small smirk. *I doubt he would've been like that.* Alister looked rough, and brutal. The kind of man who could have tossed her onto the bed from the other side of the room.

It was hard not to think about him when she knew he was on her tail, and she was surrounded by his scent every night she slept.

His men also spoke of him incessantly, like heart-sick lovers.

From the moment he'd opened his big dumb mouth and chose to avenge some poor helpless woman, she'd been attracted to him. Well, she would have been attracted to his good looks regardless, but she wouldn't be fantasising about him without the words he'd spoken to comfort her.

That strange kindness, from someone who looked like a scarred villain, had tugged on one of the very few heartstrings she had.

Ugh! Rosetta turned to her side to curl up. *I miss men!*

Men that weren't her crew; she could never cross that boundary, *ever.*

I want to see my port boys.

A good stiff fucking would stop her fantasising about the arrogant Captain Alister Paine just because she was sleeping in his damn hammock.

It would stop her from trailing her hand down her body and into her tights so she could caress her delicate, throbbing clit, playing with the sensitive nub at the apex of her thighs just to rid herself of her own created ache.

Once she had what she wanted, she'd steer the ship straight to port and let her crew, and herself, finally blow off some much-needed steam.

With her plan set, once she gave herself some sort of blissful relief with an orgasm, she finally closed her eyes.

Deep into the night, Rosetta was jolted awake by the sound of a bell ringing. She was immediately alert.

The warning bell. She rolled out of the hammock with skill, falling through the air before her bare feet swiftly found the floor. *We're under attack.*

She grabbed one boot and shoved it on. The other, she shoved on her other foot as she hopped around the room to grab her weapon belt.

The question she had was, *who the hell is attacking us?!*

They were anchored near the shore of an unoccupied island, away from any shipping routes. No one should be able to see they were here, surrounded by mountains on one side from the land, and open sea on the other side.

“Raise the Jolly Roger,” she yelled when she opened her door once she was properly dressed. “If they’re pirates, let them know so they back off!”

She froze when she saw men climbing over the railings of the main deck from the outside. It was too late.

“Rosetta!” Naeem shouted, climbing the steps two at a time to greet her. He’d probably been asleep in his bed since he looked just as dishevelled as she did. “I can’t see another ship.”

“Then drop grenades into their row boats!” She turned him and pushed him back down the stairs. “It’s a sneak attack.”

Of course it was. That’s why they were being invaded with the dark of night covering their approach.

“Whoever they are, they will regret coming onto my ship!” She walked to the railing of the quarterdeck to speak to her crew that were surfacing one by one; nearly ninety men ready to fight. “I want them all dead!”

How dare someone try to take over my ship! In the dead of night, no less!

All her men began to fight the enemy who had set foot onto the deck of the ship. It was done near blindly as some of her crew worked to light the lanterns so they could all see who they were attacking.

Last thing they wanted to do was attack their own men in the confusion.

Someone climbed over the railings on her level like some creepy spider immersing from the darkness. It was hard to see him with the dark of night as he crawled up to hold onto the shrouds. The crescent moon above them was the only reason she could even see him at all, casting the front of him in shadow.

She unsheathed her sword to raise it at the person who had the strong build of a man.

Her eyes nearly bulged out of her skull. *He’s as big as an ogre!*

“Did ye miss me, lads?!” A boisterous booming voice chuckled out.

There was a wave of silence and pause that washed over the entire crew. Even she knew the familiar voice.

Her lips parted in disbelief. *Alister.*

They turned on each other. Her crew had to fight off his that had grown in

number from those she had marooned with him.

He stepped down seamlessly from the tall railing like he was merely taking a normal step. He drew his cutlass sword at the same time that glinted in the moonlight, stomping his way towards her.

“I told you, you would regret not killing me.” There was a smugness to his tone.

Then he swung.

Rosetta deflected it, stumbling to the side at how swiftly she’d needed to protect herself.

With a menacing laugh, he swung sideways.

She had to curve her body backwards to miss the tip of his blade cutting across her stomach. Her hair waved in front of her face, almost blocking her view for a moment. When he tried to slash downward, she pushed the flat edge of her long blade and held the length of it.

She kept him at bay but her arms bounced downwards at the sudden force. She could feel her arms shaking.

He was stronger than her, which was no surprise.

When he reached out to grab her, she ducked down and quickly walked backwards. She couldn’t take him head on like this. He was too big for her alone, too strong, too tall, too everything!

I have to run. But to where? I just need to give myself time to think.

“If you want me,” she told him. “Then you have to catch me.”

She turned and immediately started to run towards the quarterdeck railing. She heard him give chase. His weapon belt jiggled around just as much as hers, the thudding of their boots hitting the timber beneath their footsteps.

Grabbing a rope connected to the sails, she flung herself off. She flew through the air, going towards the rear of the boat before swinging back around.

Her boots found the main deck right in front of the doors to the cabin that belonged to Naeem and Mr Smith.

Without hesitation, she opened the door after a single step and shot herself inside. It slammed behind her and she quickly hid.

She’d seen him jump from the top railing and land onto one foot and knee when she’d entered this room.

The door opened with a bang against the wall before swinging to close by itself. She emerged just off from the side of it with her pistol raised for his

head.

As though he knew she was there, he suddenly turned and pushed her hand upwards before she could shoot him. She released the trigger before she accidentally shot the one bullet she had in it.

He held her wrist tight. "Got you, lass."

She kned him in the crotch with every bit of force she could swing into it. With precision, she knew she'd kned him in the balls.

He grunted, loosening his grip as he keeled over a little. He grabbed his precious jewels she had just damaged.

Still, he came forward.

She lined up her pistol again. He stepped side-ways and slapped her arm to the side, knocking it from her fist.

Rosetta slashed forward with her sword and he raised his cutlass to block it. *Shit, what do I do now?*

"Get off my ship!" she yelled, slicing her sword through the air once more.

"IT'S MY SHIP!" he roared.

Then he swiped his leg to the side and tripped her.

Her sword was flung out of her hand as she fell and crumbled against the timber. She stifled a wince when her elbow and hip bones smacked against the ground. Her sword clanked against the floor and out of reach.

He grabbed her left wrist to try to force her onto her stomach, and into submission. She booted him in the gut before she punched his good eye with a heavy hit.

He grabbed her other wrist so she couldn't attack him again with it. Leaning up, she sunk her teeth into his arm, biting him like a rabid dog.

She knew she must have drawn blood with the copper taste that spotted in her mouth.

"Give up. I've already got you and my men will overtake yours within the next few minutes." He twisted her body so her front was against the floor, capturing both her wrists with one large hand. "You've lost."

Even though it was useless, Rosetta kicked her legs and wiggled her body in a bid to escape. *No! No! No!*

She hadn't completed her goal yet! *How did he even find me?* It had barely even been a month since she abandoned him on Dunecaster Island.

When he lowered himself to get her to stop moving, she snapped her head back. She felt the back of her skull collide with some part of his face. He

gave a yelp of pain.

“Bloody hell!” He picked her up by her arms and then shoved her against the ground, knocking the wind from her by bashing her chest against it. “You just don’t give up, do you?”

I was so close! She had been waiting years to be this close.

She almost, *almost*, felt real tears welling in her eyes. They tingled in her nose and she fought to suppress them, refusing to allow this man to see how torn she was.

“So what now?” she asked through clenched teeth, turning her head back to look at him over her shoulder. “I can only imagine what you’ve got planned for me.”

He sat over her bottom, straddling it to keep her down. He raised the hand that wasn’t holding both her arms behind her back. He rubbed his stubble black beard, looking up at the ceiling in thought.

“Not quite sure.” Then he turned his eye down to her, a grin forming across his features. She noticed the canines of revealed teeth were large and sharp, making his grin seem wolfish. “But I know I’m going to enjoy the hell out of it.”

Alister yanked them both to their feet, shoving her forward while still holding her arms behind her. He opened the door and brought them out into the open, putting the sharp edge of his cutlass to her throat.

“Got her, lads!” he yelled, his voice reaching over the distance.

Those closest to them paused their fighting, making those further down halt when they realised what was going on.

“Drop your weapons or I’ll slice her pretty throat.”

The sound of swords clanking against the ground sounded. No one resisted when they understood they had lost. Their surrender was immediate.

Her eyes found Naeem’s whose eyelids curved into heavy bows. He looked disheartened. He looked disappointed for her. He even mouthed, *‘I’m so sorry.’*

Rosetta shook her body from side-to-side in a last attempt to get free but he pressed that blade closer. She turned her head up to avoid it, having to stretch her neck back to the point it was almost painful.

“Tie them up to the main mast and the railings,” he commanded, forcing Rosetta to have to watch her men being bound. He pushed her forward. “And her with them.”

Multiple hands grabbed her and started dragging her backwards. They shoved her down to her backside to not only tie her to the mast, but also tie her hands in front of herself.

Daylight started to break over the horizon when they were finally all fixed to the ship and unable to escape.

A lavender purple sky still twinkling with stars showed them it was going to be a beautiful, cloudless day. Such a pretty sight for such an ugly situation.

She would much have preferred the misery of rain.

They were so close to land that they could hear the sounds of seagulls squawking. It sounded as though they were mocking them with laughs and it made her mood sour further.

She was tied to the main mast purposefully next to Naeem and Mr Smith, while others were next to them until they circled it completely. The rest of her men were tied to the deck railing supports.

Since she was facing him, she watched Alister stand in front of the cabin door on this level with his hands on his hips, a triumphant look on his face.

“Good job lads.” His eyes swept over the men standing, those who were of his crew. “Ah, it feels good to see all your ugly faces together again.”

A wave of chuckles rolled over the crowd and even Rosetta could feel the cheerful energy that came from them.

She thought Alister looked good bound in shackles and forced into submission, but he looked irresistible with the confidence that now seeped from him. His strong large chest was puffed with pride, his expression of contentment making his rugged face appear even more handsome.

Dick, she sneered in her mind.

Rosetta needed to think a way out of this, but that currently didn't seem possible.

He started walking down the side of the deck as he looked over her crew with thoughtfulness. His grin had grown smaller but it was obvious he was in a rather good mood.

“Here's what's going to happen. You are all going to submit your loyalty to me and join my crew.” He disappeared from her vision but she could hear his heavy footsteps as he stomped. “You will stay on my ship under my command and earn your wages. You will work, whether you want to or not.”

He started walking up the other side of the long deck, walking in front of every single one of her crewmen, before coming to stand in front of the cabin

door again.

“Say aye, if you agree.”

Rosetta narrowed her eyes when he looked at her, and she saw the twinkle of humour in his features. *He’s expecting them to instantly join.*

When silence fell over them, she watched as his humour slowly faded and realisation settled in.

None of her men were willing to switch sides.

“Either you say aye,” he warned, his smile fading into a mean look of annoyance. “Or, you die.”

“We’d rather you hang us by a noose than to abandon Rosetta!” Naeem shouted, squirming in the rope tied around them all.

One of Alister’s dark brows raised in astonishment. “All of you?”

“Nay,” one of her men said, before another, then another, until every single one of them rejected his offer.

She knew the way her pursed lips of anger turned into a smirk was menacing. The way her eyes squinted with glee helped to continue his derailing happiness.

He removed his cutlass from his weapon belt and pointed the very tip of it under her chin. He lifted her head with it.

“What if I take her life? Will you still wish to swear your loyalty to a dead woman?”

“Do it and find out,” a voice shouted from the other side of the mast.

“Most of us have sworn to follow her to the grave,” Mr Smith finally chimed in from next to her. “If that means joining in her death now, then so be it.”

“Most but not all. I say aye,” a man tied to the railing said. Her gaze fell to him and she gave him a soft smile when he said, “I’m sorry Rosetta, but I value my life more than yours.”

“It is fine, I harbour no ill feelings,” she told him. “But you will never be allowed to join my crew again.”

He seemed to wince.

A second ‘aye’ followed, and then a third.

Silence filled the area once more.

Three men. Three men had surrendered to Alister’s will and would be spared their deaths. The rest of her thirty odd men, stayed on her side.

Staring down at her with the cutlass focusing his vision, he seemed to

patiently wait for more. When none came, he stepped back, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Truly? You all wish for death, including hers, rather than to join my crew?” He pulled his cutlass away from her chin. “What witchcraft have you cast over these men that they would so hopelessly follow you?”

“Freedom,” Naeem cut in, making Alister’s eye move towards him. “We were not forced to stay as her crew, we have all chosen this path. You cannot offer us what she has.”

“I am offering you more than freedom!” He cut his sword to the side, making a whooshing noise as it sailed through the air. “I am offering you treasure and the ability to leave my crew once we make port and I have replacements for you!”

“But we have chosen to follow her for a reason.”

“And what reason is that?” His upper lip curled back in agitation, and the glare he wore made his face seem dark and ruthless.

Even Rosetta thought he looked frightening but she felt little fear. Not when her goal had fizzled from her grasp and now laid a heart wrenching ache in her chest.

“Freedom,” Mr Smith reaffirmed.

“Freedom,” another said, before they all began to chant the singular word in unison.

Freedom. Rosetta closed her eyes as she listened. *Freedom.* She let her head rest back against the wooden pole behind her, turning it up to the sky. *Sweet, sweet, freedom.* She breathed in deeply through her nose before letting out a relaxed sigh back through it. *My freedom.*

She opened her eyes once more to face Alister.

He had a frown crossing his features. He truly thought all her men would have caved and it was obvious he couldn’t comprehend why they would choose to follow a woman over him.

“What’s it going to be now?” she finally asked, making her men quieten. “Will you cut our throats and feed us to the sharks? Will you hang us? Will you imprison us and sell us to the highest bidder? What is the punishment for stealing your precious ship?”

I must say, I’m rather disappointed I won’t finish what I set out to do.

She wouldn’t have minded if death found her directly after it, but it was rather hollowing now that she was facing it before completing her task.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Alister now had to make a decision. But first he had to make up a plan because he didn't bloody have one!

He'd honestly thought all her crew would join his, considering he was a

man and she was a woman. He was the great 'Bloody Storm of the Seas' after all, and she was some nobody.

What was he supposed to do now that they wouldn't?

He was mulling over his options while some of the crew that had stayed behind showed him the changes she had made to his ship.

Everything was neat and organised in a way that was, surprisingly, better than the way he had left it. He wasn't happy it was changed from what he was used to, but he couldn't deny it was a more efficient way to store everything.

Everything had been changed. From the way the cannonballs were stored, to the barrels of food that were now in alphabetical order. The recent loot they had stolen was also put away in a manner that allowed for maximum storage space to allow for more.

Even Glen Darkley's kitchen had been rearranged and, apparently, the stubborn and unmoving man was rather pleased with his fixed area. Not even Alister could get him to change his ways if he didn't want to.

He was surprised to see Clint in there already helping his father, considering the boy liked to hide in the sails if he could. He hated kitchen duty.

"What are you going to do to her?" one of his crewmen asked.

Alister didn't like the look in his eyes.

"What's it you?" he snapped, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt to bring him closer. "Grown to fancy her while she was captain, did you?"

"No." Greyson rubbed the back of his brown, medium length hair. "But she was a good captain to us. We expected her to treat us like shit in comparison to her own, but she didn't."

Another man overhearing their conversation came to lean against the wall in the dim hallway with his arms folded. "She was fair."

"I don't give a shit what she was. She stole my ship."

Actually, Alister did care how she'd treated his crew while she'd forced him to be absent from them. He cared for their well-being, not that he showed it.

And now that he was in possession of the Howling Death, he wasn't all too upset that he'd lost in the first place.

He wouldn't tell them that, though.

"Aye," the one against the wall said with a nod. "But we're saying, she

ain't bad."

"Bitchy," another man laughed as he rounded the corner, merely walking past them carrying a small crate of rags. "She was bitchy, but she was funny."

These three men had fought with him when he'd returned, but she'd somehow managed to gain some of their respect. *How does she do it?*

Alister couldn't believe his ears.

They weren't saying it, but he knew these men were asking him in a roundabout way, to show her mercy.

How does she get men to fall to her will? They were like him, weren't interested in being merciful to anyone. So, why her?

Things had changed on his ship. Already he could see the friction between those that had stayed behind and those that had jumped off at Dunecaster with him.

Those that had journeyed with him were rightfully angry. They wanted payback and punishment for everything they'd suffered getting here. Those that had stayed behind were relieved to have him back in charge, but were also worried for those of her crewmen with whom they had started, unwittingly, building relationships with.

"She must be a siren then," he spat, pushing the man away. "Since you've all lost your bloody minds."

"Nay, just one heck of a woman."

Greyson shook his head. "I think the feast last night helped to convince us she is quite crazy?"

Which of course they liked.

"Why?" Alister asked, his brows crossing.

"Where is Kent?" Greyson laughed. "We should get him to give the captain a big wet kiss."

A laugh came from the two before they walked away, hoping he'd follow. Curious to know just what the hell had happened, Alister did.

It didn't take them long to walk down the hallways until they found the man who was even taller than him in height. He was standing in his sleeping cabin, going through his personal items, fearing that something had gone missing during the takeover.

"Good gods," Alister remarked. "Why in the name of the sea gods is he wearing lipstick?"

"Captain!" Kent exclaimed in shame, rubbing the back of his arms across

his mouth to smear it away.

“Hey!” Greyson leapt forward. “You can’t remove it because you’re ashamed Alister’s here.”

“She’s tied to the mast.” He pointed his finger at the man. “She can’t force me to follow the bet.”

“Yeah, but we can!”

“Tell me what is going on!” Alister yelled, appalled that she was forcing one of his men to wear lipstick like some... some... woman! There was now a cross-dressing man on board his ship!

What has she done to my men!?

“She beat him in an arm wrestle.”

Alister’s eyes widened. *Impossible.* Kent was almost as strong as he was.

“She stabbed me with a fork! It shouldn’t count.”

Greyson wagged a single finger at Kent.

“She still slammed your fist down. It doesn’t matter that she used her brain to do it.” He wagged it even harder when he said, “And she paid up her side of the bet because she knew she’d cheated.”

Well that made more sense.

“She bet you that you wear her lipstick if you lost,” Alister stated, folding his arms across his chest to hide his curiosity. He rubbed his chin. “What was your bet then?”

“We all got to see her tits,” Kent grinned, cupping the air in front of his chest. “Had been dying to see her rack.”

Alister gave a bellowing laugh. He couldn’t believe it.

“She actually paid up?”

“Oh aye,” Greyson said, his smile forming. “She offered because she knew she’d cheated the rules of the game, but told Kent here that he still had to pay up his share for losing. Told him he had to be a pretty woman for us all for a week.”

“And you’ll honour that bet,” Alister told him with a chuckle, slapping the man on the back when he gave a whining groan.

“Look, if you want her dead, then so be it. We will follow your lead,” Greyson sighed, ruffling the back of his hair again. “We don’t really care what you do with her. But, some of us can’t say we hated her in charge.”

He expected Kent to disagree with him, but the large man merely turned his gaze away when Alister raised his brow at him. *Even he agrees?*

“Your expression has been noted,” Alister told them, looking away from Kent before turning from the room. “I’ll think on it.”

He didn’t need to. He’d already made up his mind a long time ago that he wouldn’t kill Rosetta Silver, not if he didn’t *have* to.

Actually, there was much he wanted to do to her and none of it required violence on his part. Unfortunately, he didn’t trust her tricky nature.

He’d thought he’d imagined it, perhaps exaggerated her beauty from the last time he’d seen her, but he realised he was mistaken. *She’s a bonnie lass.*

Other than sleep tussled, her long brown hair had been brushed, unlike the nest of knots he’d seen last time. Her deep blue eyes had twinkled with the sunlight growing on the horizon, catching his attention every time he’d looked at her.

Her nose was small, curving upwards. Her lips pouted with a defiant cuteness he thought she’d displayed before, rather than actually just appearing that way.

Those wild freckles from many years in the sun reminded him of the wild personality she’d already shown him. Her skin was light but tanned.

She hadn’t been wearing her doublet coat this time, so he’d seen her in those black tights and the white tunic that was tucked in just below her palm-sized breasts. Her body was curving, but strong.

He’d bet that tunic was hiding strong muscles.

But other than the way she looked, the lass had kicked him in the nuts, blackened his good eye, and split his upper lip. She appeared gentle but she was anything but.

And Alister liked them feisty.

A nasty piece of work that could take him when he wanted to vent his many months at sea like a rutting animal.

This woman would be able to handle that, might even enjoy it, and he couldn’t do anything about it because he knew she’d most likely try to slit his throat!

So, what was he supposed to do with her?

With a grumble, he walked through the lower decks of his ship to breach the surface.

His men had begun to laze around the ship, very few of them needing to watch over their current captives. Most of them were below deck since the ship was stationary and didn’t need manning.

He entered his chamber on the quarterdeck and inspected it since he hadn't yet.

There were a few of her personal items laying around, more specifically, a tiny chest filled with that dress she'd used to trick him – as well as some other items that were of little importance to him.

Shoes, perfume, womanly things.

Then he noticed the pillow and blanket in his hammock when he'd never brought them inside before. Pulling on the blanket, he brought it to his nose to find it smelled like the perfume of gardenias that she'd worn last time.

It seemed to be a favoured smell of hers.

It was strange to think that an odd woman had been sleeping in his bedding.

He moved away from the hammock to inspect his desk and her ship route, wondering where she was heading and why. It looked as though she was trying to intercept a ship but he couldn't find any information stating which one.

Only some diagrams of its interior.

What are you up to? Alister could only guess.

He spent the rest of the morning in his chambers, fixing it to the way he liked.

CHAPTER NINE



Not long after Alister had attended to his large cabin, steaming food started to be brought in and placed on the dining table. He'd ordered Glen to make food not only for himself but also the men who had travelled with him.

None of them had eaten well for the last few weeks.

He continued to shuffle paperwork, going through it carefully, while they placed down plates and a bottle of grog as well as rum.

“Bring her in,” he told his men when they were about to leave.

Alister realised he should hide her long, double-edged sword in a better location than across his desk. He also found her pistol and placed it on the dining table to keep in view.

Can't have her reaching for either.

A few moments later, Rosetta was shoved into the room. Her hands were already unbound like they had no fear of her, which Alister didn't.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked with a brash tone, folding her arms across her chest to stand in the middle of the sparsely lit room.

His were already folded while he was leaning his backside against the desk. He looked over to her with a mocking sneer.

“You have quite the hide to speak like that when you are a captive.”

She gave a defiant upturn of her head, snubbing him with her little nose.

The sun shining through the timber gridded window behind his desk was the only thing casting light into the room.

Appearing without a care, Alister walked to the eating table and pulled his chair out. He sat in it, not pushing it back in.

After he curled his arm over the corner of the backrest of his chair, he gestured to the seat on the other side of him with his hand. “Sit.”

“What? Dinner before you kill me?”

He gave a mocking snort.

“If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead.” He brought his eye from the chair to her face, raising a brow at her. “And I do believe this would be lunch, considering the hour.”

With unladylike stomping, she grabbed the armrest of the seat, turning it slightly to create room. It loudly scraped against the floor before she proceeded to plop herself into it.

Alister grabbed her pistol, cocked the hammer of it, and then pointed it at her head.

“You and I are going to have a little chat.”

She looked at the barrel of the gun with a bored expression.

“Pointing a woman's own gun at her. That's a rather low move.”

“Ah, but you see, I can already tell you're a devious fucking bitch.” He

placed his elbow on the arm of his chair to rest it there while he kept it trained on her. "If I don't do this, I don't doubt you'll try to scheme a way of killing me this time; considering I've taken back my ship."

With a harrumph, she folded her arms once more. She also folded a leg on top of the knee of the opposing one, kicking it back and forth idly.

He reached for the bottle of rum on the table, poured a silver chalice of it, and slid it over to her.

"Drink, eat, speak with me."

He took a chug from the bottle directly, hitting the base of it with a thud against the table when he was done.

"You were pretty smart with the way you tricked me." He saw her lips part in surprise at his compliment. Then her squinting eyes trailed down his broad chest and then back up to his face with an unsure expression. "You wouldn't have taken over my ship if you hadn't done something so dishonourable."

Her arms loosened before she finally unfolded them to grab the chalice. She gave a long a sigh.

"There is no honour with pirates."

"True." He gave her a grin. "Which means you're good at it."

She cocked an eyebrow at him, taking a sip of the rum like she didn't seem to care if he'd poisoned it or not.

The feast between them wasn't fancy, but it was at least enough to perk her interest by the way her eyes swept over it.

"I saw you organised my ship."

"The systems you had in place before were inadequate." She finally gained the courage to place an egg on her plate. "I've just made improvements to what were already there."

Alister had been surprised to see two chickens on the ship and, from what he could tell by the number of eggs available, he knew she must have bought them when she'd taken them to port.

"I didn't realise they were so lacking until I saw the changes," he admitted.

Even Pierre had been surprised by what they'd seen before he'd gotten him to talk with their men to find out what had happened since they'd been absent.

He would get an update later.

Rosetta narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. "You are being gracious. Why?"

Alister started piling his plate with smoked meat, dried beans, eggs, and whatever else he could find from the bounty before him. He eventually placed the pistol down, but close to his plate just in case, so he could eat.

With a knife and fork in his hand, he said, "I am merely reflecting on what I have seen. I have many questions." Then he pointed his fork full of egg in her direction. It slipped from his fork to splatter against his plate. "I'm also rather curious about how a wee lass like yourself not only found herself on these seas, became a pirate, got herself a loyal crew that would die for her, and then found her way to captain a ship to commandeer mine."

"I don't have to tell you jack shit about myself, Alister Paine."

He gave a shrug like he didn't actually care, looking away from her to focus on his food. *I missed Glen's cooking.*

The crew who'd stayed with him had been terrible cooks.

He ate like a starving boar, ravishing his plate with not a single shred of etiquette or care that he had a lady in front of him. He smacked his lips, filled his mouth with full hungry bites.

While he was doing this, she took small, neat bites of her food.

When he was done, he leaned back in his chair to watch her nibble at her own plate while he took swigs from his bottle.

"I am rather curious. You sold my loot."

"What of it?"

He placed the bottle down on the table, rolling the base edge of it around. "What did you get for it?"

She pursed her lips. "Three-hundred and sixty-seven pounds."

"Ha! How did you manage that? I calculated around three-hundred and twenty."

She gave her own singular laugh. "Mr Smith was a hard-working businessman before I met him. He can swindle any man out of the highest price. There is none better than him."

Alister knew exactly who he was by overhearing the conversations between them when he'd been her captive over a month ago.

"Then why is the safe so empty?"

What did she do with all of that coin? He'd expected to see a hoard of it and yet there was barely anything inside it. Of course the safe was the first place he'd checked.

"A hundred and seventy of it went to your crew," she admitted, grabbing

her chalice to lean back in her chair like he was. It seemed she was trying to mirror him. “A further eighty went to mine.”

Alister cocked his head to the side, his brows furrowing deeply. “Why was it unfairly shared?”

She gave a shrug, talking over the rim of her silver cup as she said, “Your men earned it, mine didn’t.”

She gave more to my men because they’d been the ones to originally steal it? It was clever on her part.

“You only did it because they would have been more upset if they didn’t gain a bigger portion of it.” He gave a huffing chortle. “You did it to appease them.”

“So?” She rolled her eyes at his imprudent tone. “You can mock me by pretending to know me, but anyone in my position would have been a fool not to do it.”

Alister pointed the rim of his bottle at her.

“You’re right, which is why I agree with it. I just won’t let you spin webs to deceive me. You’ve already done enough of that.”

The naughty smile of pride she gave made him wipe his mouth on the back of his hand in reaction to it.

That smile could do twisted things to a demented man like him. He found it suggestive, even if she was trying to be malicious.

“What do you really want?” She waved her hand at the table between them. “You haven’t just invited me here to eat and converse. Tell me what you want.”

“In due time.”

He let his eye trail over her, hoping she didn’t see it for what it was; an appreciative look. The woman had a body that men would kill for, and she sat in way that exuded wicked confidence.

That assertiveness would give men the assumption she would be bold. Alister had to force himself not to let his wandering eye linger on her slouched position, and return to her face. *She’s the kind of woman who looks like she’d ride me well.*

Confidence often could be seen as controlling, and men liked it when a woman controlled their cock while seated over them.

Too bad she’ll most likely try to cut it off first.

“What did you do with the rest of my traded loot? Where is the rest of the

coins?”

She sighed once more. “I spent it fixing and supplying the ship. The number of holes I found were pathetic. We barely had enough food and water to make it to port.”

“Vinil port,” he told her.

When her eyes squinted, a dark grin began to form across his lips, curving them wide enough to reveal his teeth.

“How...” She seemed to think better of her question to ask a different one. “How the hell did you find us? This island is deserted, not many sail near it. No one knew we were approaching it. How did you know we were here?”

Finally she asked him this question, and he was so prideful of his answer. He even started to snicker.

“You’re witty but foolish.” He leaned forward, resting one of his thick forearms across the table in front of his chest. “While I was tied up and your crew weren’t looking, I told one of my men that you’d kept to find out where you were heading. They climbed the outer hull of the ship, crawled through the window of this room, saw your planned trip, and then relayed that information to those you’d imprisoned. Those lads then gave me that information when we were in Dunecaster.”

Paling realization struck her face. Her eyes opened wider, her lips parted in a stupefied expression.

“Aye lass,” he chuckled, reaching over the table to point a thick finger at her while his elbow remained against it. “You’d written this pit stop. And since you had to port, and we were already at one, we were able to come here and lay in wait for you. We saw you approaching from shore.”

The small boat he’d used to get here was hiding between the mountain walls.

“But how did you even get a ship? It’s barely been a month!”

Alister had to admit, he was having fun revealing his scheme to her, showing her how she’d failed and all her faults.

It serves her right after what she did to me.

“You left us on Dunecaster. I had a small chest of treasure buried there in case I ever messed up, got drunk on it, and gambled our supply funds away.” He shook his head, finally leaning back. “Luck on my part. I don’t gamble like I used to but it meant I had the funds to buy another ship, supply it, and head straight for here in less than four days. We arrived three days ago.”

And he'd gotten his men to row to shore when he'd taken back his ship so that they could burn the one they'd used to get here, as well as take the little supplies from it they had.

He hoped she would ask him about it so that he could tell her he burned it because he didn't want to give her an option of somehow getting away.

"That's why you were so confident!" She bashed the bottom of her fist against the table to punctuate her words. "And there I was thinking your arrogance was unfounded."

"My arrogance is never unfounded," he answered with humour. "I have chests buried all over the seven seas, except for the south."

Small chests that could barely hold much, but would be generally big enough to save him if he somehow messed up.

"Why not the south?"

Alister liked the hint of curiosity in her tone, and the appreciative eye she seemed to give him. Even if she tried to hide it behind taking a sip of her rum.

He gave a shrug. "Haven't sailed it much."

"Because you're after Dustin 'The Raider's' treasure."

A scowl washed over his features. "How did—?"

She gestured her hand towards his desk.

"I went through every nook and cranny of this room. It wouldn't take a genius to figure out what you're after with all the crossed-out maps you have."

It was true. Alister was after 'The Raider's' infamous, and apparently very vast, hidden treasure.

It was said to be a place rather than a hole he needed to dig. A cave filled with so much gold and jewels that Alister could become a king, not that he wanted to be one.

No, he just wanted to find it, to own it, to possess it.

He'd also sworn an oath to the previous captain of his crew before he died, that Alister would find the fabled treasure trove and prove it wasn't a myth. 'Mad Dog' had been laughed at for most of his life for racing after it, and Alister was set on proving he was right.

"Aye," he sighed, his eyes closing in frustration that she'd figured it out already. "That's what I search for."

"Fool." She thrust the insult at him like a dagger. "Even I know only mad

men chase after it.”

Alister let his usually cocky grin fill his face and leaned against the table once more.

He tapped two fingers against his temple. “Good thing I’m not right of mind, then, eh?”

He expected her to glare, instead a small smile curled her lips. She’d liked his comment, and he liked that look from her.

She’s a tempting woman. The way she was speaking to him was like the tango of battle. Their words, insults, and compliments were sharp like a thrust of a sword. Her posture said she had little care about her predicament as if she knew she was going to be able to scheme her way out of it.

Her piercing blue eyes weren’t afraid to hold his own while most women shied away from both his external appearance, as well as his mean demeanour.

She was willing to go toe-to-toe with him.

“Surrender your crew to me,” he said gleefully, lightly slapping his hand against the table to punctuate his demand.

“Excuse me?” The words sounded like they’d clogged in her throat, high pitched and dumbfounded.

“Surrender your crew to me and then I’ll head straight to port and let you, alone, go.”

He was willing to offer this pretty little snake freedom for entertaining him so well.

She blatantly laughed at him.

“No way!” Her shout was full of adorable giggles of defiance as she sipped from her chalice. “You’re demented if you think I’ll give up so easily.”

“Between you and I fighting for this ship, we have both lost valuable men. I won’t push my crew to the bone just to fly my sails.”

He was finally at why he’d called her into this very room. Now that the formalities were over and he’d hopefully gained enough of her trust, he could be open about what he needed from her.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t what he *wanted* from her.

“I don’t care. I won’t hand over my men to you.” She narrowed her eyes down her nose. “They’re mine.”

“I don’t keep long-stay prisoners, and I don’t sell men either.” He wouldn’t waste his supplies and he didn’t work in human trafficking business. It had

too many issues. “The men on my ship either work for me, or they die.”

And he had never allowed an in-between.

He wouldn't make her the exception simply because she was a beautiful woman. Alister was a cutthroat pirate, a killer, and a criminal.

He was never the hero in anyone's story.

“No. I won't be separated from my crew.”

There was a desperate hint to the way her eyes widened for a moment, the way her brows twitched instead of frowning completely.

Her fleeting emotion faded and she crossed her arms across her chest. But it wasn't done in defiance, not with the way her face was turned up to the ceiling like she was deep in thought.

She's trying to think of a way out. He almost wanted to laugh at her.

“You have brought me to the perfect place to maroon you lot until your answers change.”

The way her eyes slowly trailed to him with shock was delicious. *She will learn that I'm cruel.* And then she would come to fear him as she rightfully should.

“I don't even need to move the ship before I push you into the water. Tempest Island is a well-known place we pirates maroon men.” He gave her the vilest grin he could muster, hoping to scare her just a little. “Either your answer will change after five days, or their loyalty will fade due to hunger and desperation and they will abandon their captain that allowed them to suffer in life.”

She threw her hands forward. “What if we help each other?”

“Come then, let me hear it.”

He made himself comfortable in his seat, wondering how she was going to try and get him to bend to her will. Would she resort to more trickery? He was actually rather excited to find out just what she would try.

One of his brows raised when she got up from her seat and started making her way over to him.

His hand shot for her pistol, which was still cocked, and pointed it at her. He slid his chair back so there was space and he could easily manoeuvre to his feet if he needed to.

She didn't seem to care about his defensive posture, or the gun. She picked up his empty silver plate and threw it to the floor so she could sit in front of him on the table. It clattered against the ground in a circle before finally

settling with a ringing *ting*.

Her knees were knocked together between his, her hands leaning back against the table while her bottom seemed to just be resting on it.

“Watch it,” he warned, turning the gun from her torso to her face. “I don’t particularly trust you.”

“I’ll help you get more men, your own, if you help me get a particular ship.”

Alister’s eyes crinkled so deeply he thought it’d begin to hurt as a laugh grew in his chest.

“I don’t help charity cases, lass.” He relaxed in his chair, sprawling in it like a lazy nobleman; he’d killed enough of them to know how they acted. He rested the elbow of the hand holding the gun on the armrest once more. “I’m not the kind of man who steals from the rich to give to the poor. I don’t care who suffers in this world as long as it’s not me.”

“But—”

“Nay,” he answered with a scowl.

She kicked both her legs forward, the bottom of her boots hitting the corners of the armrests. Her legs were spread directly in front of him and the way she leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees allowed him to see directly into her opened tunic to see her bare stomach.

It was still enough to mostly cover her breasts, but the dip in her body meant he could see the inner parts of those mounds. Round, pale in comparison to the tanned skin of her upper chest the sun would hit.

There was nothing to strap them down and they jiggled in the only thing hiding them, the tunic, catching his attention when he’d tried his damn hardest not to look.

He was rather envious that some of his men had seen them and he hadn’t.

He quickly looked back up to her face before he was caught.

“Why not?” she asked sweetly, her lips pouting more than usual.

“Why should I do anything to help you?”

Her perfume caught in his nose with how close she was to him.

Sweet smelling flowers that reflected nothing about the harsh woman in front of him. The devious bitch who was smart enough to use wiles against stupid men... and he considered being a stupid man for a moment.

His hardening cock was begging him to.

“Is there nothing you want from me?” Slowly, like approaching a rabid

feral animal, she reached her hand out. She touched her fingertips to the dark hair on his chest revealed by his own partially opened white tunic. "I can get you another map of Dustin's treasure, one you don't have."

That was the problem with Dustin's cave of loot. There were many fake maps of it and he'd been chasing them all down, going to each location just to find out it had been another empty lead.

"You cannot promise things you currently don't have."

Her touch was surprisingly gentle, her fingertips trailing up from his sternum until she was brushing them over the side of his neck.

"But I know they are on the ship I want."

"Pretty lies," he huffed, his voice almost cutting off when she started brushing them over his jugular.

Not because he was worried she'd injure somewhere so vital, but because the tickling sensation made his breath catch.

He pressed the barrel of the pistol under her chin in a blatant threat. She seemed to understand he didn't mind she was touching him; he just didn't want her to attack him.

Her hand came back down to touch the thin silver chain around the base of his neck. She followed it with her fingers, as well as with her gaze, until she found the pendant high on his sternum. He felt the metal go from warm to cool by her flipping it to look at the reverse.

When she lifted it carefully to inspect the writing on it, his free hand shot forward to get her to let go of it.

She gave him a small smile, her blue eyes holding his singular one, as she moved her hand away.

"Surely you wouldn't strand a poor helpless woman on an island with only men."

"Maroon," he nearly gasped when she slipped her hand inside his tunic to palm his chest, precariously brushing one of his manly nipples at the same time.

When it happened again, he knew she was doing it on purpose.

"And aye," he said with more confidence, his momentary stutter fading. "I would."

"What if they hurt me?"

She was trying to convince him that he was putting her in harm's way, when she indeed could *be* the danger. She wasn't a poor, helpless woman and

they both knew it.

“Then you don’t truly trust your men, do you?” He cocked his brow at her with a mock of humour. “Surrender them to me if they are so terrible. I do like them rotten.”

He needed her to. He needed her to tell her men to cave to him and take his command if he was going to get them. They would obviously fight to the death in protest unless she told them to.

He could kill them, but then sailing this large ship would be a struggle that not even Alister could handle with the number of men he had left. All because of her.

Her hand reached up to brush multiple fallen strands of his long jet-black hair from his forehead and cheeks.

There was something in the expression she wore.

A sensual sweep over the features of his face, an almost enthusiastic gaze that said she was drinking him in. He refused to believe she was doing this for anything more than deceiving him. Which confused him when his eye found her chest as though he was drawn to it, to find her nipples had visibly hardened against the thin material barely clothing them.

Was she actually becoming aroused?

No, she was just trying to dupe him. He wouldn’t fall prey to her again, wouldn’t be swayed by this woman who was obviously, and outrageously, teasing him.

She wasn’t even trying to hide that she was.

“Alister.”

His eyes shot up, realising he’d been caught trying to see if he could actually see those rosy points if he looked hard enough inside her shirt.

She leaned her body forward, her free hand coming to rest on his forearm while her other caressed his cheek, sifting her fingers through his long stubble.

“Surely there is something I can give you to get you to help me.”

Her lips found the side of his neck, before she suggestively stroked the tip of her tongue across it.

Alister grabbed her thigh and tipped her forward, forcing her to fall back while her arse found his lap. She gave a small yelp of surprise.

Her legs were now spread around his torso and the back of her thighs rested on the arms of the chair. Her upper back was against the edge of the

table as he forced her body to lay down, and away from him.

He placed his forearm across her stomach to keep her down, while he bounced the pistol against the corner of her jaw.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, lass.”

His lips thinned into agitated lines. Not because he was irritated with her, but because she was toying with him when he’d started growing an erection long before she’d started playing this game.

And Alister knew he shouldn’t cave to his desire.

He was angry at his own body that it didn’t want to stay in control, and the moment he gave that away, she could use the knowledge better to manipulate him.

He realised he’d only made it worse by having her closer to him and sitting on his lap like this.

“There is nothing you can say or do to convince me otherwise.” Alister knew it was the truth. “Give up.”

“Nothing?”

She started to sit up and he let her, hoping she’d get off him now that he’d told Rosetta her antics had failed.

“Aye, nothing. So don’t start something you won’t want to finish.”

The way she sat up and then stared at his face with only a few inches parting them, was already enough to derail him. He refused to show it, even when she subtly licked at the seam of her lips.

If she rolled her hips any further forward, he knew she’d feel his erection press against her in those thin tights. He just hoped she didn’t.

“I’m a stubborn man. You won’t win against me.” Not like this, not in this situation. Rosetta could offer him anything and he’d still say no to helping her. “You’re better off trying to think of a better offer than whatever it is you currently think will work.”

She didn’t falter. Her lips curled into a small provocative smile. A defiant one that he wanted nothing more than to remove with his own mouth.

Then she grabbed the sides of his head and crashed her lips against his. She also tilted her body more forward, sitting against his hardened cock.

Alister curled his arm around her shoulder and gripped it, pulling her back to separate them.

“What do you think you’re—”

She cut him off by pulling his face towards her and kissing him a second

time.

With gritted teeth, he grabbed the back of her nape with his large hand this time and pulled her back.

“Oi, lass. It isn’t going to work!”

Once again, Rosetta shot her head forward and crashed her lips against his. She giggled against them, making his shaft twitch.

She also rolled her hips against him as best as she could with the way her legs were placed on the armrests. That stroke was enough to pain him.

Screw it. She may not be giving him what he needed, but he was now at the point where he was going to take what he wanted from her.

He’d been wanting to fuck the absolute hell out of her since she’d pushed him off his own warship and sailed away with it.

She was offering it, and Alister was going to show her why she should have listened to his warning. Especially since it would do nothing to help whatever silly goal she had in her head.

Alister picked her up with the arm holding the pistol while getting to his feet. With his free hand, he pushed everything that was within his reach from the table.

He slammed her back against it with force.

She let out a gasp of surprise at how hard he’d knocked her against it, giving him the perfect chance to slip his tongue between her lips and teeth. He forcibly licked the inside of her mouth, feeling her tongue slip against his.

For the first time, Alister kissed this treacherous woman back, and he did so with earnest.

He also thrust his cock between her legs, showing her exactly where this was going to go now. And just to make sure she understood it, he slipped his hand between the table and her arse, lifting it so that he could grind his hips harder against hers.

Her mouth tasted like a mingle of food, rum, and sweet woman. The way he devoured the taste of her, the feel of her lips, was rough, demanding, and forceful.

Alister was surprised by the small mew she gave him when he tilted his head and deepened it even further. She even reached one of her hands up to tangle it in the loose half of his long hair, pulling him in like she wanted it.

Then he started working on the ties of her black tights.

I’m going to make her regret this. Alister was set on breaking her today.

He was going to rail her body, and he wanted her to absolutely hate herself afterwards with how much she enjoyed it.

Because right then, he was a tangled mess of emotions and it was all her fault.

Instead of killing her, he was near desperate to have her glove his cock. Instead of punishing her, he wanted to take her in a way that would have her pining for it when he was done with her. Instead of hating her for her devious, tricky, dishonest nature, he desired her for it.

He needed to see how she'd unfold when she was at the mercy of his hips, and he was unwilling to be benevolent with them.

"I told you not to start this game with me," he said when he broke from the kiss. He leaned his head to the side and drew his tongue across the fast-beating pulse of her throat. She tasted of sweat and salt, and he sucked her neck to take more of it in. "And now you can't be upset with me when I play it."

He now wouldn't let her get away, *so she better fucking want it.*

She gave a rolling quivering breath when he pushed his hand into the tights and palmed down her flat stomach, feeling it dip under his palm. His middle finger slipped between her folds when he cupped her between her legs.

She's wet. Her pussy was damper than he thought it'd be. He turned his head down like he'd be able to see, despite the fact their meshed bodies were in the way.

Could it be she actually just wants to have sex with me? Could it be more than just her trying to use her body to get her way, to deceive him?

He doubted he'd ever find out the truth from a liar like her.

He circled his fingertip against her clit but she rolled her hips against him. He realised she wanted him to go lower. It was almost like she was impatient when he was just trying to be courteous.

The tip of his finger found a deep pool of wetness when he reached her entrance, and then pushed it inside. He stopped when he felt she'd taken it all the way to the thick, ruby bejewelled, golden ring on his middle finger.

He felt her tense around the intrusion and his brows creased together as he explored the deepest part of her.

"You're surprisingly small." He hadn't expected her to feel so snug around just a single finger.

Then again, he was much larger than her. He could clasp both of her thinly

boned hands in just one of his own.

She gave a little moan when he rubbed it inside her channel, moving it in and out. Her breaths even seemed to come out shorter.

But, she still turned her head to him and he leaned back just a little to see her giving him a glare.

“I don’t screw my crew.” *Well isn’t that a relief for me.* “Asshole.”

Just as he was about to add a second finger, Alister grunted when something sharp lanced his shoulder.

He was thankful that his finger hadn’t been holding the trigger of the gun when his body tensed. He probably would have put a hole in her head and killed her in an instant.

With his nose crinkled, and his teeth gritted tight, he ripped his hand from her tights and flipped her over so that her front was against the table. He held her down with the hand holding the pistol.

Alister reefed the eating knife from his shoulder and threw it to the ground. Blood splattered around it while it also began to soak into his white tunic.

“You should have gone for the throat.” He wasn’t sure why she didn’t. “And I was trying to prepare you but I don’t think I give a shit anymore.”

He curled his fingers around the waist of her tights and tore them down her body until they were around her knees. He expected her to kick her legs in protest but she ground her bare and exposed backside against his crotch.

“I haven’t agreed to anything.” She said this, but she ground against him again like she wanted to spur him on, like the cleft of her arse was seeking to stroke his cock.

She really didn’t need to. He was hard, horny, and more than prepared enough to slam it inside her.

He worked on undoing the buttons of his breeches with one hand as he held her down with the other.

“Ah, but you haven’t said nay,” he said with a hint of humour.

He didn’t think she was going to either.

Whatever game she was playing, it was obvious she was playing it to the very end. Alister didn’t give a shit as long as it gave him sweet release.

He grasped one of the generous round curves of her backside and used his thumb to pry her pink lips apart, opening her entrance for himself and giving him a little peek inside her channel.

He also lined up his cock.

He couldn't help licking at the seam of his lips as he pressed the broad head against the moist little pool. It instantly spread over the tip as he made their bodies kiss.

The saucy woman thought it was a good idea to roll her hips against him. She pressed herself over him more to tease him – when he was trying to decide on whether he was going to enter with a gentle slowness or not.

With a devilish grin, Alister pulled her hips back as he thrust forward with a sharpness. He plunged into her core in one swift move.

“Uck!” she gasped out when she must have felt a bite of pain.

He just ground the tip of his cock deeper against her cervix, his eyes rolling back into his skull. His nose crinkled in bliss. He clenched his molars at the gloving snugness that greeted him.

Hot. Wet. So fucking tight!

He could feel her pussy rippling around him and he let out such a deep expire he felt his body sagging afterwards. It was squeezing him, putting so much pressure around his shaft that it made him throb harder.

More blood pumped in satisfaction at the way it felt.

Pulling back halfway, he felt her body trying to come with him so he pushed her arse forward to stop her.

“Stay where the hell you are.” He wouldn't let her take an ounce of control from him.

“W-wait,” she stuttered. “You're too big, just give me a moment.”

Well isn't that the compliment of the century.

He figured she hadn't thought he'd have as much girth as he did, or length. She'd been teasing a man she thought might have had a smaller cock.

Not a single piece of his body was stout.

Alister quietly chuckled as he leaned over, bringing his lips to just below her ear. “Perhaps you should have been nicer to me then.”

He shoved in hard.

Her body let out a gasp, and he could see in his peripheral that her mouth had fallen open while her eyes widened.

He'd fit in plenty of women and knew eventually she'd adjust to him. He wasn't willing to wait for that, not when her quivering channel was calling for him to thrust like a maniacal madman.

He pulled his hips back and thrust straight back in without waiting. He grunted when he hit the end of her and then he ground deep, feeling her pussy

slip around him with nearly the entire length of his cock.

Only a few inches were unfortunate enough not to feel her around it.

Gripping at different intervals, in different ways, he did it again. He gave another deep grunt; she gave a small moan this time. The noise she let out made his balls ache for a moment as if a tremor had rolled through them.

And now that he was done adjusting to the mind-scrambling way she felt around him, Alister started thrusting his hips back and forth with speed. He leaned back to stand straight, his legs spread wide around her closed ones, and pulled his tunic up so he could watch himself plunge into her.

Pink folds moved back and forth as he took himself away, and then slammed in hard. And it was always hard, his thrusts never soft, his hips never kind.

Punishment was being delivered, and the rapture of it already made his legs shake like they wanted to go weak in ecstasy. His grin with clenched molars was devilish and large as he watched himself take her pussy.

She must have finally started feeling good because she started letting out constant little cries. And when he realised she was, he gave a groan, then driving him further to whatever was starting to build inside him.

Her moans were unhidden and they started to ring in his ears.

He thought she'd be quieter, thought she might try and hide her reactions from him. Or at least, to those outside his door that might overhear her.

The way her arousal seemed to grow to the point he could hear it every time he moved her wetness around with his dick made him want to hear their hips slap louder when he impacted. The way she started bucking her hips backwards like she wanted him to go faster or harder made him just give her both.

But the way she felt?

Alister didn't even realise he was lost until her body gripped him for the first time and it felt like it centred him. But not to the outside world, or to his own mind, but to her, to what was happening between them.

A heavy expire left him every time her channel did it. The more frequent it became, the more he was desperate to get her to finally come around him so he could feel it hold him in a vice-like grip.

Every stroke seemed to make him crazed as he drove into this sensual woman and he let go of everything so he could grab her hips in both hands. He needed to hold onto her as every stroke felt like blissful heaven.

“Ah, fuck, lass.” The words fell from him by accident, out of his control.

His head fell forward like he didn't have the strength to hold it up any longer. His legs quaked at the pleasure that wracked through him. The more he thrust, the more he felt her sloshing around him with a growing wetness, and it started to make his balls constantly ache for release.

I think I'm losing it. He had to be. It was just a pussy; it shouldn't make him feel like he was about to drown.

It shouldn't make him groan and pulsate deep inside her warmth when he found himself staring down the barrel of her pistol that was now pointed at his own face.

He'd let it go to hold her. She must have realised it and took the chance to threaten him with it.

Alister let go one side of her hips and grabbed the back of her hair in a tight fist. He yanked her up, pulling her so that she was standing and flush against him.

It also meant he was now feeling that cold pistol just under the corner of his jaw and she was in a better position to point it at him.

He placed his lips against the side of her neck, right below her ear, as he gave it a rough kiss and then bite. “You can blow my brains out after I blow my load.”

He didn't care, not when it felt this fucking *good*.

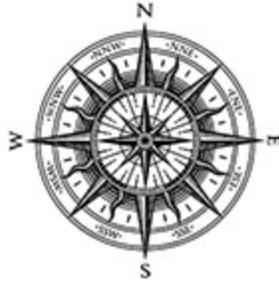
Perhaps it was because he'd been horny for this bitch for weeks, but he didn't give a damn if she killed him if his last moments were this.

“Oh! Oh!”

He felt her hand shaking unsteadily, her soft moans turning into loud cries since he'd changed the way her hips met his.

He looked over her shoulder to find her dazed gaze focused on the ceiling. Her mouth was wide open as she released noise after noise. Her eyelids were crinkled heavily and her brows were knotted tightly together.

And she was gone. Alister knew she was as lost as he was.



Rosetta's arm fell when her breaths started to come out in haunting shudders. She couldn't seem to catch them anymore, couldn't seem to focus enough to breathe.

Everything was slipping from her senses.

Her lungs as they seized rather than expanding for precious breath. Her tear ducts as they made little droplets collect in her lashes. Her nose and cheeks as they became fuzzy as though her sinuses were on the fritz. Her throat as she started to moan louder and louder, more broken.

She was too focused on his unbearable thick hard thing spearing her channel like this, seeming to gouge the front of it every time it rolled over her G-spot. She tried to buck her hips into him every time he rammed in just so it would be deeper, harder, more violent.

The way he was gripping her hair tugged on every strand and forced her body into a deep bow. It felt like he was ripping her hair out. It was painful, it pulled on her scalp, and she wanted him to grip it more aggressively.

Placing her hands flat against the table, she had to hold them both up.

She barely noticed it when he slapped the pistol from the table so it would hit the floor and slide away.

Gone. Out of reach. And immediately forgotten.

Not when a moment later, that same hand was inside her tunic and grasping a breast. She could feel it bouncing in his palm. He slipped her hardened nipple between his middle and index finger, rolling it between them as he squeezed the rest of it in his large meaty hand.

The scream that fell from her when she started coming needed to be released with the force of her orgasm washing over her. In waves it tore through her, hitting so strongly she felt her legs buckle beneath her.

It took her over to the point she knew he was forced to help her stay upwards for this pounding.

Everything was released. Every bit of tension in every muscle went lax so

that the power of her body could focus on squeezing his wonderful cock. Swelling in sweet, sweet, rapture.

“Hah...” he huffed against her throat. “Aye. Just like that. Don’t stop.”

She didn’t think she’d stopped coming, not with the fact he continued to slam into her with such ravished thrusts, not with the speed with which he gave them to her.

He was mangling her poor breast, bruising it, and she wanted him to, the pressure perfect. She wanted it purple after this.

She knew she was looking up at the ceiling, but her vision was so hazy and dark she’d thought she’d gone blind. How badly had she needed this?

Take it. She begged with her thoughts with gritted back teeth. *Please, just give it to me.*

Those feral guttural sounds he was making added to everything; the warmth of his body against her own, the press of firm large muscles cushioning her. *Feels so fucking good.*

It was too much. She needed him to stop, she was desperate for him to never end this just so she could feel it forever. It was torture, it was perfect.

And just when she thought she couldn’t take anymore, a plea forming in her clogged throat, he pulled from her with a quivering groan.

Luke-warm liquid spread between her closed thighs as he pressed his cock between them. Then he pushed through to the other side and she felt the length of his hard cock pulsating heavily between her thighs and against her folds.

Delicious groans came from him as bursts of his semen spurted onto the table in front of her.

Every time he rubbed her clit, her body twitched, everything sensitive. His breaths rolled around her throat like it wanted to encircle it as he came and she gave little mews in answer.

There was a momentarily pause, both of them trying to crash back to reality in this weird embrace. Two strangers who should hate each other, instead had just shared undeniable pleasure.

When he finally released her, he slumped back into the chair, almost falling away from her like he couldn’t stand any longer.

Rosetta bowed forward, desperately trying to hold up her body that was trying to go limp. Her arms shook against the table, her legs quaking beneath her, natural tension trying to fight against deep-seated satisfaction.

She turned around to face him, resting her backside against the edge of the table to assist her so she didn't fall. She didn't want to let him know just how much she'd enjoyed this.

The ache in her core almost made her wince.

The first thing her eyes found was the thing that caused her current pathetic state.

Jutting up from between his hips like a tower of manly hardened steel, his cock was still fully engorged. It was covered in clear wetness from her all the way to the base, but the tip was covered in milky white.

But that wasn't what made her eyes nearly bulge out of her skull. No, they widened because she saw the size of the thing that had just made her scream with abandon. It was long and almost as thick as her wrist.

No wonder she'd struggled to adjust to it, despite the fact that she hadn't had anyone inside her in months.

Then her eyes perused up the heaving torso of the towering man before her, his tunic dishevelled and revealing more of the curling black hair on his chest, before finding his face.

She expected him to look smug behind that eyepatch.

What she saw was a man heavy-lidded with deep satisfaction. His amber eye caught the daylight and seemed to glow in comparison to its usual darkness while parts of him were showered in shadows.

"Pull your pants up before I shove this back into you," he demanded, his eyes never leaving her hips, and the mess between them, as he palmed his hard shaft. "Unless you want to ride me."

He didn't grin, but she could hear the excitement at the idea of that in his tone, like he wanted her to climb on top of his lap and ride his cock. She was so very tempted to.

Only when she did, tying up the ties around her waist, did his eye finally look up to her face.

He cocked a brow at her, a grin forming across his features. *And there is that smug face*, the one she had been expecting.

Rosetta returned it.

She knew he'd enjoyed this and would want more just as she already did. She could use that to her advantage, although that wasn't why she'd done this.

She had just wanted to satisfy the fantasy she'd had of this man. To take

him and have him soothe the burning need that had been building in her since she'd first started sleeping in his room. Surrounded by his scent. Surrounding by his things.

Rosetta had used him for her own selfish need.

"I'm still marooning you on that island, lass."

Her smile grew and she came forward, being careful not to knee that still exposed monster, to kneel on his lap. With light touches, her hands came up to caress the sides of his neck before they went to the nape of it.

"And I still don't care." The quivering breathless groan he gave was wonderful when she pressed her lips to his jugular. She felt that rod of his tap against her thigh like he'd pulsed. "I won't surrender my crew."

Then she pulled back and tucked her tunic into her tights to right herself.

He rolled his eyes in a dull expression. "So be it."

He tucked his cock away, not caring to fully do up the buttons of his breeches. He then grabbed her and lifted her off him, and off the ground as he stood.

She had to stop herself from giggling out loud as he semi carried her out of the room by carting her at his side, but she did kick her legs in excitement.

He threw her through the doorway and into bright sunlight.

"Aye lads, looks like she's chosen to be difficult."

CHAPTER TEN



Rosetta stumbled out onto the quarterdeck before he grabbed her hands and held both her wrists behind her with one meaty fist.

Alister walked her down the stairs and her eyes found Naeem. She noted

the angry stare he had as he watched her being man-handled and she knew, without a doubt, she'd been heard screaming.

Her tit hurt and the sensitive part between her legs wasn't fairing much better. She gave him a grin.

His face then grew into a bright smile of humour.

"Looks like she got what she wanted from him boys!" Naeem shouted with a laugh.

There was a slight pause when they were almost to the bottom of those steps, like Alister was dumbfounded by his statement.

She turned her head back to see he'd frowned before seeming not to care.

"It was adequate enough," she chuckled in return when she looked back to her bound crew. He shook her like he knew what she said was an understatement. "Looks like we're being marooned boys."

"Five days should teach you all enough of a lesson," Alister added with a dark tone, but she could hear the hint of malevolence in it.

"I say we eat Harvey tonight," Naeem suggested, turning his head to look at one of the men tied to the railing.

"Hey!" Harvey shouted from the other side of the mast. He bounced on his arse while jutting his chin towards another man tied up. "Eat Carter, he's got more meat on his bones."

A string of laughter followed.

"You've got a strange crew," Alister said to her.

"Strange crew for a crazed woman," Naeem answered.

"I'll give you crazy, you piece of shark shit," Rosetta bit, kicking her leg out at the man, not that she could reach him with Alister holding her back.

More laughter came and she noticed Alister's men gave each other strange looks because of her crew.

Not wanting to waste time, Alister told his men to start untying hers one by one.

"Last chance," he offered when the first one was taken to the side of the main deck and told to stand on the railing.

She was apparently going to have to watch them all jump to the water.

"Are you going to jump, Mr Smith?" she asked the older gentleman. "Or should I come over there and push you myself?"

With a brash confidence, he didn't jump but simply fell backwards with his arms outstretched to the sides. He twisted his body at the last moment so he

could dive in hands first.

They all jumped in without hesitation and Rosetta watched with her hands held behind her back, with a bored expression. She heard the crash of a body hit the water every time, as she saw a string of men swimming towards the shore.

When it was her turn, she was shoved forward towards the railing. She was finally let go, the last of her crew on the ship.

“You’ll miss me when I’m gone,” she said to Alister, turning to him instead of stepping onto the railing. “You’ll come get me before tomorrow ends.”

He folded his arms across his broad chest, giving a short chuckle like he truly found her words humorous.

“I think not, lass. I’ll see you in five days when you’re ready to stop this foolishness.”

Then her eyes found the pretty Pierre standing next to him. She blew the blond-haired man a kiss, gave Alister her middle finger, and then ran for the side of the ship.

With a perfect swan dive, she jumped over the railing and headed straight for the sea.

She crashed into it, feeling coldness rush over her skin and causing goosebumps to prickle all over. The moment she broke from the water’s glittering surface, she started swimming without looking back to see if she was being watched.

Her boots were waterlogged and her clothing was soaking wet as she started waddling in knee deep water when she reached the shore. Her hair slapped against her and wrapped around her neck when she swiped it out of her face. The salt of the sea dripping into her eyes burned them as she tasted it upon her lips.

Naeem came to get her, grabbing her arm like she needed any help walking out of the water by herself. She didn’t, but she appreciated the caring gesture regardless.

The sand made a squeaking sound with every footfall.

Even though the water in her boots made it hard to walk, she didn’t remove them until she was no longer walking through messy sand. She only removed them when she found grass beneath her.

Her eyes scanned over the island they were on while she placed her hands

on her hips.

It was a small mountain, as though the earth had jugged a spike of land through the water with violence to create it. There were minimal palm trees and it wasn't habitable to live on. Still, that meant there was shade.

At least the coconuts will hydrate us. It was a hope of survival to not die from thirst so they could all suffer through hunger.

That was why this island was cruel to be marooned on. Desperate to live, marooned men would drink to extend their suffering.

"So, what now Rosetta?" Naeem asked while her crew came to greet her all together. "I know you haven't left us on this island without a plan."

"Are you a betting man, Naeem?"

Without a care in the world, she shoved her hand inside the front of her tights, fishing around in it. It probably looked like she was scratching or groping at her pussy.

"You know I am," he laughed.

She finally pulled what she wanted from her pants.

"What's the bet that Captain Alister Paine is actually a mamma's boy?"

She started to twirl something around her index finger, being careful not to fling it away.

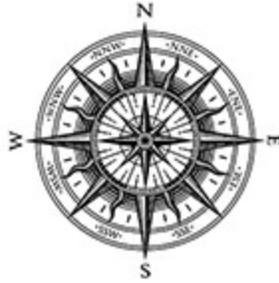
"One silver that he's not." Naeem's smile died, his eyes growing wide. "That's your gamble?! Rosetta, I will truly eat Harvey if you've actually gotten us stranded on this island for five days."

She turned to stare at the sea, and the ship that stayed where it was as though it had no intention of leaving. *He's going to taunt us.*

She thought he might be expecting her men to swim to him when they couldn't take starving anymore.

"Then I bet you two silvers," she said with a confident gleam. "He'll be here before tomorrow morning." She held what she'd stolen in her hand. "If not, we can eat Carter."

"Hey!"



Alistair was resting one of his forearms on the railing of his ship, watching Rosetta and her men swim to shore.

His was relaxed, and thankfully sated, with humour curling his lips. She'd gotten him off and he felt far clearer-headed because of it.

"What's your plan here, Alistair?" Pierre asked, coming up beside him to watch as well.

He placed both arms on the railing, bending forward to lean against it while Alistair was slightly turned to the side with one knee bent in front of the other.

"Some of her men will cave," he told him. "I don't need her entire crew. If at least half agree to fall under my command, we'll have enough to sail."

But, it'd be better if they all did. The more hands Alistair had, the more he could share the workload.

His eyes turned up to the sails that had been neatly tied away. It took at least over thirty men just to get this ship going comfortably and, although he had that many, it took even more to maintain it throughout the nights and days.

They couldn't drop anchor in the middle of the sea and it meant this ship needed around the clock work. They had to work in shifts.

Then there were other departments that still needed to function. The cleaners, the repairers, the stock hands, those that helped Glen Darkley cook when he needed it.

With their combined crews, they now had just over eighty good men.

Of his own, she'd managed to drop his sixty-six men down to the fifty's.

He'd help man the sails if he needed to, wasn't shy to make repairs and get his hands dirty. He'd just much rather he didn't have to.

"What do you plan to do with her if she agrees to give up her men?"

"Take her to port," he admitted. "Last thing we need is a woman on our ship inciting jealousy."

Pierre raised his brow at him and Alister returned it with a colourless expression.

“I can do what I want with her in the meantime.” He turned his head back to see she’d reached the shore. “I have a lot of anger I’d like to take out on her.”

A lot of lust too.

Pierre gave a snort, nodding his head like he understood. “She did steal your ship. That’s a feat in itself.”

“Brilliant bitch,” he sneered, but the words didn’t hold any real menace. “She’s a cunning piece of work and it’s obvious she’ll do just about anything to win.”

Even let me fuck her.

He knew there must be a reason other than desire that she’d let him. He may have caved, but he wasn’t a fool to believe there wasn’t evil intent behind her actions.

“Sounds like you.”

Aye, it does sound like me. But Alister had used his brawn and cutthroat lack of morals to get his way.

“She’s more dangerous.” This time, both of Pierre’s brows raised in disbelief that Alister would admit to something like this. “She’s the kind of woman that will kiss you while cutting your throat.”

He rubbed his chin, remembering how she’d put the gun to his jaw. He thought she might have actually shot his head off if she hadn’t been about to reach orgasm.

“The crew have told me everything that she’s done with them since she dropped us off at Dunecaster,” Pierre said. “I think I might actually have to agree with you. At every turn, even when taking down a trading ship, she used her wit to gain her advantage. She managed to turn most of those who stayed behind to help us win back the ship when we arrived, to like her.”

“I know.” Alister felt a soft breeze cut through his clothes, making it bubble away from his body as his hair crawled across his shoulders. “Greyson asked me to show her mercy.”

“Considering what you’re doing now, I’m guessing I don’t need to ask for it on their behalf then.”

He nodded but he wasn’t pleased that Pierre had been told to ask him for mercy. It furthered Alister’s belief that she may be some kind of wicked

enchantress.

“Aye, I decided on the way here that I wouldn’t kill her.” Even though she wasn’t some meek woman, the idea of harming one still didn’t sit too well with Alister. He’d kill a woman if she tried to kill him, wouldn’t be the first time, but he didn’t want the blood of women or children on his hands if he didn’t have to. “I don’t mind if she suffers a little bit in the meantime though.”

“Five days is a long time.”

“They’ll signal us when they’re ready.” Alister slapped him on the back before gripping his shoulder. “I want crew in the crow’s nest watching the shore until that happens. I give them three days before they come to their senses.”

“I’ll let the men know what to expect.”

“Good. Now, have you eaten?”

“Aye.” Pierre gave him a satisfied grin while patting his stomach. “Glen gave us our meals while you were busy.”

“Did you actually leave any food for anyone else?” Alister laughed at the grump face he received. “You’re a pig, lad. Have some decorum.”

They turned away from the railing and Pierre followed him as he walked up the stairs to stand in front of the helm.

He didn’t need to be here, the ship stationary, but he couldn’t stop himself from placing his hands on the handles of the wheel. Gently, he turned it from side-to-side, relieved to feel the polished timber under his calloused palms.

It was the only place he truly cared to maintain properly.

I missed you, you old boy. He leaned his arm between the handles, unwilling to depart just yet from his favourite part of his much-loved warship.

“So lads!” Alister yelled, catching the attention of most above the surface. “Who wants to drink and play dice?”

What else were they going to do for the next few days other than laze around the ship and get up to drunken foolery?

Before long, crates were brought up to the main deck for men to play on, either crouching around them or sitting on the ground. Some also found their musical instruments and started playing while men sung sea shanties.

With a bottle of rum in his hand, and a cigar between his teeth, Alister watched his men party.

The sun wasn't far from turning into a sunset and he was rather pleased with witnessing the shouts, yells, laughter, and the occasional stray punches that fell from his crew.

They were a violent bunch but they rarely held grudges.

"Come here pretty boy." One of his men patted his thigh while whistling at Kent.

Kent, with bright red lipstick, proceeded to punch the man who whistled at him so hard he was knocked to the ground, unconscious, in one go.

"How's that for pretty?" He spat on the ground near his feet. "Dickhead."

"Kent!" Alister shouted, walking over to a barrel and patting the top of it. He placed his elbow on it and wiggled his fingers. "I'll make you a bet. If you beat me, I'll wear the lass' lipstick, and if I win, you have to wear her dress."

The man pointed his finger at him. "Yer can't stab me with nothin'."

"Nay lad. I think I can beat you with nothing but my own arm."

He wiggled his fingers in a taunt once more.

"Then I'll take that bet!"

On the odd occasion, Kent had beaten Alister in an arm wrestle. Mainly when he'd drunk too much and was sloppy, or if he'd manned the helm after a difficult storm.

He was feeling rather confident he'd win today though.

"I think the lads would like to see you in a dress."

He received a growl as Kent slammed his elbow on the table and grasped his hand. Crewmen surrounded them, excitement filling the air at watching their captain participate in their revelry.

With the cigar still in his mouth, he placed the bottle of rum down on the ground to grab his good luck charm. Before any fight, any takeover, anything that required a gamble, Alister would grab the locket around his neck to kiss it.

It was a ritual of his, and one he never missed doing.

He'd carried it with him since he'd been a young boy and he considered it a good luck charm. It was his most precious keepsake.

Yet, when he felt around his neck and sternum, he felt nothing.

He turned his head down, expecting to find it and couldn't.

The unfinished cigar carelessly fell from his mouth. He released Kent's mighty fist to start searching inside his tunic, patting his body.

It's gone!

How the hell had he lost it? He knew he'd been wearing it last night when he'd kissed it before crawling over the side of the hull.

He'd been wearing it for seventeen years! Not once had the chain ever broken, not once had he ever needed to repair it, not once, even when polishing it, had he ever taken it off!

"Yer too scared now, Captain?" Kent gave a laugh, waving his hand towards the crew to get them to laugh as well.

Alister leaned across the barrel and grabbed the man by the cuff of his collar and pulled him in. Kent put his hands up in surrender, no doubt unsure of him with the way his face was screwed up into angry lines of seething rage.

His eyes widened. *The lass...* The last time he remembered wearing it was when she'd touched it to look at it.

He released Kent by pushing him back, and stood up to look over at the shore.

"Get me a boat!" Alister roared. He started pushing confused and startled men out of the way. "Get me on that island. NOW!"

He should have known she was up to no good! *She tricked me! Again!* She'd stolen his most priceless possession straight from around his damn neck.

He shouldn't be surprised but could his bruised ego take much more of her trickery?

"Alister, what's wrong?" Derek asked, rushing to his side while Alister was helping his men hoist a rowboat down the side of the hull.

He was trying to pick up their drunken and sluggish pace.

"She stole my locket!"

Derek winced. He knew how much that necklace meant to him. He said nothing for there was nothing he could say.

"Oh aye! And she's going to get it when I get my hands on her."

His ship he could replace, his crew, his loot, but his necklace he couldn't. He couldn't get another without telling the person who gave it to him in the first place, wouldn't be able to have the precious memories he had with it.

And he'd much rather not see the disappointment on their face that he'd lost it. The shame he'd feel.

A few moments later, Alister was crouched down at the head of the boat

holding on to the bow so he didn't fall out. Watching the shore coming closer as men rowed behind him, his hand clenched into a tight fist.

They only just hit the sandbank when he jumped out and started running for land. Water sloshed around his knees as his men followed behind him.

He was glad he'd noticed before the sun had gone down otherwise he'd have to look for her in the dark.

They had long ago left the shoreline.

Alister headed for the trees, knowing they were most likely taking shelter from the sun with them. He came over the rise of a small hill, and that's when he saw them clustered together.

He heard a shout from them in the distance and they all turned their heads to him and the few men he had following behind. Rosetta was sitting up against the trunk of a coconut tree.

"You owe me a silver, Naeem!" He heard her yell when she rushed to her feet.

Alister grabbed his pistol from its holster.

She made an ear-piercing squealing noise while ducking when he shot at her. The bullet hit right behind her, making the bark of the tree fling off in a mini-implosion.

He'd wasted his single bullet and wouldn't try to reload his gun. She'd started running for it and he was too busy chasing after her.

None of her men followed after her, not when they were trying to get in the way of his own men. He managed to duck past them before they could stop him.

He had a feeling they let him.

"Get back here, lass!" The yell he gave was laced with fury, guttural and dangerous.

Sand shot up from behind their feet as he gained on her.

"I have a name you know!"

"You won't need it when you're dead."

She took them to the shore, but it wasn't sand under their feet but a cliff of rocks. Waves crashed against them, spraying foam around as the ocean pushed and pulled the water.

He took out his cutlass when she turned to him, but he halted when she held her hand out to the side of her body.

In her hand, he could see the locket dangling from her fist precariously

over the rocky edge. If she dropped it, it'd be lost to the sea forever.

"Stay where you are or I'll toss it." Her eyes were narrowed on him, squinting with determination.

Looking at her face, he knew without a doubt she'd do it.

"Give it here." He put his cutlass away and held his hand out. "I'll forgive you if you give it back."

He was unsure if those words were a lie or not.

She punched her hand to the side, making the locket swing. "No."

"If you drop it, Rosetta, you'll regret it."

She gave him a smile, a cruel one. "Ah, so you *do* know my name."

"Aye, I know your name." He waved his fingers, silently telling her to toss it at him. "Now give me the locket."

He wasn't near the water and it was safe for her to do so. Hell, he'd dive into the water for it if he had to.

Slowly, she brought it away from where he'd permanently lose it, and started to inspect it. Although she wasn't looking at him, he didn't dare move.

She was aware of his movements.

"Alister." She said his name while she read the front of it, then turned it. "Mum." His lips thinned in agitation as she used her thumb nails to pry open the locket. "Always be safe."

"I know what it says!" He took one step forward in a stomp against the grass and dirt beneath his feet.

Her head shot up.

"Well, Captain Alister Paine. It seems I have something to offer that you dearly want."

She closed the locket with one hand, holding it in a fist while the rest of the chain dangled down. She played with the length of it with a cruel pout and squinted eyes trained on him.

"My own necklace doesn't count."

"Sure it does." She punched her hand sideways through the air and it hung over the water once more. "And you can hurt me however much you like, but you'll never get it back once it's gone."

He let a glare fill his features.

"I don't trust you," he freely admitted. "You want a ship but I won't wait that long to have it back."

He didn't trust that she wouldn't lose it in the time that took.

"That's not the price for it."

It's not? "Then what in the seven seas do you want?!"

"For you to actually *listen* to my offer. That's the price for it."

His brows crinkled together. Then he rubbed his hand down his face with a weathered look. He guessed he'd never actually listened to what she had been trying to say to him back in his cabin.

He folded his arms across his chest but his feet stood apart in a stance that would have told her he was defensive.

"Fine, speak it."

"I want a ship, a particular one. I want you, and your boat, and your men, to help me get it."

"And what would I get in return?"

"Maps. Uncharted maps you don't have, maps to not only Dustin 'The Raiders' treasure, but also many others that have been confiscated."

"You have no idea if these maps actually lead to anything real."

"No," she admitted, and he watched her eyes trail to the side in thought but also with a hint of sadness he wasn't sure was real or not. "But I know they are ones you don't have. I've seen them, I've been on the ship before."

He shook his head. "It's not enough. Not with the amount of time and coin I'd have to invest. I told you, I don't help charity cases."

"I can also get you men." Her eyes came to him once more. "There are more than enough prisoners on board to fill both our crews. They will either be thieves, murderers, or men who are being moved for crimes of piracy to be hung. They will agree to the freedom we can provide by offering them work rather than the noose."

Alister's eyes widened, his lips parting ever so slightly.

"You're talking about Queen Mary Anne's head fleet ship! That's a bloody suicide mission."

She brought her fist away from over the water to cup her hand holding the locket with the other one.

She gave a mocking snort.

"I thought you were one of the most notorious pirates on the seven seas of Old Gaia. Didn't know you'd be afraid of just one ship."

"One ship? It travels in three! And the Laughing Siren has over a hundred and forty soldiers on board."

There was a reason Alister had never attacked it when he'd seen it on the horizon. He'd passed it many times in his life.

"The other two won't attack the head ship once we're on it, and once Commodore Theodore Briggs and his first mate Samuel Lester are dead, the crew will falter and surrender if we overpower them."

"You seem to know a lot about it." His eyes squinted suspiciously.

She shouldn't know this much about the commanders of such an important royal vessel. It was protected information and, now that he was aware of which ship she was after, he knew the schematics on his desk applied to this one.

"Like I said, I've been on the Laughing Siren before." She paused, seeming to think on her words. "My father used to be a soldier on it."

"Can't it be a different ship?" Was he really considering helping her? "The other fleet ships will have prisoners."

She shook her head.

"It won't have the maps I can give you, and it has to be that one. Since I set sail on these seas, I knew it was the one I wanted. I know the ins and outs of it, where it is weakest and the easiest way to take it over. The prisoners on board mean I already have hands to hoist the sails, and there will be enough that you can chose the ones you want. You'd have a full crew, nearly twice the amount you have now."

A full crew of more than willing men was actually a pretty good deal.

"It'd also have coin on it," he mumbled while placing a hand over his lips and chin in thought, knowing those ships also had gold and loot he could take for himself.

"You can have it all. The guns, the swords, the clothing, whatever stocks they have." He raised his brow at the fact she'd let him have whatever he wanted from the cargo bay. "But you'll leave us enough that we can survive before we resupply."

The Laughing Siren was a Galleon ship. One of the largest that sailed. It was slow, but it was strong and always manned with cannons.

My frigate is one of the only ships that can take it on.

"I could end up sinking it if we try," he told her, making sure she understood what could happen. "I won't let my own ship sink just to get you yours."

She gave a shrug. "Either I have it, or it's at the bottom of the ocean. I'll be

happy with either one.”

She's really set on it. His eyes took in the sight of her with a new light.

She was selfish enough to have it in her possession or in nobody's. He'd thought the same thing about his own Howling Death when he saw it for the first time.

He started to rub the long stubble on his cheek as he contemplated her offer. *It's actually not a bad deal.*

“The loot we'd gain would be enough to appease my crew.” It would be their biggest payday yet, and he wouldn't have to share it with the prisoners since they'd only just joined him.

“And until we take the Laughing Siren, my crew and I will help you sail.” She folded her arms across her chest, turning her head to the side with an upturn of her chin. “And we, including me, will follow your command.”

Alister raised his brow at that. “You'll listen to my orders?”

“Yes.” But she released her arms to point at him. “But I won't scrub the deck. You won't have me bending over on my hands and knees for men to stare at my arse.”

He couldn't help chuckle. *Well that's a fair request.*

“You will still have to work.”

“Put me in the kitchen with Mr Darkley. I don't mind helping him cook and I'm good at it. I can also hoist the sails.”

His head fell back as he gave a bellowing laugh to the sky.

“You won't be manning the sails, lass. I've got strong men for that.”

“They're all disabled!” she yelled. “I'm just as fit as your injured men!”

A guttural noise of irritation sounded from his nose.

“Are you judging a man simply because he's missing a leg, or a few fingers, or an eye?!” He pointed at his own eyepatch. “Every one of my men are able-bodied, regardless of the parts of them that are missing. I wouldn't change my crew for any other, even if they had all their parts!”

Her head reared back, her eyes going stark. It was obvious Rosetta realised she'd offended him, very deeply.

He was a formidable captain and he was half blind for pity's sake.

“Stop treating me like a woman,” she huffed, stomping her foot in a tantrum.

“You were screaming like one earlier!”

His eyelids flickered rapidly when he thought he noted a hint of redness in

her cheeks, before it quickly faded.

“I am still just as capable as a man.”

“And you will work where I put you,” he told her, shaking his head in disbelief. “You said you’d follow my order but you’re showing me you will be incapable of doing so.”

“Fine,” she sighed, once more folding her arms but this time with a defeated slump. “Do we have a deal then? We will work for you while you help us get the Laughing Siren, and then you can raid it for whatever you want as long as I can still sail it.”

“Nay.”

“But-”

“I have to ask my men first. I can’t make a promise and a decision like this without their approval.”

A bright smile filled her beautiful face, catching his attention as the wash of the sunset bloomed behind her.

The sky was still a day blue, but the clouds had turned flame orange with purple shadows. It was a wonderful sight with her in front of it, near wanting to steal his breath from him.

He didn’t like the reaction that he got by looking at her in front of it. It shouldn’t, not when he was still rightfully angry with her.

But the things I can take from that ship would be worth more than I can raid in a year. And with this many men at his disposal, it *could* actually be possible.

“But you will ask them?”

Why did smiles like that from pretty women do strange things to the insides of men?

“Aye, I will.”

Alister wasn’t stupid enough to pass up such an opportunity.

She suddenly threw the locket at him with accuracy and he caught it in his right fist.

He stared down at the silver locket in his big palm, surprised she wasn’t going to hold onto it as collateral.

She actually gave it back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Rosetta walked next to Alister as they made their way back to their crews, which she hoped would become one for a short while.

She had an extra spring in her step, thankful that her plan so far had

worked in her favour.

But he truly shot at me. She peeked at him from under her lashes.

He'd almost killed her! It had been less than a foot away from her head.

He must have been really furious I stole his mother's locket. Her eyes fell to it already hanging around his neck, bouncing against his sternum with each footfall.

He seemed to be deep in thought, and she figured he was mulling over the deal that could be made between them.

She thought he might be interested once he listened to what he could actually gain from helping her. He'd been too arrogant before, refusing her without letting her explain.

He eventually broke the silence. "What's the deal if they say nay?"

"You will take us straight to a port where you know you can get new hands, and you will let me and my crew go." She placed her hands behind her back, giving a shrug. "I can find a new ship."

"You won't get the Laughing Siren on your own. It'll take you years to get a ship that can take it and a sizeable crew that can over run it."

"I know," she answered with a dejected tone. "I had everything I needed when I took your ship."

Rosetta's hopes had been dashed, and she didn't often get her hopes up for this reason.

Silence fell upon them once more.

There was a very defined line that seemed to have been drawn in the dirt between their men when they came upon them. Neither would attack each other, but they all had their weapons raised.

They were patiently waiting for them to return to see the result of what she had done.

"Captain," multiple men from both crews said in unison.

A giggle fell from her when they both answered in reply.

He gave her a strange scowl, before turning back to them.

"She's coming with us. The rest of her crew are staying behind."

"For now," she added to calm her men who looked concerned.

Then they nodded, some giving a chuckle. They already knew what she'd planned to ask him and were now aware she'd managed to convince him to at least consider it.

Alister nodded his head towards the beach. "Get in the boat."

“Rosetta,” Naeem said, before using his thumb to flick something at her.

She caught what he’d tossed at her with one hand and noticed Alister looked at her palm when she opened it. She had one silver in her palm. She held it up to the last of the sunlight with two fingers in a display like she was examining to see if it was real, despite knowing it was.

With a small smile of triumph, she headed towards the rowboat clunking against the beach and hopped inside it. Alister and his men followed suit and began rowing towards his ship.

He had his arms folded, sitting on the bench across from her. He tapped his bicep with his head turned, refusing to look at her.

“What was the bet?” His tone was dark, as though she should be worried about what she answered.

“That you’re a mamma’s boy.”

She heard someone behind her nearly choke on their own spit when they tried to stifle a laugh. His head shot to him with such a deep glare that she thought it might set the man on fire.

“I honestly thought it would take you longer to realise,” she admitted. “Is she dead?”

She figured that was the reason he was so protective of it.

“What she is, is none of your fucking business.”

“And here I thought we were getting along.”

She sighed, but it didn’t hold any real emotion behind it.

“We are. You’d be dead for everything you’ve done if we weren’t.”

“You can say that again,” someone rowing the oars in front said. “We’re all surprised you’re not.”

“That’s because some of you dogs asked for mercy on her behalf.”

Rosetta slanted her head to the side, her brows furrowing. “They did?”

Alister finally turned his eye towards her but, by the way he looked at her, it seemed he was set in his sour mood.

“Aye, seems some of my men took a fancy to you while you were captain.”

She wondered if that was the whole truth.

“How’s Kent?”

She noticed the edges of his lips turn up even though he was trying to not let them. “Getting groped and whistled at.”

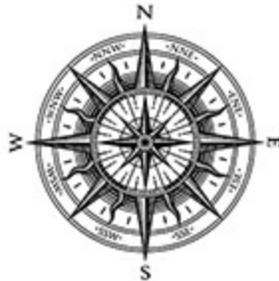
“He looks better as a woman than I do.”

“True,” he blatantly lied, that smile of humour growing in full force. “Was about to make him wear your dress before I noticed you’d taken my locket.”

She slapped her knee with glee. “That I have to see!”

“Maybe you will,” Alister answered with a tone she thought may have sounded hopeful when the side of the boat hit against the hull.

Metal staple shaped handles were permanently fitted to the side so they could climb up it. She was the first to do so and she had a feeling Alister was staring up at her arse while he climbed beneath her.



Alister leaned one of his boots against the railing of the quarter deck, standing before the collective of people below him. Everyone was on the surface since he needed to address them all.

He’d already relayed the offer she had given him, and the kinds of things they’d get in return, if they helped her procure the Laughing Siren.

They were now taking a vote.

“It’ll be to the majority vote. All of those in favour, raise your hand.”

Just over three quarters of his crew raised their hands in the air in agreeance.

“Then I will be accepting her offer and we will be working together. I want some of you to row to shore and pick up her men. The rest of you, make room for them in the cabins below, rearrange yourselves how you see fit.”

There were many sleeping cabins below deck but it was usually filled with two or three men. That would now become more compacted with the new arrivals. The rare obnoxious snorers were sometimes lucky enough to get their own, who would surely now be banished to some dank corner of the ship to suffer together.

Once they were moving, he lowered his leg and turned to her.

Her hands were on her hips, but there was no mistaking the cheerful expression she swore.

“There you have it. I’ll have Pierre and Derek vacate the cabin below so

that you may sleep in it.”

She shook her head. “No, don’t make that distinction between me and the men. I’d much rather not deal with the backlash from it.”

“Then where else are you going to sleep?” he asked with a tone of uncertainty. “Because I won’t be giving you mine, lass.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Just give me a cabin with Naeem and Mr Smith. I’ll be comfortable sharing with them.”

She’s happy to sleep with men present? Just how comfortable was she with them?

“Fine.” Then he pointed his index finger at her. “Don’t sleep with the crew while you’re on my ship.”

The way she scrunched up her nose with a strange smirk made him wonder just what the hell kind of thought she’d had to make such a strange face.

“Why not?”

She batted her eyelids, her smirk turning into a pout like she was trying to hide humour.

It didn’t take a genius to figure it out. *She thinks I’d be jealous.*

“If you sleep with one of them, you’ll have to sleep with all of them.” He swayed his hand to the side as if he was referencing a vast amount of something.

He also wouldn’t take her again if she did, but he wouldn’t tell her that.

“Excuse me?” She sounded the words deliberately, her mouth staying open once she was done.

“My men share everything. Food, coin, women.” He brought his hand back but tilted his head forward to be more level with her. “If you take one of them, they will treat you like every other woman they come into contact with; a prostitute. Unless you want hands grabbing at you constantly, which I have no interest in getting in the middle of since I know they won’t take you by force, don’t give them a reason to treat you that way.”

“Then shouldn’t I be doing it anyway then?”

His brow creased in confusion. “Why do you say that?”

From what he’d discovered earlier, she hadn’t bedded any of them. She’d been far too small for that, had taken a while to adjust to him.

“Are you not a part of your own crew?”

He gave a curt laugh. “Aye, but I’m different and they know that. I can do what I want with you.”

Both her brows raised. “If I let you.”

He was the one to roll his eyes this time, turning away from her to head below deck.

“And stay away from Pierre. If he tries, he always manages to succeed. He’s got a way with women. Just a fair warning.”

“What am I supposed to do now?”

He gave a shrug, holding the handrail as he walked down the steps.

“Wait for the rest of *my* new crew to board. I have shit to do.” Then he turned his head back with the smuggest grin he thought he’d ever worn. “Since I am the captain and all.”

Her scrunched up nose of annoyance was delightful to him.

He had to speak with Glen about the fact she would be helping him in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning it. He may not like her encroaching on his area.

He would also choose the most suitable cabin for her where she wouldn’t have to pass many of the men to get to it.

This better not bite me in the arse.

Even if it was going to, tomorrow when the sun rose, he’d finally be able to set sail.

CHAPTER TWELVE



The following morning, Alister searched his ship for Rosetta and found her sitting on one of the eating benches in the kitchen, talking with Glen.

She was also peeling potatoes, the skins falling into an empty barrel, while

he was frying up meat.

“I’m surprised you’re already up,” Alister commented, since he’d first gone to the cabin he’d shown her to last night to wake her.

He’d only found Naeem and Mr Smith in their hammocks but not her. Since she wasn’t there, he’d gone to search for her, untrusting and worried what she was up to.

He wasn’t expecting to find her already doing her chores.

“Thought Mr Darkley would need help making the boys breakfast.”

Sure, but someone needs to be awake to have a thought.

“Come, he can take care of the rest for now. We have much to discuss.”

He walked out of the kitchen area and started making his way down the long hallways. Eventually he heard her footsteps tapping behind him to catch up, right as he was reaching the stairs that would take them to the surface.

He led her to his chambers.

Sitting behind his desk, he gestured to the maps she’d organised on it when he hadn’t been here.

“Explain your plan because right now I can’t see it.”

He’d gone through what was on the desk by lantern light throughout the night but couldn’t understand what she was intending.

From the other side of his desk, she stood over it and started picking up the smaller maps and the random assorted papers.

What he did notice among everything, was a rough diagram of the ship that looked as though it’d been drawn by someone who’d been inside it. Roughly how many levels it had, what kinds of rooms there were.

Information like that was invaluable and would help them greatly.

“That’s because you’ve made a mess of it!”

Revealing the map of the northern hemisphere below everything, she pointed to Tempest Island, the place where they currently were.

She started explaining the route they were taking, while placing smaller maps of the locations they’d be passing close so they had a better gauge of the surroundings.

She showed the route she’d originally set up for his ship, and then the information she’d picked up on the Laughing Siren’s sailing route. From the place it had originally set out on its current voyage, all of its stops, to where it was currently heading.

To have such updated and new information meant she must have paid a

pretty penny for it, and been in contact with someone who could get her such protected information.

“I was hoping to intercept it here.” She pointed to a small collection of islands. “We were going to lay in wait for when they were passing and surprise them from a short distance so they couldn’t run.”

He looked over everything with a careful observation gaze.

“You’ve put the Howling Death in a position of destruction with your plan.”

Which is probably why he hadn’t understood it.

Alister reached into one of the drawers and pulled out his measuring compass and a ruler. He changed the length between the two needles and started walking the route of the Laughing Siren, and the different places they could intercept it.

“I hadn’t particularly cared for the state of this ship once I abandoned it.”

“Duly noted, but not something I will allow,” he answered, eyeing her for a second with a disgruntled expression. “The two accompanying ships will attack mine and try to sink it. I want to avoid that as much as possible.”

Placing his elbow on the table so he could fold his arm and cup his chin while he walked the points of the compass, his brows furrowed in concentration. She leaned over closer in front of him to watch what he was doing.

“We’ll have to figure out how to approach it oncoming rather than from the sides or rear.” He nodded his head to gesture outside the door. “I have front cannons, they won’t.”

“Try not to put too many holes in it.”

He heard the grimace in her tone and tried to look up to her face. He didn’t make it that far, not with the way she was bending forward.

His eye found the gaping opening of her tunic and had a near perfect view down it. He turned his head down to the table before she noticed to where his gaze had trailed.

The woman’s got a sinful body. And the way she wore her clothing left extraordinarily little to the imagination.

Her tights hugged her body all the way up past her navel. They revealed every curve she had, every outline of bones and taut toned leg muscle. Her tunic was always precariously unbuttoned low that he’d often caught peeks of those round mounds because he towered over her.

Even when he'd been trying to shoot her yesterday for stealing his locket, he'd still found her tantalising.

He'd been hoping that nailing her would ease some of his desires, but unfortunately he'd enjoyed it so much he found himself constantly fantasising about doing it again.

"You don't have a map of the Kou Pelin Islands." He tapped his finger against a place directly near the fleet's path that would be perfect. "We can direct the fleet and cut the Laughing Siren off from assistance for a short while. By then, it will be too late and we've hopefully boarded enough men that the Howling Death can back off a safe distance while we take it over."

The Kou Pelin Islands weren't accessible because they were nothing more than cutting rock formations hundreds of feet tall. From a distance, a sailor could see the tops of its trees and greenery, but they couldn't be climbed.

Only birds could fly to it.

Alister grabbed a blank piece of paper and opened the glass square ink bottle by popping its cork. Dipping his quill into it, he started drawing a rough sketch of what the four islands looked like together. Two sections of the four towers were connected like an archway.

"If we come around from the topmost island, we might be able to push the Laughing Siren through the middle of them which means the other two would have to back off to go in behind it or go around the other towers."

Rosetta came around the table to get a better look at his drawing and its position on the map so she didn't have to look at it upside down.

He felt one of her knees knock against his own.

"Wouldn't that mean we'd have to go around as well?"

Alister shook his head at her thoughtful face before looking back to his sketch.

"My ship has a shallower hull and is narrower. I can go through the gaps of the other two islands clustered closer together whereas the fleet ships will have to go all the way around to avoid the sand banks if they don't go through the deepest section in the middle."

He looked to her once more, unable to stop his eye from roaming over her as she bent over the table, giving him a side view of her.

Shit... Why does she have to smell so good? He slyly covered the bottom half his face, and nose, to hide from her aroma.

He cleared his throat to bring himself back to their current conversation.

“There is a much wider gap between both of the two outer islands that are closer together. Commodore Briggs will probably try to go through the very centre to flee since it will be deep enough for his ship. We will be coming at him in a way that would force a collision if he doesn’t. He won’t sink his ship that way.”

“He also wouldn’t be able to turn the ship sharply enough with them so close.”

“Exactly, he either has to go through them, or could get stuck on the banks turning next to them.”

She tapped her fingers against her lips in what he guessed was a thoughtful gesture, before trailing her finger over the route of the galleon ship she wanted.

“If we fail there, there’s no other opportunity to commandeer it before it makes port in Oklay.”

Oklay was a city in the country Banksia, which is where the prisoners were being taken to. They would then all be given a trial and hung in front of the Queen and her consort for their own personal entertainment, wanting to watch criminals kick and struggle on the noose.

Queen Mary Anne was a powerful and stony-hearted ruler. Alister admired her for it, while also wanting absolutely nothing to do with her. He knew she’d hang him for all his crimes before he even opened his mouth.

“We can’t attack it on its way back because it’ll have no prisoners for us to take.” Her brows knotted together once more, but this time in concern. “And I also don’t know how long it’ll be before it will be going on a similar voyage. It’s usually carting cargo for Queen Mary Anne or being used for trading between her alliances.”

She really does know a lot about the ship. She knew where it was going, the places it might go, why it might go there.

“It doesn’t matter if that’s the last spot to commandeer it.” Her eyes slowly trailed to him at his stern tone. “It’s the spot we’ll most likely succeed. Like I said, this is a suicide mission, but it doesn’t *have* to be. I’m not really interested in courting my own death.”

“I might be though.” She whispered low enough he’d barely even heard it.

“Here then.” He handed her the compass and grabbed her arse by squeezing the side of his hand between her cheeks to turn her to the desk in front of him. She gave a small yelp of surprise at his touch. “You figure out a

better spot.”

He folded his arms with irritation as he leaned back in his chair, slumping in it.

She immediately dropped the compass to the table like it was a hot metal rod that had been sitting in fire.

“No.”

“Nay?” He gave a mocking laugh. “Don’t be defiant just because you aren’t getting your way without actually having something to argue with. Have a look and tell me a better option.”

He gestured to it with an aggressive shove of his hand.

“I’m saying I can’t.” He noted that her gaze flickered everywhere but his face, almost like she was avoiding meeting his eyes. “I understand the use of the compass, but...”

There was only one reason why she couldn’t do what he told her to then.

His arms loosened but didn’t unfold. “You can’t count.”

“Mr Smith does it for me. I’m a woman, I was never taught how to do complicated math. I can do small amounts but the use of a compass and the spaces in between the measurements need to be accurate. If I’m even just slightly off, it could put us off course.”

He gave a sigh, suddenly feeling terrible for making her feel awkward. He ran his hand over the top of his hair, pulling on the loose folded half bun at the back.

He should have known better than to think a commoner woman such as herself could count in this day and age.

“I’m not surprised. The fact that you can even read is a miracle in itself.”

It was only a hundred years ago or so they’d stopped burning women on the stake when they’d learned that they had the capabilities for reading, claiming they were witches.

Even though things were changing and women were now encouraged to learn, only those who’d received a higher education were taught to. Some commoner women were also taught, but it was rare, generally by a mother or friend.

He figured Rosetta was one of these rare women. She obviously wasn’t some noblewoman.

“Here.” Alister opened the compass so that it would reflect three miles. “That’s how far we can see through a spyglass. That’s the distance our hiding

spot needs to be from their route so we can see the fleet. You've chosen the Dotoro Islands because they're within that range, but other than flat sandy islands which won't hide us, the Kou Pelin Islands is the only other location."

Now that he'd simplified it, she took it from his hand and started walking it over the map.

Once more, he leaned back in the chair.

He knew she'd argue with him if she didn't see it for herself. *I can already tell she's stubborn.*

She pulled out smaller maps that showed the shape and topography of the islands before placing them back down with a shake of her head.

Then Alister realised he'd done himself a favour.

His teeth were revealed by a wide grin, his eye dragging over the curve of her backside as she leaned over directly in front of him. If he wanted to, which he did, he could reach out and touch it with ease.

It was large, round, and hugged so tightly by her pants that he knew its exact shape.

"What about the Flinagan shores?" She turned her head to look at him over her shoulder.

His sight darted to her quickly. "Same problem as your original location. It leaves us open for attack."

She gave him an irritated huff before squinting her eyes because of the expression on his face.

"Are you truly laughing at me?"

He shook his head. "Not at all, I'm merely thinking about all the booty I plan to acquire through this."

Her booty. In particular, how many times he might be able to get that backside of hers hitting against his hips as he rammed into her before they made it to the Laughing Siren.

He was getting hard at the prospect.

It would take them three weeks to make it to his chosen location and, if sex between them was as good as the first time, he thought he'd might want it constantly.

She threw the compass down on the table, making him wince for his poor tool.

"Okay, so maybe you're right."

"Careful lass, these tools are important and fragile." He reached for it,

checking to make sure it wasn't damaged from her brutality. "Good. Now let's talk strategy."

She turned to lean that thought-stealing arse against his desk to face him. He kicked his leg forward so it would be between her calves, trapping her where she was.

Her eyes slid over him as he started to talk about the multiple ideas he'd already come up with, while his own did the same.

As if he'd noticed the last time they'd been alone in this room, the sunlight coming in from behind him brightened the colour of her blue eyes. It also made her skin shine.

He leaned forward to point at the diagram of the ship, discovering that she was the one who'd drawn it.

It showed each level, what it generally held, and where the prisoners might be. The only one he was really interested in was the main deck.

His men needed to know where the hatch was so they could stop reinforcements from getting to the surface. They also needed to know where all the best vantage points were.

He also liked that he knew how high the cannon ports were. It would do less damage to the hull of his ship below the water where it could sink them. They could stick around for longer than he originally thought since his was shorter.

She stayed leaning against the desk, but she twisted her upper body to look at the scrolls with him, almost lying on it.

It put her closer to him and he couldn't keep from being distracted by their close proximity, the amazing way she smelled, the fact he was getting more aroused by the second.

Maybe it was because he was also excited about what he could obtain if all this went well.

He turned his head to her, putting his face a short distance from hers. He was surprised she'd remained silent most of the time he was talking, allowing him to create the plan that he thought was best.

Considering she'd been hunting this thing, he thought she would have had more to say.

"So you agree with me? This will be the best way to attack."

She gave him a crooked smile, and he watched her eyes drift over his face as it grew.

“Sure.”

He poked the table and the maps. “You’re not going to fight me on this?”

He’d essentially told her what was going to happen, and she’d have very little part in it. *She’ll just get in the way if she tries to help.*

“You’re the expert.”

She’s up to something. He could tell by her tone, and the fact she’d given in so easily.

But he didn’t seem to care when her eyes stopped moving to stay fixed on his mouth.

She’s got some kind of hold over me. He shouldn’t be this drawn to her. Like a siren calling unwitting seamen to their deaths, he was constantly entranced by her charms.

And he knew it was happening, so why did he still want to let her drown him?

It worsened when she seemed to inch closer.

His hand shot forward to grip her around the nape of her neck as he pulled her in. Her hair brushed over the back of his knuckles, like silk against his skin.

She gave a subtle moan while he returned it as their mouths met. Soft lips greeted his own, and he couldn’t control his urge to draw them over hers in rapid succession.

Leaning back so they were both more comfortable than the twisted positions they were in, Alister tilted his head to deepen the kiss.

His hand squeezed her nape when her tongue slipped forward at the same time his did to form a wet clash, and then an intricate dance started that made his body pulsate in reaction.

He felt her hands palm his chest before little nails dug into him through his tunic as she fisted it.

He could feel warmth building between them, saliva being shared that he could taste the way they mingled. They were so focused on the kiss that they even started breathing for each other.

But when he placed one of his palms on her thigh to caress up the length of it, she tried to pull away, separating their kiss.

Alister yanked her back in to steal her lips again. *Nay, I’m not done yet.* There was a momentary pause where she accepted it, before she pulled back once more.

“Sit on me,” he demanded as he reached down to pry a boot from her.

“No.”

Her leg shot forward to kick against the edge of his chair. He jumped when she'd almost kicked him in the groin if it hadn't just missed it.

She licked her lips before wiping her mouth with back of her hand.

“The first time was free,” she told him with breathless pants. “The rest must be earned.”

He ran both his hands up the calf of that leg.

“I'm getting you a ship, lass.” He couldn't believe what he was hearing! “What more could you want?”

She was the one who had been teasing him and yet now she was pulling back?

Still, he couldn't help noticing her nipples had hardened against the material of her top. That her eyes were softer in expression. That perhaps even her cheeks were a little pink like she may be warm with desire.

“That's not what I mean by earned.”

What's that supposed to mean?

She leaned forward to cup his jaw with one hand in such a forceful grip it caved in his cheeks. She gave him a quick kiss on his stupefied mouth.

“But you have a pretty face which helps.”

Pretty was the last word people used to explain his features; his face had long ago stopped being his fortune. Harsh, roguish, scary, those were words people used now. Women had even sneered or turned their noses up at his scars until they discovered how fat his coin pouch could be.

Irritation bubbled up inside him when he realised she was intending to reject him today, even as a grin formed.

“Aye, but you want me, Rosetta.”

It wasn't a question but a statement, one that gave him self-assurance.

She tilted her foot so she could press the tip of her boot gently against his erection like she knew he had one.

“I think you're the one who wants me right now.”

There was a flirtatious hint to her eyes, one that only increased his desire to flip her over and slam into her. *Saucy lass.*

She could say what she wanted, but Alister had a feeling that, if he tried to slip his fingers inside her, he'd find her slick and warm.

“Oh aye,” he admitted, grabbing her by the back of the knee and pulling

her onto his lap. “And you’ll let me have you again by the time we reach the Laughing Siren.”

I give her three days before she lets me take her, he thought confidently, a mischievous grin forming across his face.

Then he took her mouth in an unyielding passionate kiss. One she couldn’t escape from and one he wouldn’t relinquish until he was done feasting.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Alister had been wrong in his estimation of getting Rosetta beneath him again.

Five days they had been sailing and every day he brought her into his

quarters with the excuse he needed to discuss their plans.

And for five days, he'd needed to give himself release after their meetings because he'd manage to steal her mouth, which she was happy to supply, but nothing more.

He wanted the woman, but he refused to allow her to create tension inside him by getting him pent up.

That's what he'd told himself, at least.

Alister knew he needed to release some of the tension growing inside him.

That's why, when he heard the man in the crow's nest shout, 'Sail ho!' Alister had grinned.

Killing someone is just what I need. Getting loot and slitting throats was exactly what would raise his spirits after receiving bruising kicks to his ego from her rejections.

"What kind of ship have we got?" he yelled back, moving away from the helm for a moment to grab his nautical spyglass from the bolted down table next to it.

"It's a frigate cap'in!"

Hmm. He leaned against the wheel to keep it steady as he raised the lens to his good eye to find it on the horizon.

He didn't need to close the other since it was blind.

To see another frigate was never a good sign.

When he finally found it and started inspecting it for what details he could make with the distance, despite his glass magnifying it, Alister's lips drew tightly together.

It worsened when he heard the clomping footsteps of what sounded like a bear coming up the stairs.

"Is it a trading boat?" Rosetta asked him.

She must have heard the commotion from below deck and came to investigate.

"Nay," he answered sourly, lowering his lens. "Pirate hunters."

Alister immediately began turning his ship the other way.

"You're turning away from it?" She gave him a mocking snide laugh. "And here I thought you were supposed to be some great killer who didn't run from anyone."

He turned to her with a foul face, pointing his index and middle fingers of one hand at her.

“And whose fault do you think that is?”

She quickly frowned, her head shaking a little in confusion.

“We made a deal, lass,” he bit, straightening the wheel. “It’s your fault I can’t go after it.”

As much as he knew he could take it on, the amount of damage his ship would obtain due to their cannons could put them at a disadvantage if they wanted to capture the Laughing Siren.

He wanted to sink it just because of its existence, but he’d made a deal with Rosetta and he intended to keep to that promise.

“Oh.” Her gaze shied away from him in embarrassment for her earlier tone.

“Go back to your station,” he demanded.

“I’ve already done my duties!”

“Then go do something else!”

His mood had soured further and if she wasn’t going to give him what he wanted, then he needed to ride out this terrible mood on his own.

“But—”

“Cap’in!” Keat in the crow’s nest shouted. “They’re turning to us!”

Shit. “I need all hands on deck!” he yelled. “They know who we are.”

They must have seen his ship’s figurehead before he managed to turn them.

Pierre and Derrek started giving orders while he kept his focus on measuring how far the pirate hunters were by eye. He was also diverting the way he’d turned to try and keep them relatively on course.

It did little to help; they were going the opposite way.

“Here, let me help,” she offered, stepping forward with her arms raised. “I can man the helm or watch the approaching ship.”

He thwarted her reaching hands out of the way.

“Touch the wheel of my ship, lass, and you’ll regret it.”

This was his position and he refused anyone’s help when he didn’t need it. The only ones he would ever trust to touch it were Pierre and Derek.

The way her face tightened into a spiteful look raised his hackles.

“Aye! Exactly! Now get below deck and stay there where you are safe.” When her look worsened, he pointed at her again. “The last thing I need is a woman getting in the way!”

“I’ve fought against pirate hunters myself!”

“I don’t give a shit.”

He grabbed her shoulder to turn her by force, shoving her towards the deck stairs.

She stomped down them, giving him the freedom to look through his lens once more.

She'd distracted him for long enough that he knew the ship had jumped in size through his magnifying telescope. *They're gaining on us.*

The ship was smaller than his, lighter, and they had the wind on their side. Before long, Alister knew they'd be upon them.

"Change of plans, lads!" he yelled, turning the wheel of his ship the other way. "Ready the cannons and prepare yourselves for a war."

Because there was going to be one.

If Alister couldn't run, then he would fight, despite what position that put them in for getting her ship.

When they were soon to be in range of the Howling Death's front cannons, he knew there was no point in raising his black flag. They knew they were coming, and that they would fight to the death.

"Fire the front cannons!"

The command was echoed throughout the ship, voices deep and loud as it travelled until he could no longer hear it.

Two great bangs sounded as the front cannons shot.

One hit the front of the other ship. The other hit the water with a giant spraying splash.

"Again!"

Another two were loosened.

When that same side was hit once more, and they did not receive fire back, Alister knew two things.

This frigate didn't have as many cannons as them to the point it didn't even have a front cannon. Secondly, it was moving down the left side of his ship.

"Ready the port side cannons!"

Alister turned his wheel to the right to help stop the potential collision.

"Derek!"

"Aye cap'in!" He came bounding up the stairs, taking the wheel from him without another word as though he already knew what he wanted.

Derek would protect the helm better than anyone and would be better at defending than attacking if the need arose. That peg leg didn't make him

steady for crossing ships but he would if they were desperate.

Alister withdrew his cutlass as they started coming up the side of the ship, readying himself for battle.

“Fire!” Once the command started echoing, he also yelled, “Move across!”

His men started swinging to the other ship while the crew of the other one did the same.

Alister gutted a man before he even had the chance to land on his ship. Then he stole his rope before it was gone and swung his way over.

He booted someone in the chest as he went to land, letting go of the rope so he could hold his cutlass with two hands and shove it into his head when he impacted.

There was no point in finding the captain. Alister wouldn't know who he was, and if he knew who Alister was, he'd probably eventually try to greet him.

Metal rang as swords crossed with each other. The sound of the occasional gun fired, wasting their singular bullets.

He felt a swift but shallow slice across his shoulders. If he hadn't been moving forward, it would have been deeper.

Alister turned and blindly swung at the same time, hacking into his side with his longer reach. The bearded man gave a gargle that worsened when he yanked his sword back to take it from him.

Then he quickly raised his cutlass to the side when he saw someone coming towards him on his good side. He blocked the attacker and thrust his hand forward. He grabbed him by the throat and lifted him off the ground. He let go of his sword so he could attempt to pry his hand off him, just as Alister pulled his sword back and stabbed it through his torso.

Blood was quickly covering him as he took life after life with little care.

The ground beneath his feet shook each time his cannons hit their ship, but he knew his own was receiving return fire as well.

His men were already going below deck to kill the gunmen, slowly overtaking the crew that was less in numbers than his own.

Alister hadn't wielded a crew this large before so he was sure the sheer number of them had come as a surprise. Rosetta's men were aiding him in winning this fight with what he could see were less deaths of their own crew.

Just as he was turning to find another target, someone cut the throat of an enemy right next to him. A heavy burst of blood sprayed over the side of his

body, hitting him in the face and covering his eyepatch.

His tunic was covered in blood that was not his own except for the back of his shoulder. Unfortunately, some had gotten in his good eye, temporarily blurring his vision. He went to rub it away.

“Watch out!” He knew that voice.

It wasn't hard to distinguish the fact it was a woman's voice!

Just as he wiped the worst of the blood from his face, he watched Rosetta land on top of a man who had been about to cleave at Alister.

She rolled forward to get away, but she had done enough to protect him so that Alister could kill the man himself.

She quickly pulled her gun from its holster and shot a man in the back of the head who was about to kill one of her own men.

Pulling her sword from its sheath, she turned to Alister when he started coming for her. She must have thought he was an enemy because she went to swing and then immediately halted.

“What the hell are you doing on this ship?!” he roared so loudly he knew a few heads turned to him.

He was even more furious when he had to quickly pull her forward to stop someone from cutting her from behind.

“To help!” she shouted back, running down the deck and out of his reach.

She leapt, shoving her sword into the back of someone who had been overpowering one of their men.

It wasn't hard to tell who was their crew and who were pirate hunters' since their clothing didn't look like rags like most of theirs did.

Only a handful cared about the way they looked.

Fuck! He didn't have time to watch out for her when he had men coming for him at all sides. And when he realised he did, he knew they had started to single him out because they knew who he was.

His face was known. He had many wanted posters with sketches of his face. Alister couldn't touch land without someone recognising him.

He lost her in the fray. Rage and fury coursing through his entire being that it felt like it hardened his muscles into stone.

As he fought, barely gaining a scratch, men came to help him take those down who were encircling him. He kept them at bay, knowing he couldn't get any kills in unless he was lucky. Not with this many around him, not when he was this overrun by himself.

He constantly had to duck blades, thankful none of them seemed to be holding a loaded pistol.

But he could only defend until there were only two left.

Just as he was about to swing a deathblow down on one, a sword protruded toward his chest, nearly stabbing into Alister.

He jumped back and quickly aimed for the other man, cleaving him in two instead.

He saw the holder of the sword was Rosetta.

She didn't pay him any notice. She just removed her sword and turned back to the rest of the ship to assist others. Yet, Alister couldn't ignore the fact she'd watched his back, twice now! *I was saved by a bloody woman!*

He also couldn't contain his shame.

Once the men around him were dead, the only ones left to fight were stragglers. They were deposed of quickly considering they were being overrun and had to fight multiple opponents. They couldn't trust a single soul on board this vessel to join their crew since they'd slit their throats in their sleep.

Once everyone was dead, Alister quickly swung back to his ship when it turned back around to pick them up, as did most.

The pirate hunting ship was half on fire and half sinking to the bottom of the ocean. There was no point in staying on it unless they wanted to join its ugly fate.

They had been victorious but they had lost quite a few good men.

He knew the hull of his ship had suffered massive amounts of damage and he wasn't sure if he had enough supplies to repair it properly.

It was littered with caved in sections from impact and occasional holes from where cannonballs had hit the same area twice.

"All those that aren't hurt, start working on repairing the holes closest to the water," he said as he stood on the prow of the main deck. "Make sure the ship is safe to sail before going higher."

He knew they must be taking in water.

He wiped away the blood he could feel trickling down the side of his face; he was covered in it. They would all need to use some of the sea water seeping in so they could bathe in it.

All he knew was that he still held a clump of anger in his chest. It was nestled so deep he could feel his nose was still crinkled and his teeth slightly

bared as his eyes searched those of his crew who were staring at him.

They'd gained nothing from today.

No loot. No supplies. No crewmembers.

This fight had been about nothing but survival.

Bloody pirate hunters. They were the last thing Alister wanted to see on the horizon.

If it wasn't the fact that everyone was mostly silent, he wouldn't have heard someone speaking quietly from the back.

"Are you okay Rosetta?" Naeem asked, grabbing her arm to check her.

"Sure am," she laughed quietly, pulling her arm away from him. "You owe me for saving your life, yet again."

The only reason Alister had seen this interaction between the two was because he had started stomping his way through the crowd that parted for him. With such an expression on his face, they wouldn't dare get in his way.

"But you're hurt."

"It's okay." She brushed her tunic down to hide the cut she'd received. "I'll fix it la—"

Before she could even finish, Alister grabbed her wrist and started pulling her back through the crowd.

"Hey!" She yanked on her arm, bashing her fist against his hold on her. "Let me go you manhandling bastard."

He didn't care he was making a scene with her.

His men all turned their gazes away to go back to their duties at the look on his face. They knew he was furious. He had every right to be.

Dragging her up the stairs of the quarterdeck, he opened the door to his cabin and threw her inside of it.

"What's the meaning of this?" she asked, stumbling forward before she quickly righted her footing.

She spun around to him just as he slammed the door shut.

"I told you to get below deck!"

"No!" she yelled back. "I will not sit on your ship like some fragile, scared, helpless woman!"

He started coming for her, pointing the index and middle fingers of one hand at her.

His eyes were so narrowed his eye lashes impaired his vision, his teeth so tightly gnashed together he feared he'd shattered them in his mouth.

“You gave me your word that you would do as you’re told!”

Her eyes widened as she started backing up from him.

She threw her hands forward beseechingly, but she didn’t look afraid. She looked cautious.

It looked like she was ready to defend herself.

But Alister didn’t like that look. It was defiant, insubordinate, and downright rebellious. He wanted her afraid! Some of his own *men* were more afraid of him than this silly woman.

“I saved your life!” she yelled, making him halt for a moment. “If it wasn’t for me, you’d be dead!” *I bloody know that!* “When I saw you couldn’t see, that’s when I swung across.”

He started stepping forward once more.

“So you were still above deck when we had enemies swinging over?!”

Her lips pursed together, but she stopped backing away from him and stood her ground. She even had the audacity to fold her arms across her chest and turn her head to the side dismissingly.

“I didn’t have to save you,” she said with a bored tone, refusing to turn her face towards him when he was right in front of her. She was treating him like he was insignificant, like this conversation was pointless. “It would have been better for me if you’d died.”

“What’s that supposed to fucking mean?”

“I could have gotten your ship and your crew for free!” She stomped her foot like a child having a tantrum, even her cheeks puffed out for a moment. “I would have been able to command them as my own as the new captain. You would have been out of the picture without me having to do a thing. They couldn’t blame me for it!”

Alister’s jaw dropped slightly. *She’s right.*

It would have been beneficial for her if she’d let him die.

That did nothing to settle his anger.

It worsened when she dropped her arms so she could push at his chest, her hands slipping over him due to the sticky crimson liquid covering him. A wet metallic smell constantly tangled in his nose from it.

“And I would have if I had known you were going to yell at me for it!” She shoved him again. “I don’t need this shit from you.”

Alister needed to reign in his fury before he did something careless and stupid. Because, despite it, his body was pumping blood violently all around

his body, in places where it shouldn't.

He didn't know what was coming over him, perhaps it was because he'd never had a woman around right after he'd fought in a battle, but his anger was shifting into something else entirely.

He could see she was injured, could see she was covered in blood similarly to himself, but he couldn't help finding her so freaking sexy because of it.

She looked wild. She looked fierce.

Rosetta looked like a psychotic murderer as much as he did, and he felt his stomach clench in want for her.

His body was thrumming with aggression.

The need to release the pent-up needs and wants inside him had only grown because of this day.

The way she looked with copper smelling liquid clumping her hair, splattered across one side of her face, and reddening the white of her tunic, did strange things to him.

He nearly wanted to groan when he saw her sodden top was so damp that it stuck to her skin, moulding around her breasts, clinging to them. It highlighted her nipples to the point he could perfectly see the shape of them.

He grabbed her face and forced her head up, making sure she couldn't face away from him.

"You're a distraction," he bit, letting his singular eye flicker between both of hers. "You may have saved my life, but you almost got me killed because you'd come over. I got surrounded because of you!"

She started pushing against his chest to get him away.

"Then keep your eyes on your enemy instead of being an idiot!"

"You will do as you're told Rosetta!"

"Go to hell!" She started kicking him in the shins. "I won't let you push me down the ranks and make me feel like a useless woman!"

But it was because she was a woman that he was concerned!

It didn't escape his notice that she'd never taken anyone head on. She'd only assisted in fighting and he could only imagine what would have happened if she'd been cornered.

Rosetta wouldn't have stood a chance against anyone.

And it was because she was a woman that they were currently in this position where he was shouting at her when he'd much rather do something else, like kissing her.

When kicking him obviously wasn't working, she screamed in his face, "Fuck you Alister!"

Everything built at once. *Gladly.*

Alister shoved her so hard against the wall the wind was knocked out of her and she let out a tight gasp.

He crushed her lips beneath his, needing to kiss her, needing to smudge the blood of different men across each other's faces.

He lifted her leg and thrust his already hardened shaft against her.

For five days he'd wanted this woman who had teased him, allowed him to kiss her, and had given him nothing but an ache rather than release.

It felt like she was trying to get him to this point where he was desperate for it. Was it another trick? A way to somehow control him?

He should be furious. He should be threatening her with his nine-tail whip for disobeying him like he would have with any other crewmember. Instead, all he wanted was to punish her with his cock.

He wanted it. He wanted to take her.

The fact her lips were moving underneath his, despite her slapping at his shoulders, made him grab her wrists with his other hand and pin them above her head.

He thrust against her again, right against the centre of her body with her leg at his hip and spreading her. She gave an expire, he let out a small groan.

She bloody wants it. If she didn't, she wouldn't be reciprocating, wouldn't be kissing him back, wouldn't be bucking her hips against him like she was seeking his dick.

She was confusing him, and he had no idea how to handle the whiplash of emotions.

One minute he thought he was close to being inside her, the next she was leaving him with an erection that pained him. One minute she was sitting on his lap with her tongue halfway down his throat, the next she was trying to get away.

She instigated it almost as much as he did and yet she was always the one to pull away. She was fucking with him and Alister didn't appreciate being fucked with.

Alister felt like he was being cruelly played. Like she was trying to dupe him on purpose to make him look like a fool.

He pulled on the ties of her tights and shoved his hand inside their tight

space.

“Wait!” she gasped, managing to get her mouth free of his before he controlled her back into the kiss.

She gave a mew when he shoved his hand between her thighs and touched her.

I want inside her. His want for it grew when two of his fingers rubbed over her entrance and found a little wet pool for him.

“Nuh-uh,” she murmured against his crushing mouth, making it hard to understand her.

Then she kned his side.

His anger spiked higher and he quickly shoved both his hands to her arse and lifted her before slamming her back against the wall. She couldn’t kick him if she was like this, with her legs spread for him and in the air. It put her in a position where she needed to hold onto him if she didn’t want to risk falling.

“You have been teasing me, lass,” Alister sneered. “I told you I don’t like to play games.”

He started kissing her neck, shoving himself against her again just so her body would stroke his. Anything to make himself feel better.

“S-Stop,” she said quietly, but her voice broke on a moan when he slipped his hips over hers right against the sensitive nub of her apex.

When he heard her moan, he made sure to press harder.

“You don’t do what you’re told. You won’t go where I tell you to. You come into my cabin and kiss me, only to deny me moments later.”

She was turning him into a tangled mess and he didn’t like it!

She almost got me killed! She also saved him.

What was he supposed to do with the hate-filled lust that was clinging to him? Especially when he could feel her legs tightening around his waist.

I’m going to fuck her. He wanted to take it out on her.

He wanted to feel that wetness around his shaft again. Hell, Alister just wanted to hear her moan again from it. He was going to take all of today’s anger, and blood-lust, and frustration, out on her.

He bit her neck simply because he wanted to hurt her, bruise her as she had with his ego. Thrusting against her again, his eyes narrowed at the wall. She gasped in pain in reaction.

Why does punishing her sound like a stupendous idea?

He started pulling at her tights, putting her in a strange position that had her knees buckling in as they slipped over her arse.

The only thing supporting her was one of his hands and her arms around his neck.

“Please,” she said quietly, her head falling forward to rest against his shoulder. “Please stop...”

It sounded like a bloody defeat. There was a shaky kind of tone to her voice. Alister had never heard this from her before. Or thought he would hear.

His hand stopped before he pulled her tights any further over her backside.

What the hell am I doing?

Just because she wanted him, that he could feel she did, was clinging to him, didn't necessarily mean she was *willing*.

Shit. She had him so messed up he'd almost thrown his morals out of the window. *She'd asked me to stop three times.*

He'd almost taken someone when he shouldn't. Alister had been moments away from slamming into her.

He felt like a monster.

Dropping her feet to the floor, he shoved her tights up her legs to right her, and to hide her body from his sight. She gasped as she bounced on her feet from how harshly he yanked them up. Then he pushed her away from between his arms.

He threw her to the side and he watched her stumble in his peripheral.

“Get out,” he said with a dark quietness, keeping his focus on the wall in front of him.

Leaning against it with both hands, he tried to take back control, tried to right his mind. *Shit. I need to calm down.*

“You...”

“I said get out!” He felt like a freaking bastard for this. “I'm pissed off and I'm not thinking straight.”

He didn't understand why she was still here, talking to him, when he'd been touching her without her consent. He had been undressing her and thrusting up against her like a crazed madman.

Most other women would have run out of the room crying by now.

She even came to tentatively touch his shoulder. “What about your back? You've gotten hurt.”

Did she understand that he immediately regretted what he'd been doing and was trying to soothe him?

I don't need her freaking pity! It was her fault for getting him to this state to begin with!

He reached out and grabbed her neck in his hand. He didn't choke her, but he put her in a hold in which she would feel small.

Turning, he faced her. He expected her to look afraid, instead she looked up at with a glare.

"You want me to treat you like a man? The next time you don't do as you're told while you are under the command of my ship, I'll put the nine-tails to you like anyone else of my crew, got it?"

He couldn't use his cock to punish her just because he was horny for her. He needed to treat her like everyone else if she wouldn't take him.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Fine, I'll go. Take care of your own wounds for all I care."

Good. He let her go by pushing her away.

"Go be annoying elsewhere."

She immediately turned from his cabin and left him by himself so he could vanquish his anger, and lust, and regret in solitude.

With her gone, his mind didn't feel so muddled.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



After that terrible day, Alister expected her to stop coming to him. He knew he'd gone too far and had almost realised too late what he'd been doing. Yet, she continued to stand near him when she wanted to.

She spoke to him at the helm, asked him how his back was healing. Annoyingly, she even tried to check it by pulling his tunic up his back until he wiggled her away from underneath it before she could see.

Instead of getting Clint to bring him food or grog water, since that had once been of the boy's duties until it became hers, she continued to do it.

It didn't seem she was upset or bothered by what had transpired between them. She glared at him, smiled at him, was exactly how she'd been before.

She even came to look over his shoulder when he was in the navigation room, watching what he was doing so she knew where they were in the world. Not seeming to mind she was alone with him in a confined space, she inspected the maps so close to him he could feel her shoulder brushing his.

Or her hair whisk over it.

He'd been apprehensive of her at first, closed off, considering his actions.

Then, despite everything, she was the one who instigated the next kiss like she couldn't help herself from tasting him.

Rosetta, with one draw of her silky pouted lips, sent him hurtling right back to where he was; just desperate to have her again.

They were back at playing cat and mouse once more.

A game where, if she wasn't with him in his chambers, he would corner her somewhere below deck just so he could tease her, hoping the more he tried to touch her or even speak to her, he could somehow get her to falter. Sometimes it was to his own stupidity, since he'd often leave with an ache in his groin, but he couldn't help grinning when he walked away from her panting form.

Unfortunately, that was until a nasty rumour started circulating around his men, who often told him of the things her crew were up to if it seemed suspicious. Most of it wasn't – they were just being overly cautious of the newcomers.

But on this day, he found out something he wasn't particularly pleased with hearing.

"Aye, Alister. She's sleeping with her crew," Pierre told him while Alister was manning the helm.

He was supporting himself against the wheel, speaking with Pierre about the state of his ship since all the repairs that could be done, were done. He wanted a full report every day to make sure there weren't any complications.

They were uncertain about the state of the hull since it still had many holes

and leaks in it.

“My crew,” he corrected with a hostile bite to his tone. But that wasn’t why he was angry. “And how do you know this?”

“Rumours have spread throughout the day that she was seen in the hammock with that black fellow last few nights.” Pierre looked down to his filthy covered nails before biting into one like he had little care for what they were actually speaking about. “And apparently odd noises could be heard from those in the cabins around them.”

“Why should I care?” Alister told him, gripping the handles tighter.

“We know you’re keen on her.” His eyes drew over Alister knowingly, one of his blond brows raised. “We were just wondering if that was still the case.”

“I don’t give a shit what you do with her.”

Aye lass, I told you if you sleep with one of them, you sleep with all of them. Except him.

He didn’t like that she’d been seeking his mouth, teasing him and denying him again, when she may have been with another man the entire time.

The grin that formed on Pierre’s face soured Alister’s mood further.

He’d thought the relationship between herself and Naeem was a little strange. It was a little too close than most would say was normal.

Naeem had stomped his way into Alister’s quarters the first day they’d set sail, demanding to speak with him.

Apparently he, and those of the men that had been her crew, were worried her safety wouldn’t be the top priority of himself and his men. There had been a threat that, if she got hurt in any way, they’d turn on them with a vengeance.

It was one of the reasons he hadn’t liked her on the pirate hunters’ vessel. She could have been injured terribly or killed and her men may have turned on his, despite the fact it was her own fault and she’d gone against his orders.

And he needed them to sail, especially now with the amount of work that was needed to toss out the water draining in constantly at the moment. It was around the clock work.

Alister had mocked the man, but he’d still thought it was odd that he was chancing that kind of threat. That he feared her treatment or death more than Alister’s reaction from being threatened.

His eyes narrowed as he glared at the front of his ship after hearing this terrible news from Pierre.

Perhaps they're in love with each other. And for whatever reason, they'd been denying it up until now.

It might be because they were forced to occupy the same sleeping space. Forced to be in close proximity to each other.

He didn't like this.

Because he had to make certain of the rumours, Alister stood outside her cabin the night he'd been informed of what was going on with his back to the wall.

He folded his arms and listened in.

Hearing Mr Smith shouting for them to shut up so he could sleep, a giggling Rosetta laughed at Naeem who told him he was just jealous that she was in his hammock tonight, confirmed what he'd been told.

He hadn't stuck around to hear any more.

Out of curiosity, he'd changed the shift arrangements. He put Naeem on night duty with the sails to see what she would do. Only to find out she'd been seen in Mr Smith's hammock!

Alister couldn't believe the update he'd received the next day. The man must be twice her age and she'd still brazenly hopped into bed with him.

Since he'd heard of her lying with Naeem the first time, Alister hadn't spoken to her again unless absolutely necessary. Although he was still attracted to the bonnie lass, his desire for her had fizzled away near instantly.

She was now just becoming an annoyance on his ship, one that was starting to upset the men. Once the rumours began to circulate, he'd started receiving reports of an occasional man receiving a slap for trying to bed her as well.

He wasn't interested in getting in the middle of it.

That was until she stormed her way into his quarters without knocking while he'd been asleep in his hammock.

The door slammed against the frame loudly, shocking him awake.

He moved his arm until his forearm was covering half his face, hiding the scar with it as if he was merely hiding from the sunlight that was filtering through the room.

Then he raised his head from where it rested to face her.

"Aye sweetheart, it's too early for that kind of noise," he said with a dull tone.

"Get your men to keep their bloody hands to themselves!" she screeched at

him with such an unladylike, gremlin tone that he grimaced at its ugliness.

With a sigh and a roll of his eyes, he dug into the creases of his hammock, knowing his eyepatch was somewhere within it.

“I told you what would happen if you sleep with one of the crew,” he said, refusing to play dumb to her coy actions, while putting his eyepatch on to cover his blind eye. He adjusted it until it fitted right. “Doesn’t matter if they were those who were your own.”

He watched her eyes widen and her mouth fall open. She reached behind her and slammed the door shut behind her.

“Excuse me? I haven’t fucked anyone.”

He rested his head back, kicking the leg that was outside of his hanging bed so he could make it swing from side-to-side to rock him. He closed his eyes, more interested in sleep than this conversation.

The sun is only just rising, why am I dealing with this shit now?

“That’s not what I’ve heard. You’ve been caught in bed with both Naeem and Mr Smith.”

“To go to sleep!”

“Pardon?” He lifted his head once more to look at her. “You expect me to believe that nonsense? What kind of woman crawls into a man’s bed but does nothing with him?”

She’d taken with him easily enough. A stranger, someone who had raised a weapon to her, had threatened her.

The audacity of this woman with her lies. He and his men weren’t idiots and the cabin walls were nothing but thin timber.

“A cold one!”

“There are blankets, sweetheart,” he chuckled darkly.

“They are itchy,” she rebuffed. “My skin is sensitive and they still aren’t enough to keep the cold at bay.”

“You had no issues before, why all of a sudden?”

“Because my coat was enough to keep me warm! The hull currently has holes in it.”

His brows furrowed, *well that is true.*

“It is damp below deck and the wind coming through the damage of the ship makes it freezing down there.” She folded her arms across her chest, narrowing her eyes on him into a deep, icy glare. “I can’t sleep when I’m cold, or itchy, or uncomfortable.”

He leaned up on one elbow, balancing himself with years of skill.

“Why didn’t you tell me then? Hm?”

He shook his head; he had no reason to believe her.

“And what am I supposed to do? Complain to you I’m cold when there is very little you can do about it? I’d rather not be mocked because I’m simply cold, I’ve already been mocked enough for owning a pair of tits.”

His lips thinned at the truth of her words.

He definitely would have laughed at her for it, poking at her for her gender since men could handle the temperatures below deck, no matter the state of the ship. Men were resilient, women less so.

“Do you think it’s comfortable lying next to Naeem or Mr Smith? Naeem is a wriggler in his sleep and Mr Smith snores like an ogre, but they are warm.”

Alister’s gaze turned towards the bed below him that he rarely used unless he was so drunk he couldn’t make it into his hammock.

She’d slept with the blanket and pillow.

He’d seen them both inside his hammock when he’d taken it back, and his were made of higher quality material than the grey blankets the crew had.

His eye turned back to her to see her visibly cringe.

“And the idea I’d sleep with Mr Smith is ridiculous. He reminds me of my father.”

“And Naeem?” he questioned, trying to keep the curiosity out of his voice.

“The man is my friend and has been for many years. They are the only people I truly trust and they are like family to me.”

Is that why she said she was comfortable with sharing a cabin with them? Alister thought for long moments.

“I can’t have you sleeping with men for warmth because the ship has been damaged.”

“What else am I supposed to do? Freeze to death?” She started tapping her toe impatiently. “Those that catch a sickness on the seas are often a liability and are prone to catching worse illnesses.”

If one person gets sick, the chances are others will as well. Now that was something Alister couldn’t have.

He gave a sigh at her dramatic answer, before rubbing at the hair on his cheek as he contemplated his solution.

With the dampness below deck and the wind, he doubted even if he gave

her his blanket it would be enough.

I can't put her with Pierre and Derek. And she'd been right about the fact that, if he gave her that cabin to herself, he'd have to deal with an upset crew. He was already giving her special attention, any more would be an inconvenience that could cause tension he didn't need.

They also needed to be close by to man the helm.

"Alright lass," he finally sighed. He couldn't believe he was about to say this, but, "Bring your hammock in here."

"What?" Her head reared back while her face twisted into a mangle of disbelief. "Sleep in this room, with you?"

"Aye. You were able to sleep comfortably in here before." *It also means I can keep an eye on her.* "The men will back off once I explain what's been going on."

"But I don't want to sleep near you." She eyed him suspiciously in his hammock. "I don't think I trust you."

"Hurtful." Alister placed his hand over his heart like she'd wounded it. "I wouldn't harass a lass while she tries to sleep."

He might before that though.

Her lips pursed into a cute pout of annoyance, her foot tapping more while her head turned to the side in thought.

"Can I have the blanket and pillow?"

He let his arm fall from his hammock so he could gesture to them below him. "Does it look like I need them?"

"Fine," she huffed. "I'm already sick of almost falling to the floor because Naeem has tried to roll over."

A light chortle escaped him. *Now wouldn't that be funny.*

Rosetta slammed the door on her way out and Alister folded his arms behind his head, giving a grin to the ceiling.

She'd just given him a ticket to have an easier way between her legs, now that he knew the actual truth of what had been happening. Perhaps the damage to the hull, and finding out about these rumours, had been a good thing.

She hadn't denied his offer, showing him she truly had just been cold rather than being promiscuous.

And, she can't escape me if she shares my room.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Rosetta's life on the Howling Death had fallen into a routine over the course of few weeks she'd been onboard.

Each morning, she rose before most to help Mr Darkley and his son in the

kitchen. She'd follow his instruction for what meal he planned to cook up for the morning, giving her own ideas – which he mostly shot down.

He was a stubborn man who liked to do things his way.

She'd help place the food on the dining benches so crewmen could come grab their grub before they went about their own jobs. Or those who were about to go to bed would come to have their morning meal before sleep.

Then she'd help clean the area.

She'd have free time in between that and she'd mingle with the men, talking to those who were also on breaks.

She spent some of her time above the surface. Standing in the warm sunlight, Rosetta would lean against the railing and watch the horizon. Some would find it boring to watch the wide and desolate ocean pass by, but she didn't.

Not when every minute she was sailing closer and closer to what she wanted. She often thought of her future, what she would do once she obtained it.

Obsessed. That was the word many used to describe her hunt for the Laughing Siren. Foolish was the word others would call her, thinking she'd never obtain it. To most, she was a silly woman chasing after a whim, a fantasy.

I'll prove them all wrong.

Her eyes would often stray to the man who was currently steering her to potential victory.

With the wind blowing his long black hair any way it may, he stood over them on the quarterdeck behind the helm like a god of the seas.

Pierre would speak to him and she could tell they were discussing their current position by the fact he would be going over scrolls of parchment with Alister.

Others also came to talk to him in the times she was above the surface. Some were also casual conversations to appease and entertain him.

There were times he was so focused on their direction that it didn't seem like he knew she was watching him.

Then there were times when she'd look from the horizon upon which she was lazily gazing, to find his sight was already on her. There was a dark glint to his sight some moments, one that got her licking at the seam of her lips.

She knew she returned such a fierce look with her own.

Rosetta liked to approach him with a certain swing to her hips, a certain crossing leg walk. She would even skim her fingertips against the railing when she walked up the stairs.

It was always followed with a lie that she was just checking to see if he needed food, or water, or something else, when really she just wanted to annoy him with her presence. An obviously flirtatious one as she twirled her hair like some vain, daft girl.

She often got the reaction she wanted. To string him high and dry since he couldn't leave his station, or openly try to touch her without wanting to insight jealousy from the others.

Before anything could be said or done, she would return to the kitchen to help Mr Darkley prepare the feast for the night.

Men would eat their dinner before lazing around the ship to drink and go to sleep, while others were rising to do their night duties.

Then once again, she'd help clean the cooking and eating areas.

It kept her mostly busy and she was thankful that the in between times of meals were no longer accompanied by groping hands.

She'd been irritated that the moment anyone got a sniff of the idea she might be having sex with Naeem or Mr Smith, everyone had turned on her like uncontrollable grunting pigs. All those except her original crew, who apparently had never heard the rumours otherwise they would have shut them down.

Men had started to grab at her thighs or arse while trying to talk to her, brush their hands against her face, get close to her.

Even slapping a few of them hadn't worked until she just blatantly grabbed her pistol and threatened someone, whose unruly behaviour turned into anger.

It had all died down the moment she moved her sleeping habits to Alister's quarters.

He hadn't been joking when he said they'd turn to me like a harlot. She couldn't blame men for being men when they were probably used to being around women who liked being shared because it got them more coin.

That was a lie, she totally could but she didn't see the point in holding onto that particular grudge when there was nothing she could do about it. There was nothing a woman like her could do in the era into which she was born.

After only dealing with it for three days, she'd been overwhelmed.

The groping hadn't really stopped, but at least it was now only one set of

hands on her. She also often groped back before she came to her senses.

There was something about Captain Alister Paine that got her all hot and bothered, and stupid. And even forgiving.

She'd met many men like him in the past, and they'd all given her the same reaction. She'd never spent this much of an extended period with one, though.

Still, there was something about his carefree, nonchalant personality that drew her in. Quick to laugh, but also to anger, he was a man of muscle and steel.

Every time he cornered her in some place below deck when she was down there, as if their paths just kept meeting when they really shouldn't, his mouth was like a raging storm.

And, like a small boat, she constantly got swept up in it and lost. The amount of times she'd almost caved was disastrous.

He still hadn't earned her yet.

Rosetta rarely slept with the same man twice unless he paid her for it. She wasn't a prostitute, but there were a few port boys she allowed to think she was so that she could get paid for something she already wanted.

She cheated them out of money they didn't really need to lose because she wasn't hungry for coin. She usually had plenty. *It's their fault for being so stupid.*

But she wouldn't tell Alister that. She wouldn't allow him to think of her as a prostitute, or to treat her like one.

She knew she was making a very definitive line with all the rejections she'd handed out over the past two weeks. What he didn't know was helping in his favour was: he didn't have a tantrum she'd seen some men have when they were rejected.

She'd forgiven him for the one day he had actually gone too far, simply because of the way he'd looked afterwards.

His face had been crinkled into a mess of emotions, a few of them confused and apologetic. He looked troubled. Without him needing to say anything, she could see he'd realised his mistake.

They never spoke about it, and she initiated contact again to show him it was forgiven. It was also because she had just wanted to satisfy her hungry hands and mouth that had been itching to touch him.

Rosetta was selfish.

But afterwards, when she did continue to reject him, it was as though he didn't seem to care that he wasn't getting what he wanted. He'd tease her, trying to get further and further each time. Before he could go too far, she'd stop him and he'd call her out on the fact he knew she wanted it.

The last time he'd said it, he'd then slapped her on the arse and walked away while whistling like a deviant.

Arrogant bastard, she thought with a smile of humour at his back at the time.

So yes, over the course of the last two weeks, Rosetta's life had settled into a routine, but she didn't think she'd ever had this much fun on a ship before.

She'd go to sleep before him and she woke before him.

Today she'd woken earlier than usual and had since been sitting on the steps of the quarterdeck, deep in thought.

It wasn't long before someone troublesome came to bother her. With calculating thought, she knew exactly how to bother him back.

"Ow! Ow! OW!" the person sitting in front of her between her legs shouted like a five-year-old. "You're as bad as my mother!"

"Then stop struggling so much!" she yelled with an exasperated tone, like she couldn't understand why he was so upset when she knew exactly why.

She was the one purposely torturing him after all.

"But you're bloody hurting me!"

"That's because you don't know how to sit still!"

"Because you're bloody hurting me!"

It was a struggle to stifle the evil and maniacal laugh that threatened to escape.

"Why are you complaining so loudly first thing in the morning?" Alister grumbled from behind them, coming out of his cabin sooner than he usually did.

The sun was only just rising when he usually didn't appear on deck until it was finished. He would then take over from Derek who had been steering the ship throughout the night.

"I've been tryin' to shut 'em up but they just won't listen to me," Derek shouted.

He was probably also one of the reasons Alister had been woken up.

"She's torturing me, captain," Pierre whined, reaching his hand back like he needed saving.

Rosetta yanked the hairbrush through the man's long flowing golden locks.

"He said he dearly missed it when women in port brushed his beautiful glossy hair." She tilted her head back to look at Alister. "So he told me I should do it for him."

Pierre had seen her brushing her own, something she did when she could remember to do it. Since she'd woken up at that early hour, she decided to untangle the knots from her brown hair.

Without even looking, not taking her eyes from Alister, she continued to forcibly yank the brush through Pierre's tangled knots.

She noted the way Alister looked at his own long black hair, and then at her with a strange expression. She couldn't believe it. It almost looked as though he wanted her to pay him such attention regardless of Pierre's whining.

"But you don't have to be a brute while doing it!"

Rosetta gave Alister a smirk, and then a wink, which made his expression turn into one of humour.

"Sure I do. It's just so knotty, Pierre. And you did tell me it would be an honour for me if I did it."

She could do it more gently, starting from the ends, but instead she was choosing to rake the brush from the scalp down.

"Rosie please," he cried, trying to reach behind him to stop her since she had him trapped where he was by a fist full of hair.

Rosie...

Rosetta visibly shuddered, a deep roll of nausea rolling through her to the point she felt bile rising. She almost wanted to run to the side of the ship and be sick over it.

She let him go to shove an arm around his throat while pulling her pistol from its holster.

"Don't *ever* call me that again," she told him through gritted teeth, putting the barrel of the gun to his head. "Nobody is allowed to call me that."

"Oi!" Alister warned, stepping forward.

She turned her head back to give him a glare.

"You either." She could see his upper lip curled back in a show of irritation. "You can all call me whatever you want except that, got it?"

They could call her bitch, slut, idiot, sweetheart, whatever name they wanted, as long as it wasn't that pet name.

“Okay, we got it, lass.” Alister lifted both his hands to wave them down. “Now put the gun away.”

Rosetta spun the gun on her finger before she shoved it into its holster. Booting Pierre in the back so he could get to his feet, he stumbled as he found his footing. She threw the brush at him so hard his stomach caved like he’d been pelted with a fist.

“You can brush your own damn hair.”

Then she got to her own feet to storm towards the kitchen. *I have duties I need to perform anyway.*

A hand grabbed her before she even made it halfway across the deck.

“What was that about?” Alister pulled on her arm to turn her around when it was obvious she didn’t plan to. “You can’t go around threatening my crew because you’re in a bad mood.”

“I’m not.” She ripped her arm away from him. “And it’s none of your business!”

“Are you on your period or something?”

The heat on her face had nothing to do with embarrassment and everything to do with rage.

“How dare you say something so rude, you absolute prick!”

It may be true that Rosetta was feeling the remaining twang and pain of receiving her monthly Satan’s waterfall of suffering between her legs that had just ended, but that had nothing to do with her current foul mood.

She usually suffered mild discomfort a day or two afterwards and it could make her irritable at the best of times.

“Then you need to calm the hell down.” His words insinuated he may have been more understanding, but she refused to let him think that this had anything to do with her womanly genetic makeup.

“I am calm!” she yelled at the top of her lungs that it almost sounded like a screech. “I don’t have to justify to anyone why I’m upset, but if it’s so damn important, I just don’t like being called Rosie!”

He opened his mouth to argue but a shout sounded from above, stealing everyone’s attention.

“Sail, ho!”

They both turned their heads up to the crow’s nest, their meaningless argument forgotten.

“What kind of ship?” Alister yelled, turning to walk back over the deck

and up the stairs to go to the table next to the helm.

Rosetta's captain's instincts kicked in and she followed. Watching him pick up his nautical spyglass to look over the horizon, she tried to see without one.

"A colourful one, Captain!"

When he found it, she watched him smile with those big even white teeth.

"Looks like we've got ourselves a trading boat." *That means...* He put his fingers to his lips and sounded off an ear-piercing whistle. "I want all hands on deck! We're about to get the supplies we need to repair our ship."

Then he turned to Derek who looked tired and weathered.

"Sorry old salt, but it looks like you're going to bed late."

"Aye cap'in, don't yer concern yerself for me." He reached out to pat Alister on the shoulder with hard slaps. "I'll hold yer ship for ye."

Derek then kicked his peg leg back to brace himself. With bulging muscles, he started turning the ship so they could chase the trading boat.

As much as she wanted to call out commands, witnessing Alister take control of his men was something she'd found she'd come to enjoy experiencing. It was exhilarating and made her blood pump harder.

The way he yelled out to his men, harsh commands that demanded they be obeyed showed his strength as a captain. Yet the laughter and glee behind them, riled the men up and got them excited.

And once one man started singing a hard-working sea shanty to get them in a rhythm, the ship came alive with power. Violent energy started to pour from them until she thought it might become something tangible.

"Man those sails." He pointed to them when his feet met the main deck to walk along it. "Get the cannons ready, gunmen." He swiped his arm to the side. "And I want you all bloodthirsty if they fight back!"

She didn't think he'd noticed she was shadowing him until he turned around and almost ran into her.

"And you." He grabbed her shoulder and pushed her behind him. "Get below deck."

Excuse me?! The pirate hunters she understood, they'd focus on her as a hostage, but this was a trading ship!

"I'm a pirate, Alister." She pulled her sword from its sheath hanging around her hips. "I'm not some starry-eyed damsel that needs protecting. Stop treating me like one!"

“I don’t give a shit what you are.” He pointed his finger at her sternum. “But you are not stepping foot off this ship until we have all those men bound. If you want to help so badly, protect my ship if one of them tries to jump across.”

“But—”

“You gave me your word, lass, that you would follow my orders. I won’t have you disobeying them again.” He leaned forward to be level with her with a dangerous glint to his features. “And I’m giving you one, savvy?”

She blew a curl of hair from her face with a huff, resigned to following his order to stay on the ship after what had happened last time.

But she wouldn’t go below deck.

Alister removed his black doublet coat with the brown cuffs and carelessly threw it into his quarters like he thought it’d get in the way. His sleeves were already rolled up past his forearms, showing his dark hair and the scars he had underneath them.

Rosetta had never seen him without his tunic on, but she’d known the first time she’d seen his face and exposed arms at the same time, that this man was covered in scars. She was curious to see just how much of them covered his skin.

When the jolly roger was raised, the black flag with a white skull and two swords crossing underneath it, the trading boat turned to flee.

“She’s a clipper, Cap’in,” Derek yelled from the quarterdeck.

“Aye, but we’re faster.”

Before long, the Howling Death came into range of the boat and Rosetta went to the railing to watch them uselessly trying to flee.

“Run a shot across the bow!” Alister yelled, and she heard the sound of two cannons give a boom each.

Two cannonballs were fired from the front, crashing into the water with an explosion next to it.

“They’re striking their colours,” the man in the crow’s nest told them with a cheer.

But she’d already known that, could see they were lowering their coat of arms flag.

“They’re surrendering, lads.” Rosetta turned back to stare at Alister just as he grinned with triumph. “Get ready to board.”

That’s a Western trading ship! She tapped the railing with excitement

when they were coming up beside them. She'd been hoping they came across one before she had to part ways from this ship and its crew.

Multiple men flung from ropes to the larger ship. Others laid long planks of wood between their hand railings so they could stumble across.

It was hard to hear in the distance, but she figured Alister had told the men to tie the traders up because they weren't killing them. No one had drawn their swords against them.

The moment Rosetta saw their crew starting to bring over raided supplies, was the moment she swung across.

He did say she could cross once they were bound.

She didn't spare anyone a glance as she headed straight below deck. There was only one thing she wanted on this boat and it wasn't loot or treasure.

There weren't many men below deck yet, but she had to duck under the arms of occasional men carrying heavy crates while jumping over cups and items that had carelessly been thrown from rooms into the hallways. She peeked her head inside those rooms to see men digging through items to find anything worth stealing.

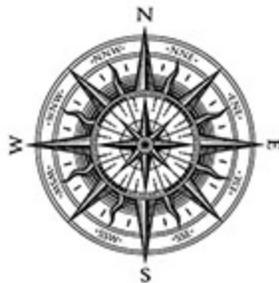
There was an excitement that filled her lungs as she giggled. Raiding a ship was one of her favourite activities.

She'd almost tripped a few times because she was running. She needed to get to the place she wanted before the men ransacked and trashed it.

It would be the last place they'd raid.

That's why she hadn't wasted any time in crossing over the moment they started going through it. *I hope they have what I want!*

She couldn't contain the hopeful grin she wore.



Alister had just watched his men finish dragging up the last trader that they'd found and tie him up, when someone caught his attention.

He watched Rosetta land on her feet on the boat he was currently standing on, and immediately head below deck. *Damnit! That woman just doesn't*

listen.

He gave his final orders before chasing after her. *I told her to stay behind!*

There were more men closer to the surface, but the deeper he went, trying to find her, the less of his crew he saw.

He checked inside every room he passed, trying to find a trace of her.

The urge to throw her over his shoulder, cart her back to his ship, and berate her for this grew nigh overwhelming with every minute that ticked by and he couldn't find her. All she had to do was follow his damn order. He was furious he was now doing this when he had other things that should be taking priority.

Anger bubbled but he knew he needed to snuff the worse of it. *Does she want me to nine tails her?!*

He never thought when he'd threatened her with it, she'd actually do something that would be deserving of it again!

He found her in the place he, strangely, should have figured she'd go. She was standing in the kitchen area, smiling at a tin of something she was tossing into the air.

Then she went to put it into the pocket of her coat.

Fuck! Alister ran forward and pushed her out of the way.

He grunted. She went crashing against the wooden benches before tumbling to the ground.

Alister turned while pulling his pistol from its holster and pointed it at the man who had just sliced his cleaver through the air. He shot him in the head.

A loud bang sounded before the cook stumbled back, hitting the pans hanging from a rack. They made loud clunking noises as his lifeless corpse hit the ground.

Holding his side, he made sure the area was clear, walking around to check every shadow and every spot where a man could hide.

"Alister!" Rosetta shouted, coming up to grab his hand and move it. "You're hurt."

He elbowed her hands out of the way to keep the pressure on the wound to his side.

"I told you to stay on the ship!"

He wrapped his large hand around her throat and pulled her in. He wasn't choking her, but damn did he want to.

He may have even squeezed a little tighter than he usually did.

“You said I could come across once the men were bound.”

“And we had checked that we hadn’t missed anyone!”

“I was fine on my own.”

“Really?” He gave a laugh, but it didn’t hold a single shred of humour. He released her by pushing her back. “Because I just stopped you from getting hit by a cleaver.”

The man had been slowly sneaking up behind her with it raised. Alister had intercepted him just in time that he sliced sideways instead and got him in the torso.

Hissing in a breath, he looked down, thankful the injury was on the side he could actually see, and moved his hand away.

He pressed it back when he saw how quickly he was bleeding.

If he’d had his cutlass in his hand, he might have been able to deflect the attack but he’d been too busy trying to find her to hold it. For this. Very. Reason.

Women! They always get in the way.

“I knew he was there.” She narrowed her eyes on him. “I was just reaching for my pistol when you pushed me.”

He didn’t care if it was a lie or the truth. That wouldn’t change the fact she’d disobeyed his order and he was in need of serious medical attention.

He turned away from her, walking down the hallway so he could find the surface.

“Let me help you,” she offered, coming beside him as he placed his hand on the walls to steady himself.

He wasn’t weakening, he was just bracing himself through the sharp throbbing pain that came with every footfall on that side of his body.

She tried to put his arm around her shoulders and he nudged her out of the way.

“I don’t need anyone’s help, Rosetta,” he barked. “Never have, never will.”

“Captain...” one of his men gasped when he made his way into sunlight.

“Aye,” he nodded with a disgruntled tone. “Blame the lass.”

He grabbed one of the ropes still connecting his ship to this one, and used it to steady himself as he walked across a plank.

The entire time, he knew Rosetta was following him and he really wished she wouldn’t. He didn’t need some woman fawning and cooing at him

because he was injured.

At least she's getting off the trading boat. He wouldn't have to think about her while he was tending to his own wound. He wanted to be angry but he was just too concerned about himself to care right then. He'd deal with her later.

"Do you have a doctor on board?"

He guessed her question meant she didn't have one.

"Nay. You killed him when you took over my ship." He turned his head to the closest man available and found Clint staring at him wide-eyed. "Boy."

The fourteen-year-old came running over, his messy black tousled hair held back from his face with a bandana.

"Y-Yes, captain?"

"Bring a clean cloth, a bowl of grog, and one of the large bottles of rum to my quarters."

Clint went running as if the backs of his heels were on fire, quickly disappearing below deck.

Alister headed for his quarters. Just when he went to close the door by pushing it behind him, he felt resistance.

"Leave me alone, lass."

This wasn't for the faint of heart. He didn't want to have to deal with someone who might faint.

Heading deeper inside, he grabbed a clean eating knife. He also grabbed a small candle stick and the flint and tender he'd need to light it.

Just as it was lit by setting wood shavings on fire and using that to light the wick, with one blood-covered hand, Alister removed his shirt. He fell into one of the dining chairs, then started heating the blade of the knife.

He could see in his peripheral she had ignored him and was kneeling at the small chest of her personal items. She'd already removed her coat and had rolled up her sleeves, which he'd never seen her do before.

"Do you never listen?" His voice was quiet from pain, but there was a bite to it. "I told you to get out. You've already screwed up enough things today by not following orders."

She didn't stop what she was doing, nor did she answer him.

Clint burst through the door, running forward to place everything he'd asked for on the table in front of him before leaving.

Alister threw the cloth into the grog water to soak with his free hand. Then

he grabbed the bottle of rum, ripped the cork out with his back teeth, and spat it across the room.

He chugged half the bottle in one go, trying to numb his state by drowning in it. It wouldn't be enough, he'd need at least another three bottles before he'd be even tipsy – if he was lucky.

Rum barely did anything for him these days.

“You shouldn't drink, it'll make you bleed more.”

As she was coming over to him, he pointed one of the fingers holding the bottle at her.

“You don't get to tell me what to do.” Then she knelt in front of him between his legs, reaching to grab that cloth. “Oi, what do you think you're doing?”

“I have tended to every wound of my crew.” Her voice was small, her expression grim as she spoke but she looked surprisingly composed. “As well as my own. I have a little bit of medical knowledge.”

She's got scars on her? He knew she'd hurt the back of her arm the day of the pirate hunters but he thought that might have been her first wound. It hadn't looked deep.

“Is that why you followed me all the way in here?”

“Yes.” Her eyes came up to his face, and he noted a hint of softness he'd never seen before. Soft was not something he would usually think of her expressions. “So let me help you so you don't have to do it yourself.”

His lips pursed together into a thin lines, before he turned his head away.

“Fine. You'll need to cauterize the vein I'm bleeding from first.”

“I know that.” She twisted the cloth to wring it out, and then made him jump when she wiped it over his side. “Will you be able to handle being stitched or should I expect you to wriggle like some?”

“Stitch me? Lass, you ain't coming anywhere near me with a needle and thread. Just stop the bleeding, I can heal the rest.”

She was silent for a few moments.

When he looked to her, he could see she was inspecting his wound.

“No,” she sighed, patting his wound again with the soaked cloth. “You'll definitely need a few stitches.”

“Nay.” He shoved the burning hot knife towards her so she'd take it.

“It'll help stop you from getting an infection.”

“I've healed through every injury I've ever gotten the same way.”

She gave a shrug. “And today you’ll get a new way.”

Alister slammed the bottom of his fist against the table.

“You’re one stubborn bitch, you know that? I’m telling you nay.”

She pushed the tip of the blade into his wound and he gave a yelp he tried to not let out. *It’s worse when someone else does it!*

“You got hurt because of me,” she said once she was done cauterizing his wound enough so that it would stop bleeding. “Let me tend to you properly. It’s my way of showing that I’m sorry.”

“Ha!” he chuckled darkly, feeling the corners of his eyelids crinkle while taking a swig of his rum. “Can’t believe my ears. The lass is apologising.”

He took another swig, glaring up at the ceiling in thought. *She’ll keep pestering me.*

“Exactly, so let me help.”

Knew it.

“Fine, hurt me further with your little needle and thread.”

Not that he wanted it!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



When Rosetta had first entered the room behind Alister, she'd taken her sewing instruments from the small chest of her personal items. Then she came to kneel in front of him, using the cloth to clean his wound as best as

she could.

She'd used the flame to burn the tip before she'd started to clean it as best as she could, and then she'd gotten to work on sewing him up.

The injury was just below his rib cage on his right side. It wasn't too large or deep, but it was enough to concern her.

She could tell by all the scars on his torso that he had cauterized every wound he'd ever gotten and never tended to them properly. He had shallow white streaks all over his chest, stomach, shoulders, and arms.

The way she was doing it would cause less scarring.

Every time she pushed the needle in, he would take a swig of rum before she did as though he was trying to drink courage for it. He didn't move at all, but she did hear him hiss out a breath through clenched teeth.

She tied the last knot and used the knife to separate the needle from the thread.

"There, was that so bad?" she asked, placing them on the table.

"Aye, can't say I'm partial to how that felt," he answered, pulling on his skin to better examine the stitched wound.

"You'll heal quicker like this. So even if it hurts now, it'll hurt for less longer."

He looked to her still kneeling between his knees, giving her a grimace. "Is that even true?"

A quiet laugh fell from her by accident.

"Yes." Then she brushed the backs of the fingers of one hand over a scar that ran from just below his sternum, all the way to his navel. "You also won't have such a deep scar."

He has so many of them. She'd never seen a body this riddled with them.

"Don't give a damn if I've got scars, lass." He went to take a drink, looked at the bottle, and then tipped it upside down. He placed the empty bottle on the table carelessly. It fell to its side and rolled. "Doesn't hurt so bad anymore, either."

She fingered a scar across his chest and the pectoral muscle beneath it seemed to leap to her touch.

This was the first time she'd seen him without a shirt on and she was able to see his torso in all its strength and glory. She quietly admitted to herself that she was enjoying what she was looking at.

Rosetta didn't mind the stain of blood still on him.

His chest was covered in black curling hair that made his usual tanned skin seem pale in comparison. There was even a goodie trail of it running down his navel to fade into his breeches.

His stomach had defined muscles, his torso thick with them.

“Why didn’t you stay on my ship?” His tone wasn’t as sharp as it was before.

She thought perhaps her touching him like this was easing his obvious anger.

She sifted her fingers through the hair on his chest, letting her eyes drink him in without a care in the world if he wanted her to stop or not.

“It was a Western trading ship. I knew they’d have nutmeg and I told Mr Darkley about the wonders of it. Wanted to see if they had some before your men ransacked the kitchen and made it impossible to find anything.”

Things often got lost in raids, everything piled into the cargo bay of the ship.

What one man thought was treasure, another thought was trash. Like, for example, seeing this man half naked, his chest and torso out on show for her, was a treat she wanted nothing more than to savour. Whereas another woman with a soft and fragile heart may have found him unsightly because of it.

She couldn’t stop touching him, even if she tried.

“You disregarded my orders... for a spice?” His voice held disbelief and her eyes darted up to look at his confused expression.

They came back down to watch her own hand as she deliberately brushed it over his chest to almost knead him, flicking one of his manly nipples along the way.

Both his hands twitched like they wanted to turn into fists in reaction.

“I thought it was safe, that you’d rounded up all the traders.” She gave a shrug, bringing her hand back over the little sensitive point to see his hands actually clench. “Didn’t really mean to disregard it.”

Her hand then started trailing over the scar that ran down his side and over his hip. It brought her hand dangerously low on his stomach.

She even fingered one of the deep V lines that ran diagonally down his hips.

“You’re giving me ideas here, Rosetta.” Her eyes darted back up to his face to see he was searching hers. He didn’t often call her by her name, but it made the corners of her lips curl up almost every time. “Not really in a

magnanimous state at the moment.”

When she looked down, she could see the bulge of something slowly, but visibly, growing in his breeches.

“I guess you were trying to save my life.”

She brought both her hands to the waistband of his pants and scratched the back of her nails up his hips lightly. His stomach dipped, clenching in reaction, and that bulge suddenly got bigger.

“And I am already on my knees.”

She placed her hands on the buttons of his breeches, but then paused when her gaze found his wound. “Are you alright though?”

“Oh aye,” he said with a hint of humour, the anger in his eyes fading into something much more dangerous. “It’ll fix me right up. Call it an addition to your healing of me.”

Rosetta raised up on her knees to press her lips to his stomach while her hands worked on undoing the four buttons holding his breeches closed.

Her body reacted swiftly to her own actions as she stroked across one of his chest scars with her tongue. She even brought it over his nipple like she had with her fingers and the expire he gave made her belly clench low with a shuddering flip of desire.

She was growing more excited by the minute at the idea of touching him.

She’d given herself an excuse to touch him, to give him a reward like she’d needed to be able to. Almost like she needed to convince *herself*.

Just as she was about to dip her hand inside the opening she’d created, and pull something from it she had wanted to taste for a long time, a knock sounded at the door.

Both their heads turned to it.

“Alister,” Pierre said from the other side, the handle of the door starting to turn. “Are you alright? Heard you were—”

Alister shot forward and grabbed the empty bottle of rum from the table to throw it at the door that was slowly beginning to open. She was thankful it was opening in the direction away from them.

Glass shattered across it and it suddenly shut.

He turned his head back to her. “You were saying?”

She stifled the urge to giggle and slipped her hand inside. She gave his hardened shaft a stroke at the same time she freed it, making it jut up from between his hips.

Her eyes went heavy-lidded as she stared at it, licking at her lips. She didn't know where she wanted to start with the hardened rod of meat standing on end with all its glory for her.

Everywhere seemed to call for attention. The dark pink broad head with the little slit at the top; its flared rim. The two dark blue veins on either side of it. Even the ridge underneath seemed to beg for her to cup it with her tongue.

“You look hungry there, lass.”

And she was. She was quite giddy with the prospect of what she could do to him.

She cupped the side of his cock, barely able to fit her hand around it, while she leaned in to press her lips to the other side of it. She kissed it, rubbing her lips over it as she travelled from the base, all the way to the rim of his cockhead before going back down the other side.

Using his fingers to comb through her hair, he grabbed a fistful of it when she started pressing feather light kisses sporadically over it.

Only when he let out another deep expire, his cock pulsating in her palm, did she lick her tongue across the tip of him. Then she gloved it with her mouth, sucking completely on the head in a tight suction.

She twirled her tongue around it at the same time and his head fell back against the chair to rest there. She met his eye with her own and curled her lips up into a smile at the lax expression he held.

She slid her mouth further down.

His nose crinkled when a quiet groan came from him.

When the tip of his cock pressed against the back of her throat, she drew up only to push back on him. Every time she brought her mouth away, she cupped her tongue back, and slipped it forward when she pushed on.

She was trying to give him an additional stroke.

She was slow at first, but the faster she climbed in speed, the more she saw his hand grip the armrest of the chair. His other hand would grip her hair tighter, pulling harder on the strands.

His abdomen dipped.

Placing her arms onto his lap to cuddle into it to get a better purchase, she stroked the base of him with her hand as she moved her mouth.

His hips started to twitch, almost as though he was absentmindedly thrusting his hips back and forth. Rosetta got her first hint of salt.

And when she did, she pulled away to trail her tongue over him, letting her teeth catch on the head to add a different sensation.

He let out a puff of breath, like a pent-up sigh from her taking her mouth away. It seemed as though he'd needed a moment of relief.

"Fuck, Rosetta. Were you a whore before you were a pirate?" he asked, before she made him derail his thoughts to groan by dragging her tongue over one side of his sac.

She took his words for what they were, a compliment, and brought one of those little orbs into her mouth to suckle on it as a reward.

Watching this masculine arrogant man shudder, his muscles jerking all over in different places in reaction, made her grin up at him.

Ho! Ho! I'm really enjoying this.

She moved onto the other, rolling her tongue this time to feel it move, and he bounced his leg like he couldn't stop it from quaking.

She started to stroke him as she flicked her tongue back and forth, and his face crinkled up into a furrow that appeared as though she was torturing him... and loving it.

And then it seemed to be too much because he pulled on her hair to release his sac from her tight suction.

She started trailing kisses back up the side of his thick throbbing shaft. It was warm to the touch and so engorged she knew it must ache terribly. She could feel it pounding in her palm with deep pumps of his heart.

"You know," she said between kisses, the hint of humour in both her voice and her features, making sure to look up at him with his cock impacting his clear vision of her face. "You're pretty sensitive."

"Oh aye, that might be because you don't know what it feels like to have you playing with my cock like this."

He was making it seem like what she was doing was different to what he was used to.

She wondered if Alister was used to women who were focused on the end rather than the journey to getting a man to come by their mouth.

She, on the other hand, rarely did this.

And she only did this when she really wanted to. When she intended to make the man she was sucking lose his grip on reality and only focus on her playful mouth.

Impatient, he yanked her head and forced her lips to the tip of him. "Now

suck it like before.”

She knew exactly what he meant, and if she didn't comply, he'd make her do it. He looked desperate for it, so twisted up with need that it seemed to radiate from him.

After teasing him for two weeks, she didn't doubt Alister was desperate for her to make him come.

What he didn't know, is she'd been teasing herself at the same time. Her pussy throbbed to replace her mouth around him with her inner walls and grind herself into bliss. Every stroke of her mouth made her body jealous that she wasn't receiving it.

Rosetta brought her mouth up and down over him in rapid goes, twirling her tongue all the while to give him exactly what he wanted.

She'd give him what he wanted to today, simply because he'd been a good boy and saved her – even though she hadn't needed saving.

“Haa!” His head tilted back, his sight turning to the ceiling after his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

Alister let out a deep, long groan that resonated in her ears, his mouth falling open wide.

His hand gripped her hair even tighter while the other came to hold her around her nape, almost like he was afraid she'd try to back away at the last second right before he achieved release.

He gave her another groan and gave her another hint of salt to taste.

“Aye, just like that.”

His grip on her started to tighten, his hips started to rock more. He even subtly moved her up and down just a little faster, while she licked him at the same time. Her tongue was a never stopping limb, constantly moving, constantly slipping over his delicious cock.

And then he shoved her head down further and held her still.

She felt the first burst of liquid fill her mouth just as he gave a deep groaning expire. Alister started coming, his cock pulsating between her lips and under her palm as it came from him.

She stroked him with her hand and slipped her tongue side-to-side, which seemed to make his body shake more.

She waited for it to stop, and for him to release her, before she pulled her mouth away to swallow down the salty taste of him.

He fell back and sprawled across the chair, his chest rising up and down in

quick heaves as he caught his breath. With his gaze fixed on her, moving all over her body almost like he was inspecting it, he huffed.

With surprisingly quick speed, he launched forward and grabbed one cheek of her arse while putting his arm around her shoulders. He lifted her, slipping her over his legs until she was seated around his hips with her knees on either side of them.

“Alister!” she gasped, trying to back away from him.

His arm around her held her where she was as he brought his mouth to her throat to roughly kiss at it. She didn’t realise he’d loosened the tie of her tights until he shoved his entire forearm down the front of it and was cupping the sensitive pink flesh between her thighs.

“W-wait,” she gasped, a shiver rolling through her when he drew his firm tongue across the sensitive spot of her skin where her jugular was. “You’re injured. I don’t want to pull your stitches out.”

She could carelessly hurt him.

His breaths were hot and panted as he spoke, giving her harsh nips with his teeth.

“I have been waiting nearly two weeks to feel your pussy again.” He gave a small noise of appreciation as he circled her clit. “Tell me to stop, Rosetta, otherwise I’m going to shove my fingers inside you.”

Her breath hitched at his words and she squirmed on his lap. She even thought her body bucked into his hand to get him to go lower.

When she didn’t say anything after a few minutes passed, he speared her core with a thick finger, making her yelp from the quick intrusion. He added a second and she let out another gasp, feeling her body stretch for it.

“I knew you’d be fucking wet. I bet the sea would be drier than you are right now.”

He pulled his elbow back, forcing the tightness of her pants to roll all the way down until they were past her hips and bundling under the curve of her arse. It created a pocket of room for him to pump his fingers inside her.

She felt just how easy the glide of his pumps were, how slick her core had gotten for him. She let out a pant, her body growing lax and surrendering to letting him touch her like this.

“*Ohh,*” Rosetta moaned, her hips twitching into his palm when his fingertips kept brushing over the right place inside her channel.

A shiver of goosebumps washed over her entire body.

She dug her nails deeply into his forearm, needing to hold onto it.

“You’re getting small again, lass.” He rotated his fingers within the snugness of her as if to punctuate his point. “If I don’t put my cock in you soon, it’ll hurt again when I enter you.”

She almost said yes, she needed to say no, but what fell from her was, “please.”

Already she was growing close and she was desperate to be thrown overboard to crash into the waves of bliss.

She hadn’t been able to give herself release since she’d been sharing her sleeping area with others. And Rosetta wouldn’t dare do it in this room where he could have come upon her right in the middle of the act.

Her cries were soft but the ache of her swelling channel was growing strong. Rosetta was building, and the higher the climb was, she knew the harder she’d fall.

He started laying her back so that her shoulders would rest against the table in front of him. She got a moment of reprieve from his mouth when he pulled his head back to look at her twisted, needy face.

But Alister had freed his other hand so he could lift her tunic all the way up until it was bundled around her throat. Her exposed breasts jiggled every time her hips spasmed, every time her stomach dipped when she tried to roll her hips, every time a quiver of breath racked through her chest.

“I have been dying to see these tits.”

He palmed her side from her thigh all the way up until he reached a breast. His thumb flicked over an aching, hardened pink bud as his hand rubbed up to her neck, and then back down to squeeze her entire breast.

Alister leaned over her body, his fingers pumping faster as he did. He licked across the scar that travelled from her hip, diagonally up her body, and then ended right where he enclosed the nipple next to it in his mouth.

“Ohhh!”

One of her hands shot up to grab his long hair, palming the back of his head to push him deeper against it.

He twirled his tongue around it once and her eyes bowed.

The second time it twirled had her head tilting back against the table, a roll of desire flipping low in her belly. The third time was accompanied by a hard suck and Rosetta was gone.

His mouth followed her breast as her back arched. Her core started to

spasm around his thick, rough fingers as she came. Her body pulled tight like a rope being pulled from both sides.

Rosetta let out a near sobbing cry as she orgasmed, waves of it crashing over her.

The moment it stopped, Alister used the hand between her leg to push deeper and lift her at the same time until she was lying on the table.

And then everything seemed to get rougher.

He curled his free arm around her head as he sucked her breast harder, a wonderful tight suction while his tongue danced over it. His fingers moved faster, moving the wetness of her orgasm around.

Rosetta wanted to spread her thighs more when he used his thumb to circle her clit but her pants wouldn't let her. He was focusing all his attention in the three places he needed to and she started hurtling faster towards that edge she'd just finished falling from.

Putting her arms around his head to hug him to her, she dug the nails of both hands into his back. Moan after moan fell from her lips.

She realised that it had gone from his body jerking from his muscles twitching all over, to her body doing it now. Everything was bunching. Her thighs, her biceps, even strange muscles in her back she didn't know she had.

Her nipple had started to go numb, almost painful even. She yanked his hair to get him to move away.

He went to the other one just so he could torment it as well. It was like he was unwilling to move away from her chest. Licking at it, sucking at it, even giving the mound of her breast little nips.

She could feel his long stubble poking into her, tickling her skin. Soft sandpaper-like texture that had her wanting him to caress her with just his cheek and chin.

He tongued her nipple before he brought it into his mouth, just as he stopped pumping his fingers and instead stayed deep to rub the tips against the swollen ridge inside.

The different sensation threw her against the clouds again.

Rosetta was once more climaxing around his wiggling digits as they played with the swollen area that made her mindless. Little sparks flashed behind her eyelids, continuing even when they started to soften as she came down into his warm embrace.

He left his fingers inside her so she could adjust slowly back to normal,

and let her body flutter around them.

Then he removed them to place his arm around her head like the other one, tapping kisses up her chest, neck, and then jaw. His breaths were heavy and laboured and they made her skin prickle even more when they rolled across it.

Her back arched a little when he slipped the entire length of his cock against her and the undershaft of it rubbed over the wetted folds of her clit.

“I want to fuck you, lass.”

Yes! By the great sea gods, yes. Rosetta wanted that more than anything.

His mouth found hers before she could reply to force it into a deep and hungry kiss.

Then she felt him tilt his hips in a way that made the tip of his cock push through her closed thighs and through her folds. It found the entrance to the deepest part of her he'd just been playing with.

Part of her tried to pry her legs apart so he'd actually slip in rather than just running over it like a cruel tease, another part had her breaking away from the kiss by tilting her head back.

“N-no.”

He may have saved her, and she may be desperate for him to fill her again, but he still hadn't earned it – even if she didn't know how he was supposed to.

If she did, she'd tell him just so she could have that big shaft pumping inside her again. Fuck, she wanted it.

She wanted the steely bulging muscles of his arms to trap her in while he crushed her under the heavy weight of his sweaty and blood-stained body. She wanted to hear him grunt like a wild animal while he ravished her with heavy thrusts which made her feel like she was in heat. She wanted that thick cock to stretch her pussy so far again it burned so deep that she'd want to weep in bliss.

Right now, she wanted it more than she wanted to breathe.

Her core ached for it, dripped for it, clenched in pathetic emptiness for it. She was so sensitive that she knew it'd feel like she was floating in heaven the moment he shoved it in.

She was so turned on by everything they had just done that she knew it would feel amazing.

“Bloody hell.”

He leaned back on straightened arms to stare down at her.

Her hands fell to rest against her chest, feeling them rise and fall with her panting breaths.

He also pulled his hips back so he could remove the kiss of their bodies and instead grind his shaft over her clit again.

“What more could you want from me?”

Rosetta was placed in a very vulnerable position beneath him currently.

Her tunic was lifted to her throat, her tights now almost at her knees. She was completely exposed and if Alister wanted to, he really could overpower her and do whatever he wanted.

She should be afraid. She knew he’d almost done it to her before. Yet, because he’d stopped himself last time was the reason she wasn’t at all now.

She felt remarkably calm looking up at this heavily aroused man who had a merciless and violent past. One she had seen; one she had witnessed.

She was panting, watching him as his eye started to trail all over her body. The way his lids grew heavy lidded and flickered told her he might like what he was looking at.

“Damn it woman,” he bit, shaking his head. “You look like you want it more than I do.”

He started to pull back, making himself stand while allowing her to sit up.

“You’re still going to have to help me get rid of this,” he told her, his hand reaching down to stroke his shaft to explain what he meant.

She winced when she looked at it. It looked more engorged than before, the veins on its sides throbbing wildly. It only made her wonder just how hard his heart was pumping right then.

“But I’ve already sucked you.”

“Aye, and you can do it again for every time you put that needle in me.”

“That’s like nine times!”

Although Rosetta didn’t mind tasting him again, the idea of all that work made her jaw ache already.

“It was seven.” He gave her a grin, placing his hand around the back of her head to draw it closer to his cock. “And maybe I’ll let you off after this time if you let me do it. If you pleasure me well, I may even fuck you again with my fingers until you’re satisfied afterwards.”

She squinted her eyes up at him in a glare. She thought she may know what he meant by letting him do it and she didn’t trust that.

However, the idea that he might give her another sweet orgasm, or a few, had her nibbling her bottom lip in contemplation.

Rosetta parted her lips to accept it.

Alister pushed in as far as he could and then ground his cock against the back of her throat. “Now that’s a good lass.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Alister held a cigar between his index and middle fingers with his hand leaning against the railing of the quarterdeck, staring down at all his crew. He held a near empty bottle of rum in the other hand that was dangling down,

gentling tapping it against the railing in tempo with the music.

Men were singing, playing instruments, or tapping on barrels to add their own drumming.

Night had fallen on them and everyone was drinking, relaxing, and merrily partying. A grin was fixed permanently on his features, watching them carouse on the main deck.

Men were gambling. Laughter was constant.

The sails were furled away. The anchor dropped to keep them near the shore.

They had made it to the Kou Pelin Islands two days earlier than they thought they would and were currently celebrating.

Alister watched Pierre forcefully take Rosetta's hand to make her dance. She leapt at the opportunity.

It didn't take long for Pierre to realise that his chosen dancing partner was rowdy, and Alister knew the tricky woman was stepping on his toes on purpose. Her squealing laughter was a dead giveaway.

Rosetta liked to pick on the man who thought his usual charm to woo ladies would work on her. Every time it bit the man in the arse.

It was often the highlight of Alister's day to watch her mess with him.

But ever since they'd arrived at Kou Pelin Islands, he'd noticed her behaviour had changed. A smile had rarely left her face. He knew the woman was excited.

She really wants that ship.

And Alister thought he might be able to get her it.

The cannons were ready, the men prepared and told of what was to happen when the ship came into view. A week ago they had raided the trader's boat and completely restored his own with the supplies they had procured.

Even though all of the holes in the hull had been fixed, neither one of them had spoken about her sleeping arrangements.

Currently, Rosetta still slept in his cabin in her own hammock.

He thought she had grown comfortable in it and didn't want to relocate again. Alister had no issue with letting her stay.

Unfortunately, it did very little to assist him in bedding her. They were rarely awake in it at the same time.

She's gone before I wake. And he often missed his opportunity to catch her trying to crawl into her hammock because he was busy.

He manned the helm for most of the day, but afterwards, he still had work to do as a captain. Checking the stocks and cargo, speaking with his crew about any issues.

That's why tonight was a surprise. Rosetta was still awake far past sundown.

"The woman's got spirit," Pierre said with a disgruntled laugh, making his way up the steps after escaping her. "I think she's broken my toes."

"You'll be right," Alister told him, ashing his cigar before taking in a deep draw of it.

"How is it you're able to fuck her, but I can barely even get close to her without getting hurt?"

The issue was, Alister wasn't.

She won't give in. He knew the horny lass wanted him, and other than the day she'd gotten him sliced with a cleaver a week ago, he hadn't gotten into her pants again at all.

No matter what he did, said, or tried, no matter how aroused he got her that she'd be literally grinding her body against his, she wouldn't cave.

His time was almost up.

Alister wondered if getting her the Laughing Siren was the price. *That's a big ask, lass,* but he almost thought it could be worth it.

He could only imagine the reward for it when saving her from the cleaver had gotten her to suck him with her annoying yet naughty mouth.

For the past week, he'd been reflecting on that day.

For the rest of his life, he didn't think he'd ever get the sight of her out of his mind with her tunic bundled around her neck and her tights down her thighs while lying back against the table looking up at him. Her hands had been curled up just above her exposed breasts, her thighs wet from his touching her.

There had been an innocence about her, a softness in her blue eyes.

Brown hair haloing around her head, brown freckles across her nose pinkened by obvious arousal, eyes fixed on him. Her huffs of breath had been quiet but they fell from wet and swollen lips even though he'd never kissed them.

The contrast of seeing that look, when usually she either looked devious or bitchy, had been mind-achingly haunting.

Even now it made his body want to shudder in desire.

Alister thought he could've drunk in the sight of her like that for eternity.

"That's 'cause yer an annoying lil shit, Pierre," Derek said from beside Alister, who had been standing with him silently the entire time.

"You're joking, right? I'm way easier to handle than him." Pierre hiked his thumb at Alister. "Don't know why she picked him over me."

Because she's a smart lass. Alister probably wouldn't have been as interested in getting her the Laughing Siren if she didn't try to catch his attention.

"She's liked our cap'in from the start," Derek rebuffed. "And even she knows ye'd probably give her a disease."

"She doesn't like me," Alister cut in, ashing his cigar again before just letting it burn. She may like the idea of his dick, but even he knew she held no feelings for him. "She argues too much with me."

Constantly they bickered. She wouldn't do what she was told, and Alister would yell at her for it. Most women, and even some men, cowered at the brutal tone his voice held sometimes.

Rosetta would either glare or laugh at him for it.

She's got a spark in her, an irritating one that he found daring.

"That's because she's crazy!" Pierre yelled, shaking his head while taking a swig of his own bottle of rum.

"Men call women like that crazy because they just don't have the skills to handle them," Alister told him with a chuckle. "The lass' mind is perfectly sound, she's just strange tempered."

"It's only crazy men that would marry women like her," Derek added, giving his old age of wisdom.

"Good luck to the man that marries her," Alister snorted. "Only a fool would take her on, and if he didn't start out mad, she'd drive him there."

"Here here!" Pierre cheered in agreeance. Then he stared down at his rum bottle, turning it from side-to-side to read its partially wet and destroyed label. "Still, she's fun to have around. Oh! And the food, that woman knows how to cook."

Alister and the men had gotten to discover just why she had wanted to show them the taste of nutmeg.

He thought everyone had enjoyed their meals that day, and even Glen Darkley had been impressed – and the older man was hard to stir an emotion from.

From their position on the quarterdeck watching above the rest of the ship, they all watched Clint try to steal a dance with her. She quickly flung him away after a few spins. She stole Naeem to swing with and he seemed eager to let her.

“Still don’t understand the relationship between those two,” Derek muttered with a dark tone.

Neither did Alister.

They seemed closer than was normal and he’d noticed Naeem would watch over her carefully when he wasn’t busy up in the sails. Alister got a lot of chances to spy on the people on his deck from the wheel of his ship.

“She’s just as close to that Mr John Smith,” Alister added in her defence. “She’s found people she trusts on these seas, that’s rare to find.”

He had the same inkling about the two people currently beside him. Pierre and Derek were the men he kept closest to him, which is why he’d placed them in the positions they were. He’d convinced his crew to vote them in.

And speaking of Mr Smith, Rosetta eventually grabbed the unwilling old gentleman and forced him to skip with her.

Watching them, Alister realised he didn’t know anything about her, or her relationship with those men, or how she’d come to be on his warship.

How did she come to be the captain of a crew? One that would die for her. Hell, Alister didn’t even know where she’d come from.

Hmm. He raised the hand with the cigar to brush the hair on his cheek. *Drunk women tend to be loose.*

If he couldn’t manage to sleep with her tonight, perhaps he could get her to reveal her past. Her secrets.

Who are you really, Rosetta Silver? Who was this tantalising woman currently in Alister’s sights?

Her dancing eventually stopped.

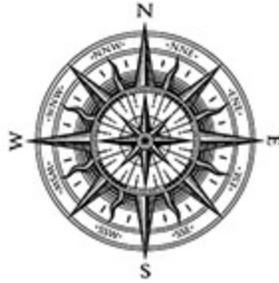
She fell with her back against the railing near the bottom of the stairs towards the back of the ship that led to a small platform. She sat in the middle of Naeem and Mr Smith, placing an arm around each of their shoulders.

A horrible laugh sounded over the distance as she stomped both her feet. He shook his head. *Woman laughs like a squealing pig.* It was high pitched and cringe worthy.

Alister chugged the remainder of his booze and carelessly threw the bottle in the ocean.

“Alright lads, looks like I need another drink,” he told them, taking a last draw of his cigar before flicking that away as well.

He just really wanted an out from his position between them.



Even though Rosetta was often distracted by the people she danced with, her eyes constantly found Alister towering above all on the quarterdeck.

He seemed to be in a good mood with the grin plastered on his face, a cigar in one hand and a bottle in the other.

After she spent some time trying to get Pierre to leave her alone for the night, she'd peeked up to the three men talking. She'd spoken very few words to Derek in the three weeks she'd been on the ship, but she didn't mind the older man.

He usually answered her in grunts when she handed him his plate of food.

Pierre was too friendly and familiar for her to ever get comfortable with. She enjoyed picking on him and hurting him for her own entertainment. He'd never asked her to brush his hair again, and she doubted he'd ever ask her to dance again either.

One lesson at a time.

But ever since she sat down between Naeem and Mr Smith, her attention had been solely on them.

Naeem's chest heaved with heavy breath, still trying to calm his heart from dancing with her.

“Damn Rosetta, you know how to make a man trip over his own feet.”

“Agreed,” Mr Smith chuckled. “You're not graceful.”

“I am a wonderful dancer!” She kicked her legs forward before taking a swig of her drink with a laugh. She knew it was the truth, but she wouldn't let them know that. “I'm also a wonderful singer.”

She opened her mouth to start and they both went to put their hands over her face to stop her.

Her laughter grew, muffled by their palms.

“You only sing when you’re drunk.” Mr Smith looked at her much like how a father would in disappointment or worry at a daughter. His lips drew together in thin lines, his bushy brows furrowing. Even his eyes squinted at her as though he was inspecting her current state of being. “You should slow down.”

“Perhaps I’m a little intoxicated.” She gave a shrug, before swinging them from side-to-side in the embrace she’d forced them into. “I’m just excited.”

“We’ve almost got the Laughing Siren,” Naeem cheered, taking the bottle of rum from her hand to raise it in the air like a cheers before drinking from it. Apparently she was sharing it with the two of them. “How long have we been waiting for this day?”

“Over three years,” Rosetta smiled, turning her head up to look at the stars with joy. “For three years we’ve been hunting her.”

“About bloody time,” Mr Smith added in.

“I thought you’d die of old age before we got her.”

“Little shit.” Mr Smith reached around the back of Rosetta to slap Naeem in the back of the head for what he said.

“You still could, the night’s still young.”

This time Rosetta heard the slap Mr Smith delivered and even she winced.

“Quit it, old johnny boy!”

“Stop it!” She yelled with a stomp of her foot to stop them before they could get into some sort of brawl.

It wouldn’t be the first time Mr Smith had chased Naeem around a ship with a sword or gun, threatening to cut or blow his head off.

“I can’t wait to hold her wheel in my hands,” she said to them, clenching and unclenching her hands. “To weigh the anchor and see the wind fill her sails.” She huddled them in closer until they were almost all face to face to hush their conversation. “And to finally...”

A set of boots stopping directly in front of her cut off her words.

“First we have to procure her,” Alister said down to them, almost as though he wanted to cut in on their fun.

She hadn’t even realised he’d moved from his place on the quarterdeck. He’d even managed to get a new bottle.

“Like I said, we could sink it,” he added. “You’d be smart not to get too excited.”

She pulled Naeem and Mr Smith so they were no longer huddled together

privately. With her back up against the railing, she took his eye with both her own, a bright grin filling her features.

“And I’ve already told you. If I can’t have it, I want it at the bottom of the ocean.”

“I’ll drink to that!” Naeem shouted with glee, chugging at her bottle.

He handed it to her, giving her barely a sip’s worth.

“Why do you always do this?” She shoved him, forcing him forward while she delivered a heavy slap to his back. “Go get me another, you selfish prick.”

Naeem crawled forward for a moment before getting to his feet. He tripped, knocking into Alister by barging into his shoulder.

“Wassup, *captain*?” His tone had a sneer to it.

It was because he didn’t see him as his true captain.

Alister grabbed the man’s shoulder and shoved him away. “Go get her a bottle, lad.”

All three of them watched him stumble away.

He knocked into multiple other people, and almost fell against men throwing dice on a crate. They stood with their fists raised in anger for disturbing them, before realising it was an accident of a clearly disorientated drunk man.

“You know he isn’t coming back, right?” Mr Smith asked with sincerity, his fluffy brows furrowing with concern.

He rubbed his hand through his full-fledged but neatly shaped beard in thought, before knocking the rim of his glasses so they sat better on his face.

“He’ll find a place to pass out in,” Rosetta confirmed, nodding her head in his direction to point with her nose. “He’s useless when he’s like this.”

“Damn that boy,” Mr Smith sighed, rising to get to his feet. “I better help him otherwise we’ll be fishing him from the water again.”

There had been an odd occasion of Naeem walking on the deck of a ship with drunken legs, before he stumbled sideways and over the railing. It would take them all quite some time to realise he was floating away asleep.

She watched Mr Smith chase after him before her eyes turned to Alister once more.

“Well?” She raised a brow at him, leaning back against the railing once more to appear calm and collected. “Are you going to sit or are you going to just keep standing there like a big, tall idiot?”

She knew he must have come to speak with her considering he was here.

Alister rolled his eyes and had the audacity to sigh like *she* was bothering *him*.

He took a seat on the steps to sprawl his body against them, almost lying down. His elbow was leaning behind him, one leg laying straight while the other was bent.

She couldn't help feeling he looked remarkably self-important with the way he'd positioned himself.

After a few minutes of deciding, she scooched down the railing to be at the very bottom of the steps so she'd be able to hear him better.

Up went the bottle as he took a drink.

"Yes!" She raised her hand out. "Hand it over."

"Nay." He swiped it to the side out of her reach. "Get your own."

She gave a pout. "If I get up, I'm not coming back."

She could see he wanted to deny her, was mulling it over heavily. He eventually sighed defeatedly and placed the base of the bottle in her outstretched hand. The glass was cold in her warm palm.

She took it, drank deeply, and then handed it back.

"You've a strange relationship with those two," Alister commented, nodding his head towards the direction they'd gone. His face was dull, as if he didn't really care but she'd noticed he often pretended like this. Alister liked everyone around him to believe nothing much ever bothered him. "Been curious as to how you met them."

Rosetta pursed her lips together, her eyes squinting in suspicion.

"Are you trying to get to know me, Alister?"

He gave her a grin that told her he was fine with being caught so quickly. "Aye."

"Why should I tell you anything? You haven't shared anything of yourself."

He rubbed at his cheek, turning his head to look at the water through the railing. "Guess that's true. What do you want to know?"

"Really?" she asked with a note of surprise. A spark of curiosity came to life inside her. "You'll really answer?"

He gave a shrug. "Depends on what it is."

"Why are you searching for Dustin's treasure when most don't think it exists?"

She brought her knees up so she could hug them, making herself comfortable.

“I promised the previous captain of this crew that I would search for it and prove that he wasn’t insane,” he admitted, his gaze returning to her.

“Like on his death bed?”

Alister gave a deep chuckle. “Kind of. Do you know of the pirate, Cole ‘Mad Dog’ McCarthy?”

“A little.” Rosetta gave a small shrug. “They say he searched all his life, sailed over every part of the world, to find Dustin’s treasure trove, and never found it. He’s the reason everyone thinks it’s a myth.”

“When he got too sick to carry out his duties as captain, he told the crew to vote for a new captain, pushing my name forward.” Alister took a swig of his bottle, turning his head to the side to look at the tall tower of rock they were beside. “The men were happy to have me as captain and I promised him that I would search for the treasure trove in his stead.”

Wait... That’s how he became captain? That was such a simple story! She expected some sort of grand epic tale.

“Do you know what he died of?”

“A bullet to the head.”

Rosetta reared her head back. “I thought you said he was sick.”

“Aye, he was. Could barely stand.” Alister looked down at the bottle in his hand, a dark expression clearly falling over him. “So he placed his pistol in my hand, stood on the railing of his ship, and told me to shoot him.”

Her eyes widened, her mouth falling open in disbelief. “And you did?”

“Aye. Shot him right between the eyes.” His gaze swept over the grimace she gave. “He loved the sea, refused to die on land to get treatment. He wanted to be with it and he knew he was nothing more than a hindrance. He was a sick man on a ship. He was in the way and he knew it.”

“And here I thought you had a heart,” she laughed, trying to hide the fact she was balking at what he told her.

He folded his arms across his chest defensively.

“That’s why I did it. He asked for the mercy of a quick death, and I gave it to him.” Then Alister gave a huff, running his hand over the top of his head. “How did you become a captain then?”

“Ughhhhh.” Rosetta groaned so loud she was sure the nearest port heard her. “That is such a lengthy answer to give. Much has happened over the

years. We will be here all night.”

“I’ve got much time.”

Rosetta shook her head. “I’m usually asleep at this hour.”

“Fine,” he chuckled, realising she had had no intention of answering. “How did you meet Naeem? Like I said, your relationship with him is odd. Many of my crew have noticed it as well.”

Rosetta turned her head up to the stars, looking for encouragement. *How to answer that?*

“I have known Naeem since I was fifteen,” she told him, not pulling her face from the sky, but she did look at him from the corner of her eyes.

Alister’s dark brows creased deeply. “You knew him before you become a pirate?”

“Distantly, yes.” She ran the pad of her thumb over the edge of her nails absentmindedly. It was a minor distraction for herself. “I only grew to befriend him right before we both decided to run away together.”

“Like lovers?” Once more his face was dull, but she thought she heard a hint of an emotion in his voice.

Rosetta gave a bellowing laugh.

“Not at all! We both just decided we should run away and become pirates together. He helped me do that.”

“Is that the truth?” She could tell Alister didn’t like her answer by his narrowing gaze. “Because that sounds like some made up fantasy story of a girl.”

“That’s exactly what we did. We both just decided we didn’t want to be where we were anymore and we used each other to get away. Because I was a woman, Naeem was the man I needed in the places where my voice was meaningless. If I wasn’t pretending to be a man, that is.”

“You pretended to be a man?” There was a crinkle of humour in the corner of his eyelids. “You’re a bonnie lass, did it even work?”

Rosetta’s lashes flickered in surprise at his compliment.

It had been delivered so smoothly, but he’d never directly commented on her features like that before.

The sound of waves lapped at the sides of the hull filled the silence between them because of his comment.

“Kind of,” she pouted, placing her chin on her knees. “I had to pretend I was a young boy. They kind of look like girls.”

Alister laughed loudly, pointing his finger at her to wag it like he'd already summarised that's what she'd had to do before she'd even said it.

Then he took a swig of his drink, wiping his mouth on his forearm.

"Alright, what about Mr Smith?"

Rosetta shoved her hand out, refusing to answer until he handed her the bottle.

She swallowed one fifth of it in one go. She handed it back.

"About a year after Naeem and I set off, we managed to sneak our way into a port. Naeem was a captain for me at the time and we'd collected a very small crew and pickpocketed and worked for enough coin to buy our first boat."

Rosetta nibbled at the corner of her lips, not liking talking about this part of her history. The next part also wasn't her story to really tell, but she thought there might not be any harm in telling Alister.

She couldn't help sweeping her eyes to the furled away sails above them, inspecting them as a way to hide the swell of emotions she felt.

"Mr Smith was going to be hanged for murdering the man who killed his wife. He'd wanted to steal his daughter to force her into a marriage once they were out of the picture and no longer supporting her. He wanted her, and the inheritance she would have obtained in their deaths."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Alister cut in, seeming impatient to learn what'd happened.

"We were watching the public trial. Nobody believed he'd killed the man for this reason, instead thinking he'd killed his wife and the man she'd been having an affair with. Even though his daughter had sworn it was true, no one believed them."

Rosetta gave a small laugh, shaking her head in disbelief at the memory. After knowing him for as long as she did, she knew it was true.

Mr Smith had loved his wife and daughter more than anything in the world. Being apart from them, knowing his wife was gone and his daughter was all alone in the world, often made him sad.

"His wife had just been murdered at the hands of this arsehole and suddenly he was put to trial in his stead. I could see he was telling the truth. Since there weren't many soldiers, I convinced Naeem and the men to help me save him."

"You stopped his trial?"

“Oh no, the trial had ended and they were about to hang him on the noose. We saved him from his death.” A solemn smile filled her face and she hugged her legs a little tighter. “Mr Smith reminds me of my father, except braver.”

“You said your father was a sailor for the Laughing Siren, which is why you’ve been on it. That means you’ve met him?”

“Of course.” She scrunched her nose at him in confusion. “I grew up with him and my mother.”

“I half expected you to tell me you were born from a prostitute, lass. I’m only guessing with what I’ve learned.”

Rosetta gave a mocking snort of laughter.

“I’m not born from such a shameful birthing.” Her head tilted a little in confusion from the scowl Alister made. “No, my father was a faithful, hardworking man, and my parents loved me very dearly. They were caring and made sure I was happy to the best of their capabilities.”

“Then what were you running away from?”

Rosetta pursed her lips.

“I don’t have a tortured past, Alister.” Her eyes turned to him with a glare. “I was just a girl who decided she wanted to become a pirate and did it.”

“I find that hard to believe.” He narrowed his eye at her in return, squinting as he took a swig of his drink. “You’re also a proven liar.”

She saw the last of the liquid sloshing in the glass bottle when he placed it against his stomach to rest it there.

“I don’t know what you want me to tell you.” She leaned back from hugging her knees and folded her arms across her chest. “Why do I have to have a terrible past to want to become a pirate? Perhaps I like the idea of glittering gold and pretty riches.”

“Nay, Rosetta Silver,” he said with a strangely stern tone. “You’re just a funny woman, and most funny women have experienced terrible things.”

She puffed her cheeks in agitation, slowly blowing out a pent-up breath. Then she reached her hand out again. He handed her the bottle and instead of taking a drink of it, she got to her feet.

His eye followed her. “Oi, where are you going?”

“I’m tired. I’m going to sleep.”

Only once she was steady on her feet, and a safe distance away from him to stop her, did she finally down the last of it.

She handed the empty bottle to him. He tipped it upside down in horror.

He surprised her by grinning. "Do you need help getting into bed?"

She didn't trust the devilish hint to his expression. The way his lips were curled. The way his eye perused her from her head all the way to her feet, and then back up.

"Nay, lad," she said mockingly, placing her hands on her hips and leaning forward slightly. "Me thinks I can get meself ta ma own hammock."

"Nay lass," he said back, not giving a damn that she'd mocked the way he spoke with exaggeration. His grin widened and changed into something slyer. "You look like you need help getting naked first."

Rosetta's irritation faded so quickly to the point she almost giggled. She hid it behind a tiny cough.

Just when it looked like he was about to rise to his feet to try and do just that, she ran from him.

She was far too tipsy, and too excited with the prospect of finally reaching her goal, to be alone with him in that room right now.

Especially since the entire time she'd been talking to him, a part of her wanted to straddle his lap and kiss his stupidly handsome arrogant face.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Rosetta climbed the stairwell and burst onto the surface of the ship.
With how warm and muggy the air was today near the shore, she was only wearing her black tights, her white tunic, and her boots. Her hat and coat

were hanging inside her sleeping quarters.

She could hear Alister shouting before she even emerged and, the moment she did, she saw dozens of men were hot on their feet, running around at top pace.

He pointed to the thick iron chain that would need to be pulled on to bring it out from the water.

“Weigh the anchor!”

He was walking across the main deck, his head turning in every direction. His black doublet coat swayed with each movement while his brown boots made loud and quick stomping noises.

He threw his arm forward, his voice a deep bellow every time he shouted.

“Faster! I want those sails hoisted!” His head was upturned as he yelled his demands.

The men were busy in the air, running across beams and climbing the shrouds. The sails had already been released and were now being fixed into their positions to catch the wind.

“Pierre!” The blond-haired man turned to him while pulling on a rope moving through metal rigs. “Make sure the gunmen are ready and the cannons are loaded on all sides.”

Rosetta moved out of his way so he could follow his demand as he went to descend to the lower decks, and then she started chasing after Alister who was climbing the quarterdeck stairs.

Derek was already holding the helm to keep the ship steady while it was being prepared. He shooed him out of the way and took the wheel in his large hands himself.

“I want all spare hands on deck!” He started turning the wheel when the ship began creeping forward, going into motion for the first time in two days. “Because we’re going to need ‘em!”

Rosetta finally made it to the top of the steps and ran forward to stand next to him. He never took his eyes off the horizon.

“There’s your ship, lass.”

She followed the way his head was turned with her eyes, to see a speck of white miles in the distance. It was hard to distinguish what it was with the naked eye.

Rosetta had been helping Mr Darkley clean the kitchen from the morning meals when movement began to rattle the ship completely. Heavy footsteps

were heard while men ran around.

Clint was the one who came through the doorway, his chest heaving from exertion, telling them that the Laughing Siren had been spotted.

Without caring to look back or finish her duties, she'd abandoned Mr Darkley to come to the surface.

She didn't care if she couldn't tell it was the Laughing Siren or not in the distance. She knew Alister wouldn't have started moving the ship if he wasn't sure.

He'd told her he'd often seen it on the seas and turned the other way when he realised what it was. This was the first time he'd ever turned his warship towards it.

The wheel made clanking noises as he spun it, the ship turning on a sharp angle to come out from where they were hiding behind the topmost island. They'd been using the tall and unreachable land to hide them from the fleet steadily approaching.

At the moment, the Howling Death was sailing at a cross section to it. Any moment now, and Alister would turn the ship again to head towards it fully.

The biggest smile Rosetta had ever worn filled her face.

I'm almost there. Today she would have it, today it would be hers. *Today I will get what I have longed for.*

"You will do what you're told today, aye?" he asked, turning his head to put his eye on her.

Her gaze searched over his eyepatch before coming to take in the way the light of the bright sky made it look like he held the yellow sun in his good eye.

"I can't have you in the way. Stick to the plan."

She was a woman and even she knew the fleet wouldn't hesitate to use her as a hostage.

It was known that a woman on a ship was generally coveted by someone important on it. They wouldn't have one on there if that wasn't the case. Her life would be considered a priority, and therefore could be used against them.

He started to turn to ship again and the view of three ships became easier to see as they got closer.

"Yes, I'll follow the plan."

The plan Alister had that she remain on the Howling Death and let the men slaughter their way through the ship.

“Good.” He said with a curt nod, before putting his attention on the rest of the ship. “Raise our flag, lads! She’s almost in range of our cannons.”

Their black flag began to rise.

She watched as Alister reached up to grab the locket from around his neck and kissed it, not seeming to care that he’d done it in front of her. *Does he always do that?*

And then there it was, the Laughing Siren with all of its beautiful sails, timber, and glory.

They couldn’t see it yet, but Rosetta knew there was a carved statue of a mermaid on the bow of the ship. Its arms were reaching forward with its hands cupped together but open like it was trying to catch something. The tail fins were curled and stretched behind it.

It also had a wide-open mouth like it was laughing. It was an exaggerated expression that almost made it look ghastly.

The vessel’s trims were painted blue, while its timber was a sandy oak.

The galleon was larger, stronger in the hull than the Howling Death, but it was slower.

What will the support ships do?

“Warning cannons!” Alister yelled, and men echoed his commands over the main deck and then below it.

Booms sounded before two cannonballs launched from the bow of the ship. They hit the water, nowhere near the on-coming ships.

It was done on purpose.

They were all currently travelling the distance next to the Kou Pelin Islands. On the port side of Alister’s ship, and the starboard side of the fleet ships, were shallow banks of sand and the massive, towering islands.

The Howling Death was coming at them from a diagonal angle. It was trying to force the Laughing Siren down between the only gap available between the islands, otherwise it would run aground onto land and beach themselves.

With the way they were heading towards them, if it tried to go towards the open ocean, their ships would collide.

“Again!”

Another two booms sounded.

One of the fleet ships was forced to back off from the starboard side of the Laughing Siren as she started to turn towards that very gap. The other was

running up the side of her to take them on.

“It’s working,” she gasped.

“I told you they’d go through the middle to get away.”

Turning the wheel again, Alister began leading the ship between a different but far narrower gap between the four islands.

His frigate warship was shallower and narrower in the hull and could sail through it. They were turning away before the other enemy vessel could come upon them. The Laughing Siren was on a path that could no longer be changed.

The fleet ships would have to go around the Kou Pelin Islands since they were large ships that would get banked. Or, they would have wait to follow their head ship since the gap wasn’t wide enough to allow them to pass through at the same time.

Her heartbeat was like a deafening drum in her ears, the thrill and excitement making it pump so hard it resonated throughout her entire body. It pounded through her veins and even made her fingertips throb.

“I’m hoping one of them is stupid enough to try and follow us,” Alister commented when the Laughing Siren and the Howling Death were out of sight of each other because of the singular tower of rock between them. “We might be able to raid them after we take your ship if they get stuck.”

Rosetta grabbed the arm of his tunic and swung her arms back and forth with glee, yanking him around.

“I can’t believe it worked!”

He gave a deep, loud laugh. “I may not look smart, lass, but I know how to take down ships.”

“Smart? You’re absolutely bloody brilliant!”

Her stomach clenched at the grin with which she was rewarded.

“Alright, here we go!” Alister shouted to everyone, just as they started coming through the gap.

Since his ship was faster, they were coming out at the same time as the Galleon.

There were dozens of men on the main deck, waiting until they got close enough to swing over.

Four cannons sounded, not from them but from the Laughing Siren. They missed them, but barely.

He turned the wheel once they were clear of the shores and started to creep

closer.

“Prepare yourselves!” Just as he said that, another boom sounded and a cannon ball hit the hull of their ship.

The impact rattled everything and nearly made her teeth clatter.

So close. They were almost there.

“Starboard side cannons, fire! Port to the surface!”

His demand was echoed down the line. Just when she thought it would be too early, his cannons fired and targeted the cannon ports of the Laughing Siren right where she was perfectly lined up.

It blocked them until the men onboard the enemy vessel could clear the rubble away. There were only just over half a dozen left who could attack them.

“Derek,” he said to the man standing behind him. “Take the helm.”

His peg leg tapped against the ground as he took over so that Alister could release the wheel.

“Now!”

Men started swinging across to the Laughing Siren. Others twirled grappling hooks attached to ropes and flung them across to hook onto her railing. They were too low to be able to use planks to walk across.

Rosetta followed behind Alister as he went to the railing to stand on it, holding onto a rope to swing across. He pulled his cutlass from his belt, and without even caring to look where she was, he swung across from the quarterdeck without a word.

A gust of wind pushed her hair over her shoulders as she watched the chaos on the ship Rosetta wanted more than anything. *It’s there. Right in front of me.*

She wanted to reach out to it, to touch it as though that was the answer to obtaining it. To place her hand on its timber, to feel it beneath her fingertips... just once. Just once in case it went sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

But it was out of reach as she remained on the Howling Death, watching everything unfold.

The sound of cannons firing rung in her ears. Wood splintering, men yelling. Eventually the clang of swords hitting swords made everything a roar. Its energy resonated to her as she searched for its captain, knowing Alister was going to head straight for him so he could obtain this vessel for her.

Someone is fighting for me. She knew he was actually fighting for himself, for his own selfish gain, but it meant that Rosetta might achieve her long-awaited goal, something she had been dreaming of for years.

He brought me here. And without Alister's help, if he had actually taken back his own ship and then left her to rot in a cell, or an island, or even to drown in the ocean, Rosetta wouldn't be here.

She wouldn't be about to have everything she'd set out to do all those years ago. *I want this ship, and its captain and crew dead.*

It was hers. She wanted it. It belonged to her. And if she couldn't have it, then she didn't want anyone to possess it. Least of all, Queen Mary Anne's Commodore.

The Howling Death was sailing away, getting out of the way of Laughing Siren's cannons. Everyone who had needed to cross over had already left.

It would circle back when they gave the signal they had taken over the ship and she would be able to cross.

There was minimal crew left, barely ten men who would have to maintain the sails that were already open. They were the gunmen from below who were making their way to the surface.

If Alister failed, the Howling Death wouldn't have enough men to sail properly. For now, it could gently glide across the ocean for a short while with so few men.

I hope he doesn't die. Rosetta was rather fond of Alister, desired him like a terrible ache. It would be terrible if he was to be killed because of an act of heroism and greed. *Unless he gets in my way.*

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Alister landed into a clash of fighting men.

Rifles belonging to Queen Mary Anne's soldiers were lined up to shoot those of his men who were on the deck with puffs of smoke. That was until

more came up behind them and cut them down with their swords before they could release their bullets.

The smell of fire and gunpowder littered the air.

There were more soldiers on the main deck than pirates, but he knew his men would have already blocked the hatch, stopping those below deck from coming to the surface. They would then protect it so it couldn't be opened again.

For now, they only needed to concentrate on those who were on the surface.

Alister didn't engage those around him unless they targeted him. He would cut them down with brutal strength by slashes of his sword.

After killing a soldier, his sight returned to the tall, thin man protecting the soldier manning the helm.

This was the first time Alister had ever seen Theodore Briggs, but he knew by the fancy light blue and white uniform that he wore, that he was the man he needed to take down.

He wore a white, curly wig to signal his status, as well as many emblems pinned to his professional jacket. One or two even appeared to be medals with ribbons hanging down.

Alister made his way to him, slowly climbing the stairs and fighting off those who were trying to fight him on his rise.

A few of his men were protecting his back, while also moving to the other staircase that led to this deck to stop low ranking soldiers from climbing it. He was planning on cornering him and giving him nowhere to flee.

"Argh!" Theodore grunted when Alister swung down on him and he had to quickly block.

The force had been heavy enough that the man crumbled and stepped back, giving Alister the chance to swing his sword and cut the man at the helm in the back. He fell against the wheel before collapsing to the ground with the intention of never rising.

He raised his sword to block Theodore's attack while Alister was distracted. The clash of their swords rung in his ears.

They pushed off from each other, stepping back to create space.

Then they began a complicated dance with the tips of their swords. One would step forward to swing, while the other raised his sword to block and step back.

Considering the dark eyebrows above his brown eyes, he knew Theodore must have brown hair underneath that white curly wig he wore. Especially since he had a neat but full beard covering his face except for just his rounded, bald chin. His cheeks, upper lip, and the sides next to his ears were covered in thick bushy hair.

He looked strong, like he was hiding lean muscle under that white uniform with light blue trim. He was just as tall as Alister, but he could tell the man was a few years older than him, possibly in his mid-thirties.

“I know who you are,” Theodore said while pointing the tip of his thin sword at him. “Captain Alister ‘One Eye’ Paine. Bloody Storm of the Seas.”

“Aye, know my own name.”

He swung his sword downwards and forced the man to have to redirect his swing rather than block it.

“You’re a wanted man.”

Theodore swung sideways, forcing Alister to jump back so he didn’t get cut across the gut.

“Know that too.”

He swung down again, and Theodore skilfully stepped to the side to avoid it. They were circling each other, moving around the small platform.

He’s good. Alister had to give him that. Theodore had obviously gained his title as Commodore through his skills because even Alister was having a difficult time with him.

I’m still better.

“You’re one of the most notorious pirates on the seven seas.” Alister hid behind the mizzenmast to dodge a swing as Theodore spoke. “I’m sure the queen will be pleased to hang you from the noose if I don’t kill you today.”

Alister came around the other side of the mast quickly, coming up behind him. Theodore spun around and blocked his attack just in time.

“You’re a little cocky.” Alister let his fist fly, punching the man across the face. He stumbled back with a slightly disorientated wobble. “And a bit slow.”

He pushed his sword forward in a stabbing motion, slicing the man’s arm. He dropped his sword with a hiss of a breath.

Alister kicked it away with a grin.

“You also have no weapon.”

“Not quite.” He quickly reached into his coat near his hip and pulled out

his own pistol hidden beneath it.

Alister's eyes widened. *Shit.*

The gun was kicked out of the man's hand by someone swinging onto the deck with them. Theodore gave a grunt and Alister raised his sword while the man was distracted to end this.

He knew the person was one of his own since they'd saved him. Theodore went wide-eyed at Alister, putting his arms up to deflect the attack with his own body.

A sword blocked his swing, the metal tinging but slinking to the side.

A glaring Rosetta had stopped his attack, her blue eyes narrowed on Alister. *She stopped my sword?*

"Hey, lass!" he yelled in bewilderment. "What the hell do you thinking you're doing?! You were supposed to stay on the ship!"

"Stay out of this Alister," she snapped before swinging her sword... at him!

Alister narrowly blocked it while stepping back, his brows creasing.

"This wasn't the plan!"

Hell, she was attacking *him*. He always knew there was a chance she'd come onto the ship, but never in his mind had he thought he would have to fight her!

"I have my own plan," she told him with a determined hint to her eyes, before she kicked him in the side, right where she'd only a week ago sewed him up.

Alister keeled forward, his free hand coming up to his side at the sharp sting he felt. A gasp tore through him as agony spread across his torso. He was still far from being fully healed.

"Hello Theodore," he heard her say, just as he turned his head up to see she now had her back to Alister.

"Rosetta?" Theodore's brows furrowed as he looked at her before him.

His head shook from side-to-side, as if he was trying to clear his vision. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Couldn't believe she was there in front of him.

They know each other?

Alister wanted to jump in but she was currently in his way.

"I have waited three years to see you again." She pointed his sword at the man with her shoulders rolled back tight. "Did you miss me?"

"This is where you've been?" His face turned into a twisted face of fury to

the point it started to flush red. His yellow stained teeth gritted as his expression bunched into an ugly snarl. “You ran off to become a fucking pirate?!”

“Yes,” she freely admitted, the bored tone and expression she often wore around Alister set in her features. Then it faded into a scrunched-up nose and twisted mouth as she yelled, “Just so that I could one day find you and cut your damn head off!”

She swung her sword forward with a scream and the man dived to the side.

“Let’s talk about this.”

He started backing away from her, worry and concern on his face. She gave a guttural shout every time she swung her sword. They were starting to circle the mast and Alister was too stunned by watching them to move.

Especially since he’d already tried to and she’d swung at him again!

“You don’t want to make me do anything I would regret,” Theodore warned in a dark tone.

“Oh, I’m sure you would try.”

He eyed his weapon on the ground and Alister swiftly shot forward to kick it behind him, far across the deck and away from Theodore as possible. His brown eyes shot to Alister, giving him a glare before turning his gaze back to her when she once more screamed and ran forward with her sword raised, causing him to have to retreat.

One problem solved, now he just had to get Rosetta out of the fucking way.

Right now she was being a liability, foolishly chasing him without thought.

“You don’t want to do this, Rosie.” He had his hands raised, pushing them downwards as if he was trying to coax her to lower her sword.

Rosie? His brows knotted together. Alister vaguely remembered her shouting at Pierre about calling her that pet name.

She swung her sword and Theodore dodged it from hitting him. It lodged into the mizzenmast, embedding into it and getting stuck.

As she was trying to tug it free, Theodore raised his fist and punched her in the face. The hit was so hard that spittle flung from her mouth.

Alister stepped forward to catch her, being careful of his cutlass, but she only stumbled a step before she righted herself. Unfortunately her sword was gone, still embedded in the mast.

She wiped the blood from her mouth with the back of her arm, reddening

her tunic, before spitting a glob of it to the ground.

“I’ve learned to stay on my feet, Theo.”

“What the hell is going on!?” Alister finally shouted, disgusted by watching this pathetic fight.

And it was pathetic. It could barely be called a fight at all with the way Theodore was easily dodging and Rosetta was losing. She was completely at a disadvantage in skill and strength.

Now that Rosetta no longer had a sword in her hand, Theodore’s expression of worry once more turned into anger. His eyes turned to Alister with a sneer.

He pointed at Alister, his nose crinkling so tight it made him appear older and uglier. “You better not have fucked this pirate, Rosetta.”

“I can do what I want,” she answered, turning her nose up at him. “And you can bet that I did. He wasn’t the only one.”

Theodore’s eyes widened at her brash words.

“You are my wife!” He swung his arm to the side, stomping his foot forward.

Alister almost dropped his cutlass. *His wife...*

“You’re married?!”

She turned her head back to give him that dull expression.

“Aye lad,” she said mockingly.

He was too speechless by what he’d just learned, and her reaction to him finding out the truth, her lack of guilt, to realise Theodore had moved.

He backhanded Rosetta so hard she fell against the wheel of the helm. She almost crumbled against it. She put the back of her wrist against her mouth when she pushed off it to unsteadily get to her feet.

She checked the back of her wrist to find blood before pressing against it again.

“I must say, I haven’t missed that.”

He hit her... Alister had seen him do it twice now, and her words just furthered his belief in the words that came from him next.

He stepped forward, reaching out to grab the front of Theodore’s uniform and yanked him closer. “You hit your own wife?”

Alister hated men like this.

Noblemen that married noblewomen, and then abused them.

‘No matter what you do in your life, Alister. Fight the strong and protect

the weak. Those words from his mother echoed in his mind.

Alister may never have met Theodore Briggs, but he knew of the man who was the commodore of the Laughing Siren and the two ships that usually sailed behind her.

He was a duke, a man high up in the social chain. He'd spent time with the queen, sat at her table. He was one of her noble servants.

That meant Rosetta had once been a tea drinking, dress wearing, high society woman, who would never have fought back.

Could never have fought back.

He was almost twice her age, was stronger than her, bigger than her. Alister could only imagine the kind of damage this man who was in a seat of power, had done to her.

Theodore uselessly threw his hands up in surrender with a terrified expression. That was because Alister had raised his cutlass, preparing to cut the man down with a growl in the back of his throat.

He wanted to enact revenge for a woman who couldn't have done it herself.

There may have been another emotion pushing him... one that was envious of everything this man had ever possessed, and he never had.

Power, wealth, freedom, Rosetta.

The barrel of a gun was pressed to his temple.

"I told you to stay out of this," Rosetta said, pulling back the hammer of her pistol.

He heard it clicking back in his left ear drum, but he couldn't see her because she was standing on his blind side.

Alister's gaze narrowed on the man who gave him a smirk. He slowly released the collar of his shirt.

She saved him.

Rosetta had protected her husband from him.

Alister took two steps back since she continued to aim it. Then she turned it to Theodore's smirking face, and it instantly fell.

"I have waited three years for this, Theodore."

Once more, the man threw his hands up in surrender.

"Whatever you've done, Rosie, I'll forgive you. Just put the gun down before you accidentally hurt someone."

A snort of laughter came from her. "No."

“We’ll get you the help you need,” he offered, gesturing a hand towards her in hopes she would take it. “Please, dove.”

“What? Like some loony house for women?” She stamped her foot, her lips turning into an irritated pout. “I don’t need any help! I’m not fucking crazy!”

“I know things were hard for you after you lost our child.”

And the things Alister was learning this day were just becoming more and more damning.

“I didn’t lose it!” She stamped her foot again, but this time her face screwed up into a terrible expression of anguish. “You hit me so hard I fell down the stairs! You killed our baby!”

“I did no such thing! I only shoved you a little but you’ve never been steady on your feet.”

And yet, not once in the three weeks that Alister had known Rosetta, had he ever seen her trip or fall. Even when drunk, or when the sea was turning with violent waves.

“You still can’t admit to it.” Her hand was beginning to shake, her gun quaking in the air. “You believe your own stupid lies.”

It took him longer than it should have to realise that her face had turned bright red with tears. Real tears.

She won’t kill him. Alister almost wanted to laugh. *And she told me she didn’t have a tortured past.*

This had never been about procuring the Laughing Siren.

This whole endeavour had been about a wife trying to get her husband to change, to apologise, to get her own version of revenge on him.

I was used as a tool. To get her here, to cheat on this man to hurt him. Alister knew, at the end of this day, she would go back to her husband just as she was supposed to.

And he and his men, *her* men, were like cattle taken to the slaughter. She would defend her husband’s life; had already done it twice.

She was going to get them all hung by the noose.

What should I care what he does with her? By law, she was his property. He could do what he wanted with her.

Whether that was take her without her willingness. Beat her while she couldn’t defend herself. Put her in a looney house. Keep her locked up for the rest of her life.

It was cruel but that was the society in which they lived.

Rosetta was no longer a weak woman, and he was sure she would teach Theodore Briggs to keep his hands to himself.

Rosetta Briggs. Alister's upper lip curled back a little into a hateful sneer as he stared at the crying woman.

She had deceived him, tricked him, lied to him, in so many different ways, and he was no longer interested. *She won't shoot him.*

He would leave her to her chosen fate.

He couldn't find it in himself to hurt her for deceiving him when he really should, but he wouldn't stick around to get himself captured for her.

He turned away from them, quickly heading down the stairs of the quarterdeck without even wanting to look back.

"Pierre!" Alister yelled, seeing the man at the bottom of the steps to protect those who had been on the upper level. "Get us the fuck off this ship."

"What about Rosetta?" he asked, his green eyes darting to her still on that level. "I saw she was with you."

Pierre raised his sword to deflect an enemy before someone else killed the holder while he was distracted talking to him in the chaos.

"We've been duped. I'll explain later." He threw his arm forward. "Call the Howling Death before it's too late—"

A loud bang sounded off behind him. He ducked, thinking the bullet was aimed for him.

A moment later, a bone crushing thud filled his ears beside him on the main deck between the two staircases.

His head turned to find the body of Theodore Briggs lying on the ground, a bullet hole replacing his right eye socket.

With widening eyes, he turned his head further to look up at Rosetta still holding the pistol in her hand, smoking coming from the barrel.

She shot him. He couldn't believe it.

"Commodore Theodore Briggs is dead!" she shouted from above. "Lower your weapons or you'll join him."

Alister's gaze fell onto the main deck.

Already his men had started to turn the tide, spraying the blood of soldiers more than their own. There weren't that many left to protect the Laughing Siren above the surface.

With her shout, they began to drop their weapons, seeing they weren't

going to be able to win.

“I am now the captain of this ship.” Her eyes trailed over the ship, over every person standing there. “Bring everyone below deck to the surface. If they fight back, kill them.”

A stunned Alister was shoved out of the way by Mr Smith, who bolted up the stairs to join her. Naeem was helping the men rally up the soldiers.

What did this mean for him? His gaze found Theodore dead on the ground.

How was he supposed to feel now he knew she'd actually killed this man? That she'd been determined to take his life for everything he'd done to her?

That she'd truly wanted the Laughing Siren and was planning on sailing it.

It meant her truths had been shadowed with hidden things rather than complete lies. That he hadn't been completely deceived... again, by her.

Alister had his own secrets, surely not as damning as this had been to discover, but still secrets he'd rather not share.

“Mr Smith, get us out of here,” she told the man.

He ran to the helm to take control of the ship that had been sailing on its own before she'd even finished speaking.

When Alister turned on the staircase to walk back up to confront her, she started to walk to the one on the other side. Her heavy stomps thudded against the timber as she stepped down them.

She was avoiding him.

“What do you want us to do with them?” one of the men of her original crew asked when she reached the bottom.

After walking over to Theodore's body, she started casually digging into his pockets to pull a ring of keys from it. She jiggled them in her hands while she seemed to think for long moments when she stood up straight, her stare fierce as she looked at them.

“Dead men tell no tales.”

She started making her way to the door of the cabin on this floor.

One man scrambled forward, his shoulders swaying from side-to-side as he struggled in his bounds, and the men pulling him back. He was also in a blue uniform different from the rest. He was most likely Samuel Lester, the first officer.

He fell to his knees when he tripped. “Rosetta, you can't do this!”

She paused, turning back with a such a bored expression it almost appeared sinister and mean. “Why not?”

“Because I’m your brother!”

The cold look she gave the man with light brown hair, blue eyes, and freckles across his face just like her, was bone chilling.

“Rosetta Silver doesn’t have any family.” She turned her back on him and leaned closer to Naeem as she went to open the door. “Make sure this ship gets out of here and that they’re all dead.”

He immediately turned to her brother just as she slammed the door behind her to enter the room.

“Rosetta!” he yelled at the closed door. “Wait, please!”

Naeem stomped forward and grabbed the man by the collar of his uniform. The one holding him let him go, but his hands were bound behind his back with rope.

“You don’t get to ask for mercy.” The man struggled in Naeem’s grip, his eyes stark with fear for his life. “You knew what was happening and you did nothing about it!”

“She was his wife and he was my commanding officer. What was I supposed to do?”

“Not nothing! You were there the day after we had to pull her off the ground after he beat the ever-living shit out of her because she’d lost their child. Right after she lost it because of him! You saw what state she was in and you still kept quiet.” Naeem pulled his fist back and punched the man across the face. His head twisted to the side as spittle flung from his mouth. “Do you know the kind of lashings I received for trying to help her to her feet because I was a man, a slave that touched a noblewoman?” He punched him again. “You did nothing to save her, so why should she save you?”

“I know.” Her brother’s eyes crinkled into sad bows. “I’ve regretted it ever since she went missing.”

“Missing?”

Naeem released a dark laugh, letting go of his coat to stand back.

“She was never lost, mate.” He pulled his sword from its sheath and pressed it to his throat. “When she asked me and the other slaves to help her escape, we’d planned before we ever left the mansion that we would come back and kill him. We were never lost, Sammy, we’ve always been on course to this future.” The smile Naeem gave was one of the biggest Alister had ever seen on his usually jolly face. “Freedom, lad. That’s all she’s ever asked of us, and that’s what we all now have.”

Freedom. Alister remembered her men had chanted that singular word when he'd told them to abandon her and join his crew. They started chanting it now, confusing his own men, and the soldiers still being tied up.

Naeem slit her brother's throat, pouring a waterfall of blood down his own torso.

They'd all known. They'd all known what Rosetta had planned, why she had planned it. They had all agreed to help her.

Alister turned from the chanting men, and headed for the cabin on this deck.

It felt like there was a fire in his stomach, burning higher with every second that passed. It threatened to scald him further with everything new he learned.

He opened the door and then slammed it behind him with so much force even he tensed at the sound.

She didn't flinch as she stood at an opened safe, going through the papers she'd pulled from it. He could see the ring of keys dangling from the lock.

"Have your men raid the ship but leave everything I'd need to repair it behind." She started shuffling the papers, turning them over to double check them. "Leave me enough supplies so I don't have to go to port straight away."

"Why didn't you tell me the truth?" he bit, finally putting his cutlass away and standing near the doorway with his feet apart.

His stance was defensive as well as aggressive.

"There wasn't as much money in the safe as I thought there'd be, but I shouldn't be surprised considering they're ferrying prisoners," she said, blatantly ignoring his question. She was treating him as though his words were of little importance! "I know I said I'd give you half, but then I won't have enough to resupply."

Then she went to a cupboard and pulled a fancy knapsack from it, as if she knew it would be in there. She started putting some of those papers inside it, filling it to the brim with them, as well as scrolls.

"I'm not the kind of person to mess around with another man's wife, Rosetta."

Her calm face turned up from her task to give him a scowl.

"I have not been that man's wife for three years." She walked over and shoved the bag at him so hard it felt like a punch to the gut. "Here are all the

maps I promised you.”

He was forced to take it when she let it go before he'd even grabbed it. He looked down to it, before holding it in his fist to dangle beside him as he turned his attention back to her.

“It doesn't matter what you say. You were still bound to him whether you want to be or not. He was still your legal husband the entire time!”

He'd bedded her, touched her, had wanted her like a damn ache, and she'd been married the entire time!

“And now he's dead.”

The cruel broken smile she gave revealed just how happy she was about that.

Alister paused. *She's right.* And she'd been the one to do it.

She had wanted to be the one to kill him. That's why she had gotten in the way of Alister.

His eyes swept over the wall of the office in thought, noticing the polished oak timber and the large map of the world that had been painted on the wall. There were small ceramic tubs of paint on a small table next to it like someone on the ship updated it when they discovered something new.

The floor was timber with a dark navy, circular carpet in the centre while the walls were painted white with a light blue trim. The interior matched the exterior of the ship perfectly.

Everything was bright and neat in comparison to his own ship.

The gridded windows were fancy with swirling patterns on the outer edges of the glass. They were clean, not a single speck of grime on them.

His thoughts continued to turn as he took in all these rich and elegant details.

Rosetta had hated Theodore to the point she'd gone out of her way to not only get revenge, but to take his life. *Why should she have remained faithful?* Especially with what Alister had discovered he'd done to her.

Regardless...

“You still should have told me what I was walking into today!” He pointed to the door. “You were supposed to follow the plan, you could have gotten killed in the process.”

She gave a shrug, not seeming to care he was shouting at her. Sometimes she frustrated him because he often liked using fear to get his way and the reactions he wanted.

He hated that she never fell prey to it.

“I couldn’t tell you the truth. I couldn’t risk you not helping me when you knew why I wanted the Laughing Siren.” She turned her eyes to him to meet his gaze. “Don’t lie to me. You know you wouldn’t have helped me if I’d told you. That, or you would have tried to get in the way of what I wanted, what I had planned, to do things *your way*.”

Alister’s lips thinned.

She was right, he probably wouldn’t have helped her. He would have shunned her attention had he learned she was legally tied to another man. And he definitely wouldn’t have let her face Theodore the way she did.

She did what she had set out to do.

In the same way, Alister was set on finding Dustin’s treasure trove. He wouldn’t let anyone get in the way until he found it.

“I won’t let you ruin how I’m feeling, Alister. I have waited three years to put a bullet in that man’s skull, have waited even longer to be free of him.” Rosetta walked to the desk at the back of the room, flipping open a tiny chest on it to go through letters. She was inspecting everything inside her new navigation office. “So you can either fuck me, or get the fuck off my ship.”

She read the envelope of the first letter before shuffling it to the back. Her expression turned blank once more, like she didn’t care which option he took.

Alister’s jaw dropped at her suggestion.

Now she wants me? He’d known if he got her Laughing Siren she might let him, but he hadn’t known it would come with all this baggage.

He’d been hoping for this but now he was too conflicted to know what he wanted to do.

Prostitutes were prostitutes, their ties and pasts didn’t matter to him. Somehow, Rosetta felt different, and he felt betrayed because of it; despite all the reasons why she couldn’t have told him the truth.

His lips thinned, and his sight moved along the ground once more. *She still tricked me.*

His nose crinkled in distaste and he turned away from her, walking to the door. He placed his hand on the doorknob and then turned it, opening the door to leave.

But her desire had been real. There was no way she could have pretended or faked what he’d seen of her, felt from her, or experienced himself.

He halted when it was just slightly cracked open.

The way she had been lying back against the table after he'd had his fingers delving inside her, staring up at him with that sense of innocence, cheeks pink with deep arousal, still plagued his mind. To see this bitchy woman compliant for the first time had been damning to his senses.

She had wanted him then, just as he did her.

There had been a side of him that had hoped, once he parted from her after getting her the Laughing Siren, he'd see her sails in the horizon in the future.

That she'd take him today, and then would drop anchor next to his ship in the future so they could rekindle the obvious passion between them. To entangle themselves in one night of bliss before fading away from each other. Him once more waiting to come across her again in the future.

And Alister knew he would have constantly had his eye on the horizon, quietly and secretly hoping to find her ship dancing along it. He'd hope to see it like a beacon in the night.

But she'd tainted that dream for him.

He opened the door further, before pausing once more.

Or did she?

Rosetta no longer had any ties to her; she'd severed them herself this day. She was a free woman. A widow.

If I leave now... He knew if she ever saw his Frigate, she'd direct her Galleon the other way. Like two passing ships on the sea that would never meet.

If I leave now, she'll never take me again.

And he *wanted* her. He wanted this more than he was willing to admit.

She was like the sea.

Dangerous, chaotic, wild. And not once had he ever turned his back on it. Not once had he ever not wanted to ride it, just like he ached to ride her.

Shit... What do I do?

CHAPTER TWENTY



Rosetta turned her back to the door and dropped the handful of boring envelopes she'd been absentmindedly scanning over, placing her hands flat against the desk. She stared at the sky-blue cushioned chair neatly tucked in

on the other side.

She couldn't help feeling disappointed that Alister had turned away, and she refused to watch him leave.

The reason Rosetta had finally made the offer to him was because... *It had never been about him earning it.*

It had been about *her* earning it.

She'd realised it the moment she'd killed Theodore and a swell of emotion had hit her.

The first time she could tell herself it had been spur of the moment, but to take the same man again felt like a betrayal. She couldn't handle the guilt.

Not for Theodore, she couldn't give a shit about his feelings, but about the person she was sleeping with.

For a night, they both could pretend they were giving themselves to each other, but Rosetta had always felt hopelessness afterwards. They thought she was giving herself to them, not just once, but twice, a third time, maybe more, when she never could, not with her tie to Theodore.

To have to look at the same person again, to have to face the guilt that they thought they were sharing something with her, made her feel hollow. Getting paid for it was different, the man never cared for her but for a quick lay.

But someone like Alister was different.

He wasn't the first man she'd wanted to be intimate with because she fully desired them, but she'd never been able to do it again. She'd always abandoned them with a hollow ache in her chest, never to see them again.

There was a spark between them and one she hadn't wanted to deny, but needed to because of her confinements.

Rosetta took in a shaky breath. *I'm free.*

Free to feel whatever she wanted. To do whatever she wanted. To become whoever she wanted.

She no longer had a path set on murdering the person whose fist had been clenched so tightly around the shackled chain attached to her throat. A chain that had extended thousands of miles, and had been weighing on her for years.

It felt like it had expanded time and space, spanning the entire universe just to drag her down into darkness.

I finally did it. She didn't realise she hadn't felt like she'd taken a full breath, until this very moment.

She could finally live.

And she had wanted to share this newfound freedom with the person who helped her achieve it. Rosetta wanted to be intimate with someone who had not only gifted her this, but had been making her ache desperately for it for weeks.

I want him.

But what did it matter? She wouldn't blame Alister for walking away.

This was why she'd never shared herself twice with the same man for whom she had a passion. He was angry, and he had every right to be. She was sure he was disgusted, and she knew she deserved that cast at her.

Once could be called an accident, more than that and she was just being cruel. She had toed the line of what she could accept the day she'd toyed with him with her mouth. *He must feel like I betrayed him somehow.*

That wasn't something she'd ever set out to do.

But I'm free now. She wouldn't have to ever face the way she felt now, ever again.

It would taint the way she looked back on this day, but this was the day that Rosetta Silver truly got to come to life.

Rosetta Briggs was dead, alongside her husband.

The person she was now had no bond to anyone except her crew. Had no home except for on the seas with her ship. She had no family except for those she chose.

Mr John Smith like a father, Naeem like a brother. A woman far away in a port who was like a dear mother to her. They were her family.

She heard the door close behind her and her head dipped forward. *He's gone.*

She'd been bracing herself for it and she finally relaxed, letting the emotions she'd been holding back roll over her.

Tears prickled the corners of her eyelids, collecting on her lashes. She tried to blink them away even though they were tears of relief, tears of joy. Disappointment mingled with a sense of achievement.

Wait, I hear footsteps.

Before Rosetta could even turn around, a large hand grasped the back of her neck and spun her. Another hand came up to cup the side of her face as lips pressed firmly against her own.

With her eyes open wide in surprise, she could see Alister had his clenched

tightly shut. His forehead was crinkled into deep lines, his brows knotted tightly. She could see the confusion in his features, the uncertainty.

And yet he was still here kissing her.

Rosetta didn't care why.

A warm breath came from her as she tilted her head and deepened the kiss, bringing her arms up to wrap them around his neck. It forced her onto the tips of her toes.

Rosetta arched into him when he drew his lips over hers. *Ngnh!* Her mind fizzled when his firm tongue pressed inside her mouth to lick against hers.

And the moment she made even the smallest moan, his kiss became more heated. Alister started moving his lips faster, gorging on hers, eating at them feverishly.

Her hands slipped down to start undoing the buttons of his tunic, rushing before he decided to change his mind. Her eyes closed as she focused on kissing him and removing it at the same time.

He kept his hand on the back of her nape, but the other slid over her shoulder to press her body more firmly against his. He was holding her to her even when she stepped back.

He followed.

When she stepped again, he tried to pull her tighter against him.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" he asked against her lips, a bite to it despite how heavy it sounded.

She pushed his tunic from him, his coat along with it, and they both almost tripped when she continued to make them back up.

"A bed."

Suddenly Alister was pushing her in the direction she'd been trying to lead them. Her back slammed against the wall and he started kissing her so hard that their teeth clanked together upon impact.

Her lips caved under his, wetness spreading over them as their tongues danced playfully.

Rosetta tried her hardest to match his heat as she felt behind her, tapping at the wood. There, she found the doorknob.

She turned it and the door caved underneath her, allowing them into the small room she knew was here. It was a small cabin that only held a bed, a side table at the foot of it, and a cabinet mounted inside the wall.

There were two rooms connected to the navigation room. One for the

captain and one for the first officer so they were close by.

She knew the one she'd been leading them to was the one the first officer had used. Rosetta would never enter Theodore's sleeping cabin. Its existence was no longer real.

As they were passing the entrance, she started pulling on the ties of her pants while Alister started working on pulling her tunic from them. He pulled it up and off her, too impatient to undo the buttons.

In a moment it was gone.

Alister reached down and picked her up by the backs of her thighs, making her wrap her legs around his hips. She could feel that his shaft had already started to harden and she tried to grind her centre against it, digging her fingertips in his bare, muscled back covered in scars.

She felt him lowering them to the single bed by kneeling onto it, before placing her back against it.

He wasted no time, breaking from the kiss to grab her leg and rip her boot from her. He made short work of the other one.

Rosetta watched him, seeing the way his face now looked as though it was filled with hungry intent. His black hair carelessly slipped over his shoulders. His breaths were laboured as he reached up and grabbed at the waistband of her tights by caressing up the sides of her legs with large, calloused hands.

She thought he'd be slow, teasing himself by revealing her at a snail's pace. Instead, the brute tore them from her limbs so quickly it made her gasp.

Kneeling on the bed, he leaned over her on a straightened arm and ran his palm over the side of her waist. His sight followed the same path with a subtle lick at the seam of his lips.

"Fuck lass, you've got a sinful body on you."

His meaty paw enclosed around a breast, his thumb flicking over the tightened point of her nipple. Then he lowered his head to bring it into his mouth, sucking on it like a cherry dripped in sweet wine.

She could say the same thing about him. With exploring fingertips, she brushed her palms over his back, feeling its strong muscles, the scars all over him.

A small raspy moan broke from her throat when the suction became tighter, his tongue flicking back and forth over the sensitive bud. That wonderful pressure was taken away too soon as his lips started kissing up her chest, over her collar bone, until they were moving over her neck.

She slipped her hands over his chest, running her fingers through the dark hair over it. She palmed every muscle she could reach in appreciation, digging her fingertips in, as she made a quick path down his torso.

She was marvelling at this strong body, and she wanted it to know just how much she adored touching it.

Rosetta unbuttoned his breeches, dipping inside to pull his cock from it.

I want it so much. She squeezed her hand around the thick and hard rod, stroking it with care and enthusiasm.

When he ground his hips into her hand with a deep expire, desire flipped in her stomach to make a dripping pool at her core. Want turned into deep raw need.

Rosetta opened her legs, trying to get him to come closer by stroking back on it.

She felt his hand reach between her legs, his middle finger stroking through her folds.

“Wait, no!” she gasped out when she felt his finger enter her.

The look he gave her when he leaned back to stare at her, was menacing. His eyes were wide, his parted lips twisted in disbelief.

His voice was loud as he said, “No?! You’re the one—”

Rosetta leaned up and pressed her mouth to his, wrapping her arms around his neck to try and bring him down.

“I don’t want to wait,” she said against his lips.

She couldn’t wait for him to prepare her. She wouldn’t allow him the chance to think and change his mind. She needed him inside and she needed it now.

She felt him tense at her words. Then he quickly pulled his finger from her and started moving his body so that he was between her spread legs. He grabbed one of her inner thighs to move it even more to the side, like he wanted her legs spread even further for him.

It seemed her impatience had spurred his own because he grabbed his cock and ran the head along her. He didn’t even go back and forth to tease her clit that was throbbing and wanting the touch. He lined it up, and then started to push in. He looked down above her, watching himself feed her each inch. It wasn’t slow but it wasn’t fast either, allowing them both to feel him sinking in.

Yes! Her nails dug into his back. Her entire body bowed into an arch at the

pressure of his body stretching hers. She didn't stop moving as each inch burrowed deeper and deeper.

She'd forgotten just how tightly she'd fit around him, just how intense that first thrust was despite how slow it was this time. The bite of pain was enough to make her gasp, to burn her, and yet it felt so deliciously good that she wrapped her legs around his waist and tried to pull him in even deeper.

The low groan that came from him filled her ears.

He pressed his cheek against her temple, the groan growing when his hips pulled back just a tiny bit like a wave so he could dig deeper.

He did it again, collecting her wetness before she knew she'd taken all of him that she could. Alister then ground his hips against hers, making the head roll inside her.

"More," she begged. She still felt a slight sting of pain, but his thick cock was pressing everywhere she needed him to. The pressure made her desperate to move. "You feel so good already."

She tried to buck her hips into him, grinding his shaft inside her at the same time he was. Just even the tiniest movement made her throw her head back.

Because of the way Rosetta was holding him around his shoulders, he was forced to slip one arm under her neck and the other under her back to support himself above her.

His mouth found hers, his kiss rough and crushing and yet she gave it back just as much. And then he started to move his hips all the way back and her eyes widened. They widened before they became hopelessly dazed.

Even before he finished the first full thrust, Rosetta was lost.

His cock pulled back before spearing right along the front of her channel, and all her thoughts became muddled.

She squeezed him in tighter, wanting him to put more of his weight on her. When he did, it felt like he anchored her as he started to slowly pick up speed.

Haa... Alister. His body was moving against hers, his chest pressing in and rubbing over her breasts like the most perfect massage. She could feel the points of them scrapping against him, sparking pleasure all throughout her hopelessly trembling system.

He felt so big inside that she felt too full, like she had to spread her legs wider to accommodate him. It did very little to help but it changed the way

her hips sat, making him press more firmly against the sensitive ridge she was desperate for him to stroke.

Rosetta had to break away from the kiss to steady her breathing through his thrusts as they started to gain more speed. She turned her head to the side as her vision split.

Alister followed her, forcing her back into the kiss.

It felt like he was giving her his laboured breath, only for her to return them even heavier. *Oh!*

“I’ve only just started moving,” he groaned, before licking across her lips. “But you’re already drenching me.”

That’s because Rosetta was already coming around him as hot liquid filled her channel.

She managed to release the beginning of her strangled cry, before he stole it with his mouth. Her nails scored up over his back and shoulders as everything tensed. Her arms around his neck, her thighs as they bounced around his hips. Her feet as her ankles arched.

“Harder.” She needed him to go harder, she needed him impossibly deeper.

She needed more of him, all of him.

She just wanted this man right now more than she wanted to live, to breathe. *Give me everything... please.*

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head before she closed them permanently with a furrow in her brows. She knew she was starting to scream out her moans, but she couldn’t contain them, not when she was breaking away like this.

Never had Rosetta been thrown to a place where all she could focus on was the hard cock thrusting inside her core, or the person who was delivering it.

The outside world no longer existed, no longer mattered, and she didn’t care if she was the only one out of the two of them who was gone.

Not when her skin wouldn’t stop rolling with shivers. Not when she could feel her channel constantly quivering. Not when her heart felt this light being intimate with someone.

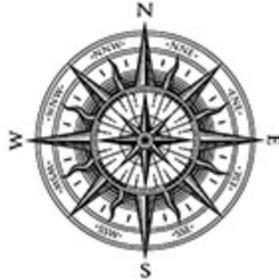
Rosetta didn’t care if he broke her. She didn’t care if he split her in two as she begged for him to go even harder.

He buried his face against the side of her neck as he moved, his mouth so close to her ear that his breaths sounded deafening. So hot and heavy against her skin as they rolled through her hair and over her scalp.

Little feral grunts came from him when she felt deep impact and she tried to use the balls of her feet to control his movements.

She needed him louder. She needed him closer.

Heat radiated between them, like a sickening fever it was destroying them and she wanted it even hotter.



Alister knew he was crushing her beneath him.

He could feel that their torsos were meshed so tightly together that there wasn't a single pocket of space between them. Already a layer of sweat had mingled between their slick bodies as his slipped over hers.

Her palm sized breasts pressed tight against his chest, his stomach forcing hers to dip every time he shoved in.

But he couldn't think past the way he was thrusting into her.

He couldn't stop ramming his cock so hard into her soft and plush pussy he could feel the hit as the tip pushed against her cervix. That hard hit that squished his cock and felt so good that he needed a greater impact.

She was so snug around him that it felt as though she was squeezing him in such a tight stroke no matter if he was pulling back, or pushing in.

Her channel gripped him, didn't seem to want to let him go that it almost felt like he had to rip from her.

Yet she was so wet it constantly spread over his shaft. *She's so turned on.*

He could feel it, hear it, and damn did Alister want to taste it.

The way she felt was mind-numbing.

He'd been waiting weeks to feel this again, and just like last time, he didn't care if he died at the end of this. Not when it felt like heaven.

He couldn't care if someone came upon them now. He couldn't stop, he wouldn't stop, not when he was experiencing the most profound kind of pleasure.

To have Rosetta beneath him like this. To finally have her naked, with her legs wrapped around him in welcome, her unhidden moans echoing against

the walls. To have her clinging to him for more.

Fuck, had Alister ever been this out his mind with lust? He didn't think so.

"Please... deeper," she begged.

How much more did she want him to give her?

He worried he was going to hurt her, and yet he couldn't stop trying to give her whatever she needed, realising whatever she was begging for, he needed too.

He tried to separate their bodies so that he could go faster, but she tightened her arms around him.

"Stay-stay with me."

He couldn't deny her request when she'd said it so sweetly. *Fuck, whatever she wants.*

Alister would follow every plea, every command, whatever she asked for as long as he was allowed to keep feeling her.

He curled his body around her more, squeezing her completely and the way her heels dug into him told him that she thought it was perfect.

How? What? Why? He didn't understand how sex could feel this blissful. He didn't know why he felt so crazed, like she was driving the maddest part of him to the surface.

The scream she gave when she started milking his cock again pierced his ear drums.

But he had to brace himself with clenched eyes as she came, his body tensing in reaction. He didn't think he'd even been this hard before, this engorged and throbbing.

There was a terrible force clutching his groin and the only thing that seemed to give him relief was ferociously pounding into her. It kept growing, clutching tighter and tighter that he could feel his hips shuddering.

He'd lose his rhythm when they jerked, like a spasm was rolling up his cock to spread over his abdomen. It was too much, he needed more of it.

Nothing else seemed to matter, not when she started moaning his name over and over.

"Alister." Her nails stopped biting him into him like feral claws when she came down. She was relaxing in his arms as her tension faded away, just so he could build her up again. "Alister."

And that's when he realised she was thinking of nothing else but him. Nothing else mattered to her.

“Rosetta...” he quietly answered back once, calling to her so she knew that he felt it too. He buried his face closer into her neck, his brows furrowing even more.

He turned the hand holding her shoulders to the bed to grip the sheets, needing to squeeze something in a death grip to release some of his pent-up anguish.

“Haaa.”

The way she felt in his muscled arms felt right. The way she sounded was like a wonderful entrancing song. Her body was warm everywhere they touched, and so hot inside that it felt like she was melting him.

And she would never know or understand that the way she smelt of gardenia flowers made him feel at home in her embrace.

His fingertips dug into her side, needing to grip her and feel her under his calloused palms, while his other hand gripped the bed even stronger. He almost needed to make sure she was real, that where they were was real.

That this wasn’t some feverish dream.

His chest felt so heavy as he breathed her in. His lungs so constricted in his chest from the sensations raking through him and stealing the air from them.

His lids were so heavy that he couldn’t open them even if he wanted to. And he did, he wanted to look at her, to watch her and experience her pleasure in every way he could.

It’s not enough. Would it ever be?

He was going as hard as he could, as fast as he could, as deep as he could. She was taking every ravishing thrust, was accepting every powerful slam, was trying to speed up every quick pump he delivered.

She was giving him all of her, just as he gave her everything, and yet he still wanted more. It still wasn’t enough, even though he’d lost his mind ages ago.

He couldn’t be any more savage with her.

“Alister!” she cried out, that swell returning to drench him in her orgasm.

She gripped his hair this time, tugging on it as her back arched. Squirring beneath him, bucking into him, tossing her head from side-to-side, Rosetta shook around him.

She was moulded to him now, but it felt so damn good when she came around him that everything inside him felt haywire and out of control.

He wanted to tell her not to stop, wanted to tell her that she felt so good

that he never wanted to let go, but he couldn't think to speak. His mind was too hazy.

Ah! Fuck, no! He could feel his balls drawing up, his seed trying to climb his cock.

But he wasn't ready to end this. He didn't want to stop.

Alister didn't want to rob himself of this moment, wanted it to last forever.

His mouth fell wide open, a long drawn-out groan shuddering from his collapsing lungs.

The arm under her back shot down to grab her arse, pulling her in with each of his thrusts. The ache in his cock was profound and terrible. *Not yet. Not yet.*

He kneaded it with strength, gripping it so tightly as if that was the answer in stopping him from coming. But his cock was so laden with seed that the dam was bursting without his consent.

Somehow his hips found a way to pump faster. *Want to stay inside.* He started to mindlessly thrust.

"Fuck!" Alister roared against her neck.

He pulled from her just as the first burst of his seed shot from him and everything seized. His heart. His lungs. His muscles.

He squeezed her so tightly as he thrust between their bodies, coating both of their stomachs with warm liquid. He ground the base of his shaft against her clit, every spurt coming from his pulsating cock like pure aching bliss.

His eyes bowed, his breaths so shaken they shook his entire body as it shuddered. His torso arched above her, as he released one of the most intense orgasms of his entire life.

It continued on, and Alister thought he was falling to pieces. Shattered. Gone. Broken.

And he was just fine with never being put back together.

Even when he stopped coming, he felt weightless. It was like his conscious was barely attached to his body as his head swum.

Her heartbeat resonated against him, beating just as sporadically and irregularly as his own. And it felt good knowing just how chaotically it was mirroring his.

But he could also feel Rosetta's torso heaving against him, pushing up in short and shallow huffs.

Damnit, she can't breathe.

Pushing up, he tried to slip his hands from underneath her.

Her arms squeezed, even her legs wrapped tighter.

“Just a little longer,” she pleaded so softly that he’d barely heard her. Her face was sweetly nuzzling against the pulse of his neck.

After a moment, he relaxed, staying exactly where he was.

He realised he wasn’t ready to let go either.

He could feel her lips pressing against him and he turned his head so he could take them with his own. Soft kisses, and she happily moaned beneath him, making his shaft twitch in reaction.

Then she ground her hips against his softening erection.

He almost chuckled against her lips. *Horny lass wants it again.*

But the fact it was softening at all meant he’d come so hard he’d emptied himself completely onto her stomach. *I’ve never come so much that my balls hurt afterwards.*

He couldn’t believe he’d almost missed this, had almost truly walked away.

He hadn’t because he’d known he would have regretted it with every passing day. Despite how he’d been feeling at the time, the part of him that had wanted this woman was stronger than his uncertainty.

He’d known it would have felt like this, that it would have derailed his mind so completely he’d feel like he was drowning in her. In what was being shared between them.

But this moment afterwards? Now this he hadn’t been expecting.

This hard and bitchy woman who was difficult to please, he never thought she would ever be this sweet to him. He didn’t think he’d ever had a woman be this gentle with him.

Her fingertips were dipping over the indents of his spine like she was trying to calm him as he collected his thoughts. Her embrace was tight but intimate and it felt as though she was holding him everywhere.

Her mouth was eager and allowed him to go at his own pace.

But there was something in their kiss, something that tugged on him. This was their goodbye.

He knew it. She knew it.

She now had the Laughing Siren. Once she had fully taken control of it and they had divvied up everything on it, they would be sailing in opposite directions.

That was the plan.

It was what they had spoken about, and they had both agreed to it wholeheartedly.

So why didn't Alister like the way this kiss tasted in comparison to the one they'd shared a minute ago?

I will search for her sails on the horizon... But the world was a big place and the sea even bigger.

What happened if he never saw them?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Rosetta kissed Alister, moving her lips over his each time to return it. It was heated, rushed like they were trying to get in as many as they could before they pulled away.

She refused to.

Rosetta refused to be the one to break from the kisses they delivered to each other, refused to be the one to separate because she knew there would be one that would be their last.

With his chest pressed so tightly against her own, she could feel that his heartbeat had started to calm. His breaths were becoming steadier.

And there it was.

She felt his head pulling back and she drew her lips over his one last time, following his mouth before she let him separate them.

The arm still firmly gripping one of the cheeks of her backside released and he had to yank it out from underneath her.

She expected him to get off her now, to roll away like many men.

All Alister did was take the worst of his weight from her as he placed his hand around her head, the other one still supporting it under her shoulders.

She dropped her legs so that they were bent with her feet flat against the bed. They were no longer wrapped around his waist but was now just cradling him, giving him the freedom to leave whenever he was ready.

Slipping her arms from his back, she placed them against the sides of his neck and jaws, searching his face with her eyes.

His lips were pursed together, a serious look upon his features as his eye glided over her.

They were only a breath away from each other, and there was a moment of silence, of pause.

Rosetta gave him a warm smile.

“Thank you.” She let the sincerity of those words fill every part of her expression.

In her lips, her eyes, in the way she looked at him.

Thank you for this. For this moment and what had led to it. For everything he had done this day, for helping her achieve her goal.

This is the happiest moment of my life. For so long she had been hurting inside. She was relieved to feel the first moment of contentment she had ever had. To be filled with this much satisfaction.

As she stroked the short black hair on his jaw, she expected Alister to chuckle, to let his arrogant and self-important personality shine.

Instead his brows furrowed deeply, his lips pursing harder together. She didn't know what it meant, but she just hoped the way his eye swiftly darted

over her face wasn't because of regret.

"Are you alright?" she asked when his gaze boring into hers became too much and he didn't remove himself.

"Sail with me," he said, his tone sharp and steady.

"Excuse me?" Her voice broke an octave as she tried to sit up.

He refused to let her move, taking his arm out from behind her head to hold the side of it in his big hand.

"Help me find Dustin's trove."

"You're joking, right?"

She let out an awkward laugh, her eyes looking elsewhere. *He's only saying this to get a rise out of me.*

Alister couldn't be serious, and Rosetta hated the way her heart nearly leapt at the idea of his cruel joke.

"Nay, lass."

He moved her head until she was forced to bring her averted gaze back to him. Her brows crinkled in confusion.

"But I thought the plan was to part ways." Then she quietly said, "That this was goodbye."

"Aye, me too." His dark face suddenly turned brighter as a grin plastered across his face. "But I'm asking you anyway."

"But why? Don't get me wrong, it sounds fun, but you don't seem like the kind of man who wants a woman trailing after him. Most men go to the sea to *avoid* women clinging to them."

His grin grew wider, mischievous even.

"Aye, that's true. But I don't mind the idea of having good pussy trailing behind me... on her own damn ship."

She paused, her head tilting to the side with a frown.

"Wait, you just want sex?" That made much more sense.

"Why not?" He lowered his head and buried it between the crook of her shoulder and neck. He swept his tongue over it, making her tense beneath him. "Think of all the good fucking we can do while we search and, at the end, I might even share the booty with you."

Hot sex and the potential of riches beyond imagination? Now that sparked Rosetta's interest.

"That's if we find it. I still don't think it exists."

He gave a shrug, sweeping his tongue once more before grinding his soft

shaft against her clit. The muscles in her abdomen twitched in reaction.

“If we find it, we both get infinitely richer. If not, one of us will get bored and will sail the other way.”

“That could get complicated.”

He pulled his head back to see that she had a dark look on her face. He seemed to read exactly what her face was saying because he let out another chuckle.

“Nay, you are too smart to fall for someone like me.”

“Maybe it was your poor heart I was worried about breaking.”

His eyes crinkled with humour as an outright laugh fell from him. Then he leaned back to kneel upright, grabbing both her thighs to drag her towards him and bring them around his hips.

The heated gaze that fell over her was body tingling. He looked over her, from her head, down her chest, all the way to her exposed folds with the way he had them both positioned.

He used the pad of one of his thumbs to pull the lips of her pussy apart, softly thrusting against her once more. The throb that lanced her core almost caused her to moan.

“My cock just isn’t ready to give up the way you feel around it.”

Rosetta’s eyes squinted, her lips thinning. She thought her body might be thinking the same thing.

“But I don’t care to find Dustin’s treasure. I want to take down fleet ships.”

“That’s your goal?” he asked incredulously. “That’s how you get Queen Mary Anne to hunt you. Do you have a death wish?”

Rosetta shrugged. “Not if there are no survivors to tell her who has been sending her ships to Davy Jones’ Locker.”

“You’ve got some big goals there, lass.” He thumbed her clit, circling it and making her hands clench, before palming his hand up and over her stomach, not caring about the sweat and his seed on it. “I’ll help you sink whatever ships your heart contents.”

Then he thumbed a nipple, grasping her breast in his calloused palm. She wondered if he noticed her thighs twitch around him in response. He started to pluck it.

“Think of just how easy it will be when you point at a ship you want gone, and you’ve got my warship and its cannons backing you up.”

“You’re talking about starting a fleet, Alister.”

“One of pirates.” His gaze fell to the ceiling, that grin never leaving his face as he pictured it. “Your strength with my speed. My firepower with your cargo space.” He looked down to her, excitement seeming to thrum from him. “I may never need to dock again.”

And the idea of never touching land again seemed to be what threw his mind over the edge because she felt his cock starting to harden.

He’s serious. Alister was truly asking her to sail with him... for fun?

“I don’t know if I can,” she sighed. “I have to ask my crew.”

“Nay, you don’t.” He raised his brow at her, a glint to his eye. His lips even pursed together. His face said he was suspicious of her words, like they might be lies to get out of it. “Your crew will follow you anywhere, will do whatever you want. They’ve already proven that.”

“I’ve only asked them to follow me until I got the Laughing Siren.” *He’s right though.* She knew they would probably agree to it. “And what about yours? You’re asking me, but I’m sure you haven’t asked them.”

“I don’t give a shit what they want. I’ve never told my crew to follow my command simply because I want it, they can put up with it for once. Plus, they will enjoy having the extra supplies you can carry.” He looked around at the walls with a chuckle. “You can ferry more livestock for better eating, more booze to drink. They will appreciate that.”

“Talking about crews...” Her eyes fell to the door. “They’re both kind of waiting for us.”

“I’m not leaving this room until I have your answer, lass.”

She brought her eyes back to see his grin had fallen and he once more looked serious.

“If you say nay, they are going to have to wait until I’m done fucking the absolute hell out of you since I don’t know if I’m ever going to get the chance to again.”

Rosetta looked down to the hardened shaft jutting between his hips and laying over her stomach.

“And if I say yes?”

“They can wait one more round.”

“And what if I say yes to your offer and no to... that?”

She didn’t take her eyes off it, trying to suppress the urge to lick at the seam of her lips in want. She even rolled her hips so that it would slip against her stomach wetted in his seed.

“You’re going to help me get rid of it either way. I’m not using my hand like I have been.” Her eyes widened and darted up to his face. “Oh aye, Rosetta. You bet I’ve been craving it that bad.”

The sheepish smile that grew on her lips made him frown.

“I have never trusted that face.”

Rosetta leaned up and pressed a kiss to one of his cheeks.

“I used to touch myself when I laid in your hammock before you took back your ship.”

“You fucked yourself in my bed?”

His nose crinkled on one side, his erection noticeably pulsating that she felt it tap against her.

“Pictured you while doing it.”

Alister’s teeth gritted, before he pulled back his hips and slammed his cock inside her. A sharp gasp fell from her.

He shook his head as he started thrusting, his long hair falling over his shoulders to hang above her like a dark curtain.

“Shit, screw it.” Then he groaned, his nose crinkling as his mouth fell open. Even his grip on her thighs became tight. “Give me your answer afterwards.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Alister followed that fine piece of ass he had just railed as they walked to leave the navigation room after finding their tunics, noticing the slight limp in her step. *I may have overdone it.*

The second time had been just as intense and heated as the first.

Regardless, she had finally given him her answer, and he was pleased it had been a yes.

Now Alister was going to have his fun with her all over the seas. Until he grew bored of her, of course, which he knew he would. What he was feeling wouldn't last.

But for now, it would give him deep entertainment and satisfaction.

She opened the door and they stepped into bright sunlight.

None of the soldiers were left on the ship. He knew their crews must have slit their throats and pushed them into the water.

What surprised him was that Theodore Briggs' body was still where it had fallen from the above deck.

A horrible squeal of happiness came from Rosetta, surprising them all, especially Alister who had been standing directly beside her and copped an earful directly. She ran forward, straight into Naeem's arms who picked her up in an embrace and spun her.

"We did it, Rosetta," the man laughed as her legs lifted off the ground.

Alister might have been concerned by watching them do this before what he'd learned, but not now. He shook his head at the two of them.

He had seen it all, had helped her escape.

Now that Alister knew Naeem had been a captured slave who had been freed by Rosetta's will, and he had helped her flee a bad man, he couldn't blame them for their closeness.

They bonded through their pain.

Naeem put her down and she reached for Mr Smith, who embraced her tightly. She even hugged men he didn't know the names of yet, had never cared to since it would have been a waste of his time.

Pierre came up to him, patting him on the shoulder once before holding it.

He stared at Rosetta as he said, "got that out of your system, did you?"

"Nay." He folded his arms across his chest, still staring at her arse like he couldn't stop himself. "She's staying with us for a little longer."

With a frown, Pierre pulled away from him. He faced Alister with a look of confusion.

"What do you mean?"

He nodded his head at her. "Asked her to help us find Dustin's treasure."

"You did, did you?" His head shot back to her, a grin forming across his

pretty face. His green eyes twinkled with a mischievous hint. “That’ll be fun.”

He knew this wouldn’t be an issue with Pierre or Derek, and he hoped he got a ring of acceptance from everyone else as well.

However, Alister did narrow his eye on the man.

“I am now telling you stay away from her.”

His green eyes widened, slowly coming back to him.

“You’re saying she’s off limits?”

“Aye. Don’t touch her.” *She’s mine to play with.*

He wouldn’t have Pierre, or his crew, hankering away at her until she caved.

Alister was going to have fun with this woman until *he* decided, not because it had been taken out of his hands and decided for him.

Unless she decides to. But then again, Alister fairly doubted she’d be the one who grew bored first.

He hadn’t minded before, but now that he’d asked her to sail with him, he felt a little different about her being with the men on his ship. The moment she did, he’d turn his boat the other way from hers.

“What do we know about the support ships?” Alister asked.

He could see his warship was sailing next to the Laughing Siren and he hadn’t been paying attention to know if they’d fought them.

Cannons could have been firing and Alister would have been too distracted by Rosetta beneath him to even notice.

“Some of the men went below deck and shot one of them down when they tried to give chase.” Pierre answered, crossing his arms across his chest. He tilted his head towards Alister with a dull look. “The Howling Death couldn’t assist with the amount of men on it, but we managed to get them to back off while you were busy.”

He placed one of his hands over his chin in thought. So, they had indeed been in the middle of a fight and he’d not once noticed. Thankfully it was alright, but that was still a little alarming.

“Good.” It was a shame they’d sunk one and couldn’t raid it before it went to the bottom of the ocean. “I doubt the other one will follow us. It’ll probably go straight to the queen and tell her we’ve taken the ship.”

“This will put a target on our heads.”

“We’re already wanted men,” Alister chuckled. “The queen can only

increase her bounties.”

“It’s your ship though and I’m sure the fleet vessel will know that. This could have her sending more hunters after us.” He nodded his head towards Rosetta. “She’ll have a while before they discover who is really the captain of this ship now, then there will be a bounty out on her too.”

“That’s true.” He brushed his hand through the hair on his face. “I’m sure that’s why she didn’t want any survivors. They probably would have tried to kill us in our sleep had we forced them to join our crews anyway.”

“Are you sure about bringing her along though? It’ll be easier to see us on the horizon with two ships.”

“Aye. And they’ll be more wary about attacking since we have two.”

That reminded him.

He reached into the knapsack he’d grabbed from where he’d dropped it on the floor, and finally looked at the maps she’d given him. *She actually delivered on this promise.*

He’d already been to one location and knew the booty wasn’t there.

Three others were maps to Dustin’s treasure he’d never seen before. One in the east, not too far away from their current location. One was in the north, but looked more promising. And one was in the south, deep south into seas he wasn’t familiar with.

I don’t know if Dustin ever went south. He’d never had a map lead that way.

The bag was filled to the brim with maps.

Treasure maps to other pirates’ potential chests. Some were just of places he wasn’t familiar with. He’d like to go to those places. He wanted to know the seas better than anyone, and one day he hoped he had travelled over all of them.

That was a goal after Dustin’s trove though.

Rosetta was finally released from the men congratulating her and she turned to point at Theodore’s lifeless corpse.

“What is he still doing here?”

Alister had been wondering that too.

Naeem stepped forward with an awkward laugh, rubbing his short, curly, black hair.

“I didn’t know if you still wanted to hang his body up and wack him with a stick like a pinata until you saw what came out of him.”

She really hated that man. He snorted out a quiet laugh.

He wouldn't get in the way of whatever she wanted to do; it wasn't his place.

"I was drunk when I said that!" she shouted with a laugh. "You daft twit!"

"How was I supposed to know you weren't serious?"

She stood in front of his body with her feet apart, her hand over her lips and chin in thought. Whatever she was contemplating pulled her face tight into a thoughtful expression.

Then her cheeks puffed as she dropped her arm, reared her foot back, and then proceeded to kick him so hard in the nuts that multiple men, including himself, winced so powerfully they covered their precious groins.

"Shit, I hope she's never kicked a man that hard in the balls while they've been alive," Pierre whined.

"She kneed me the day we took my ship." *I still haven't gotten her back for that.*

"You poor soul."

She slapped her hands together like she was brushing them of dirt.

"I'm good. You can toss him now. Oh! Wait!" She reached down and lifted a flap of his officer uniform. Pulling a small coin bag from his belt, she tossed it into the air before catching it again. "Now I'm done with him."

She threw it at Alister and he caught the weighty bag.

"Like I said, the safe didn't have much gold but that's at least something. Prick always carried a heavy coin pouch to flaunt his wealth."

She gave him a bright smile after he looked inside and nodded his head with approval. *This is almost a silver coin each for my men.* They'd be pleased with that at least.

"Alright, let's get those prisoners to the surface."

"Nay," Alister cut in. "I need to speak to my men first."

The prisoners could be divvied up afterwards.

Those of his crew came a little closer, just under fifty men ready to listen. A sea of eyes found him, and those of her crew listened in out of curiosity.

"I've asked Rosetta to sail her ship with ours while we look for Dustin's trove." He folded his arms to show his unwillingness to budge in this decision. "I've already decided this, she has already agreed, and I won't be putting it to a vote."

"What do we get out of it?" one of his men shouted, patting his chest once.

“You are just doing this for yourself.”

A few nodded their heads, agreeing with the man’s question.

Alister noticed Rosetta’s men started to circle her, speaking in hushed whispers in comparison to his boisterous crew. They were a rowdy lot in everything they did.

“Aye, for once I’m making a decision as captain and I’m not asking for permission.” He narrowed his eyes into a glare, letting his good eye trail over them. “But her ship has many benefits like her cargo space. She can hold more livestock so that we can eat better. Just think of the meat, eggs, and milk we can have rather than the shit we’ve been eating. She can also hold more grog, as well as booze. Then there is the vast amount of room for other useful cargo so that we can ferry all the good stuff.”

Like the gold and the loot they will steal, which Alister would demand stay on his ship. They’d get a share of the loot, but he was an untrusting man who wouldn’t let her sail away with it.

“What about the loot on this ship that was promised to us?!” Kent pointed his finger at Alister. “I was promised a new sword!”

“Then get yourself a new sword, the armoury will be full. We can still go through this ship and take the things we want, but...” He unfurled one hand to lift a single finger. “Keep in mind that it still needs to function and will be seen as a whole with our own. If they need it back, they can take it.”

The fact they could still go through the ship, and the Laughing Siren could be seen as a supply carrier for them, appeased his men.

Then he was asked a question he hadn’t thought of.

“Who is in command?” Pierre asked from beside him with a frown, his own arms folded but more to be comfortable rather than in arrogance like himself.

“I am,” Alister snorted with a laugh. “Obviously.”

“She doesn’t really listen to you, or anyone for that matter.”

Hmm. Pierre was absolutely right. She is argumentative and hot-headed.

“No, I will follow his lead,” Rosetta finally piped in.

Her men were following behind her.

Alister realised she’d already spoken to them and gotten their approval.

“Now that I’ve got the Laughing Siren, I don’t care where we go as long as I can sink ships.” She turned her gaze to Alister with squinted eyes. “And that my voice is heard. I am captain as much as he is, therefore my ranking is

above everyone else but him.”

She turned to Pierre with her trademark dull look.

“If you’re on my ship, you follow my command. If you’re on his, you follow his. If I am on his ship, only he can tell me what to do. No more of this ‘get me a bottle of rum barmaid’ bullshit you’ve all been pulling.”

A few of his men chortled, most likely the perpetrators of what she’d said.

Alister hiked his thumb at her.

“See, lass agrees that I’m in charge.” He knew that’s all his men really cared about. Then he refolded his arms. “I wouldn’t have made the decision if it didn’t benefit you lads in some way.”

His words seemed to placate them because they gave a ring of approval, mostly. He could see there were a few that still weren’t sold but they didn’t care enough to come forward.

After that, the prisoners were all brought to the surface while Alister, Rosetta, Pierre, Naeem, and Mr Smith, stood on the quarterdeck of this ship to look over them. Unfortunately, Derek couldn’t join them since he was steering the Howling Death.

“How many are there Mr Smith?” she asked him quietly as they all brought their eyes over the confused men standing in neat rows and columns.

They were about a foot apart from each other, as directed by Rosetta who wanted to see them properly.

Such a large ship allowed them to.

Just as Alister was doing a rough count, Mr Smith said, “There’s ninety-six.”

She placed her hand over her lips to whisper, “I thought there’d be more.” Then her gaze travelled over Alister standing next to her. “How many do you need?”

“At least thirty.” And he was being generous.

He wanted more, but if he asked for more than that, she’d struggle to fly her ship.

But thirty should bring my numbers to just under eighty. He’d lost men today, more than Rosetta’s who all seemed to be accounted for except for one or two.

“What would that leave us with?” she asked Mr Smith, showing him she really couldn’t count the simple number.

The way she awkwardly asked the question showed she was more

embarrassed by this than she'd originally let on.

Should I teach her? She'd said she knew simple math, but this was very simple. *Then again, I'm sure Mr Smith has been teaching her.*

He had little interest getting in the middle of her business if it was already being taken care of.

"We would gain sixty-six, bringing our numbers up to one hundred, including ourselves."

Rosetta ran her fingers through her hair in obvious frustration.

"This ship requires at least a hundred and twenty men to function properly."

Alister eyed the four masts on this fully rigged Galleon. It required more men to sail this vessel compared to his medium sized ship with its three masts.

"Not really," Alister butted in, bringing their eyes to him. "You need at least fifty men to hoist the sails in the day and the same at night, but that's if we are changing course often or have heavy winds. The rest of the time it's just maintaining it and that doesn't require as much effort. You won't tire your men out too much if you bring that number down to forty. The rest you can have them doing the other tasks."

"I can also help to man the sails when I'm not taking the helm at night," Mr Smith offered.

"No you can't old salt," Naeem chuckled. "You'll break a hip."

"Naeem, you're quicker than everyone else anyway," Rosetta sighed. "You've got speed in that stupid body of yours. We'll all have to help. Mr Smith and I will take longer shifts at the helm so you can take a position throughout the day in the sails."

"Was going to do that anyway," Naeem said, his dark eyes falling over the prisoners. "I won't leave you unprotected with them."

His comment made Alister's brows furrow.

She'd be left alone with unknown criminals. He hadn't thought about this obstacle.

Rosetta rolled her eyes with a loud gruff of annoyance at them, who all suddenly looked at her with concern.

She stepped forward to take the stage in front of the prisoners.

"My name is Rosetta Silver and I am now the captain of this ship. We have killed Queen Mary Anne's soldiers, those who originally set sail to have you

all hung by the noose for whatever crimes you have committed.”

She raised both her arms forward to wave them up and down with her palms up, almost like a gesture of relief.

“We are your saviours. You are now all going to be converted into the fine art of piracy, that is the price for your freedom. You will work on our ships or you will join the soldiers that are currently sinking to the bottom of the sea. Do I have any naysayers?”

Silence fell over the entire ship. No one said a word, no one even dared to cough in case it was taken as a rejection.

“Perfect!” she exclaimed while clapping her hands together in a single slap. “You will now be divvied up between myself and—”

Alister stepped forward and grabbed Rosetta by the shoulder to put her behind him.

Very sweet. My turn.

“I am Alister ‘one-eye’ Paine, the Bloody Storm of the Seas, and the captain of the Howling Death.” He leaned his foot against the railing, placing his forearm sideways across his knee. “I’m sure many of you have heard of me.”

A sense of restlessness fell over them. Some shifted in their positions with eyes going wide.

“Aye lads,” he said, agreeing with their fear for they should be afraid.

He turned his head back to give Rosetta a grin of pride, to find she was pissed at him for pushing her out of the way. With a shrug, he turned his head forward again.

“Here is what’s going to happen. This ship is currently under my protection while it flies next to my sails. If we so much as hear a single word of the possibility of a mutiny or uprising, we will do the queen a favour and hang you ourselves. I don’t keep prisoners and I don’t like betrayers. Some of you will find yourselves on my ship, and if you find yourself on it, be prepared that you will not leave my employment unless I find a replacement for you. You are already dead men, and I have no problem with making you deader.”

Rosetta came up beside him with her arms folded, tapped the toe of her boot, and glared at him.

Alister conceded. He’d done what he wanted, revealed the position these men had found themselves in by being in his presence, and then delivered his

threat.

He backed away so she could come forward again.

“Those of you who have sailed before, move to the starboard side of the ship.” Alister estimated that at least forty men moved to the right, and the other prisoners shuffled to get out of the way. “Good. You are now under my command.”

“Oi lass,” Alister said with a bite to his tone. He quickly grabbed her shoulder to turn her in disbelief. “You can’t take all the sailors!”

“I need experienced men who know how to hoist a sail, Alister. Your crew already know how to do that and can teach those who don’t. You can’t expect me to sail with inexperienced men who don’t even know what a rig is.”

Damnit. Unfortunately for him, she was right.

“Fine,” he snapped, before stepping forward. “Those of you who have committed murder, to the port side.” When no one moved, he rolled his eyes. “That’s the left side of the ship!”

If he couldn’t have sailors, he’d at least have men who weren’t afraid to kill. If they were serial murderers, then he and them would get along splendidly.

Almost thirty, uncertain men, moved to the left side of the ship.

“You are under my command. My crew will show you how to get to my ship and will instruct you on your duties.” He waved his hand to the pretty blond man next to him. “I know he looks like a woman, but Pierre is my first mate and you will listen to him if he gives you a command. When you move over, you will find Derek already at the helm, he is the quartermaster and also over ranking. If you don’t listen to them, you will find yourself beaten with the cat o’ nine tails, got it lads?”

Cat o’ nine tails was a short whip with nine ends, knotted at the tips to increase maximum damage. It was a severe punishment and just one lashing would be enough to teach many not to do anything to receive another.

A string of ‘I’, ‘ayes’, and ‘yes’s, came from them.

“Take ‘em away lads!” His crew started rounding them up and moving them over.

He turned to Rosetta. “The rest are yours. You can keep your thieves and beggars.”

But Alister was certain she’d taken all those who had been arrested for piracy. They had been the men he’d originally wanted.

Once more, Rosetta stepped forward.

“Okay boys. I’m going to make this simple. I don’t give a shit what you’ve done, if you’re innocent or not, why you did it, or who you did it to. You are dead men, feel free to reinvent yourselves. You can’t go back to your families or you’ll be arrested again. You have no homes, no friends. You’re all nobodies, just like us. But, let me make this as monosyllabic as possible...”

She paused for effect.

That’s a big word, Alister thought to himself with a shake of his head. *Noble people with their vast vocabulary*. She was speaking with men who were most likely commoners. They wouldn’t understand.

“That means clear, boys,” Naeem cut in with a laugh before Alister could say anything.

“I may have tits, but I will cut off your hands if you touch me. I will cut out your tongue if you call at me in any way inappropriate, or other than captain or by my name. Naeem has just been promoted to my first officer.” She gestured her hand to him. “Comment on the colour of his skin, and I will flay yours.” She gestured to the other man standing with them. “This is Mr Smith, my new quartermaster. Comment on his age, and I will make sure you never get the pleasure of reaching it. Savvy?”

There was a ring of agreeance.

Alister raised his brow at her. He was actually a little impressed by her much needed threats. *Tough woman*.

She stood up straight and stared at them.

There was a pause where no one said anything or did anything, waiting for what she would say next. Even Alister was puzzled by it.

“Well?!” she yelled, feinting a physical taunt by stepping forward with a stomp. “Get to work you scurvy dogs!”

Men started to rush around in confusion, nearly bumping into each other in frantic steps. Her crew, with faces of humour, quickly stepped in to take charge and help direct them. Even Mr Smith and Naeem stepped down the stairs to assist, leaving Alister alone with Rosetta.

He got to watch her take in the reality that this ship was hers now.

She turned and walked to the helm, brushing her fingertips over the well-polished wheel. Then she clutched two of the eight handles firmly, squeezing them so tightly he thought she was trying to break them.

“I have waited so long for this day,” she murmured.

He wasn't sure if it was to herself or to him.

"Your father was never a sailor on this ship, was he?"

She shook her head. "No, my brother was."

"But that wasn't enough for you to know this ship inside and out. You knew this ship because Theodore brought you on it."

"Partially," she admitted, slowly bringing her eyes away from the wheel to bring them to his face. "My father was a businessman, like Mr Smith was. He designed this boat."

"Your father helped build it?"

"No Alister. He designed it." A small sad smile filled her features as turned her head away to stare at the front of it. "*I am the Laughing Siren.*"

Her eyes strolled over the railings, the sails, just as he did the same but with an unnerved hint to his gaze.

"He told me when he had it made that I was the inspiration for it. When he had the mermaid carved at the front of the ship, it was because he loved the way I laughed when I was truly happy. That I had a wonderful laugh."

Alister snorted. "Your laugh is terrible, lass."

"I know," she sighed, her smile not falling as she hugged the wheel in longing but turning sadder. "Theodore hated it. Told me I sounded like a screeching monkey. He would often tell me to shut up."

He suddenly wished he could eat his own words.

Although her laugh was something terrible, he'd come to find it was quite adorable for such a small woman to produce such a boisterous noise.

She seemed to sense his disquiet.

"This ship has always been mine. When Theodore discovered I was the inspiration for it, he'd told the queen this was the ship he wanted to sail. I hated the idea of him having it." Then she muttered, "He didn't deserve anything that represented me."

"It's a beautiful boat." Just like its inspiration.

He couldn't stop his eye from falling over the pretty woman in front of him, who was truly a brute inside. A sensual yet bitchy woman who often got him tied into knots.

"You lied to me," he told her.

"I did that a lot." She brought her gaze to him. "You're going to have to be a bit more specific."

"You told me you didn't have a tormented past, but what I discovered

today is pretty twisted.”

“It’s a complicated past.”

“I have a complicated past, Rosetta,” he laughed darkly. “This was tormented for a woman.”

She narrowed her gaze at him.

“I refused to wear it. I am no longer that woman, and I will never allow someone to treat me that way ever again.”

“So you’re from Luxor.” She thinned her lips at the fact he now knew the city she was from. He rolled his eyes at her expression. “It’s where *he*’s from, even I knew that.”

“I wasn’t born there. My family is from Showater city, just a few ports down.”

That made Alister frown. “Then how did you end up marrying him?”

She gave a groan, lying over the wheel in dismay. “Why do you even care? I’d much rather not talk about it.”

“I’m curious.” He gave a shrug before crossing his arms, raising his brow at her when she gave him a pouted face. “If you weren’t from the same city, how did you end up being in his sights?”

“My brother,” she sighed. “My father used his ship making business to get my brother employed into the queen’s fleet. He first saw me when I was nine, when I was there to congratulate my brother in joining his crew as a soldier.”

Alister came forward to lean on the wheel, curling his arm around the handles. Leaning back, he crossed one foot in front of the other.

He was trying to get her to stop using it as a way to hide.

“From that day, he often visited my father to look over his ships under the pretence he was looking for more vessels for the queen’s fleet. He would visit my brother, got him promoted quickly. It was all a guise so he could check on me. When I turned eleven, he told my father he wanted my hand in marriage and wanted to arrange it for when I was old enough.”

“So you had an arranged marriage.”

“No,” Rosetta said with a shake of her head. “He denied him. He wanted me to choose my husband when I was old enough to make my own decision.”

Alister frowned once more. “Then how did you end up marrying him anyway?”

Rosetta gave a laugh, and yet it bitterly held very little humour in it.

“Theodore tried to ruin my father’s business. He made sure he couldn’t sell

as many ships, did everything to make sure he lost most of his income to the point we were becoming so poor we had to start selling our housing items.”

“And your father actually agreed to give you to this man because of this?”

Alister couldn't believe it! They had willingly handed her over to someone who was obviously bad and corrupt.

“I didn't know that until after I married him, when it was too late.” She pressed her chin against the wheel, right near the crook of his elbow. “He got drunk a lot. He told me what he'd done one night when he was too drunk to remember doing it. He tried to sink my father's business. So, when I turned fifteen, when he demanded my father for my hand in marriage, he was so desperate that he agreed to it.”

“Fifteen? Lass, that isn't legal.”

“It is if your parents agree to it,” she muttered. “My father didn't want to, but the dowry he was offering was twice than what was normal.”

She trailed her eyes to him.

“And you agreed to this?”

She squinted at him, seeing he wanted her to wear some the blame in this. That it was her fault. *If she agreed to it...*

“He promised to save my father's business, would get the queen to buy all his ships. The dowry was enough to save my parents, my brother, and my younger sister.” She turned her eyes away. “I did it to save my family, not knowing what I was truly walking into. I was a teenager, thinking I was going to be married to a duke and be cared for. How was I supposed to know he would start beating me not even a month after our wedding?”

She has a fair point.

“So you were an underage bride, sold to a man who was set on destroying your family just to have you.”

“Aye lad,” she mocked. “He sought after me so hard, apparently because I was this beautiful thing, and he hurt me. He at least delivered on his promise to promote my brother again and save my father's business. He'd bought the Laughing Siren before all this though.”

“You noble people are so complicated.”

She gave a snort of laughter. “You can say that again.”

“If you wanted him dead, why go through all this trouble? Why not just poison him?”

“Because I wanted to be free.” She leaned back to palm the handles again,

glaring at them. "If it was discovered I'd murdered him, I would have been sent to prison. The day he killed our child was the day I decided I was going to escape, become a pirate, and steal this ship by putting a bullet in his head. He was so drunk that day."

"What did you say to piss him off?" Her lips thinned and he let out a laugh. "Don't get me wrong lass, I'm not the kind of man to hit a defenceless woman, but I do believe I did shoot at you. You've got a bold personality; I can only imagine how much he hated that."

A smile pestered her lips.

"He was expecting some quiet spoken woman," she agreed. "Instead he got me." Then she gave him a deep sigh, turning her head up to the sky as if to pull strength from it. "He was so drunk that he told me if our child wasn't a boy, he'd tell the woman he'd gotten pregnant that he'd take that child and make me raise him. I didn't know he'd been unfaithful to me, so when he told me that, I told him if he continued to have port girls, I would sleep with other men while he was away at sea."

Alister cleared his throat of the lump that had formed in it, stepping away from the wheel. It seemed his movements caught her attention because she looked to him.

She rolled his eyes like she could read his thoughts.

"I understand it now," she laughed. "Women can't swim across the sea and tell each other, it's easy to have other girls." She turned the wheel from side-to-side with a smile because he'd moved, once more giving her the freedom to play with it. "It's lonely at sea. I had to sail it to understand what it's like."

Well good, as long as she understood that.

"Still... You would have thought with how much he apparently wanted me he would have kept his dick to himself."

She leaned her elbow on the wheel, resting against it. It didn't seem like she was willing to let it go now that she had it.

"I was a good wife. I did what I was told, did all my wifely duties without complaint. Held teas, parties, tried to show off his wealth to make him happy. Unfortunately, any mistake, no matter how large or small, was given punishment. I always looked forward to when he would piss off to sea."

It didn't take Alister much to realise, "You never wanted him to come back."

"Nope. Wanted him good and dead, long before I set out on making that so

myself. Even though I hated it at the time, I'm glad it led to this."

She gave Alister a brighter smile, her blue eyes catching the sunlight and making them look like shallow water.

"I think I was born to be a pirate. I hated sitting around like some stupid, brainless woman. He never shut up about the sea, it's all he would ever talk about. He told me all about being in command of a ship and crew, and I used that information to become captain. He had old books on sailing, which I studied before I left. The moment he had to leave for duty, I ran away since he wasn't around to stop me."

She fell back, stretching her arms out while she held onto the handles and bowed her back. It was like she wanted to turn upside down, the tips of her mud-coloured hair almost brushed the timber floor.

"There is no truer freedom than being a captain of the seas."

Alister shook his head with a deep chuckle. "Well ain't that the truth."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Rosetta brushed her fingertips over the blue painted railing of *her* ship, a small smile fixed upon on her features.

Alister had already gone back to the Howling Death and was currently

leading the way. She could see the back of him manning the helm from the short distance between their ships.

But she wasn't walking the length of her ship to look at him, she was doing it to admire what she was currently standing on.

Unlike the Howling Death's grey and aged sails, the Laughing Siren had crisp white ones. The sandy oak timber was polished, as if it was sanded, cleaned, and then refinished with wax in every port it docked at.

Not a rope was frayed, not a single metal rig was rusted.

It was beautiful.

She walked her way to the very front and held onto the rope at the corner of the front mast to lean over and look at the wooden mermaid sculpture with a far too jolly face. Its hands were forward like it was reaching for something, while its tail curled down before the fins at the end spread behind it.

"When you told me this ship was glorious, you weren't kidding," Mr Smith said as he came up the short rise of steps that led to this half level at the front.

Rosetta reached her hand out uselessly to the mermaid, wanting to touch her but unable to.

"It is, isn't it?" She finally stood back and turned to him.

His eyes moved over her, much like how a parent would with pride. "And it's yours now."

Watching him say those words, with that look in his eye, that caring and proud expression, made tears she didn't even know she'd been holding in come to the surface.

Mr Smith had never seen Rosetta cry before, but he didn't look at her with shock. The face he already wore deepened. It was almost as if he was expecting it.

He closed the space between them and brought her in for a tight hug. He placed an arm around her shoulders while he wrapped the other around her head.

A quiet sob fell from her as she reached around and grabbed the back of his brown tunic so that it was bundled in tight little fists. She buried her face against his chest.

He turned them so his back was to the rest of the ship, hiding her from all of the crew as she wept. He protected her from their viewing eyes.

How did he know? How did John know Rosetta had been holding this in?

She didn't even know if they were tears of pain or tears of joy, relief, but they overtook her so violently that she shuddered with her head against him as she took in his comforting warmth and embrace.

Was I waiting for Alister to leave before I did this?

She didn't think she would've had the courage to cry in front of him. Rosetta didn't want him to know just how deeply she'd buried the hurt of her past.

She knew it had happened when she'd been facing Theodore but that was different. That was in the moment. It wasn't the yawning depth which lingered afterwards that was far worse by comparison.

Only Naeem and Mr Smith knew just how much Rosetta had been hurting.

"I've waited so long for this," she cried, shaking her head to nuzzle her face against him. She was probably getting tears and snot all over him but he didn't seem to mind. "Why did it have to take so long?"

Three years she'd been holding this in. Not once had she ever cried about it, not once had she let it ache her heart this heavily. It had been unbearable weight.

"Shh." He patted the back of her head in a soothing manner, tenderly brushing over the length of her matted hair. "All that matters is that it's done, that he's dead."

Her fists clenched tighter, pulling on his tunic.

"He couldn't even admit to it." A hiccup of breath clogged in her chest. "He still tried to tell me it was my fault, John."

"It wasn't Rosetta." He held her tighter. "You know that. Don't listen to the words of a bad man."

"I wanted that child," she finally admitted, for the first time, ever, to another person. Not even Naeem knew this. "I wanted something to love, something to care for. I wanted to cherish something in the way I wanted to be cherished."

John was a father; she knew he would understand.

Rosetta had wanted to grow a daughter who would never be forced to make the decision she had to save her family. Or, to grow a son who was nothing like his horrible father.

It was her hope for a life she thought she could bare when she'd been married. To focus all the love and attention she had inside her without an outlet onto a child.

She hated Theodore, hated him from the moment he revealed how he'd tried to destroy her family. What he did to selfishly have her. She'd even accepted the occasional slap until then, and then she'd turned spiteful, which earned her harder and harder punishments.

"Why did it have to be me?" Why did it have to be Rosetta that Theodore Briggs put in his sights?

"Because no other woman would have had the courage to do what you did today."

A louder cry fell from her at his words. She knew he was right.

No other woman would have had the will, the smarts, the internal strength to do every terrible thing she had done throughout the last few years to get to this ship.

But it shouldn't have had to be anyone!

"The things I've done, John..." Some of them were unbearable in her memories.

"I know I wasn't there for the beginning," he said with a comforting tone, tilting his head to place his cheek on the top of her hair. "But we're all here now to make sure you don't have to do those things again unless you want to."

She gave an awkward laugh. "You wouldn't say that to your daughter."

"No," he laughed back. "I would never approve of her doing those things, but that's because it wouldn't have made her happy. You're different to her, she was soft and precious."

"I-I'm totally precious too."

His chest rumbled as he squeezed her tighter and laughed a little louder.

"Yeah, but you're as soft as a rock, my dear."

"Thank you," she sighed when her sobbing subsided, finally releasing him. "I needed to let that out."

"I figured today would be the day you would finally give in."

She looked over the railing to stare through the sails of the Howling Death to peek at the horizon, only to notice Alister could see her approaching the rail. She quickly turned away.

With her back to him, and the rest of her ship, she quickly wiped at her face.

Shit, hopefully he didn't see. At least he wouldn't have heard it, but she was sure her face was a terrible tear-shed pink.

“Are you sure about this?” Mr Smith asked with a tone of concern.

She saw in her peripheral that he was staring at Alister with his hands folded behind his back.

She waved her hand up and down at him dismissingly. “Stop being so overprotective.”

“Is this what you want to do though? You told me you wanted to sail away from the east, but that’s currently our heading.”

“There’s a map leading that way he wants to follow while were in these parts.”

He turned to give her a frown. “That’s not what I meant and you know it. *He* is leading us that way, are you sure that’s what you want?”

“No,” she laughed.

She came to the railing to stare at Alister, leaning against it with one arm folded while she rested her chin in the palm of the other. He was looking away once more and the blistering heat had faded from her cheeks enough to tell her that her colour was returning to normal.

“I don’t know what I want. I just want to follow what feels good for once.”

“He’s a pirate,” he said with far too much bite and her eyes trailed back to him.

“So am I,” she rebuffed.

“Yes, I know, but he may end up being just like Theodore. This could all be a façade to get goodness knows what from you.”

“Then I will put a bullet in his head too.” She turned back to look at Alister, who once more had his head turned to her. She gave him a wave by twinkling her fingers at him as she said, “I’m sure he will irritate the shit out of me soon enough and then we will sail away with any treasure he has gifted us with finding along the way.”

“So you’re using him?” Mr Smith leaned his backside against the railing with his arms folded. “That sounds more like you.”

Her answer was slow to come.

“In many ways. This means I don’t have to choose our heading, since I have no idea where I want to take us. As much as I dreamed about today, I didn’t really have a plan past this.” Then she gave a sigh at his raised brow, like he didn’t truly believe her. “I also just want to feel like a real woman for once. Is that so much to ask for?”

He gave a warm, welcoming chuckle.

“Not at all. I’m just making sure *you* made this decision and weren’t somehow coerced into it.”

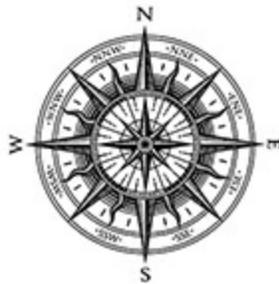
She gave a warm smile.

“I’ll never allow a man to force me to do anything I don’t want to do ever again. You should know that by now, John.”

She childishly poked her tongue out at Alister who was eight years older than her twenty-one. He just shook his head like he was disappointed in her for it before turning his head forward once more.

“Come, I want to see the interior of the ship and the damage his crew made to our stocks.”

She moved away from the railing so she could wander below deck and take in the heart of this ship.



“I would have advised against this,” Derek said to Alister while he was manning the helm.

The winds are steady today. He didn’t have to put much effort into steering his ship other than keeping it on track.

“Aye, I know.” He took his eye away from the horizon to peek slightly behind him at Rosetta, to find she’d moved away from the railing of her ship and was gone. He shrugged and turned away. “But I’ve made my decision.”

“Yer know ‘Mad Dog’ would never have approved of this.”

“Nay, but he isn’t the captain anymore.”

Derek had been Captain Mad Dog’s quartermaster, and his first mate, for most of his command. He knew the man better than anyone, even Alister.

“What happens when yer done with her? Women don’t like ta be scorned, turn spiteful when they do.”

Alister didn’t think Rosetta would ever care that much when he told her he was done with her.

Still, he said, “as long as she doesn’t point her cannons at us afterwards, I don’t care how she feels.”

“What if she does?”

Alister gave a snort of laughter. “Her hull may be stronger than ours, but we have more cannons.”

He’d fight fire with fire and then hightail it away.

“What if she tries to follow?”

A strong grimace almost made him shudder with disgust. He couldn’t think of anything worse!

“She won’t. She’s not stupid.”

Derek raked his fingers over his long scraggly beard. “The crew is worried yer going to turn soft because of her.”

With a snarl-like expression on his face, Alister grabbed Derek by the scruff of his shirt and yanked him closer. They were almost nose to nose as he lifted the shorter man to the tips of his toes while his peg leg scratched at the ground.

“Then you tell those lads that they’ve got another thing coming. No woman will have the power to make me any less of a killer, or a ship sinker. I’m not called ‘the Bloody Storm of the Seas’ for no reason and they best remember that before I gut them.”

He tossed the man back, almost making him trip because of his unsteadiness on his wooden leg when it slipped.

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing about his own men!

“I’m not some land loving man,” he spat, every ounce of hatred he had settling onto his features. “I have no interest in buying some house, starting a family with a single woman, and living my days in peace. I plan to die with my sword in my hand and covered in another man’s blood.” Then he turned his dark glare on Derek. “And if I so happen to look like I’m going that way, I’ll put a bullet in my own head.”

Derek nodded his head as if he already knew that.

“The lads want to know how long we should be expecting this arrangement then?” Derek folded his meaty arms across his chest, familiar with Alister’s angry outbursts. “They want to take advantage of this.”

“Who knows?” Alister admitted. “A month? Maybe six?” He shook his head with a laugh. “I doubt it’ll be longer than a year.”

“What if we find Dustin’s trove?” Derek gestured his chin towards the Laughing Siren. “Do you plan to share it with them?”

He gave a shrug with his shoulders.

“A small portion of it as compensation for holding supplies for us. That treasure is ours, and I won’t let anyone else’s greedy hands have more than I am willing to part with.” Then a wide, but evil grin spread across his features. “But I’m hoping we’ve split ways before we find it.”

“Are ye actually taking us towards those maps she gave us then?”

“Oh aye, I’m not waiting to find it. I’m just hoping she draws the short straw with the maps I choose to go to first.”

“Yer a devil as always,” Derek laughed with a deep bellow, stroking his beard this time with humour. “I didn’t think we had nothin’ to worry about.”

“Nay, so make sure the rest of the men know that.”

Alister didn’t think his men would ever turn on him, but he didn’t need mistrust birthing on his ship. He needed their faith in him, needed their loyalty.

He needed them to care for his back more than their own and if that meant plucking out a few weeds who may be trying to birth insane ideas like he was going soft, then so be it.

I may be sweet on the lass, but I’d never give up my crew for her. Nor would he leave the sea.

His gaze spanned over it. *This is my home.*

And he’d be damned if anyone took it away from him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



It had only been nearly a month of Alister sailing next to Rosetta and the Laughing Siren, and already he was growing irritated with the woman – but for all the wrong reasons.

His men had discovered she was just as ruthless as he could be by the fact she kept taking them off course.

It hadn't taken them more than five days to sail to the eastern map she'd given him to find nothing there. Another false lead of promises of wealth, a freaking goose chase for mad men like him to go after.

Alister often wondered if maps like these were created so pirates would be away from frequently used trading routes for a short while. So many times in his life he had come across them, maps that led to nowhere, nothing.

It meant he had seen much of the world, but it often left him frustrated. He was impatient to finish his goal.

Currently they were heading towards the most northern lands, to the location he thought looked more promising.

Rosetta turning them off-course by suddenly steering her ship away often got under his skin, but the reason she was doing it wasn't what bothered him. Her crow's nest was higher and they were able to see a ship in the horizon better than his could.

A bell would be rung from her ship, the only real communication they had to share an alert.

Then she would have her ship head towards what she wanted. She didn't care if it was a trading boat stocked with items they could raid, or if it was a fleet ship. Rosetta would turn to it and hunt it. Alister sometimes let ships pass when he was getting close to a location so he could go to it. She didn't.

She had gone after two ships but it hadn't been a waste of their time. It had just made getting to the north take a few days longer.

Both had been trading boats.

They'd raided them and then left the men alive. Neither needed more crew and once they were done with them, they abandoned them on their nearly empty vessels.

Because of her, they'd gained enough supplies that they wouldn't have to dock into a port for quite some time since they split the spoils down the middle. It had also gotten them some worthwhile loot they could sell once they finally did. He held all of it.

But today had been different. The ship she'd headed for was a lone Queen Mary Anne fleet vessel, a large one that almost rivalled her own.

When he'd started taking it over so it could be raided before it sunk, he hadn't liked seeing her walking in his peripheral. Not when he was still

swinging his sword to help kill the last of the soldiers on board.

He watched her shoot a man in the head who was rushing towards her with his sword raised, before she disappeared into the small navigation room.

With an aggravated sigh, he cut the man in front of him from nose to navel, before making his way, carefully, to follow her.

She'd partially withdrawn her sword while turning to him, thinking it might have been an enemy. It wasn't the first time they'd crossed swords because they'd spooked each other. When she saw it was him, she pushed it back into its scabbard and turned back to what she was doing.

After he closed the door and walked to the desk, noticing she'd opened the drawers to it already, he grabbed the chair behind it.

"Why is it you never stay on your ship when I tell you to?" he asked while shoving the chair under the handle of the door to prop it closed so they couldn't be disturbed.

"Because unless I'm on your ship, you have no command over where I go." Her voice was strained as she tried to turn the wheel of the black metal safe she wanted inside of.

It was pushed into the corner and hidden away behind cupboard doors. He could see the key already in the lock. *She must have found it in the drawer.*

She continued to make soft groaning noises as she pushed all her energy and strength into unlocking the mechanism. It looked a little old and well used.

"I'm still a captain, and a pirate, and I won't stay on my ship to watch like some woman."

Alister, with a huff, came up behind her. He grabbed the locking wheel of the safe she'd been struggling with by reaching around her, and turned it for her with little effort.

It released and she pulled it open.

"But you're never on my ship for me to tell you where to go!"

Damnit! Rosetta had not once stepped foot on his ship since they set sail, refusing to leave the Laughing Siren unless they were raiding.

And that was why he was growing irritated.

It was obvious he still wasn't bored with her since he often found himself climbing the side of her hull to creep onto her ship. Like a man searching for water in the desert, he constantly sought her out so he could drown in her.

She never comes to me.

Yet she was happy to come here. Where there were swords, guns, and the potential of being harmed. But apparently, coming to Alister's bed was too much of a task.

"I like my ship," she mumbled. "Why would I leave it?"

Not seeming to realise the danger she currently had pressed behind her, or his bubbling frustration, she dipped her body into the large safe to inspect everything inside it.

It put her in a position where she was bent over with her arse pointing towards his groin. Alister placed his hands on the rim of the safe edges to lock her in instead of on her hips to pull her against him.

There was a hefty pouch of obvious coins, but other than that, there wasn't much else to loot besides the papers she started going through. Most of them found their way to the floor, deemed uninteresting.

What is wrong with me? He was angry with her, found her lack of reciprocation in effort as a rejection, but the moment he was in her presence, it all faded away.

Even now he was furious she had put herself in harm's way, but he couldn't stop himself from leaning closer to breathe in the sweet smell of her when she stood back up.

He smelt the side of her neck and her hair covering it, to take in her perfume of little white flowers. Then there was the scent of Rosetta behind it that seemed just as damning to him.

She smelt sweet. She smelt of woman. Sensual. Arousing. Heady in comparison to the salt of the water that constantly sloshed around them.

Maybe it was because, when he did come to her, she would accept him without hesitation. There was never any reluctance or barrier to sly his way through.

If he came to her cabin to corner her in it, coming up with any excuse he could to be near her – whether it was to talk to her, fuck her, berate her about something – she'd be the one to suddenly bring him in for a kiss before he could even utter a single word. To jump up and wrap her legs around his waist as if she wanted to climb him like a tree, forcing him to catch her.

She'd grip his hair and tug it until his neck was strained, forcing him into deep kisses that would cause him to lose his focus just so he could get lost in her.

Why can't I get her out of my head? He didn't understand why he hadn't

sailed the other way yet, considering the way she was making him feel.

He often found himself eyeing over her ship to look for her. He'd grin if he found her watching him going about his duties.

She often did this; would go to the railing to see what he was doing. If he turned his attention to her fully, she'd give him this twinkling wave with her fingers that often made him want to abandon the helm of his ship so he could climb up the side of hers like a desperate madman.

It was like an invitation, like she was trying to tease him from afar when she did it.

His mood would sour if he couldn't see her. He didn't like it when she wasn't available in his sight, like his eye was starving to get a glimpse.

With his breath fanning so close to her skin that it was too easy to drink in the smell of her, he said with a rumble, "You will have to come to my ship eventually."

Because Alister wanted a night of her in *his* bed. Especially since he'd never had the pleasure of having her in it, or waking next to her.

No, instead he had to make his way back to his ship in the middle of the night or she'd be up when the sun rose and had left him alone in hers. He hated that, waking up in her bed to find it empty. It almost felt like he had to do a walk of shame to his own damn ship!

It was worse when he made eye contact with either of their crews along the way.

"When I'm ready," she answered absentmindedly.

She was still shuffling the papers as though they were more important than the man currently caging her in.

"What's wrong with my ship, lass?" he asked quietly, moving a hand so he could brush her hair to the side and expose the pale skin of her neck in preparation of his attention.

"It's dark and musty, and I know that bed isn't as soft as mine."

He pressed his lips to her skin, needing to taste her almost as much as he needed to take his next breath. She seemed to understand where his mind had started moving to and lowered what was in her hands. A delighted shiver racked her shoulders.

"Alister," she warned, but he was no longer listening.

He didn't care what she was warning him about.

I came in here to yell at her. Hell, she was arguing with him, and yet his

body couldn't seem to get enough of her.

He wanted to lash out at her but he suddenly couldn't remember why. Why did it matter when she was here in front of him now?

It's been four days since I've touched her.

That was because Alister had refused to go to her ship in an attempt to force her to his. He hadn't done it gracefully and often his men received the backlash from it.

Lucky for him, they didn't seem to really know the difference – since he was often aggressive and rude.

But for four days, he'd been holding back every single urge, every single ounce of want that had been growing steadily by the minute. The more he turned his sight away from her ship in order to reject his own ambition of climbing to her, the more frustrated he grew.

“You and I both know you only sleep in your bed if I'm in it with you.” He drew his lips over the side of her neck with another deep breath to take her in. He even nipped her.

His hand came forward to slip over her shoulder and inside her tunic to grasp a breast. The other continued to lean against the safe.

“You sleep in that hammock,” the one she had strung up inside the room above her bed like he had with his, “so come sleep in mine if you don't like my bed.”

“We can't both fit in it.” Her voice was growing smaller like her hard personality was fading to the soft one she only shared with him when he touched her just right.

He thumbed her nipple just to make her twitch in his arms.

“Sure we can.” Next he pinched it between his thumb and index finger, letting the rest of his splayed fingertips caress the underside of her soft, creamy mound. “We'll figure it out.”

She always responds to me.

And he knew it too. He knew she was overcome by whatever thing had hooked inside them both when she was in his presence as much as he was in hers.

Even now he could feel that her nipple had hardened under his attention. Her breathing was becoming shaken and heavy. She even leaned against him like her back was seeking his body against hers, the warmth he emitted.

So, if she still wanted him, why wouldn't she come to him?

“I don’t want to leave my ship.”

She broke the trance he was becoming undone by when she turned around and folded her arms across her chest. She was escaping his hand that had started to slip inside her tights so he could run his palm against her stomach, and then at some point lower.

He also didn’t know if she’d done it to be defiant, or to hide those taut little nipples that were easy to see stabbing against her tunic when she was aroused. His sight often slipped to them when they were, his hands itching to touch them like a beckoning call.

“Then stay on it,” he bit, his nose crinkling as he placed his hand back against the safe to cage her in fully again. “Don’t come onto the ships we raid.”

“You’re starting to piss me off with this, Alister.” He noted the glare she gave him behind cold eyes. “Stop making me feel like I’m not worthy to help.”

“And you’re pissing me off by coming to this ship but not mine!” He gripped the edge of the safe with such strength he feared he’d crush the metal under his fists.

“Why do you even care?”

“Because you could get hurt Rosetta! You could be targeted and—”

“That’s not what I mean!” She stamped her foot like she was ready to have a childish tantrum. “I already know that. I mean, why do you care which ship we’re on?”

“Because you’re making me feel like you don’t want it, lass!”

He ran one of his hands over the top of his head to brush his hair back in frustration. He couldn’t believe he was admitting to this.

“You’re making me chase you like you don’t give a shit.”

And Alister didn’t chase any woman.

They flock to me in ports! Hungry to have him. Maybe his coin too, but regardless! All he had to do was crook his finger at a woman and she would be in his lap.

But Rosetta wasn’t fawning to him, nearly tripping over her feet just to have him.

He watched her brows twitch, her folded arms loosening.

“But it’s obvious that I do.”

And he freaking knew that each time he was with her.

The way her hands would explore him made tremors roll through his body like he'd never been touched before, and was starving for the attention. She'd place them everywhere, his chest, his arms, every scar on his body like she enjoyed the feeling of them. She'd cup his face, stroke his facial hair, making him feel handsome when most others made him feel like he looked like a hideous villain.

She'd grip his long hair like she wanted to forever get tangled into it – she even asked him if he would let her plait it like she wanted to play with it.

None of this stopped him from feeling the way he did when he was away from her, on his ship, alone, hoping she might come to him as if she might *ache* for him like he did for her.

And then she didn't.

He felt like he was the only one that needed it, rather than just wanting it.

“Do I?” he sneered, grabbing her around the neck with one hand so she couldn't look away from the intensity his gaze held.

He wasn't gripping her tightly, but his aggression was there, a reaction to the way he felt prodded.

“Because I don't know what you truly want, what you're after.”

When she squinted her eyes with suspicion at his words, he pulled her closer so that they were just a breath's distance away. He didn't appreciate that his mind immediately dropped his gaze to her puffy lips, like he wanted to take them with his own now that they were just a short distance apart.

The only reason he didn't lean in was because of the spiteful expression on her face. Although, his thumb seemed to have a mind of its own as it brushed underneath her jawline in a little caress.

“Don't look at me like that. You've lied to me and deceived me more times than I know. How am I to know the truth?”

And what was her truth? Did she want him like it seemed she did when he was touching her, or didn't she by the fact she never sought him out for more?

He'd once wanted her pining for it, so why was it him instead?

She's got my sail ropes in knots. And they should never be knotted.

Her lips thinned into worried lines, and her eyes averted away from him. His own widened.

I knew it... He didn't like the way his chest swirled with a dark emotion. *She's been lying to me.*

What about, he didn't know, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to know. His mind seized on the fact she'd been sailing with him for a month, and may not have truly wanted him but something else he had.

Is it Dustin's trove? Was she planning on trying to steal it from him all along?

He released the intimate hold he had on her throat, surprised she had trusted him enough to let him, and dropped his arm.

"Fine, Rosetta." He gave a dark chuckle to mask the darker emotions he felt. "You can stay on your ship, while you point it the other way because I'm not changing my course."

Not with how close he was to what could potentially be the goal he'd been seeking for years.

How quickly he'd come to this decision didn't surprise him. He was just disappointed because he wasn't done, but at least it was on his terms. *Still have my pride.*

"Alister, wait." She reached forward to grab his wrist gently by clasping it in both hands.

He gave her a grin to show her just how little it bothered him that he'd part from her.

Seeing his expression, and the fact he was pulling his arm away from her as he backed up, she gave him a sigh. She folded her arms and turned her head to the side to dismiss him.

He reached around her to grab the pouch of coins from the safe, his chest brushing up against the backs of her arms. It brought her closer to him, and he took in once again the smell of gardenia flowers.

He hated to admit to himself it would be one of the many things he might actually miss about her.

When he held the pouch, he stepped back from her. He turned while tossing it in the air. He was waiting for her to tell him they were supposed to split it, and then he would unfortunately have to tell her he didn't care.

"I'm afraid to leave my ship," she muttered quietly.

Well that was unexpected.

He halted, but didn't turn around from facing the door he was only a step away from.

"You say that, and yet here you are."

"Have you not noticed it's never my original crew that helps to raid?"

His brow crinkled in a frown of thought. Well no, he'd never noticed that, but that's because he didn't truly care about her crew. They were her responsibility.

He looked at her from the corner of his good eye by looking over his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"I only ever send the men who were prisoners off my ship. I'm afraid that if we move too many of those I trust, they will try to take over my ship while were gone and your men are too distracted on the boat we're raiding to help."

He finally turned around and realised her dismissive posture had never been dismissive to begin with. It was defensive, as though she felt vulnerable telling him this and didn't like it. It was more obvious as she spoke, her shoulders turning inward.

"I don't trust them yet, and there are too many of them for me to get to know quickly enough. Over two-thirds of my men are people I don't know, Alister. That's why I've never come to you."

He'd like to believe her but... "Why didn't you tell me this sooner then?"

"When have you asked?"

She folded her arms tighter and refused to look at him, her eyes narrowing to the floor beside her.

"What happens on my ship is none of your concern, nor is it your issue to deal with. My fears could be unfounded and I might have nothing to worry about, but currently I have them. I haven't told anyone this, I don't want people to think I'm paranoid or crazy. I get enough of that bullshit already."

And yet her fears were justifiable. Her new crew were all criminals and she had no idea of the crimes they'd committed, or how terrible they could be.

"But you know I'll assist you if they try." He looked down to the pouch in his hand with uncertainty.

Did she truly have so little faith in him to think he wouldn't? Did Rosetta actually think he was that much of a dick to the woman he was currently sleeping with?

"And sink the Laughing Siren at the same time?" She brought her eyes to him so he could see they were crinkled on the outer corners with something he'd never seen from her; fear. "I know I said I'd rather see her at the bottom of the ocean, but that was before I sailed her. I don't want to give her up now that I have her."

She started nibbling on the inner corner of her lips, more so the bottom

one. "I'm also worried they'll kill those who have been with me for a long time before we even get the chance to take it back from them."

"If you're so afraid to leave, why are you here now?"

"I know you want to keep me safe for some stupid reason, but if I do that, they will see it as a sign of weakness. They'll think I'm incapable of being a captain that is willing to cut throats and be malevolent." She narrowed her eyes and held his with a fierce gaze as she said, "Do you know what it's like for crew members to tell you you're too 'soft' to be captain? Do you know how many throats I've had to cut to stop that word from spreading simply because it has nothing to do with my capabilities but because I'm a woman?"

No, because Alister had never been soft. But, even he didn't like the possibility of it being mentioned. Derek just telling him that there could be a possibility of it had him clutching him by the scruff of his tunic.

Alister finally came towards her with his brows furrowed further, his lips pressed tight together.

"That's why you do it? But you've been doing this even when you were on the Howling Death." *More lies?*

She lifted her finger to point at him.

"No I didn't. After the pirate hunters, I stayed on your ship like you told me to until I thought the fighting was done." Then she poked him the chest. "I didn't mean for you to get sliced that day."

"And yet I still got cut," he chuckled, his anger lessening with every word that came out of her pretty little mouth.

She'd been afraid and just didn't want him to know. He'd gained her trust in many ways, but apparently nothing that was deep within her mind. She'd never sought comfort from him, and he'd never tried to give it to her. Why should she have told him the truth of her inner fears?

"Do you think I want to get hurt? There was a reason I tricked my way onto your ship, Alister."

Once more, she folded her arms and turned her head to the side like she was dismissing him, and he now saw it for what it really was. A woman trying to hide that she felt vulnerable.

How many times has she done this in front of me? So many he couldn't count, and yet he'd always fallen for the trick and dismissed her in return rather than reaching out to her.

"I can't fight men like you. Men that are bigger and better than me," she

admitted with a hint of shame, her shoulders slumping forward and slightly curling her back.

He almost took it as a compliment.

“Aye, you’re right, Rosetta.” He could tell she didn’t appreciate him agreeing with her by her hands tightening into fists, but he was already opening his mouth to say, “Because you’re too smart to fight a battle you know you can’t win.”

She brought her gaze to him, just as he carelessly dropped the pouch of coins from his hand. He heard it open and spill against the ground.

“Instead you wrap your finger around men like me to get your way.”

He crossed the small space between them and reached down to grab her by the backs of her thighs. She let out this strange, adorable squeak when he forced her to have to hold onto his shoulders when he picked her up.

He held her legs around his waist.

She was above him, and he looked up to her with that sense-stealing breath of distance between them.

“You’re far more dangerous, lass.”

His words were rewarded with a small smile while her hair curtained around his face as she leaned it over him.

“At least you have the brains to realise that.”

But apparently, he was an idiot in other ways.

She reached her hands up to hold the sides of his jaw and crashed her lips down onto his.

Shit, I almost walked away from her... again.

And what for? Because she wouldn’t come to his ship? Because he was too unseeing to realise she’d been afraid to come to it?

He held her to him as he kissed her, allowing her to remain above him since she had locked her ankles around his torso.

It seemed she enjoyed towering over his massive frame for once.

“But don’t think you’re going to get away with the shit you just pulled,” she said between kisses.

Alister winced. He could only imagine what that meant.

“Then don’t leave me in the dark.”

She pulled her face away from his to give him an obvious glare, but there wasn’t any real sharpness to it.

“Has anyone ever told you you’re mighty arrogant? You could at least say

you're sorry."

"That word isn't in my vocabulary."

Her glare deepened and he grinned back. He stepped forward until his legs found the desk in the room. He threw her back to it, causing anything in the way to slip off the surface and hit the timber floor.

He lay over her, bringing his lips to her throat to roughly nip it with his teeth between his lips and tongue trailing over it.

"Wait!" she half giggled; half yelled. "We can't do it here."

"Oh aye we are." He started turning her over when she released her legs to get them between him and her. She was trying to force them apart.

Alister laid her front against the desk. "Just like that first time."

When he'd had her over his dinner table. The time that had started all this in his mind.

Because I still want her as much as I did then.

"And if you continue to come onto the ships we raid," he told her with his lip drawing a sensual line over the crook of her shoulder and neck.

The way her skin prickled with goosebumps in reaction made him grin.

Then he shoved one hand up to grab a fist full of long brown hair, yanking her head back. The other pulled on the ties of her tights so he could slide them down to the middle of her thighs.

"Then this is what is going to happen every time."

When she did exactly what she did last time he had her like this, grinding her hips back against him, Alister let out a chuckle. *Impatient wench.*

"Would you like a knife to stab me with?" Alister asked while reaching down to start unbuttoning his breeches as raw excitement started to thrum through him. Would he ever get enough of her? "Or would you prefer your pistol again?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Rosetta sat at the front of one of the rowboats from the Laughing Siren as men rowed the large oars. She turned her head back to see Alister had already reached the shore they were approaching and was helping his men to pull

their boat out of the water.

She had to give him that.

He wasn't afraid to assist when he had to. She'd seen him heave on the ropes of his sails with others to occasionally help if one of his men were on duty at the helm. He lifted stock if he was rearranging it to accommodate newly raided supplies.

He wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty or wet.

He rarely stopped moving.

He was always watching his crew work to make sure it was done right, would give advice to the newcomers if they were unsure rather than punishing them if they did it wrong.

With a sigh, she admitted, *he's a good captain.*

Turning her head back to look in front of her, she eyed the men in front of her.

Other than Naeem, she didn't know any of the others at all. She had done this on purpose. These were the ones that avoided her, or she, at least, had the least amount of interaction with.

After discovering the truth she hadn't wanted to particularly share because she felt ashamed of her fears, Alister's presence on her ship had increased over the past five weeks since then.

She didn't know if it was a good thing or not.

He didn't do much. He just leaned against the railing and watched her crew work like he did his own. He explained it was easy to see if someone had the idea of turning on the captain if you knew what to look for.

Apparently, there was some kind of stray gaze to be aware of but she'd never experienced a mutiny before nor had a crew she didn't trust fully.

He also worked closely with Mr Smith to arrange the men so the prisoners were never left alone as a group without one of her original crew present.

She knew he was intelligent when it came to taking down ships, but she hadn't thought he could be strategic in other ways as well.

Rosetta was working on bonding with them slowly. She was speaking with all her men as much as she could, despite her hesitation.

So, when they had finally reached the northern map's location, she organised to bring these men with her in a show of faith. Not that they would know Alister had brought his most trusted men to watch over them carefully in case something terrible went astray.

They'd discussed the plan before they'd gotten into their boats.

She knew being cautious was the smartest thing she could do, but she had begun to see a shift over time.

The tension she'd been able to feel on her ship had lessened as people got used to their roles, and her commanding them. Some were becoming friendly with her and she was starting to feel more comfortable on her own ship.

Things are settling. She didn't think she had needed Alister's help, that it only needed time, but she appreciated he'd at least tried. Even though sometimes the way he looked standing there on her ship, with his arms folded, with a deadly look as he watched the men, had been a little unnerving.

He always wore this strange expression like he was ready to reach for his pistol and shoot a man for simply sneezing. An ominous presence.

At times, Rosetta found him scary, especially when he was angry. There was something about a towering, muscular man shadowing any light with each step closer, who exuded strength and brutality to come at her with a snarled-up face.

Sometimes she laughed at him for it to hide her uncertainty, or that she was ready to reach for her sword. Other times, she'd take his mouth with her own, which seemed to be the easiest way to melt that expression.

It really depended on where they were and what they were arguing about.

She often wondered how other men saw him, since her opinion was skewed by her gender and their relationship with each other.

She'd seen men avoid him without question, refusing to be in his sight like it could put a target on their backs.

There had been whispers circulating throughout her crew about the unease of sailing next to the captain of the *Howling Death*. Apparently, his name was more widespread than she'd originally thought.

Then there were the rumours about her.

She'd nearly laughed her boots off and given herself a stomach ache when one of her men told her some of the others didn't trust a woman who would allow someone like him to touch her. They were afraid of her because she had somehow 'tamed' him.

I hope he doesn't get wind of that. Because Rosetta hadn't tamed him at all.

She didn't think any woman could tame Captain Alister Paine.

Still, she'd take it and wear it like a shroud of protection simply because it

secured her position more. If they thought she was fearsome for merely opening her legs to a man like him, then they must think she was ruthless in some way.

Despite all of this, she still refused to leave her ship unless she absolutely had to. He didn't seem to mind so much now that he'd discovered the truth and understood why.

Unfortunately, she didn't think her body could keep up with this brute's constant taking! She wished she hadn't told him so she could finally get a break for a night.

Then again, I may not be here now. She hadn't gotten him back for almost walking away. *Stupid bastard.* Not that she had ever really complained about his constant attention, since she enjoyed it every time.

She twirled a clump of hair in thought. *That man has got something over me.*

Something that had her gripping him almost every night in earnest. Something that had her nails digging into him so he couldn't escape before she was ready for him to go back to his ship. Something that had her waiting up for him if he hadn't come to her throughout the day – not that she would tell him she had been doing this.

Oh no, Rosetta refused to let him know just how badly she craved it. She wouldn't reveal she had an appetite that perhaps her body couldn't keep up with, that she just never seemed to be satisfied enough to the point where she wondered if she just wanted him to break her beyond repair.

He was arrogant, and mean, and overbearing. Sometimes he gripped her body so hard that it hurt, sometimes he grabbed her throat possessively that she struggled to breathe, and yet her body thrummed more because of it rather than being hateful of it.

He was always rough, and it allowed her to be as feral as she wanted to be. She bit him, scratched at him, tugged on his hair as hard as he did hers, and not once had he ever told her to stop.

I should end this. Before he became permanently imprinted on her body.

The last thing Rosetta needed was to one day separate from him and ache for it to the point she couldn't be satisfied by another.

I won't let any man have that kind of power over me.

But she hadn't liked when he tried to walk away. Didn't like the way it felt, and how her hands had reached for him without her consent. She had

reached for him like some woman begging for a man not to leave her! How pathetic!

She thought perhaps it was because of the reason why he was walking away.

Rosetta, for some stupid reason, hadn't wanted him to think she didn't desire him. She didn't want her inability to tell him the truth to be the reason this would've ended too soon.

It should be because one of us is done with the other. And she had a feeling it would be him first.

She pretended she didn't care, but she couldn't deny to herself the way things between them clutched at her.

Which meant Rosetta needed to start drawing away. To prepare herself. Her heart was already closed off, she'd made certain of it, but she needed her body to get over him before it had to.

Then again, I can just use port boys to forget. She almost laughed to herself. Now didn't that just sound like a stupendous idea.

When the bow of the rowboat hit the bank of sand, it broke her out of her thoughts. They all hopped out to lift it and carry it away, their feet sinking in the wet sand as water kicked up around their feet.

Once it was secure so that it wouldn't float away, she turned around to find that Alister had already started to walk ahead. He was leaving her behind! *Arsehole, we're supposed to be doing this together!*

Rosetta chased after Alister with Naeem in tow.

The rest of the men stayed behind with the rowboats next to Alister's men. They weren't ranked highly enough to be a part of this.

The small cape of shore they had landed on was surrounded by unclimbable cliff edges that towered above them in a semi-circle. This was a small area covered in trees, grass, overgrown shrubs, and sand – always sand. It would further roll onto a large, mass of land that was the country of Polytuik.

They had been hesitant about coming here since it wasn't a safe place for criminals like themselves, and had a strong alliance with Banksia, Queen Mary Anne's country.

The only reason they did is because they could tell it was cut off from the rest of Polytuik. The cliff edge meant the likelihood of encountering anyone was low, a coastal area that was completely secluded.

She could see a small waterfall sprinkling water down, probably to a river or lake that would eventually wash out to the sea.

“Hey! You could have waited for us.”

Alister didn't greet her when she came upon him like he didn't care or hadn't heard her, too fixated on his task. He was searching for a particular tree, seeming to look for a special marking.

When he found it, he started taking large, long steps with a face that told them all not to disturb his deep train of thought. He was most likely counting how many steps he was taking and making sure they were in the right direction. Calculating.

Pierre and Derek were holding two shovels each. She thought that was strange considering Dustin's trove was apparently a cave. No digging required.

She was surprised Derek's peg leg wasn't sinking into the soft ground with every heavy stomp he took.

Blowing a curl of her hair out of her face in agitation, because Rosetta hated running, she leaned closer to Pierre to whisper, “Why do you have shovels?”

He leaned closer to her to talk back just as quietly, likely worried about disturbing Alister.

“Usually when we don't find it, we sometimes find something else. Nothing worse than having to row back to the ship for a shovel to dig.”

Rosetta placed her hand over her chin and lips in thought, nodding her head to say she understood.

“Do you think there is something here?”

They ventured further through the brush and tall trees that had no branches except high above to umbrella them.

Seagulls and other coastal birds squawked and chirped while bugs made screaming buzzing sounds. This was the perfect damp yet warm environment for mosquitos and she had her hand ready to strike if they came to drink from her precious blood.

“Oh aye,” Pierre answered, a grand smile spreading. “There's markings. If someone else hasn't found it first, then there will be something for us to find.”

He put his arm around her shoulders and pointed to Alister in front leading them. He annoyingly placed most of his weight on her.

“And he wouldn’t look so serious if he didn’t feel it deep in his bones. You can see it, can’t you? He knows there’s something here.”

Rosetta let her eyes drift over him in more of an assessing way than before.

His pace was slow, like he was taking extra care to be certain of where they went and how far his steps were. His eyes were narrowed while his dark brows were knotted tightly with concentration. His lips were thinned and slightly pursed, while his good eye remained fixed only on what was in front of him.

He didn’t even brush strands of his black and long messy hair from his face when the wind blew lightly.

One of his hands was rubbing the long stubble on his face. She even thought his thumb was brushing over the bottom of the scar that run under his eyepatch.

He does look rather determined.

Her gaze stayed fixed on his eyepatch.

Rosetta had never seen under it.

On the odd occasion she would try to reach up to it so she could lift it, and he would, what he thought was sneakily, evade her.

He never took it off when he was in her presence. Not when they were being intimate, not when he fell asleep next to her – she couldn’t even lift it then because he’d awaken if she touched his face at all.

What is under there that he is so concerned about me seeing?

It made her more curious by the day. She wondered if she would ever find out.

Alister stopped, looked at the map in his hand, and started to search around a group of trees. When he found another marking, he took them in a different direction.

“This isn’t Dustin’s trove,” Alister finally said, pulling the map away from his sight and shoving it in his pocket.

Now that he was willing to talk, Rosetta came up beside him.

“How can you tell?”

He pointed at the cliff wall to their left.

“It doesn’t lead to there, to a cave.” Then he shouted to those behind him by dipping his head back. “Looks like you’ll be digging lads.”

“Aye cap’in,” Derek answered, while Pierre just groaned.

Alister’s intuition was spot on. Not even five minutes later, they stopped in

front of a small boulder that had been etched with a cross.

Pierre threw one of the shovels at Naeem, who hadn't been paying attention and got smacked in the torso. He let out a surprised grunt.

"You'll be helping."

"Ah yes, get the black man to do slave labour," Naeem chuckled with every ounce of humour. "Sounds about right."

"Then you should be good at it," Pierre winked back.

Rosetta scrunched her nose at Pierre's comment. She'd gutted men for less. She didn't like anyone being discriminatory to Naeem, her dearest companion.

In the same way Naeem had beaten men who had made cruel comments about Rosetta being a woman. Apparently walking pussy should learn their place and shouldn't talk.

"Shut up you pissy dick white boy." Naeem reached forward and patted the man on the shoulder as they walked closer to the boulder. "You've got a pretty face but I bet women are more satisfied after me."

"Ho ho! Then whip it out laddie and we can compare."

Laughter rang from them both as Derek silently came closer as well.

Rosetta had noticed the two men, who were both in their mid-twenties, had somehow bonded over the months. It'd started when she was still on the Howling Death, hunting for the Laughing Siren.

They were forced to interact, considering they were both her's and Alister's first men.

They often picked on each other for things both of them would punch another person for commenting on. It was a common trait between them, jostling and harassing people for things they couldn't change or help.

They were both terrible bullies.

It was generally done in jest, but most didn't appreciate having parts of themselves commented upon. Like their weight, their height, their skin colour, their age. Especially with Alister's men who were missing parts of themselves.

They started digging while Derek handed Alister the last shovel, and then all four of them were throwing dirt to the side. It flung around carelessly.

She looked down at her empty hands.

"What do you want me to do then? You only brought four."

Alister looked up at her, frowning a little in confusion as though the

answer should have been obvious. “Stand there and look elegant. Let us do the digging.”

With an irritated huff, she folded her arms over her chest and stepped out of the way of flinging dirt before she got showered in it.

“I’m never elegant.”

A chuckle fell from all of them, before he said, “Aye, I know that, lass.”

“Sing us a tune, my sweet Rose,” Pierre said with extended notes like he might start singing a ballad. He put the hand holding the shovel over his heart, while lifting the other hand forward.

Although he still made charming remarks like this, she’d realised long ago that he and Alister’s men no longer approached her to get into her pants. Pierre was the only one who still did it in jest, but even she knew that’s what it was, a joke.

“You don’t want her to do that,” Naeem commented with a shake of his head. “You’ll regret it.”

“Why not?” Pierre asked with much sincerity. “I bet she has a lovely voice.”

“Dig you lazy dog!” Derek yelled at Pierre since he’d stopped completely.

To assist, Naeem backhanded the blond across the back of the head. Pierre winced.

“She sounds like a drowning cat,” Naeem finally said. Then he frowned while standing tall and still in thought after flinging a spade full of dirt behind him. “Actually, I think a drowning cat would sound more pleasurable.”

It might be because Rosetta had never sung softly. She often belted out lyrics on purpose to sound like she wanted to kill men with nothing but her voice.

“Is there anything she can do well?” Pierre asked. “I still think she broke my toes while dancing.”

“Cooking,” Naeem answered.

Alister’s gaze turned up to her with a mischievous smirk on his features. She rolled her eyes at him, and where his obvious thoughts were.

Horny bastard.

“How does a noblewoman learn how to cook?” Derek threw in. “Doesn’t sound normal to me.”

Her narrowed gaze fell to Alister, who was paying too much attention to

the knee-deep hole they had already dug to notice. She wasn't particularly angry at him; she just resented more people knowing about her history than she was really comfortable with.

He'd obviously told Derek and Pierre about her past, without her consent. She wasn't pleased about that.

"One that had nothing else to do in a mansion but be bored. I often used to help in the kitchen when I was child since my mother cooked, and then I helped the maids when I was older."

Pierre opened his mouth with his head turned to her, probably to ask her more questions.

Alister quickly cut in. "Enough talk. Dig," he demanded.

She wondered if he'd saved her from being bombarded by questions on purpose or not. Then his eye darted up to her face for a second with a serious look, showing her he had. She gave him an appreciative smile.

He looked back down once more.

When they were nearly hip height to her body, one of them shoved their shovel in and a subtle boom echoed. They dug around what they found.

Naeem and Derek climbed out of the hole to reach for the medium sized brown wooden chest Alister and Pierre started to lift it out. They placed it next to the hole.

Covered in dirt like it had been sitting beneath the earth for over fifty years, the chest was medium in size, no larger than a man's torso. Rosetta had been hoping it was bigger.

But at least it isn't small.

Rosetta came forward to watch Pierre start to bash repeatedly at the rusted lock with his shovel. Each hit shook off a little more wettish dirt from the chest, revealing more of its design. The lock eventually broke and he stepped out of the way so Alister could kneel on one foot and a knee, and slowly open it.

They all peeked over his shoulders to see what would be revealed.

Inside were coins of silver, bronze, and gold, with an occasional piece of jewellery like a necklace or bracelet.

"Aye, how's that for booty, lass?" The grin Alister gave her over his shoulder was smug. "Glad you stuck with me now?"

"I don't stay around men for coin, otherwise I would never have left Luxor." She gave him a dull expression. "The duchy treasury was massive

compared to this.”

Her lips curled at the scowl he gave. *But it's the truth.*

Theodore may have been a cruel man, but he had so much wealth she could have asked for anything and he could have provided it. Any whim, any request. A gold-plated horse carriage, a thousand doves.

Rosetta had tried to play a game of what ridiculous thing could she ask for before he said it was impossible. He never did, but he often told her no, simply because it was just that, ridiculous.

“You sure know how to make a man who just became rich, feel poor.” He shook his head, digging his fingers into the coins like he wanted to make sure they were real. “The crew will be pleased to finally have some wages.”

“Aye, they will,” Derek confirmed.

“Both crews,” she said, crouching down to reach inside and grab a handful of coins.

There were more silvers than anything else, which took her by surprise. *I thought most chests were filled with gold.*

Alister gave her a strange look, one that said greed. It was obvious the idea of sharing it wasn't favourable to him.

Still, he said, very slowly like the words were forced from him, “Half each.”

“My crew is bigger!” she exclaimed. “I have more men to pay.”

“Half, Rosetta.” The deep tone he gave her told her he wouldn't budge on this.

She threw the coins back in the chest. “Fine.”

They closed the lid. Naeem and Pierre were the ones who were instructed to carry the heavy and weighted thing back to the beach. While they struggled, Derek walked behind them with two shovels in his hands, watching them closely as though he wanted to make sure they did a proper job of it.

Considering it was those two, together, they probably would find a way to mess up carrying a simple, yet weighty, chest.

Rosetta had long ago realised Derek was judgemental and liked to berate Pierre for even the slightest wrongdoing.

She fell back to walk beside Alister who was also holding two shovels as well.

“Thank you,” she muttered quietly, watching where she was going instead

of looking towards him. She also had her hands clasped behind her back. “I don’t like sharing my history.”

“Aye.” In the corner of her eye, she could see he was nodding. “It’s none of their business.”

She pursed her lips into an irritated pout. “Then why did you tell them?”

She watched as Pierre and Naeem started pulling the chest in opposite directions to make each other trip on purpose. Derek rose those shovels above his head and threatened to beat both of them to death if they didn’t stop.

“Because, it was better if they knew some of the truth.” When he turned his head to her, she turned hers slightly towards him to make sure he understood he had her attention. “I trust them. They’re good men. They won’t share that information nor will they truly care what you’ve done. They only care about what you do now.”

“Calling a criminal a good man is an oxymoron, Alister,” she laughed lightly.

He returned it just as soft. “Aye, but they’re good to those of my crew... and yours now.”

“And what about you?” She already knew the answer to this question, she just wanted to know what he thought about himself.

His sight drew away to look forward, his expression turning stern and thoughtful.

“Hmm. When I have to be.” His response made it sound like he didn’t always want to be a good man, even to his own men. “I value my crew. I treat those who earn it with the respect I think they deserve.”

She noticed he moved the shovel in the hand closest to her to the other so he could grip them both in one. Then he lifted his now empty hand so he could grab a few locks of her hair as they walked. He started tangling it around his digits as if he wanted to become ensnared by the long strands.

“I am neither a good man, nor a bad man. I take what I want, I steal what I want, and I kill who I want. But then there are those I do not feel the need to needlessly kill, those that are smart enough to surrender to me. It is never mercy, since I’ve often stolen all the supplies they need to survive, but it means I give them the chance. It’s often because I just don’t see the point.”

It was done gently, but he eventually lifted his hand to his face to take a quiet, yet sweet, sniff of her hair. Feeling the strands being lifted, hearing him want to take in the smell of her as though he couldn’t help himself, made her

stomach clench.

Her skin even prickled on her neck on that side of her body.

How could just one simple gesture, have her eyes searching for the perfect place they could hide themselves in, or a boulder at hip level so he could bend her over it?

“Then I am neither a good woman, nor a bad one,” she stated back, turning her face to the side to give him an impish smile. “I kill because I have to, not because I want to.”

“Aye, that I know,” he chuckled, releasing her hair and giving her a wicked grin. “You’re just like me, lass. Cold-blooded.”

Even though they were almost shoulder to shoulder and walking rather intimately next to each other, he didn’t step away from her when they saw their men.

Cheers rung out from them all while they were sitting around in the sand when they came into view.

Alister pointed at four of her eight men.

“You lot, you’re riding back with my men.” Then he pointed at her rowboat. “Put the chest in her boat.”

Everyone shared a look of uncertainty between each other, before doing as he commanded.

“I don’t understand.” She came up beside him when he started to help her fewer men push her boat into the water.

“You want half, you’re going to work for it.”

He hopped inside and she realised he was intending to go with it, and her, to the Laughing Siren.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Rosetta was forced to turn her back to the men in the boat when Alister sat at the very head. He folded his arms and leaned into the corner, eyeing over her and the chest between them. She was sure he was also carefully

watching her back as well.

He was pleased by today's spoils, but he didn't wear a smug smile.

"I think I've worked enough for it." She patted the top of the dirty chest. "I'm the reason you had the map."

"You're going to help me count it."

He squinted his eye at her when her lips pursed into thin lines of irritation.

She leaned as far forward as she could so the men behind her wouldn't hear her whisper. "You know I can't."

"Oh aye, and I know why."

She gulped. She didn't like the sound of that.

Rosetta mulled over what it could possibly mean as they slowly rowed to her ship.

They all climbed up the rope ladder that was rolled down the side of the hull, while men pulled the boat, with the chest in it, to the main deck by heaving on ropes.

The bustle of excitement was instant the moment all eyes fell on their booty.

"Move," he demanded to the crowd when he took one handle while Naeem took the other side. "You'll get your spoils once we've gone through it."

They carried it up to the navigation room. He dropped it in the middle of the circular blue rug in the centre and told Naeem to leave. He started going through the drawers of her desk, before going through the many cabinets and draws fixed to the walls.

"I knew there'd be one of these in here." He pulled a magnifying glass and a jewellery loupe – a small magnifying piece that sat in the socket of a person's eye – and placed them on the desk.

Her navigation room was brightly lit since the back wall was almost completely covered in windows. The room was almost semi-circular in shape with two doors on either side that led to the sleeping cabins. Hers, and one that was unoccupied since it had belonged to Theodore – she still hadn't stepped inside of it. The cabins were both small and only held a bed and nightstand at the foot of it.

"Why are you doing this here?" she asked when he dragged the chest, by himself, next to the desk and took the seat behind it.

It dragged across the floor with a sharp scraping noise that made her wince. *My poor carpet and flooring.*

“Because you don’t like being off your ship for long periods of time.” He opened the chest and pulled a jewelled necklace from it. “And we’re going to be here a while.”

He placed the jewellery loupe to his good eye and started checking the quality of the stones, lifting the magnifying glass up to check further when he needed to.

Knowing he was right, Rosetta grabbed a chair from a different, smaller desk to the side that would have belonged to the first officer, and brought it to the wrong side of the desk she should be at. *He’s in my bloody seat.*

She plopped herself in it, put one knee on top of the other, folded her arms, and then watched him.

He has many skills. Not once had she seen Alister be presented with a task he couldn’t complete.

He was smart in his own way. Not cunning like she was, but if Alister wanted something, whether it was a ship, or a task done, he always knew the best way to go about getting it.

Except for her.

Sometimes, he was exactly how he needed to be to make her melt into a useless puddle for him to do whatever he wanted with. He was never gentle, but his large massaging hands could turn her body lax for him. His words, accompanied by his deep, gruff, growly-like voice, set her spirit alight to the point she wanted to burn him with the flames he ignited.

Other times, he was so off the marker she thought he was the biggest idiot to ever be born into the cosmos.

This moment was one of those times.

“Well?” he asked, never lowering the loupe.

She didn’t know how he could see she wasn’t doing anything. He was blind in one eye and probably couldn’t see she wasn’t doing anything because of the tool in the other.

Her voice raised an octave in pure, unimaginable disbelief in his stupidity. “You know I can’t count!”

“Because you refuse to learn.”

“That’s not true.” She kicked her foot up and down, making it sway. “Mr Smith has been teaching me.”

“Trying. You refuse to learn from him.”

He put down the necklace and blindly reached into the chest to feel for a

different piece of jewellery. Once he had one, he started inspecting it as well.

“That’s not true,” she rebuffed once more.

He gave a dark laugh. “Don’t lie to me, lass. I’ve spoken with him and he’s told me you refuse to listen.”

“What does it matter if I don’t want to?” She turned her head to the side. “I have him to do all the math for me.”

It was all just so... boring. Numbers and counting. Rosetta couldn’t think of anything worse. She could count to twenty, but then she got lost and confused, and embarrassed every time she got it wrong.

“He won’t be around forever. You need to be able to do this if you want to be a good captain.”

“Naeem can count.” He couldn’t read too well, but he’d learned enough about math from Mr Smith to take over his duties.

“And what if they are both gone?”

A spike lanced her chest and twisted her gut.

“I–I’ll, uh, find someone else.”

“Someone you can trust with all the information?” He turned his head up to her, looking at her through the eye tool. “Or would you prefer to leave yourself open to the possibility of getting robbed literally right in front of your very own eyes and not know it?”

“You’re such a bastard sometimes.” Her voice was disappointed and defeated.

“That I am. I didn’t get my reputation by being kind.”

With a sigh, Rosetta took herself from the chair and knelt next to the chest. “What do you want me to do?”

“You can start by going through all the coins and separating them into groups. I noticed there were different kinds of silvers and golds from different countries. They’re all worth different amounts depending on where they’re from because of their purity and their size. The bronze all seems to be the same.”

Sitting on the floor since it would have the most amount of space, Rosetta started doing just that.

Since there wasn’t a lot of jewellery, Alister eventually joined her, helping her to go through it all. By the end, they had separated everything into six different piles: two of bronze, three of silvers, and one of gold.

“You can do the silvers; I’ll do the rest.”

Rosetta sat with her legs spread with piles between them and on either side of her. Alister moved to make himself comfortable by laying on his side, starting by counting the smaller bronze coins.

“H-how am I supposed to do that?” The number of silvers seemed daunting to her.

“Put them into stacks of ten, and then put those stacks into groups of ten.”

She tightened her lips inwardly. “Well, that doesn’t seem so hard.”

Alister looked up to her with a grin.

“Aye, it’s not. You’ve gotta have a little more faith in me, lass. I wouldn’t make you do something I didn’t think you were capable of doing.”

Some of her apprehension lessened and she gave him a half-hearted smile. She started doing as she was told.

He made sure she actually knew how to count to ten first by making her do it out loud the first time, before letting her do it silently.

He was done long before her, and eventually started to help.

Then came the hard part. She actually had to calculate how many silvers they had by their large groups of stacks of tens, in groups of tens.

Her eyes fell to him as he explained it. He didn’t seem bothered he was doing this. That she kept making mistakes, especially when they had to start bringing the total worth of everything together.

Not once did he wear a look of humour, or snort with laughter.

She half expected Alister to make fun of her. Instead, he made sure she understood the math before moving onto the next puzzle. He often pointed to the piles between them and circled his finger around them.

Eventually everything had been halved, despite the occasional odd number of coins. He placed his half back into the chest to take to his ship later.

Hers remained on the floor so she could eventually put it in the safe.

He held her gaze with a knowing stare, one side of his lips curled upwards. “There, now you can’t say I stole more for myself.”

“Wait.” She looked around at her piles. “So, it wasn’t just to make me learn?”

“Nay,” he chuckled. “Didn’t trust that you wouldn’t say I tried to cheat you out of some of it.”

Then he started pouring a handful of coins from one hand into the palm of the other, making them clink together every time he did it. Once the hand above was empty, he re-grabbed what he’d dropped with his fingertips to do

it again.

Well shit, Alister knew her well enough to know she would have done exactly that.

“Plus, counting chest loot is fun. I don’t get to do it often, but it’s one of my favourite activities.” He looked at the coins in his hands instead of her, almost like he couldn’t meet her eyes, as he murmured, “Wanted to watch you do it with me.”

A slight feeling of warmth spread across her cheeks, and she chose to believe it was because of a sudden hit of arousal, rather than a small blush of tenderness from his words.

He’d never said anything that sweet to her before.

What is it with this man and the way he makes me feel?!

He was being... considerate, and nice towards her today, more so than usual. It was getting her body in all kinds of disarray.

Rosetta almost launched herself, crawling above him to straddle his waist. She brought her lips to his, needing to shut this bastard up with her tongue before he said something even sweeter!

“Oi,” he chuckled beneath her lips, half kissing her back, half trying to talk. “We’re going to have to count those again so we can get it to your men.”

“Okay,” she answered with a tiny moan following it, clutching the scruff of his tunic to keep him to her. She pulled on it to the point she thought she may rip it in her swelling need. “Sounds good. Whatever you want.”

She didn’t care what she had to do, not when right then in that moment, she needed this big, annoying brute inside her more than anything.

Alister turned them over, spreading more of the neatly placed coins around as he carelessly laid her against them. Cold coins pressed into her bare back when he yanked her tunic from her tights and off her body to reveal her breasts, making her back arch away from the floor, and precariously into him.

She could even feel that her hair was getting tangled in them around her head when he pressed his hips between her spread thighs and gave a deep thrust. They clinked and clanked against each other as the pile slipped more around her.

She thought it sounded how she always imagined powering glitter would sound like. Almost sparkling.

Then his lips and tongue were at hers with such force and heat Rosetta thought she might turn into a puddle beneath him.

I've never been taken over a pile of money before. And she knew that was what was about to happen. A grin crossed her kissing lips, unable to stop herself from curling them.

He leant to the side on one elbow to keep his weight off her.

Because of his hungry kisses, Rosetta hadn't realised that Alister had undone the ties to her tights until she felt his warm hand dipping into it. Her stomach dipped beneath his calloused caressing palm, knowing exactly where the descending touch was going.

Her hands shot forward, grabbing the rim of his tunic to pull it up his body. He allowed it to be removed except off his arm when his fingers touched what they wanted.

A spark of pleasure shot through her when his fingers found her folds and the tips of them pressed against the nub of her aching clit.

But there was a place her body wanted to be touched more, and when she realised he intended to circle his fingers and tease her, Rosetta bucked her hips forward. She wanted them lower.

He wouldn't. When she bucked her hips a second time, she noticed that his hand followed her movements. He stayed with her clit, slipping over it and using the wetness of her own arousal that had spread its way up her lips to play with it.

A soft moan fell from her when it felt wonderful, but it only increased her need.

Warm chuckles fell from him as he parted from their kiss to brush the side of her face and down to her neck, with the stubble on his face. She felt his breath roll off her scalp near her ear, sending a shiver of goosebumps to crawl over her skin and make the hairs stand on end.

"You're wetter than usual, lass." He spoke softly with his lips against the curl of her ear, humour rumbling from him. "What's got you all riled up?"

The flush of her arousal hid the heat of embarrassment that rose underneath her skin. She would never admit to Alister it was because of his stupid sweet words that may not have been intended to be that way in the first place.

"Just shut up and put your fingers in me." She wished she could eat her own words with how heavy and husky her voice sounded.

It gave away completely that Rosetta was aching for him to touch lower.

Her hands clung to his back when he finally drew them down, her nails

already digging into his skin. *Yes!* Her mind screamed when he prodded her entrance, even when she noticed herself just how wet that pool was.

“In here?” He pressed the tips of two inside.

A broken mew came from her in answer and she tried to spread her thighs wider for him. Already that small amount of pressure felt perfect.

Then he pulled them away with a chuckle, pressing against her clit again, and her lips parted in disbelief.

Screw this, two can play at this game.

Rosetta’s hands shot forward to undo the buttons of his breeches. If he was going to tease her, then she would do it back.

She pulled his cock from them and her pussy immediately clenched when she felt how hard it was, that it felt like warm stone under her palm. That pool at the entrance to her core grew and it used all of her restraint to stop herself from squirming.

Now that she was holding it, her body was literally *weeping* for it.

“It seems like you need my cock, Rosetta.”

Her body shivered for a moment underneath him when he stroked his tongue just below her ear. Especially accompanied by his words and his fingers swirling that throbbing nub.

“N–No.”

“Why do you always lie?” he chuckled, slipping his fingers down just enough to take some of that pool and push it up her folds, showing her he had proof. “You’re wetter than you were before.”

She didn’t answer him, couldn’t answer him when she looked down and stroked her hand over his cock. The girth of it was calling to her body, begging for him to spread her with it. To be stretched by it.

Her inner walls wanted to take its velvety texture and glove it in dampness. And it desperately wanted that wide, broad, and flared head prodding in so deep she knew she’d feel it later, once she’d finished screaming around it.

She stroked her hand over it, gripping tighter around the head when she pushed down on it. She received a small, breathy groan from him, but she wanted Alister shuddering. To get him back for playing with her, denying her.

“It’s not going to work,” he said, spreading his fingers around her folds to then clasp it between them. “Your hand doesn’t feel as good as here does.”

A gasp broke from her when he suddenly slipped his fingers down and

shoved two inside her. Her core clamped around them when she felt his rings at her entrance, almost as if it was trying to suck them in deeper, when she could feel he was as deep as he could get them.

The question of why he pushed them inside her when he said her teasing wasn't going to work, was answered when he started thrusting them.

"Do you want me to fuck you, Rosetta?" Her hand slipped away from his shaft before she crushed it in her grip, tension shooting through her. She dug her fingertips into his back, a moan falling from her instead of words. "Do you want me to fuck you with my hard cock?"

Instead of trying to make her ask for it, he was going to try and make her tell him that she wanted it, that she wanted him. That she was aching for it.

Rosetta bit her lips until they were forced shut.

Her clinging to him, her nails digging in when he started to move his fingers faster, should have been enough of an answer.

"Do you need me to fill this wet hole until you come around it?" His fingertips found that swelling ridge that made her mind go blank and her heart race. "To have me thrust inside you until you're drenching me, until you're fucking my cock yourself when I feel so good inside your pussy that you're moaning in my ear?"

She squirmed beneath him, trying to do just that to his hand, bucking into it. Stifling the moan that threatened to escape, Rosetta desperately tried to aid his fingers, to get them to feel faster.

"Do you want me to take you nice and hard, and fast, and deep against the riches until all you can feel is me? Until I'm done fucking ravishing you and I come against your stomach?"

She squirmed, wanting just that.

"Do you want to be covered in my seed?"

Oh god, shut up! Because, in just a second, Rosetta was about to deliciously come around his thick fingers, was about to lose herself to them. The filthy, naughty words he spoke with his deep, guttural voice was just as much of a tease.

She wanted all of it!

"All you gotta do is say yes." Then he started rubbing the tips of his fingers against her G-spot.

"No!" she screamed, her back arching as a moan started to break from her, nearly causing her lips to bleed when they forcibly parted against her

clenching teeth.

I'm coming!

Or so she thought.

Alister ripped his fingers from her, and her tights, right before she could finish clamping around them, that dam about to be broken as she orgasmed.

Nooo!

“Fuck this,” Alister bit, rising to lean back on his knees above her. He stroked his shaft in his big paw, drawing her attention to it. “If you want it, take your boots off.”

Rosetta had won.

Her eyes were wide in shock that her defiance had won against his impatience. He must have taken her silence as further denial because he narrowed his eye at her.

“Take them off or I make myself come on top of you and leave you like this.”

Oh hell no! She may not be willing to say the words but she wasn't afraid to push him to his back, sink herself around him, and ride into oblivion if he denied her further.

Rosetta immediately curled her leg forward and yanked her boot off her foot. She swiftly did the same to the other, yanking it off her foot and tossing it to the side.

Just as she started to wriggle her tights down her hips and over her backside, he grabbed the centre of them between her thighs, grabbing both sides through that gap, and ripped them down and off her legs.

His hand reached forward and grabbed her leg, dragging her carelessly across the ground as he positioned his cock.

The coins shifted around her right before she settled, with his cock submerged completely inside her body and his hands gripping her waist to shove her down harder on him.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, refusing to allow him to escape as her back arched at the thickness and girth that spread her, the length that pushed so deep she could feel him at her cervix. At the hardness that felt like stone against her plush core that moulded around him.

Alister groaned, his head falling back upon complete impact before it slumped forward.

“Shit. I couldn't wait any more.” A deep expire fell from him as he leaned

above her on a straightened arm and withdrew, only to slam forward. “Your pussy’s hot inside. Feels so fucking good.”

He pulled back once more, only to shove back in even harder.

She let out little moans every time, unable to stop herself, unwilling to. Her nails dug into the sides of his back as she tried to draw him closer, and he refused to come down. To coat her in his warmth, and strength, and body. To crush her.

“F–Faster.” She needed him to go faster. *I’m so close.*

Hanging there painfully on the edge, she used the balls of her feet to try and push him in as she worked to use her own body to get what she needed.

A grin started to form across his face. A wicked one. The kind he only wore when he was intending to be cruel with a dagger in his hand, like when he intended to torture another living, breathing, human-being, and loved it.

“You’re about to come, aren’t you?” Her thighs twitched around his hips, a moan escaping from her as she looked up at him. “Then beg for it.”

Her lips parted in shock. She wished the rest of her body would react in the same way. Instead it only trembled, desperate to release the swirl that ached against her entire being.

He stayed slow, his pound hard, and deep, but ever slow. The rhythm stirring her insides was blissful, but it didn’t have the power to help her cross that bridge. Rosetta was suspended on the cusp.

She opened her mouth to deny him. To tell him she refused to beg.

“You can tell me no. But I’m currently right where I want to be.” He looked down to where they were connected, his grin growing wider before his nose crinkled, and he shoved in even harder. He was watching himself take her, watching her core slip around his shaft as he thrust. “And at this pace, I can go all day.”

His gaze flicked up to her face, and Rosetta realised her predicament.

She licked her dry lips, before she looked down to where they were joined and bit the bottom one.

He was serious. He was going to subject her to being right on the edge, every thrust making her desperate, just to torture her.

“Or do you like it that much you just want me to stay inside you? To fuck you all day hard and slow until you finally give in?”

A loud gasp was ripped from her when he grabbed a fist full of coins and pressed them against her chest and neck. The coldness of them against her

unbearably hot and flushed skin sent a chill over her entire body.

A few remained stuck to her skin while the rest rolled off her, but the original caress of them over her sent her mind hurtling. She loved the feel of them against her, of him rubbing gold and riches against her skin as they lay all around her.

Every slow thrust caused her breath to hitch. She felt him pulling all the way back until the rim of his cockhead pulled on her entrance, until he slammed all the way back in.

“Beg Rosetta.” She could hear the frustration in his voice, how it was boiling in him. His hips proved that; by going harder and so deep, it nearly destroyed her. “Beg!”

She couldn’t take anymore.

“Faster!” she screamed, her face twisting into one of agony and need. It burned inside her, clinging to her entire body that twisted away from him just so it would stop. She needed him to withdraw and put her out of her misery, or take her how she needed and let her fall into bliss. She needed it so badly she was willing to do it herself right in front of him. To use her own fingers to give her what he was denying her. “Please, Alister. Faster.”

She turned her head to the side in shame. She couldn’t believe she was letting him win!

Yet he leaned down, curled his arms around her head, and gave her exactly what she asked for, and then more.

Alister started to thrust as fast as his body would allow and Rosetta barely made it through the third stroke before she was crying out.

“Yes! Oh yes!” Her arms wrapped around him as he lay completely on top of her, pressing all of his weight and muscles into her that it trapped her against the ground. Her nails scoured across his back, cutting deeply that she knew she must have made his skin bleed. “Just like that. Please don’t stop.”

Her eyes were rolling into the back of her skull as she orgasmed so hard that sparks flitted across her dark vision like she was going blind from the pleasure being released.

She must have been too loud because Alister placed his hand over her mouth to quieten her.

But he didn’t slow down, even when the tension in her body relaxed. He continued to thrust so fast that it wasn’t long before Rosetta was swirling away again.

And by the third time she was finished wringing his cock, Alister pushed away from the ground to get to his knees. He withdrew from her and grabbed her by the back of the head to make her sit up as well.

“Open your mouth and stick your tongue out,” he demanded.

Rosetta was too dazed in her satisfied state to deny him.

As though her brain was made of goo, she opened her mouth and pushed her tongue forward so it sat over her bottom lip.

Alister stroked his shaft, his body shuddering and quaking, twitching every time he pushed the taut skin down around it.

The first burst of his seed hit against the bridge of her nose and forehead. The second crossed over her upper lip to her cheek. The third against her chin and throat.

“Damn it.” He shoved forward until he buried his cock halfway inside her mouth. “I keep missing.”

Warm liquid started to spurt against the back of her throat and on her tongue.

He ended his climax with a final groan before he withdrew and looked down at her. He was huffing wildly, his chest heaving heavily from exertion and the strength of his own spending.

“You look good with my come on your face,” he panted with a quickly rising and falling chest.

Rosetta brought her tongue back inside her mouth. She rolled it until she collected every drop from the roof of her mouth and what she could from her throat, tasting his seed.

“Now be a good little whore, and swallow.”

Looking up into his heated gaze, feeling well satisfied because of him, a part of her wanted to do as she was told.

The other part of her wanted to be defiant, wanted to get a rise out of him. That part won as she spat the contents of her mouth against his chest.

The look on his face was priceless. His eyebrows darted up, his bottom lip fell as he looked down at his own seed splattered against his torso.

A grin spread across her mouth when his eye turned to her, and his nose crinkled with fury.

With gritted teeth, Alister grabbed the back of her hair in a tight fist and yanked her forward. “You’re going to pay for that.”

Rosetta giggled when he used her hair to pull her back and then shoved her

to her front. They continued while she squirmed her legs as he got between them.

Once more she felt coins against her skin but all over the delicate front of her. She felt them against her hard nipples and they pulled even more taut against the coldness of them.

She didn't know what he was going to do, perhaps do exactly what she wanted and punish her with his hips.

She gasped, and immediately tried to crawl forward when she felt a hand slap against one of the cheeks of her backside. The shock to her system made her arch her back, and the second time she felt it, ripped another pain-filled gasp from her.

The hits were hard, the slapping sound loud.

When he realised she was trying to escape, he released her hair to grab both her arms and shoved them behind her back. He clasped both her wrists together in the centre of her spine with one hand to stop her, pushing her down against the ground.

A moan surprised her when it strangled past her lips when he spanked her arse a third time.

Her eyes rolled when he did it again, her hips lifting away from the ground. Every hit sent pain through her body. It hurt. It burned. It stung. It caused her eyes to water.

And yet it was so delicious that she found herself getting to her knees in welcome for it. He'd forced her chest to the ground by keeping her arms where they were and pushing her down, but he could do nothing about her hips if he wanted to keep delivering his punishment.

Slap. Rosetta moaned wildly. *Slap!* He hit harder, and she wondered if he did because he could tell she was starting to enjoy this. *SLAP!*

She shouldn't be enjoying this. It fucking hurt. It stung so badly she knew her skin must be blistering red. Alister was being ruthless as he harshly slapped her backside with what she guessed was all his strength now.

Instead, it caused her body to clench each time in want. Every hit sent a fierce throb through her system. Her nipples throbbed. Her clit pounded. Her core quivered in reaction.

Another slap had her bucking into him.

I must be out of my mind.

She knew she was when he suddenly shoved his cock inside her

whimpering channel, and she was upset because she just wanted him to keep spanking her!

Slap! Rosetta's cheek nuzzled the coins her face were pressed against when she realised he was going to pound her and spank her at the same time. A shuddering sob fell from her parted lips.

His cock rammed hard, and fast, and deep, and was so intense that she could do nothing else but wantonly take it. She shamelessly spread her knees in welcome for it, feeling them being abraded by the carpet when they dug through the coins to reach it.

Her breasts scraped against the riches beneath her as she bounced. *Slap.*

Then she felt him grab her hair and yank her head back to force her body into an arch.

She usually enjoyed this, wanted him to pull her hair.

She found herself screaming, "NO!" She wiggled her hips. "Don't stop. It felt so good."

His hips ceased for a moment, and he tugged her head back harder so that she was forced to arch further to look at him.

His gaze was dark and heated. It held such anger, but it held undeniable lust. "I can't do both and I'm not letting your hands free."

Her eyes found the ceiling as she thought, her channel pulsating around him. The answer came to her.

"Then tie my hands." She turned her head to the side where his tunic was. It pulled on all the hairs in her scalp, but she didn't care past her panic. "Use your tunic."

She returned his grin before he let her hair go to do just that. Within seconds, Rosetta's hands were bound behind her back, tied thickly by his shirt.

Then he was gripping her hair to yank her head back and thrusting again. A deep, husky chuckle came from him after he delivered a sharp slap to her backside and Rosetta released a loud, unhidden moaned.

Rosetta was in hell. His cock was spearing her so fast and hard that it tore through her like agony. *Wonderful.* Her scalp burned; her neck hurt from being in the bent back position it was in. *Magnificent.* Her backside ached and each hit stung worse. *Perfect.*

Then there was just the way the skin of her backside and thighs jiggled every time he hit against them with his hips. How it made her body bounce

and caused parts of her to scrape against the coarse ground.

She never wanted to find heaven again if this was how good hell felt. She didn't want to be saved.

If God was real, then she knew there was no way she could turn back from this. She was being taken by a beast that was allowing her soul to be tainted. *Condemn me.*

She had never been so turned on before. She was so horny that this was the best thing she'd ever experienced.

"Take me." It was a plea, a beg, and the words whispered from her mouth. All sense of her dignity was gone, leaving behind some wicked sinner that no longer cared. *Slap!* Her eyes rolled once more and a loud cry broke from her as she started to come, to orgasm so hard she felt its warm liquid running down her own thighs. "Use me! Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop."

Every muscle in her body tensed as bliss washed over her completely. Lost. Broken. Damned.

Rosetta loved it.

Every hit was perfect, every slam of his hips, every sharp tug of her hair. Even just the remnants of his seed coating her tongue made her feel feral.

And it didn't stop, it continued on and on until a long and deep groan sounded from Alister and she knew this was about to be over.

More. Her eyes bowed, her mouth fell open. *Just a little more.*

He withdrew and she felt heavy drops of liquid burst against her arse and back. He stroked his cock through his release by using the lips of her folds and the cleft of her cheeks.

She could feel him shuddering, could perceive that warm rod pulsating as it slipped over her. His groan was haunting, sounding as though it had been dragged from him by force. It was drawn out, louder and shakier than usual.

When he was done, he released her and she fell flat on her face. She didn't care to right herself, not when her body was still blissfully spasming and twitching with her backside in the air.

They both heaved and huffed, neither one of them quiet about it. She turned her head back to find his face was pointed to the ceiling while he sat back on his knees, desperately trying to recover. Sweat was dripping down his chest and face just as much as she felt it sliding over her own skin.

He'd been doing all the work after all.

"Fuck lass," he said with a gruff and hoarse voice, turning his gaze towards

her slowly. "I don't think I've ever had this much fun while having sex."

"Eh, I've had better."

A sultry smile pestered against her lips when he narrowed his eye at her.

"Liar," he said confidently.

When her smile grew, he reached forward with a grin, knowing she'd been caught in her lie.

"You'll pay for that."

He grabbed her by the hair once more, not as hard as before, but enough to direct her to her knees. She tightened her legs together when she could feel her own juices trickling down her thighs to the point they reached her knees and dripped to the floor. *I came so much.*

"And it seems like you're in a bit of bind here to get away from me."

A sense of dread crept through her.

She wiggled her arms to free them to no avail.

"Now open your mouth." He started drawing her closer to his flaccid cock. "You're going to make me hard again and then I'm going to fill your mouth with my seed." He twisted his head, his grin growing mischievous and malevolent at the same time. "And this time I'm going to force you to drink it."

With no way to escape, her eyes turned away from his face to his cock covered in her multiple orgasms.

Oh shit, what have I done?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Alister wiped the water dripping from his face with his hand, blinking rapidly to disperse it from his eye so he could see where his ship was heading. His long hair was stuck to his skin, drenched and heavy as it

constantly wrapped around his neck and face.

With a steady stance, his well-worn boots slipped back an inch whenever he tried to brace himself to steer.

He knew calling out commands from his position was near pointless. He doubted anyone would be able to hear him. He would just have to have faith that Pierre was leading the crew while he was otherwise occupied with a more dangerous and turmoil battle.

For three days the drenching rain had poured on them.

Below deck, men were trying to remove the water that had gotten in. They used mops and buckets and whatever else they could find to carry it to the surface and dump it back into the sea where it belonged.

Others were making sure all the stock and cargo they had were still where they were supposed to be by strapping it down. Working to make sure everything that needed to remain dry was covered and placed away from the ground.

The Laughing Siren was still next to his ship. Although the rain had been constant, the winds had mostly been light.

The occasional harsh wind would cut through his sails and rock his ship to the side but, other than having to turn the wheel to right it every once in a while, things had been easy.

It was nothing he and his men couldn't handle. They were experienced sailors and had flown across the waters in storms worse than this.

That was until this afternoon.

A gale of wind blew, right before the first large wave hit the side of the hull and tried to knock him towards the Laughing Siren.

"The storm is worsening!" Alister yelled over the roar of the rain hitting the timber of his deck, doubtful that anyone was able to hear him.

His ship was lighter and therefore slowed down when a wind tried to push them back. Rosetta's started to creep up beside him, heavier and able to take the harsh winds and waves better.

He peeked back to see Naeem at the helm, trying to control the growing storm. He couldn't see Rosetta.

Good, she's inside. She was the last thing he needed to worry about right now. He had other problems on his mind.

He didn't need her making him think she was truly insane by trying to brave the terrible and dangerous weather.

“Cap’in, we need to start moving away from the Laughing Siren.”

“Get inside man!” Alister yelled, swiping his arm to the side at Derek who was running up the stairs.

As much as the old salt was one of his best men, his peg leg made him near useless in the rain. It didn’t have enough grip and he’d seen Derek slip over too many times in the past.

The man was destined to die with a sword through his belly, not because he slipped over and washed into the ocean.

When it didn’t seem like he was going to do as he said, Alister yelled, “NOW!”

He wasn’t going to lose anyone simply because they wanted to fight a storm when they couldn’t. He wouldn’t waste his time with foolishness.

I know we need to move away. But they needed to communicate with it first.

“Pierre!” When the man couldn’t hear him, he yelled as loudly as his lungs would allow him on a bellow, “PIERRE!”

Alister saw him turn to face his call from below deck, managing to hear his voice.

He was heaving on a sail rope with multiple others.

Someone took over what he was doing so he could run up the stairs, nearly barrelling into Derek who was trying to climb down them.

“Go to the Laughing Siren,” he said when he was next to the helm, holding onto the railing of this deck to stay steady. “Tell them to meet us at the Kannas Islands.”

He knew from the last time he’d looked at a map they weren’t too far from the islands. There was a cape they could use to shelter them from the worst of the storm.

As much as he wanted to keep moving forward, it seemed as though they needed to wait this out.

Currently they were heading west and had been for two weeks. Not wanting to go south yet to follow the last map he had of Dustin’s trove, he was going to the other map locations he’d been given that weren’t of the famous loot he was after.

“She won’t listen to me, Alister,” Pierre said with a shake of his head.

“Aye, she will.” He righted the wheel when a wave tried to steer his course. They weren’t too bad yet; they still had time to deliver the message.

“She’s already inside. She knows how bad this is getting.”

She’s smart, she would have to know she can’t help.

“No... she’s not.”

That made his eyes widen. He snapped his head to the side to see her pushing Naeem out of the way and taking the wheel herself!

“She can’t!”

Even Alister knew he was going to struggle through this storm and he had three times the amount of muscle as her! He could see how bad it was going to get; it wasn’t his first storm like this. It was going to be a strain even on him.

She pointed forward, telling Naeem to do something. He was just as shocked to see him falling away from the wheel and actually doing what she commanded. The man abandoned her to take care of the helm by herself.

Every curse Alister knew fell from his mouth.

He hopelessly looked at the wheel in his hands, the way he was gripping the handles with tanned knuckles threatening to turn white. *Damn her to hell!*

“Take the helm!” He waited for Pierre to take it from his hands before he even thought about letting go. “Steer it closer.”

It has to be me. She won’t listen to anyone else.

Hell, she barely fucking listened to him, but hopefully he could knock some sense into her for once.

“What do you want me to do if you can’t make it back?”

“Kannas Islands. Wait for me there.” Then he started making his way to the steps. “But I’ll be back.”

He wouldn’t abandon his ship when it needed him the most.

Alister started climbing the shrouds so he could get up to the top level of his sailings. One wrong footing and he could find himself crashing into the waves.

He found a rope he needed, waited for the perfect moment, and then swung over. The wet rope slipped through his calloused hands as he slid down it when he knew he’d swung far enough.

Alister’s feet found the main deck of the Laughing Siren, and he immediately started sprinting for her.

Just in time too. A large wave knocked into the side of the hull and the wheel gave a punch of a turn. It knocked her off her feet.

She went sliding to the floor on her side as the wheel began to spin out of

control. Alister grabbed the handles and righted it before any real damage could be done to their course.

Thankfully it had been heading away from the Howling Death rather than towards it.

Rosetta got to her feet and tried to barge him out of the way with her shoulder.

“Move!” she exclaimed, trying to take the handles from him with her smaller hands.

“Get below deck!” When he wouldn’t move, she pushed him hard just as the boat swayed and he was forced to back off. “Do as you’re told for once! You can’t man through this.”

“I don’t need your help!” He watched her struggle to fight the wheel but managed to hold it straight. Her face was tight with tension. “I know what I’m doing.”

When it started to win in its tug of war with her, and a long-winded grunt of effort came from her, Alister reached forward to help her steady it.

“Nay. You don’t.”

If she did, she wouldn’t be here trying to do this when it was obvious that she couldn’t.

“I’m getting real sick of your shit, Alister.” She turned her head to him with her teeth clenched tight. “Go back to your own ship and get it the hell away from mine before we get tangled!”

Every second that past brought stronger and stronger winds, bigger and bigger waves. Alister was running out of time to return to his ship before Pierre was forced to steer away.

He shouldn’t be wasting his time arguing with a stubborn woman! He didn’t want to be doing this.

“Where is Mr Smith?” *Why isn’t he here to talk some sense into her?*

Alister was aware Naeem did whatever she told him to without considering anything else. Without question. He followed her so obediently that it was prideful, but Mr Smith didn’t.

He often advised her to take different choices. Smarter ones. Safer ones.

“He’s in his cabin. He can’t help through this, he’s too old.”

She had the intelligence to know that, and yet she was still out here in the rain like a madwoman.

“Rosetta,” he started with a warning in his tone, but she turned her head to

him so sharply with a spiteful frown of her brows it quietened him.

It didn't stop him from returning her glare.

"I get that you want to help but I know what I'm doing. I don't want your help, Alister." She stepped forward to be closer to him so she could scream only a few inches from his face. "I was a captain before I met you, and I'll be one long after you're gone from my life!"

The way she yelled those words at him, with the face she wore, made something lance his gut.

"Move!" someone yelled next to him, yanking on his shoulder to get him out of the way.

The shock he felt because of what she'd said to him was the only reason he stumbled back.

Naeem got between them and started hooking something around her waist.

Are those... cannon grenades?

Rosetta looked down to what he'd clipped around her waist and threw her head back to bellow out a laugh.

"Are you trying to blow me up?!"

"I couldn't find it!" he shouted with panic. "Had to improvise."

"It'll have to bloody do then, won't it!?"

Then Alister watched Naeem take over the helm and Rosetta fell away. She leaned down and picked up a length of rope that was wrapped around the support and tied it around Naeem's waist for him.

"I want you stuck to this helm, got it?"

"Aye captain."

She ran to the quarterdeck railing.

"Abrasive actions, boys! Secure your lifelines! If I find out even one of you fell into the ocean, I'll hunt you down and drown you myself!"

Like they hadn't realised they could need it, men started running towards the main mast of the ship to tie rope around their waists to secure themselves to it.

"Bury the hatchet! Anyone below deck is stuck down there for now."

She started stomping past Alister with the intention to walk down the stairs to the main deck. He grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Head to the Kannas Islands. We're going to seek shelter from the storm."

She turned to him, ripped her arm from his grasp, and stepped forward to be closer.

“My ship can’t go that way! She’s too deep. Go to the Grutten Valley.”

The Grutten Valley was similar but wider; it wouldn’t shelter them as well. Kannas Islands also had taller rock formations in its near crescent moon shape, which would give them as much calm as they could get with this kind of storm. *Why would she choose to go to-* It clicked with Alister.

“The shallows,” he said with a gasp of realisation.

He hadn’t thought about them because it wasn’t an issue for his shallow hull boat.

“Aye lad,” she sneered. “The shallows. Your ship can navigate through that cape in a storm like this, mine can’t. Now go back to your own ship!”

Then Rosetta sprinted away before he could say anything else.

She tied a lifeline to her waist and started shouting orders from the main deck to her men. Her voice reached them all even with all the noise of the storm.

A large gust of wind hit so strongly that even he had to brace himself and step back. He expected to see her go flying with her light weight, but she remained fixed on her feet where she was.

His eyes found the six cannon grenades around her waist.

They’re weights to keep her on her feet. Rosetta had increased her weight so she didn’t get thrown around like a rag doll by the wind.

No doubt this was her idea. *She’s brilliant.* He’d bet she usually had a proper weight belt but Naeem had been unable to find it.

Alister found his feet stuck where they were as he watched her direct her men with such finesse that even he was awed.

“You’re realising it, aren’t you?” Naeem shouted to him over the storm, water quickly rushing down his face. “Why we follow her, why we do what she tells us to.”

He was. Alister was actually looking at her as a captain who could be equal to him, rather than as a woman who was playing pretend.

I’ve always looked down on her. He hadn’t realised it until this very moment.

A lightning strike above them flashed a hot bright light, illuminating his sight of her. The thunder that immediately followed sounded as though it was trying to tell him something.

“She’s never needed your help.” Alister turned his gaze to Naeem as he spoke. “She knows she’s too weak to hold the helm of her own ship through a

storm like this. She knows she's too light to climb the shrouds right now. She knows she's not going to be of much use, but she won't sit by idly and watch her ship struggle while she sits warm and cosy in her cabin."

Rosetta started checking on the lifelines of her crew, pressing her boot to the mast as she tugged on the ropes with all her strength. She was making sure that they were all tight and she wouldn't lose any of them.

"She knows what she has to do to survive." The face Naeem wore was so full of pride and full of faith that it almost shined from him. "She's always been like that.

"Aye," Alister finally said. "I see it."

He ran down the steps to go to her and caught her right before she tripped back, while having to catch his own footing since he almost did as well. He didn't do it because she needed him to save her, but because he was intending to grab her anyway.

Holding her around the nape of her neck so they wouldn't get pushed apart by the waves and wind tossing her ship around, he stared down at her.

Their hair blew over their shoulders, wet but no match for the wind. It was like they wanted to become tangled.

"You've got this, lass," he said, actually believing it.

She frowned at him; no doubt puzzled by the words he would have to explain later.

The blue of her eyes had never looked this dark.

They were the exact same colour as the inky navy of the storm waves behind her he could see over the railing.

"Grutten Valley, four days."

She rolled her eyes. "The Laughing Siren can take a storm like this, better hope it's not your ship that sinks."

True. The Howling Death was smaller and had a larger chance of being barrel rolled over. Thinking of his warship, Alister let her go without another word. He grabbed a rope and ran for his ship before it was too late. He flew through the air with his feet out in front of him.

Alister landed on the quarterdeck deck to Pierre.

"You're lucky!" he shouted. "Was just about to turn away."

Taking the wheel, Alister, without hesitation, started steering his ship away to a safe distance.

Not once did he look back for the Laughing Siren to make sure it was

following, safe, or nearby. Not once did he let his eye stray from what was in front of him as he navigated his ship through flat sections of water between the growing waves.

The waves that did manage to hit the hull made the Howling Death rock violently side-to-side. It was a struggle just to hold onto the wheel of the helm.

Alister often had to right his footing and brace himself.

Currently everyone was working their hardest to control the sails while the winds blew. Frothing water sloshed over the main deck to wash out over the other side.

Anyone caught in that current was swept off their feet and barrelled into the railing.

Darkness came long before the sun was gone but, when it was, the only thing lighting the way were the crackling strikes of lightning. They occasionally struck against a wave in the distance.

The navy-blue sea eventually turned into the blackest colour, as if God himself had poured ink beneath the crashing surface to create a nightmarish vastness to its yawning abyss.

Thick dark grey colours blanketed the sky, not a star in sight to guide the way. The sky looked like it was falling, ready to crash down upon them. The clouds were rolling as if they would eventually roll down to them and wash them into the next life.

The Howling Death was in that limbo place where the sky and the sea touched.

The only reason he knew which way to go was the compass necklace he put around his neck.

Alister fought against an element that could sink him with just one towering wave. Every hour brought worse and worse conditions as he fought against the tidal swirls.

Pierre and himself took shifts steering. One would rest for only a few hours, trusting each other to be in control enough to sleep, before the other would take over.

When he slept, the raging and violent sea swung his hammock from side-to-side, rocking him like it was a mother trying to aid a newborn babe to sleep.

For almost two days, it never let up, never gave them reprieve. He barely

ate; it was near impossible for Glen to cook with the state of the ship.

Alister saw the large mass of volcanic land like an unlit lighthouse out at the sea. It wasn't active currently, but it was easy to see from a far distance. *She picked a good island to track.*

It could be seen from miles away, even with the dark clouds that hid the sunlight behind it. He'd been going in circles for the last day trying to find it.

Staying a safe distance from it while he tried to figure out which way the low, but wide crescent cape was, the storm continued on.

"I thought they would have beaten us," Pierre said, coming up beside him since he'd gotten one of the men to wake him.

Alister was attempting to safely move through the points of the wide cape while the waves pushed to change his direction.

The moment he passed them, he almost sagged with relief as the intensity of the water immediately dropped. The wind still knocked them around, but he no longer had two different elements fighting against him.

Inside the Grutten Valley's storm breaking rocks that circled around them, everything seemed calm. A place of serenity and peace surrounded by violence. Mostly.

The harsh rain never stopped falling.

Alister brows drew into a deep frown. "Me too."

The Laughing Siren wasn't here.

It should have beaten them here since the Howling Death would have been thrown off course more. The size and lightness of his ship was perfect for fighting and chasing others, but storms often got the better of them.

"She'll be here," Alister answered with certainty.

He still told his men to drop both anchors and hunker down through the weather. They secured the sails, making sure they were neatly furled away.

There was an air of tension throughout his ship as he walked below deck.

At first, he thought it had just been him, but it seemed all of them were worried for the Laughing Siren when it continued to not show over the course of the next two additional days the storm raged.

Silence fell on them as they ate. They drank but his men did it with long and sullen looks on their faces, that only deepened when they turned their gazes to him if he was around.

Alister always returned it with a plain expression, like he didn't care, but as every hour crept on and Rosetta didn't come, even he couldn't stop his

brows from being permanently crinkled together.

On the fifth day, the sun finally greeted them shyly behind heavy clouds.

“Do you think it’s a break or should we expect more weather?” one of his crewmen asked him.

They all often spoke to him periodically while they sailed, regardless if he was steering the ship or merely walking through its dark halls.

Alister scanned his eye over the horizon to see the clouds moving further and further away, growing softer and lighter by the hour.

“We should have clear skies for a few days.” Whether the storm returned, he wouldn’t know. “Check the sails, I know some of them have tears.”

His ship had seen better days and they would use this chance to repair all the damage they could to it.

I gave her four days. It should have been more than enough time. *We made it here in two.*

But after another two days of sunshine had passed, and seven days in total since he’d last seen the Laughing Siren, Alister was now ready to set sail again.

The winds were calm, the sky clear, the waves gentle. Even sea loving birds squawked, telling all that even the animals were confident enough to emerge from their hiding spots.

“It’s been a week, Alister,” Pierre said with heavy concern present in his voice.

He’d come into Alister’s chambers to speak with him while he sat at his desk, mapping where they had come from, to this island. He was mapping the course they'd probably taken.

It would have only taken a day to sail here with calm seas. Seven days she’d had to make it here, almost half of which had been calm.

Which meant Alister knew the truth now.

“Do you think her ship sunk?” He could tell Pierre was afraid to ask him the question by the tone in his voice. The worry in it was unnerving, and made his nose crinkle when he realised it was *undeserving*.

Alister threw his measuring compass against the large map against his deck. He didn’t care if he’d damaged it, not with the anger that suddenly burned up inside him like a hot fiery tornado.

“Nay,” he snapped with a lethal tone. “Her ship is fine. The bitch just ain’t coming here.”

Rosetta, for whatever reason, wasn't coming.

He turned his gaze up from the desk, to glower towards Pierre. He knew it was the truth. She would be here otherwise.

"Tell the men we're leaving in an hour."

When he left to leave Alister alone to brood by himself, he removed his eyepatch and threw it at the table.

His face itched incessantly because he wore it constantly. He'd usually sleep without it but had refused to if he was in Rosetta's bed until he left it in the middle of the night, or woke in it alone.

He was furious, but most importantly, he couldn't stop himself from feeling disappointed. Possibly rejected?

I wasn't done with her. But apparently she was.

Five days of storms he could have said perhaps they were lost at sea and couldn't find their way. But it had been two days of sunshine and her ship still hadn't dropped anchor next to his.

She told me she was getting sick of my shit. He picked up his measuring compass again to place one point of it against the desk. He spun it between his forefinger and the table, watching it twirl. *She said that she would be a captain long after I was gone from her life.*

He gave a chuckle. *Had she been planning to use the storm as an escape the entire time?*

He didn't understand why she would have needed to. She could have just told him. *Why would she direct us here then?*

Wait... The tool fell from his hand. *She's got most of our supplies!*

He wasn't so stupid to have her carry everything, but she still had most of the grog water, rum, and food.

His eye fell on the door of his cabin, realising they were going to need to find the nearest port if they wanted to eat in a week.

She stole from me! He slammed his fist against the desk, making everything on it bounce or rattle. *Again!*

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



With the storm raging on, Rosetta walked up the steps of the quarterdeck with Mr Smith hot on her heels.

They both went to the helm and grabbed the wheel together. They steadied

it, allowing Naeem to fall away.

“Go rest,” she told him. “We’ll take over.”

He nodded, untying the rope from his waist to put it around hers. Then he worked on getting a second rope around Mr Smith, securing him to the support of the wheel as well.

Together, they had the strength to hold the wheel and steer it.

For nearly an entire day, this is how they had been navigating a storm she could see wasn’t going to calm any time soon. Mr Smith and her would take the helm while Naeem took the time to sleep, just so he could come back and be at it again.

They couldn’t be trusted alone, neither one had the strength by themselves.

Nobody seemed to have noticed she hadn’t rested much herself, and she’d much prefer to keep it that way.

Rosetta was tired but she hadn’t been able to think about anything other than making sure her ship and crew were fine. She was worried. She didn’t think she’d sailed through a storm this difficult before.

She knew they were encroaching on the second night when Naeem came back to take it again. The sky was blacker and she couldn’t see a wave coming unless a strike of lightning forked its light across the sky.

“Go sleep John.” She needed him off the deck.

She only allowed him to leave his cabin when she needed his help at the helm, the rest of the time she commanded him to stay inside.

He nodded, leaving them.

“We can’t see where we’re going,” Rosetta said to Naeem, standing beside him while he steered. “Do you know where we are?”

She looked down at the compass that said they were heading in the right direction, before placing it around his neck for him. He checked it as well.

“No. Hopefully we find it soon.” He turned his head to her for a moment. “Did you see the Howling Death at all?”

She shook her head. “No, it’s gone.”

Naeem was staring at her as a flash of lightening lit up her face. He inched closer like it would help him to see her better.

“Bloody hell Rosetta, when was the last time you slept?”

Shit. Just when she thought she’d been getting away with it.

“I slept earlier.”

“When? Because you didn’t sleep when I was last at the helm and you

couldn't have with John." The fact he hadn't called him Johnny boy meant Rosetta knew he was serious.

"I'll sleep soon. Let me check everyone's lifelines first."

Her legs were tired as though they were filled with lead, her arms ached, but she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep with so many men who could potentially have a rope not secured to them. She didn't want them spiralling off the ship and out to sea.

Rosetta ran down the steps and started grabbing the ends of ropes, making sure they were tight against the mast bulbs jutting out from where they were connected.

Just as she checked the last one and was about to let go, a sudden big wave crashed into the side of the hull.

Falling, she tried to hold onto the rope. It was too wet. It slipped from her fingers, somehow managing to burn her palms in the process despite its soaked texture. Rosetta went flying backwards, heading towards the railing as the ship gave a heavy dip like it might tip.

Water came rushing over through the other side, pushing her faster and further than she would have if it didn't.

I don't have a lifeline!

"No!" she heard someone yell. "Save her!"

As she flipped backwards and was about to roll over the railing, she managed to grab the edge of it.

Holding on for dear life, her body dangled on the *wrong* side of the railing. She could feel her hands slipping and she knew she was digging the tips of her fingertips in so hard they were turning white. Coldness from the storm made them ache terribly with her fearful grip.

She kicked her boots against the outer hull, trying to get purchase so she could climb over.

A gurgling, roaring, near sucking sound came from behind. One that sent fear and terror through her and chilled her all the way down to her bones. She thought her heart might have stopped in her chest.

She looked to the side to see a wave coming right for her. Her eyes went stark as she realised she was about to be washed away.

Oh gods! Oh no! Shit! She kicked harder, desperately trying to get purchase before it was too late. *I need to get over!*

There was nothing else in the world that could make her realise how

insignificant she was than seeing a towering wave almost the size of her ship coming towards her. Curling with froth like the mouth of a rabid, disease-ridden dog.

A set of hands grabbed one of her wrists and she looked up at one of her crewmen just as the wave hit.

Rosetta was flung to the side, but the person holding her managed to use the momentum to swing her back onto the ship. They held onto her with her between their legs as they both went sliding around the deck.

She tried to snuff the scream that was trying to lock in her throat.

“Are you alright captain?” the man who had saved her asked once they settled.

She looked up at someone she didn’t know well, one of the prisoners she’d released.

“Yes,” she said as he helped her to her feet after he got to his own. “Thank you.”

She told him to go back to his position in the sails before she bolted for the quarterdeck.

Her eyes fell on Naeem, who looked paler with fright, as he watched her climb to the top of the stairs. His eyes were near bulging out of his skull. She was almost certain he’d been the one to call out.

With a nod to him, Rosetta went inside her cabin. Closing the door, she fell to her knees right afterwards.

I almost died.

If that prisoner hadn’t grabbed her, she would have been washed out to sea.

She would have been pushed so far underwater she doubted she would’ve been able to reach the surface in time before she drowned.

She felt weak as she shakily got up and stumbled to her sleeping cabin that connected to the navigation room. Getting into her hammock was a struggle with her exhaustion and the intense rocking, but she eventually managed.

Her sleep was restless as she was swayed around but she did get a few hours in. Mr Smith was the one to wake her, realising she hadn’t come to him for far too long.

The worry that lanced her chest caused her to almost fall out of her hammock as she tried to burst out of it quickly.

“How long was I asleep?!”

“Eight hours.”

Poor Naeem! They quickly ran outside to find the storm was just as dangerous and unrelentless as when she'd left it.

It seemed never ending. Like it would continue on for the rest of eternity.

She put her hand on his shoulder and he turned his head to her.

“Finally! I can't feel my fucking arms anymore.” He let go so they could take over. Then he patted John on the shoulder as he said, “Watch her; she almost went into the sea.”

The look Mr Smith gave her behind his rain dotted glasses was enough to make her cringe.

They both had to steady the wheel when it tried to turn. “It's fine. I—”

A bright flash of light blinded them.

A horrible, heart wrenching, cracking and fizzing noise sounded alongside an ear-splitting **boom**.

No! No! Nooooo! Rosetta bounced on the spot, biting her bottom lip with her brows crinkled tightly together as she stomped her foot.

The main mast to the Laughing Siren was hit with a powerful lightning strike.

And once the eye piercing, sight blinding light vanished, fire gave them enough light to watch it slowly break in half and topple against the deck. Men dived out of the way from below, while those who had been in the air were tossed from it.

Thankfully their lifelines stopped them from falling into the water, but she was sure one or two of her men had either died from the impact of hitting the side of the hull, the deck, or had been electrocuted.

The odds of this happening were so rare.

Rosetta felt her heart drop to her stomach as her eyes bowed heavily.

We can't sail without it. The storm was now going to take them on an adventure she wouldn't be able to control.

All of them had their jaws dropped, their eyes opened wide at what they'd just witnessed. Nobody could believe their terrible luck.

“There's nothing you can do, Naeem,” she told him, seeing he was stuck where he stood from watching what just happened. “Go sleep.”

There was nothing *any* of them could do.

She and Mr Smith would have to hold the wheel. They still needed to stop the ship from toppling over. If they let go, they would spin in circles until they tilted and a wave pushed their ship under.

Unfortunately, holding it would do little to help where they were taken. The rest of the sails would help to direct them, but without a fully working main mast, the waves would be stronger and would heave them around.

“Rosetta...” Mr Smith said once Naeem was gone.

“She won’t sink, John,” she reassured. She had too much faith in the Laughing Siren for it to do that to her. “We have to keep pointing east.”

Rosetta flipped open her navigation compass to see they were pointing the wrong way. Mr Smith helped her to turn the wheel.

“If your will could be ridden, girl, we could make it anywhere.” He gave her a grin so wide his teeth, with the occasional missing one, showed. It was something he rarely did. “If you say we’ll make it through the storm, then we will.”

She didn’t know if he said it to lift his own spirits, or hers. She appreciated the gesture regardless.

“You’ve never doubted me, have you?”

“No.” He shook his head, pushing up on the handles as they both tried to go through a flat part of the sea between two waves. “I hope my daughter turns out as strong as you at your age.”

“I’ve told you; we’re going to go back to Port Douglas once we’ve checked this next map’s location.”

Mr Smith came from the mainland islands of the western countries and that’s where Rosetta had found him in her first year of being a captain. They were heading in that general direction because of Alister.

“No. If the guards see me they will take me in.”

As much as her heart was broken for her ship, Rosetta gave a bellowing laugh. She needed to keep herself focused; she couldn’t wallow in sadness just yet.

There was still too much to do. If she showed her crew her uncertainty and fear when they needed her to be strong the most, then what kind of captain was she?

“I’d like to see them try.” They turned the wheel once more but it did little to help them as they rode across the base of a wave, rather than beside it. “I told you I’ll take you back to your daughter once I have this ship. I’ve got her now, and I always deliver on my promises.”

The look he gave her was the same one he’d given her when she’d first made this promise. It looked like the man’s eyes were filling with hopeful

tears.

Rosetta knew this man before her was a great father. He'd taken her under his wing, sheltered her, protected her, cared for her more than he'd needed to. He was not bound to her by blood, and yet he cherished her like she was his own child.

She could only imagine how much he loved his daughter. How much he had tended to her, provided for her, by giving Rosetta just a partial amount of the tenderness he must have for his own blood related child.

He deserved to have her in his arms once more.

She may even come with us. Rosetta would allow his daughter to come onto her ship so they could be together once more.

"First though, let's make it through this."

"I captain!" he cheered with a gruff voice, making her smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



On the fourth night, the storm finally let up enough for them to get a small break in the clouds to see the night sky.

Rosetta read the stars alongside Naeem and Mr Smith, and they discovered

they'd been blown far off course.

With the sorry state of her poor damaged ship, it would take Rosetta another full day and night to get to hers and Alister's meeting location with her mangled sail.

That's if the weather continued to clear.

When the morning came and they were showered in bright sunlight, Mr Smith stayed with Rosetta while she steered by herself.

Only once Naeem had rested, did she finally allow the hatch to the lower deck to be opened permanently and let the crew come to the surface. They'd rotated shifts during the storm, but she was now allowing them all to greet the sun.

What she thought would be a celebration of success, considering they were all still alive, swiftly turned into something nasty.

"I thought we were going to be joining the Howling Death during the storm," one of the people asked from the crowd of nearly a hundred men.

"We are. That's currently our heading," she answered from the above deck. "We're about a day away with our sails like this."

The top half that had split apart had long ago rolled into the sea, taking part of one side of her railing with it. She still had the bottom sails, but the top was completely gone.

Men stood around what was left of the main mast and she could see the look of concern on their faces.

"You couldn't even captain us through a storm without almost sinking us!"

"Mr Smith had to help you hold the helm!" Another yelled. "What kind of captain can't even steer their own ship?"

"Men died because of you!"

Rosetta's heart nearly seized in her chest at their words. Especially when men agreed with those that had spoken.

A large group of them began to make their way forward, pushing others out of their way to the point they almost fell to the ground.

She could only guess the number coming forward. It at least appeared to be a fifth of her crew.

"A woman shouldn't be on the seas, let alone commanding over men," one of them said, pointing a finger in her direction. "You almost got us all killed. Hell, three men did die!"

She gripped the handles of the wheel, refusing to step away from it.

“I also got us through that storm with a damaged ship! I would like to see anyone else do better.” *I worked tirelessly! I barely rested and they want to blame me?!* “I can’t control where lightning will strike. Their deaths aren’t my fault. I’m not a god!”

“But the gods of the seas bless good sailors and ruin those that aren’t! The destroyed mast is proof of that.”

The man standing at the very front folded his arms across his chest with his legs apart like he wanted to make a stand. He hadn’t said anything yet, only those around him did, but it appeared as though he was the leader of this gang.

“By the laws of piracy, we want a vote.”

Her face felt cold as it paled.

“We’ve told you we won’t accept a mutiny!” Naeem shouted, coming forward to stand next to her. “Rosetta is our captain.”

“To those who were her crew before,” one of them said. “If she didn’t want to be faced with the laws of piracy, then she shouldn’t have taken pirates as her crew!”

The bald man at the very front gave a smirk, his face twisting into something evil.

He opened his mouth for the first time to say, “She no longer has Alister Paine to protect her. Without him here, we can do what we want.”

Rosetta was forced to stand her ground when she found three pistols pointed at her from below, raising up around the leader’s head.

“If you shoot me,” she said with an expression that hid every emotion she felt, lifting her nose up at the barrels poised to kill. “You’ll be dead before you even get the chance to vote.”

The narrowed squinting eyes she received from them all told her they knew what she said was the truth. Her men would retaliate with vengeance.

“We want to choose a new captain and those that follow him. You have to allow us to make a vote, and if you value the potential of your life, you will let us.”

Those of her original crew stepped back and drew out their own pistols or swords. They turned their weapons to those who were threatening her.

“We won’t let you overtake her.”

The men who wanted to vote her out, faced them while drawing their swords as well.

Then there was the part of her crew who were confused and scared, those who were just common thieves or sailors who may have committed small crimes, or been in the wrong place at the wrong time. They immediately backed away to the front of the ship so as not to be a part of what could potentially be a fight to the death.

Rosetta knew there were about thirty men of her original crew left. Those who opposed her were smaller in comparison, but they looked more dangerous.

Alister had taken the murderers. The other prisoners she'd taken mostly were people who had turned to crime out of desperation rather than malice. But these men...

She knew she was facing pirates, men who were just as ruthless as her.

And if they were just like her, and men like Alister and his crew, then Rosetta knew what was going to happen if she let this continue.

It'll be bloodshed.

"Stop!" she yelled, making their heads turn to her. *I've just escaped a storm and now I'm facing a bloody mutiny!* "If I allow the chance to vote and you lose, will you concede?"

I feared this was going to happen. Her paranoia hadn't been unfounded. *I knew something was wrong.*

"You can't be thinking of agreeing," Naeem gasped. He gripped the top of her arm and turned her to him with a frown of sincere concern. He looked so afraid it made her own brows crinkle slightly. "You know what will happen if you lose the vote."

"What else can I do? They'll kill each other," she whispered, her eyes bowing at the truth and reality of the situation she found herself in. She lifted her hands to shrug in frustration. "And then there won't be a crew to sail this ship, no matter who the captain is."

My men will fight for me. She didn't think her life was worth all of theirs. She'd killed Theodore, she'd gotten to sail the Laughing Siren as her captain... And, she'd been blessed with mind-shattering, body aching pleasure for months, something she'd never thought she'd ever experience in her entire life – not with the way she'd been forced to live it so far.

Rosetta wouldn't be any greedier than she had already been just to live a little longer. Not at the cost of this many good men's lives.

The leader stepped forward more while finally pulling his own gun from

its holster.

“Other than these idiots,” the man said while nodding his head to her original crew, “no one else will vote for you.” He cocked the hammer back. “Allow us to choose or you die.”

“I’m asking if you will concede?!” she yelled, earning her a dark look.

The man curled his upper lips back into a mean cringe, his eyes narrowed on her in an obvious glare. In every line of his features, she could see that this man, for some reason, despised her.

“Because, as it stands,” she continued. “I can either allow you all to kill each other and then none of us will be going anywhere, or I can allow this vote.”

A different man stepped forward, much older and greyer than the rest. He didn’t look any less violent.

“I’ve been a pirate for many a years. If yer win, I’ll lay me gun down.” But then he gave a cruel, near toothless grin. “But if yer lose, ye’ll be going for a long swim, girlie. That’s how it works.”

She gave a huff of irritation. “Who is your choice?”

“I am,” said the bald man at front. “Name’s Timmy Barnes, and I used to be the captain of the Lazy Rocker before I was arrested for piracy.”

“I will follow the code and allow the vote. Naeem, take the helm.”

He begrudgingly took it so she could step away.

Timmy started making his way up to be on the same level as her, but they stood at the top of the two different sets of stairs that led to this deck. One on either side.

He looked to be a man in his late twenties, similar to Alister’s age from what she could gauge. He was bald with a long brown beard that had been plaited and came to his sternum. He looked strong with muscles and definitely had the cutthroat look of an average pirate.

“I have been sailing these seas since I was a thirteen-year-old boy,” he shouted to the men below them. “I know how to lead a crew, far better than this pair of tits, and know these waters better than anyone. We’ve been following some stupid little girl whose been using her pussy to get Alister Paine to protect her! She’s worthless without him.”

He turned to her with his arms folded, tapping the barrel of his pistol against his bicep.

Rosetta scrunched her nose up at him with distaste.

“She hasn’t got what it takes to be a captain on her own without him, and she wouldn’t even have this ship if it wasn’t for him. He just made her captain so he can take her hole but I’m sure, once he was done with her, he was planning on taking this ship from her.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about. She took over the Howling Death and marooned him on Dunecaster!” one of her men yelled in defence. “She got the Bloody Storm of the Seas to bend to her will to get her this ship.”

“She made a deal with the devil!” Keal, the man who was often in her crow’s nest, added. “I’d like to see ye make such a deal with the likes of him. He would’ve sliced all ye necks before yer even got a chance ta speak to him!”

More of her men continued to give her praise.

“No one else would have the cunning to get his help and she managed to escape getting her head removed when he took it back.”

“I’ve been sailing with her for two years and she’s better than most men on the sea. Us men, we’re stupid. She’s got more wit in her little pinkie than you do in your whole fat fucking, ugly head.”

She gave a puff of breath through her nose, trying to stem a single laugh that tried to escape. *Bless these boys.*

“Can’t even speak for yourself, huh?” Timmy asked with a humorous laugh.

“Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate their help.” She folded her arms across her chest to mirror him. She even started tapping the toe of her boot like she was bored. “I just don’t think you’re going to win no matter what you or I say.”

Timmy gritted his teeth and turned forward.

“Those of you who would rather see a *man* captain you, raise your hands.”

Those that had stepped forward with him, all raised their hands. A small handful of those who were in the back group, also raised them, although hesitantly.

“Those of you who want me to stay as your captain, raise your hands.”

When they did, and the number was obviously greater, she turned to him.

“Isn’t that a pity, TimTim,” Rosetta sneered, shaking her head at him. It caused her nest of knots, which should really be glossy hair, to crawl across her skin. “It looks like you’ve lost.”

“I won’t be captained by a woman!”

She gave him her own cruel smirk. “That’s fine with me. Was going to make you go for a swim anyway.”

That smirk fell when he pointed his pistol at her. *Shit.*

She didn’t have time to get her own.

Rosetta was tackled just as the gun sounded that she’d been shot at. ***Thud.*** She and the person who had tackled her flew through the air and she tucked her head in to protect it rather than look up at who had saved her. They both hit the main deck without ever touching the stairs.

The wind was knocked out of her as her back hit the ground and it tore a painful gasp from her chest. *OW!*

“Get him!” Naeem shouted, releasing the helm without care for the ship to grab Timmy.

All he managed to do was spook the man until he fell over the quarterdeck railing. He landed against the main deck only a few metres from her with a disgusting crack and let out a small scream.

“Kill him!” one of her men shouted.

They all ran for him as a single unit.

She watched as Timmy raised his arms to block a downward swinging sword. He let out a yell as his hand chopped away, right before someone cut his throat.

The rest of her men, including the prisoners who had voted for her, started circling those who had voted against her. There was a crowd at the front who remained dead frozen, those who were even more afraid than before.

The mutineers lifted their hands, either conceding to the vote and surrendering, or realising they wouldn’t win now that they understood how many were on her side.

“Are you okay, Rosetta?” John said above her, raising himself onto straightened arms.

She realised he’d been the one to save her. *Such a good man.*

She gave him a broken smile of reassurance, too conflicted about what just happened to give him a real one.

“Yes, I am. Thank—”

He coughed over her before she could finish.

Blood splattered against her cheek. She flinched; her eyes fluttering shut. It had been a light splatter, but Rosetta felt like his blood slapped her in the face

so hard a part of her soul had left her.

“S-sorry,” he choked for coughing on her, before finishing, trying to get to his hands and knees above her so he was no longer crushing her.

“J-John?” she stuttered.

Her heart clenched when she realised he’d ended up taking the bullet in her stead. She’d been hoping he’d managed to get them both out of the way.

He rolled to the side, falling onto his back.

Rosetta immediately crawled to her knees, tucking her hair behind one ear so it didn’t shield her vision. She stared down at the man who had a track of blood running through his always neat, white and black peppered beard.

“John?” Her voice broke an octave.

It can’t be...

Tears began to well in her eyes when she saw blood was beginning to pool beneath him. She turned him so she could see he’d been shot in the back on the right side. And Rosetta knew by the wheezing, rattling, disgusting wet sounding breath he gave, that he’d been shot in the lung.

“Why?” she cried, lightly slapping his chest as if that was the answer to dispelling the bullet from his thick torso. “You stupid old man! You shouldn’t have gotten in the way!”

“Couldn’t let it be you, love.”

He raised his hand as he gave her a warm loving smile that shattered her heart into a million little pieces. He stroked the back of his wrinkled hands, which were covered in the evidence of a hard-working man’s life, against her cheek.

“I made you a promise.” She grabbed him by the scruff of his tunic and lifted him, despite that he winced at her for it. She shook him. “You’re not allowed to die, you stubborn fool. I told you I’d kill you if you did.”

He gave a laugh, before another cough bubbled more blood to his lips.

No, he can’t do this to me. He was dying, whether or not she wanted him to go. *Oh god, no. Anyone but him.*

Or Naeem. They were the only two people Rosetta didn’t want to see die. She didn’t think she could face the world without either of them.

“Y-you can’t leave me John, please. Who will help me take care of Naeem when he’s too drunk to stand? Who will help me navigate the waters? Who will help me count the stocks?”

She didn’t care she was being watched as she placed her forehead against

his shuddering chest.

Her voice broke in different octaves, unstable and whisper-like, as she asked, “Who will be there for me when I don’t know the way?”

She knew she shouldn’t be letting her men see her like this, but her heart couldn’t take the sickening ache in it. It felt like it was being squeezed so hard that it would burst.

“Y-You’ll be fine, Rosetta.” She turned her face to him, knowing by how hot it was that her face had turned bright red from her tears. “You’re a beautiful woman, inside and out, just like my d-daughter. It’s why I-I’ve always followed y-you, trying to help you find y-your h-happi-ness.”

The more he spoke, the harder it seemed to be.

She wanted to scream for someone to help him, to stop the bleeding, to save him, anything, but she knew, deep down inside, there was nothing they could do.

John was drowning in his own blood.

He started gasping for breath, each convulsion making her feel like hers were being sapped from her along with him.

“P-please,” she begged, looking down with a plea.

She stroked his face by running the tip of her thumb through his beard. She even wiped it over the lens of his bloodstained glasses, wanting him to see this world clearly before he left it.

She wanted him to see how much she couldn’t bear to let him go.

‘I’m sorry’ was all he could mouth before he started convulsing, gasping, desperate to breathe when he couldn’t. Choking.

And then his gaze faded away to turn into a haunting, lifeless stare. *H-He’s gone.*

Rosetta let out a loud screaming cry as she curled over him with shuddering breaths. For a few moments, she desperately held onto his body, heaving over it, crying over it, her heart dying over it.

She could hear no breaths, could feel no heartbeat with her hand over where it should be, and eventually the warmth he had always held, started to turn into a coldness.

Bitter, bitter coldness that seeped into her body to kill her own warmth.

“Rosetta,” one of her crew men whispered, crouching down to place his hand on her shoulder in comfort.

She knew his voice, someone who had been with her for almost as long as

Naeem. *Keat.*

They knew. They all knew how much this man meant to her, how much she cared for him, even if she had never told them.

“Kill them,” she commanded, turning her tear shed face up at the men who had tried to mutiny against her.

“But the ship...” Without them they’d struggle to sail.

“KILL THEM!” She no longer cared, not when retribution for this could be dealt. She wanted justice. “I want them all dead.”

“W-wait!” one of them said, putting his hands up in surrender. “We said we would concede if we lost.”

Rosetta turned her head to the man with his hand still on her shoulder, and gave him a look, one he should know by now.

He sighed, standing to raise his sword.

He began the slaughter of the under thirty men who had been the reason the man in her arms was now gone from her already sad and dreary world.

She thought that would satisfy her, that it would help to take the worst of the weight crushing down on her, would heal her pain, but it didn’t.

All it did was stop her tears while her heart weighed down so heavily it felt like an anchor had dragged it all the way to the floor so she could trample over it with her own feet.

But Rosetta, covered in blood, did shakily bring herself away from the floor.

She left Mr Smith where he was and walked up the quarterdeck steps so she could take the helm of her ship.

She didn’t say anything to anyone, didn’t give any orders, and no one tried to speak to her. They started going about their normal duties without her directive. Naeem was the one to issue commands but she didn’t care enough to listen.

Eventually, she saw two people carefully lift Mr Smith’s lifeless body.

She finally spoke.

“If you toss him, you’ll miss having hands,” she warned, unsure what they were planning on doing with his corpse. “Take him below deck and wrap him in a blanket.”

“What do you want to do with him?” Naeem asked as he came up the stairs to stand beside her, worry obvious in every creased line of his face.

It was an odd expression from someone who usually held humour, even in

times when he usually shouldn't. She knew he must be as upset as she was about John's death, even if he was trying to hide it.

Rosetta started to steer their course away from their current heading.

She couldn't face Alister, didn't care to face him with how hollow she felt inside. A big piece of her had been taken from her this day, and she wanted to do nothing more than fall into the ocean and peacefully float away.

Turning her head to Naeem but refusing to meet his eye, she said in a soft voice, "I want to bury him."

He at least deserves that.

FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for taking the time to read *Sea of Roses*, the first book of my 'A Pirate Romance Duology'. I hope you enjoyed reading it!

It was a lot of fun writing this story and creating all the characters and their wacky personalities. Pierre always made me giggle everytime I had to write a scene involving him. I love Alister and Rosetta's quirkiness and how their relationship is filled with hot and cold. There's nothing more entertaining than a little light banter.

I went through a POC sensitivity reading as Naeem was an important character and I wanted to represent him well.

Sorry about Mr John Smith! And about that cliffhanger, please don't hate me!

If you loved this book, please leave a review, share the book, or post in any social media platforms. Any support helps authors get ourselves out there and the more support we receive, the more books we can publish for your enjoyment!

Turn the page for the blurb for book two: ***Storms of Paine***.

The story continues...

Storms of Paine

A Pirate Romance Duology

Book Two

After the storm that separates them, Captains Rosetta Silver and Alister Paine find themselves sailing side by side together once more. Their passion refuses to fizzle out and burns brighter, hotter, and, frighteningly, deeper every time. Rosetta manages to convince the land hating Alister to port. They need supplies and the Laughing Siren still needs repairs.

BUT LAND MAY BE DANGEROUS FOR THEM – and not just because of the bounty on his head.

Emotions within Rosetta are stirring and she doesn't have a compass to navigate these unfamiliar waters. Alister's behaviour in port isn't what she was expecting, and well, she isn't a saint either – far from it.

HE'S LIKE A STORM, AND LIKE A SAVAGE THUND-ERSTORM, SHE FEARS HE WILL SWEEP HER AWAY.

However, the more she discovers about his complicated past and the true nature of this man, the more it has her wondering if she should give herself over to her feelings... or run.

OPAL REYNE

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