

Sera swallowed her dread as Jonathan began to unlatch the heavy doors of the throne room. Something was obviously amiss. Why else would the captain of her guard wake her in the middle of the night and insist she follow him through the vacant halls of her castle? She cinched her cerulean robe tighter and ran her fingers through her deep brown curls. She watched the back of his blond head with weary eyes until he finally swung open both doors. All looked normal in the corridor forged of marble and stone. All except what waited in the middle.

A woman with blazing red hair stood between two guards. One of her copper eyes shined bright against the lanterns, the other hidden behind the locks of her hair. She stood flat-footed, legs apart, her brown pants stuffed into worn leather boots. Her coal overcoat dropped past her knees, embellished with gold thread and buttons. It fit stiffly over her slim body. The white blouse she wore under the open coat lay softly against the contour of her breast. “Sera,” the woman said with a wicked smile, “I hope you’re having a good night.” She tipped her tricorn.

Sera’s tongue quickly loosened. She cut a sharp glare to the pirate standing before her. “I go by *Your Majesty* nowadays,” she said shortly. “You have thirty seconds to explain why you have chosen to wake me up at this godforsaken hour before I personally drag you to the dungeons, Lhyanne Clissaire.”

Lhyanne shrugged. “Well, darling, you may remember that you and I have unfinished business.” She reached down into the pocket of her coat. The guards drew their swords instantly, but Lhyanne laughed at them. She walked straight for Sera as she revealed a chain with a gold medallion hanging from the end. “Would you tell them to relax? They already stripped me of my cutlass and pistol. Besides, what harm could I possibly do with this?”

Sera eyed the necklace, her face warring. Slowly, she approached the pirate as Jonathan barked a warning from behind. “Do not trust this criminal, Your Majesty.”

Sera evoked silence with the wave of her hand, then turned to the guards and dismissed them from the room. She swallowed her unease, squared her shoulders, and met the pirate face to face. She took the medallion from her hands, gently turning it over so she could see the carved dragon emerging from the water on it. “What harm can this do?” she asked in a low tone, meeting Lhyanne’s sly expression. “That all depends on what you say next, Anne.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow what you mean, Ma’am,” Johnathan interrupted. “Why does Anne the Dreaded, commander of the Reaper Fleet, have your royal crest in her possession?”

Lhyanne addressed the question with an air of amusement. She was talking to Jonathan but looked straight into Sera’s sapphire eyes and snatched the medallion back into her hands. “Sera never told you? Seems you’re not the honest queen you always dreamed of being.” Her eyes darted to Jonathan. “Don’t you think it was a tad too convenient that the day before Sera Asselo invaded her father’s doorstep, his attention was caught on the fleet of unflagged ships attacking his shores?” She looked back to the queen. “I don’t think she would have had the same luck claiming her throne if daddy’s forces weren’t pulled away from the castle at the time.”

Jonathan cut Sera a disbelieving glare. “You made a deal with a *pirate* to take your father’s throne?”

“Yes, I did,” Sera said flatly. “And I don’t see why my affiliation with pirates is so shocking considering *I used to be one*, Jonathan. In fact, my old first mate is now Tiramis’s leading privateer.”

Jonathan heeded her tone, and wisely checked his attitude. “I understand, Your Majesty, but you became a pirate out of necessity. Lhyanne Clissaire is no ordinary privateer.”

“Not for her lack of trying...” Lhyanne muttered. Jonathan glared at her.

Sera pinched the bridge of her nose and began to pace while sorting out her thoughts. “Despite fighting over treasure and trade routes years ago, I’ve reached out to Anne many times over the last two years, but she was never interested in my letter of marque.”

Jonathan shook his head. “So what?” he asked Lhyanne. “Have you finally decided to serve the kingdom of Tiramis under my queen’s name?”

“Quite the opposite, actually,” Lhyanne chimed. “I’m here to enlist her services.”

Sera could have strangled the pirate. “Would you just shut it, Clissaire.” She turned to the Captain of the Royal Guard. “Jonathan, you are my closest friend and have kept true to me through the last decade. So please bear with me for just a moment to explain.” She paused, searching for the right words. A strength born a decade ago stirred in her eyes, causing Jonathan to ease.

“After my father disowned me for questioning his royal judgement, I went right to the docks and took a measly job on a merchant ship in order to get as far away from here as possible. I spent months thinking about how to take back my throne, and suddenly when my ship was under fire, I was given the opportunity to do so. Pirates from the southern continent attacked us. I’d heard stories about this crew; they rarely left any survivors, and it would be a cruel death.”

Jonathan grew quiet. She rarely spoke of her days on the sea. Those days were behind her, having ended almost two years ago to the day. Or so everyone thought they had ended.

“My captain wanted to surrender to them,” Sera continued, growing tired of standing and eventually taking a seat at the room’s head on her throne. Her long legs stretched out past the robe’s hem, crossing at the ankles. The tension was finally easing. “He was scared, ready to hand over our flag and our lives before the fight had even begun and became violent in his fear. But before the old bastard noticed me sneak up on him, it was too late. I put a blade right in his heart.”

Lhyanne *tsked*, swinging the medallion back and forth in her hand. “I’ve heard many tales of how the famous Sea Serpent came to power over her fleet. But I never would have pegged you as the mutinous type, Sera.”

Sera rolled her eyes. “It was mutiny, or death. I’m glad the rest of the crew agreed that death wasn’t an option. But no one was trained to fight. Hell, we didn’t even have active cannons aboard. So, I did what I had been trained to do until the very day my gluttonous father cast me out like a dog; I took control.”

Jonathan crossed his arms. “Your Majesty, I mean no offense, but you were only fifteen years old at the time. How did you manage to take control of an entire ship of grown men?”

Sera closed her eyes and rested her head onto the rich blue velvet lining her throne. It was so late. She didn’t want to deal with this right now, she didn’t want to answer questions or hear what Lhyanne had to say. She just wanted to go back to sleep. But she knew this was better handled in seclusion, where the dead of night offered enough quiet to think. “Fear, Jonathan. The kind of fear that drives men to do the unthinkable, and in this case, that was trusting a fifteen-year-old girl to lead them to victory. They had no idea who I was or what I had in mind, but when I stood over the corpse of our captain and started barking orders, no one hesitated to listen. And little did the pirates closing in on us know, but our ship wasn’t your typical merchant ship carrying spices and fabrics. We sold weapons from shore to shore. Swords, pistols, gunpowder, cannons. Our ship was a floating arsenal.

“It wasn’t easy, but we feigned surrender and tricked them into boarding our ship. Then we unleashed hell.” She yawned, sitting up straight. “By the end of the battle, we had two ships in our custody. I claimed the pirate ship and called for any of the sailors to join me if they wished. About half of them joined my crew, the other half thanked me by gifting me all the weapons we used in

battle since they couldn't be sold anymore. I renamed the ship the *Oath Breaker* and started building the fleet that would eventually serve to take back my kingdom."

Lhyanne leaned against one of the marble columns lining up to the throne, fidgeting with the sleeve of her coat. But the story stretched on, and Anne the Dreaded wasn't known for her patience. "I didn't sail all the way here to listen to a bedtime story. I'm here to collect on our deal, Sera." The mirth drained from her tone; an unusual soberness seeped into her resolve.

"Do not interrupt Her Majesty when she is speaking," Jonathan spat at the pirate, but Sera held up her hand to silence him.

"Remember, Jon, this woman is as good as royalty." Sera shifted her stare to Lhyanne's cunning eye. "She commands her fleet like I command my kingdom. I am loathe to admit, but she deserves the respect you would give our allies."

"She's a pirate!" Jonathan yelled. "She's no better than the crew that attacked you all those years ago. And now she shows up in the middle of the night demanding your aid? No good will come of this if our allies find out you're conspiring with pirates, Ma'am. No good will come if your people catch wind of it."

Lhyanne suddenly pushed off the column, striding to meet Jonathan face to face. "You hear this, *Your Greatness*. I believe your guard thinks little of me, even worse, it sounds like he thinks little of you."

"Nonsense," he scoffed, standing his ground. "I am nothing but loyal to Her Majesty."

"Once a pirate, always a pirate. Isn't that right, Sera? After all, you were almost as ruthless as I when pillaging and ransacking." She glanced back with a wicked smirk. "I think we might do better to discuss our business in private, so as not to suffer from such indignant interruptions."

Jonathan clenched his teeth, his hand falling to the hilt of the sword. "I'd sooner cut off my own arm than let you stand alone with my queen."

Lhyanne's smirk grew malevolent. "Careful what you wish for, dear."

"For the sake of sanity, both of you quiet!" Sera shouted, standing up. She looked down on Jonathan and Lhyanne. "Anne, you may command your own fleet, but you are at *my* mercy on these shores, and you should act with such notions in mind before I throw that medallion in the sea and toss you in the dungeon for the dragons to take judgement on. And Jonathan." She looked to the captain with cold eyes. "If I want to hear your opinion, then I will ask. Until then, hold your tongue if you wish to see yourself in this position after tonight. The three of us will stay in this room until everyone has spoken their peace. Is that clear?"

Jonathan bowed his head, his jaw clenched tighter than a knot. "Yes, Your Majesty."

The pirate looked like she might burst out laughing, but she nodded. "Clear as crystal, Oh Greatness."

"Good," she sighed, straightening the wrinkles in her nightgown, and falling back onto the throne. She stifled a yawn and continued. "Anne is here to collect a debt. She was the only one willing to help me who wasn't afraid of my father. I built a fleet that was unstoppable on the sea, but my father's throne wasn't at sea. I needed a way to distract him, and despite our differences as rivaling fleet commanders, she gave it to me. In return, I promised her a favor. That medallion is a token of our deal." Sera ran her hand through her untamed hair, a hollow forming in her gut. "So what is it that you want?" she asked Lhyanne.

Lhyanne scoffed and crossed her arms. "I want the world on a silver platter, Sera Asselo. But not even you can deliver that," she said with a harsh grin. "I need you to get me into the city of Plathiah."

Sera involuntarily wrinkled her nose. “Did all of your ships suddenly sink?”

“Funny,” Lhyanne sneered. “No, all my ships are still intact and sailing swiftly. But they wouldn’t be if I tried to sail into the city alone. Its shores are far too treacherous for someone who’s never navigated them.”

Jonathan’s tongue slipped, but at least it wasn’t at Sera. “You’ve never been to Vanliar?” he asked contemptuously.

“Never to the country’s shores,” Lhyanne shrugged. “However, their trade route is nothing short of a goldmine. I’ve snagged a ship-full or two of their goods on a high occasion north of here in the Gulf of Halana.”

The hollow in Sera’s gut consumed her. She couldn’t hide the twinge of concern. “Anne, if my ships are caught smuggling you into that city and you do something stupid, then the entire State of Vanliar will be at my throat. In fact, their radical regime will probably consider us allies and target Tiramis.”

Dragons on the high tide. Sera swallowed hard. Lhyanne’s schemes were going to get her into a war. She never should have given this pirate lord so much leeway in their deal. But here she was two years later, holding tight to the velvet arms of the throne and thinking her way through this madness.

“Actually,” Lhyanne mused, striking up a pace across the threshold, “it’s much worse than that. I’m not asking you to have me chauffeured all the way to Plathiah.”

Sera raised an unamused brow. “Then what are you asking?”

Lhyanne stared deliberately into the queen’s eyes. The medallion swayed in her hand. “I’m asking you to step aboard my ship and personally guide my crew through the razorous labyrinth

of Vanliar's coast—the very coast you used to navigate every day as a pirate. And then get me into Plathiah.”

Sera nearly choked on her own breath. An unsettled laugh rumbled in her chest. “No.” The word came out with more composure than she expected.

“No?” Lhyanne repeated.

Sera shook her head, wiping the exhaustion from her eyes. “No. I am not stepping foot in foreign territory unannounced so you can prey off of more merchants.”

Lhyanne's jaw clenched down, a flicker of rage lighting her eyes. Sera stared at the uncommon reaction, but she didn't lean into it. This woman expected her to commit what was no better than an act of war. What did she expect?

The flicker in Lhyanne's eye cooled, replaced by frigid contempt. “You really think I would waste the royal opportunity I was gifted just to snatch a few more ships?” The words were bitter on her tongue. “I should be insulted, Sera Asselo. In fact, I'm not only insulted, but I am outraged that you have the nerve to say no to anything I ask of you. If it weren't for me, your skeleton would still be gibbeted on the docks outside Cliffson. I am the only reason you sit so smugly on that damn throne. And yet you *laugh* at my demands when you promised me anything in the world. I should have known what a spoiled brat the Sea Serpent would have been. You sit in your high castle with your silken robes pretending like the last ten years never happened and expect everyone to play along! I should have tossed you overboard two years ago for even asking me to help you.”

Sera's nails dug into the throne. She didn't catch her temper before it boiled over the brim. “I built my fleet from nothing to nine hundred vessels in a mere eight years. I alone made it the strongest naval presence from here to Vanliar. I poured my blood and sweat into my work and never took a break until it was ready to cleave Tiramis anew. *You* did not reclaim my throne,

Lhyanne Clissaire. And you do not get to stand here and insult everything that I have built from the ashes of that day. *You* agreed to help me. *You* shook my hand and accepted that damn emblem. I told you from the very start that I would not do what you asked if it put my kingdom at risk. I will not put Tiramis at war just because you can't figure out how to sail to Plathiah without sinking your ships."

Sera seethed her last word just as Lhyanne spat out a bitter laugh. Ironically, the grounds for war were already laid out. They both were ready to grab each other's throats by the time Jonathan reached the throne.

He towered over both of them, and easily could have jumped to his queen's defense, but Sera was surprised when the captain spoke calmly. "Pardon me, Your Majesty, but may I ask why Ms. Clissaire needs you to personally escort her?"

Sera looked at Jonathan like he spoke in tongues. She nearly tore his head off before she realized what he was doing. Starting a war with Anne the Dreaded was just as bad as warring against Vanliar. Sera sucked in a deep breath, cooling her temper, and remembering who she was. "He makes a good point, Anne," she said levelly. "If I'm seen on those shores, hell will raise. Even if I dress how I used to, everyone knows that I was the Sea Serpent—news like that doesn't just fade away. I've worked myself to the bone to convince what few alliances I've forged that my pirating days are over. But I have expert sailors that have been to Vanliar's shores hundreds of times and can guide you to Plathiah. If I send one without his uniform, he could get you there just as easily as I could."

It was a reasonable solution, but Lhyanne was not a reasonable person. "I'm not asking for any worthless sailor. I'm asking for *you*." There was still a bite to her voice.

Sera hissed a sigh. “Even if we managed to keep me undetected in Plathiah, which would take the work of the sea dragons themselves, do you know how long a journey it is to Vanliar? It takes at least seven weeks to cross the Frosian Ocean. I would be away from my throne for over three months. Why is it so dire that I am the one to take you?”

“Because I made this deal with you.” Lhyanne never took her stare off Sera. “Not Jonny over here, not your expert sailors, not even the mythical dragons on high. You shook my hand, you gave me this emblem, you promised me your services. For as much as you look down on me, at least I enforce honor in the Code aboard my ships. You used to work out of Vanliar; you know what channels are safe to use and you know where to hide.”

Sera could have sworn she heard Lhyanne plea, something no human alive had probably ever heard. But she still shook her head. “It’s too risky, Anne. I’m sorry. If it were anything else, I would help. But I can’t bring that strife to my kingdom.”

“Need I remind you,” Lhyanne growled, “*this* is only because you took a risk wilder than the waves of the Southern Channel?” She suddenly pulled back the hair covering her face and revealed a gruesome scar. Her eye had been carved out on the day she helped invade Cliffson and dethrone Sera’s father. It had healed well, but the hollow scar was harrowing. Lhyanne sighed, dropping her gaze, and shaking her head. “You used to be fiercer than any man lazing on his throne, Your Greatness. You could have taken on the world, but no. You traded an empire for a kingdom and chose to laze away like the rest of them. So tell me, Sera, are you worth your weight in the gold you sit on? Because with promises so empty, you’ll need all you can muster to keep your precious kingdom from falling.”

Without another word, Lhyanne Clissaire tossed the golden emblem to the foot of the throne and headed for the door. Sera stared at the royal crest. The sea dragon jumping out of the waves mocked her. She had established that crest the very day she reclaimed her throne.

Sera inhaled deeply, knowing very well what she had to do.

“Wait,” she yelled just before the pirate reached the door, “just... wait.” Both Lhyanne and Jonathan watched her expectantly. She leaned onto the arm of the throne and covered her eyes with her hand before she sighed.

Dragons on High, help me.

“I don’t understand why you have to be the one to go with her,” Haelin said quietly as she helped pull Sera’s belongings out of the wardrobe.

Sera looked at her wife across the bed. She shook her head and wiped her brow. The summer breeze made the heat tolerable, but she still felt the sweat dripping down her back. “I don’t understand it either,” she sighed. She walked to Haelin’s side and gently grasped her fawn hand.

The queen consort glanced her way, her dark eyes uncertain in the morning sun. “I have a bad feeling about this, Sera.” She tucked her long black hair behind her ear. “Your intentions might have always been to reclaim Tiramis and rule in peace, but you still based your operations in Vanliar’s coves and pillaged off their ships for years to fund your dealings. It was a miracle that their leaders didn’t strike war with Tiramis after you took the throne and revealed who you were. How do you know Lhyanne isn’t trying to get you killed?”

Sera wrapped her arms around Haelin and breathed in the fresh morning air delivered by the sea below the window. “Because she didn’t get me killed two years ago. I don’t think she will now. There was something different about her last night; she was desperate.”

Haelin pulled away. The breeze caught the skirt of her pale green dress as she paced. “Why wait until now? Why not collect her payment two years ago?” She shook her head again and busied her fingers with one of the lush pillows from the bed. “A shadow rests over this entire journey, Sera. I’m afraid of what you’ll find in the midst of it.”

“Do you forget that I’m a token of luck on the seas, love?” Sera asked with a wry grin.

Haelin didn’t acknowledge it. “Lhyanne Clissaire has never acted with anyone in mind but herself. Sea dragons or not, you are still at her mercy.”

“I’m just navigating her to Vanliar,” Sera assured, but she couldn’t quite convince herself either. She sat down on the edge of the bed, rubbing her palms into her eyes. “I have to do this, Lin. I’ll admit I’ve had forebodings about the day that Anne the Dreaded would come knocking at my door. This deal is the one thing from my past that I couldn’t put to the grave—everything else I’ve laid to rest so I can run this kingdom in peace and prosperity. But now this might be the very thing that sends us to war...”

“No one is going to war,” Haelin said calmly. She sat down beside Sera and wrapped her hand around her wife’s. “Not so long as you do what you do best and use your head. No one but Jonathan and I know where you’re going and who you’ll be with. So long as we keep it that way, you’ll be okay.” She managed a slight grin.

Sera couldn’t help but smile. “I trust you with my life and my kingdom, Haelin Asselo.”

Haelin sobered. “Are you sure you want to leave me in charge while you’re away? Wouldn’t one of your advisors be a better fit?”

Sera's nose wrinkled at the very suggestion. "I did not organize the coup of the century just to win the hand of my beloved only to leave an *advisor* in charge when I am suddenly stolen away by my sea-faring rival of ten years. What an odd thing to suggest, Your Royal Highness."

Haelin cast her a sidelong glare. "You organized it for your throne, Your Majesty."

"Who says I couldn't have been fighting for both?" Sera shrugged, throwing herself onto the soft sheets of the unmade bed. She hadn't let any of the servants in her room all morning while she packed. "I thought of you every day I was away, Haelin. From the second I met you when we were twelve, I knew I was going to spend my life with you. Come hellfire or frozen tides, I was going to marry the princess from the north. When I asked your father for your hand two years ago, I nearly screamed with joy when he said yes. I'd trust no one else to rule in my stead."

Haelin leaned back into Sera. "But what if there's an emergency? What if a plague strikes when you're away or the summer is harsher than we expected and the crops don't do well? I'm not you, Sera. I don't have the same respect from the people of this land. Most of them still don't think of our marriage as legitimate. There are people in this very castle who refuse to call me a member of the royal family."

A moment of silence reigned. Sera looked at the woman beside her and scoffed. "If there's a kingdom-wide emergency and they refuse to listen to *your* advice, then they're all damned. You know what you're doing. I've already made it clear that *everyone* in this castle is to listen to your commands. If they refuse, then they refuse to listen to me, and there are consequences." She turned on her side so their faces were inches apart. Her voice was a mere whisper. "Trust yourself, Haelin. The education and medical institutions you established in this city have already helped so many; the people will trust you. And Jonathan is right by your side."

Slowly, Haelin's demeanor relaxed. "Okay," she nodded, "okay."

Sera wanted to lay there in her wife's arms for the rest of the day—the rest of her *life*. But her past was still breathing down her neck. So she savored the next few minutes while holding the love of her life, and then they both walked through the castle to the harbor where Cliffson met the caress of the sea.

The cerulean canvases billowed on the masts of her royal fleet docked in the empty harbor. Not a murmur carried over the docks. She successfully arranged for privacy when she set sail this cloudy morning. Yet the sea breeze tugged her hair, pushing back to the silver cliffs towering behind her where her castle sat watchfully atop.

Sera could barely believe Lhyanne's audacity for sailing right into the royal docks. The pirate's ship was on the larger side. From its red-painted hull to the two gold-painted masts, the square-rigged ship was as flashy as it was gawky. The main sail was the same color as the hull with gold stitching of a lion's head in the center. Of course she didn't think she'd be crossing the Frosian in a sloop, but a little more discretion would have been appreciated.

"Why don't you write *Just Stolen* on the side and save me the trouble of being hanged across the ocean?" she yelled up from the dock to where Lhyanne was speaking with a large man onboard the vessel.

Lhyanne looked down and smiled at the two women. "There's no pay without a little prey, Asselo. We need to pose as merchants, and this Hongerun cargo ship was the perfect guise. No one will suspect a crew of pirates would ever be so stupid as to sail in this bulking monstrosity."

Sera slowly rubbed her temples and exhaled her frustrations as Lhyanne climbed down to the dock. "You realize I just formed an alliance with them, right? You are literally holding a match above every bridge I have built in the last two years."

“Then get your hands wet. It sounds like you’ve completely lost your spine since your glory days, Sera,” Lhyanne sighed. “Maybe it’ll do you some good to be on the sea again. There must be something you’re yearning for from the old days?”

“She was just telling me how she was relieved to wear pants in place of a skirt again,” Haelin said from her side.

Lhyanne’s attention shifted to the queen consort. “Your Royal Highness,” she greeted, and dipped her tricorn. “I trust your night wasn’t interrupted by my arrival.”

Haelin nodded her regard for the pirate, but little more. Her face was cold, her tone harsh. “You come to my home, steal my wife away without any indication of what danger you’re putting her in, and you smile at me about it. You’re as mad as all the stories say, Lhyanne Clissaire.”

Lhyanne didn’t flinch at the insult, nor did her smile fade. “Don’t blame the debt collector when they come knocking on your door, Your Highness, for you’re the only reason they’re there.”

“And the mercy of my queen is the only reason you’re not hanging from the gallows right now.” Haelin narrowed her dark eyes.

“Maybe she shouldn’t be so generous with her bargains, then?” Lhyanne cut Sera a mocking glance.

“Maybe,” Haelin replied, taking two steps toward the pirate. “Or maybe you should remember her kindness while you sail away from these shores and risk her life for your selfish desires.”

“I wouldn’t be a particularly good pirate if I didn’t act on selfish desires, Your Highness, nor would I be able to live with myself if I let her off the hook right now. So why don’t we let the tides drown this pointless conversation?” Lhyanne nodded her head to the ship beside them. “The sooner we take off, the sooner she’ll return home. What do you say?” She held her hand out in between them for the queen consort to shake. But it remained untouched.

Haelin looked at the hand, then looked back up to Lhyanne. Rage boiled within her eyes, but the Queen Consort of Tiramis kept her resolve together. “Bring her back to me.” It wasn’t a question. It wasn’t a plead. Haelin Asselo’s demand sat heavy in the air. Without another word, she turned and headed back to the castle.

Sera watched her wife until she could no longer see her behind the ships.

Lhyanne let out a low whistle. “Now that’s a wrath I don’t want to attract.”

“She certainly won’t have any problems ruling when I’m gone,” Sera smiled. She stared at the glistening cliffs and the beckoning castle atop them for a moment longer, her heart wrenching at the thought of leaving. “You’re right. The faster we leave, the faster we return.” She turned to face the pirate behind her, sucking in a deep breath and bracing herself for the unknown. “Let’s get this over with.”

Lhyanne smiled, nodding her hat over her hidden eye. “Let’s hope you’re blessed by the sea dragons like the legends say, Your Majesty.”

Sera leaned her elbows against the bright red railing. Standing along the bow of the *Hawker*, the commandeered vessel that had become so familiar, she could barely open her eyes against the relentless summer sun. Yet ahead of them swarmed a dark shroud of clouds blowing a thick mist their way. The anchor had been dropped for an hour now near the coast of a deserted island where they waited for the storm to pass. The mist of the sea sprayed against Sera’s face as a whistling gale mixed with the tune of a shanty somewhere on deck. She sighed and turned to where Anne the Dreaded stood at her side.

“So explain this to me again,” Sera muttered, rubbing her temples. “I’m guiding you through Vanliar’s sea so you can get into Plathiah and sneak into a retired admiral’s home?”

Lhyanne nodded, the shadows of her tricorn shading her visible eye. “But not just any old admiral. I’m going after Admiral Hathard Goddray himself.”

The infamous admiral who was notorious for trespassing in foreign waters. “What does he have to do with any of this?”

Lhyanne sighed. “I became a thorn in his side twelve years ago when I targeted Vanliaran merchants crossing the Gulf of Halana. He put out a bounty of one thousand gold for my arrest.”

Sera whistled her astonishment. “One thousand gold? The most I ever had placed over my head was six hundred.”

Lhyanne’s smile was merciless. “His grudge against me is personal. He felt a fool when I pretended to be a boy and worked on his ship when I first sailed the seas.”

Sera narrowed her eyes. “I thought you hit the seas when you were fourteen aboard a pirate ship from the Prospering Isles?”

The pirate lord shook her head. “That’s when I turned away from the law,” she said with a hint of pride. “But I started out my seafaring as Lord Goddray’s personal cabin boy when I was twelve. The job didn’t last long. He was a cruel bastard and I fled my duty the first chance I could. I was thirteen. A year after hiding on the Prospering Isles, I joined the *Death Racer* as a woman and thoroughly enjoyed plundering Vanliaran ships ever since. From then on, he’s been after me. I guess he didn’t like it much when he learned I was the one causing him so much trouble. He almost caught me once—eleven years ago. But I wasn’t the one captaining the leading ship of my fleet at the time.” The *Leviathan* was Lhyanne’s most infamous ship—having sailed on the most cunning voyages and having been captured in the most ruthless battle by Admiral Goddray.

Sera thought carefully for a moment. “What do you plan to do once you’re there?” She had a knack for sensing recklessness, and that sensor had been blaring ever since she stepped onto the *Hawker* five weeks ago. They had managed to successfully sail the high seas undetected in their stolen ship so far, but the closer they got to Vanliar’s territory, the worse that alarm chimed in Sera’s head.

“I plan to march right into his home and take what he stole from me eleven years ago.” There wasn’t an ounce of fear in Lhyanne’s voice.

Sera shifted her weight from foot to foot with the sway of the waves. She rolled the billowing sleeves of her black blouse to her elbows, inhaling the ocean mist. “I’m certainly not one to judge old grudges, but why target him in particular? The old crow’s been retired for nearly half a decade. Whatever he stole from you is probably in custody of Vanliar’s state at this point. The chances of it being in his possession are slim.”

Lhyanne cast her a sidelong glance, the edge of her lip curving upward. “No. What he stole from me is more priceless than a dragon’s scale. Not even the power-hungry leaders of Vanliar could pry that treasure away from Goddray’s hands.”

Sera eyed the pirate suspiciously. “You’ve dragged me from my wife and my throne; I at least deserve to know what’s worth risking my life over. What is it you’re after?”

“That,” Lhyanne mused as she drummed her fingers along the wooden railing of the *Hawker*, “is no business of yours.” She reveled in Sera’s growing vexation, then turned and propped her elbows onto the railing. “I’ll get you back to your wife in no time, *Your Greatness*, but right now you still have a debt to pay, and that bastard Goddray still has my treasure.”

Sera could have broken the woman’s nose, but she caught her temper before it flared. “I don’t understand why I’m the only navigator whose help you wanted when you don’t even trust me

enough to tell me what we're after. Like it or not, I'm part of this crew. I should know just as much as everyone else aboard this sailing death-sentence."

The pirate lord laughed. "Don't flatter yourself, Asselo. You've made it clear you want no part in this journey. You're not part of my crew."

Sera's eyes narrowed. "Then what am I?"

"Queen, quartermaster, glorified prisoner. Frankly, Your Majesty, I don't give much of a dragon's ass what you label yourself as so long as you hold up your end of our deal," Lhyanne shrugged, losing interest in the conversation. "But if it makes you feel any better, I'm not treating you differently than I am anyone else aboard this ship. That is why you dragged me out here on this beautiful sunny day in the first place, right?" She turned her head further to keep her good eye on Sera as the queen paced along the creaking deck. "You've been complaining about being here for the last five weeks, poking your nose around my entire crew trying to figure out what I'm after. But no one could give you an answer."

Sera paused her pace in front of the pirate. "I got one story from a cook saying you've gone off your rocker to search for the fabled dragon summoners."

Lhyanne's lip twitched at the disrespect. "You'll have to point out which one next time you see him," she said with flaring nostrils.

A moment of silence overfell the front of the ship. Another gusting wind stole Sera's attention. "You really haven't told anyone the details of this quest?"

Anne the Dreaded glanced in the direction of the wind, solemnity seizing her expression as her fiery locks danced wild behind her. "No one but Kadra knows."

Sera thought of Lhyanne's first mate. The gentleman had been more than pleasant to her since day one. "Why?"

Lhyanne sighed, breaking her stare off the distant horizon. “For the same reason you’re the only one I brought on board to navigate: the truth only puts a knife in your back.”

Sera fell hushed. The clamor of the crew and crash of waves echoed in her head. Just what was this woman going to such lengths to reclaim? She supposed it didn’t matter. For five weeks, she had grown impatient waiting for her part to play on this journey; she had complained and passed her time watching the horizon behind them where Tiramis lay far beyond. Lhyanne hadn’t told her a single detail and Sera knew in her gut that wouldn’t change until they reached Vanliar. So she huffed a sigh, surrendering her attempt to get answers from the sly pirate.

“Fine,” Sera muttered, “keep it to yourself all you want. It’ll make it easier to deny my hand in all of this if you get caught.” Lhyanne smiled at her, but before the pirate could walk off and tend to her duties as captain, Sera continued. “*But* if I’m stuck aboard this ship for another two weeks, then I *demand* that you give me something to do.”

“You can tell me what’s truth and what’s myth about all the stories you’re in, Your Royalness” Lhyanne suggested. “Like how exactly you managed to be the sole survivor of a ship crash that led you to be marooned for a month.”

“I’d rather cast myself into the sea,” Sera muttered.

Surprisingly, Lhyanne laughed. She stood up, straightening the collar of her shirt and the belt around her waist. “You’d damn this whole expedition if you threw yourself overboard,” she sighed. “I know Kadra could use help sorting through the cargo. The lunatic claims he found a barrel worth of dragon scales below deck.”

Sera wrinkled her nose. “Those are only valuable to dragon summoners, why would the Hongeruns store them on this ship?”

Lhyanne shook her head. “They’re only useful to summoners, but they’re valuable to an entire population of regular people who have never seen a dragon in their life. I’m sure he’ll show them to you—”

Before Lhyanne could finish her thought, a commotion broke out along the main deck. A chorus of shouts, a stampede of boots. Not a minute later, a bell chimed overhead. Sera and Lhyanne sprinted for the distress, pushing past idling sailors in their path until they could make sense of the calls.

“Ship on the horizon! Call the captain!”

“Hongerun warship, heading straight for our course!”

The lookouts cried from their crow nests, the crew on the ground ran to the portside railing, but Lhyanne carved a berth in the crowd with her mere step.

She took out her flintlock and fired a warning shot into the air. “What the hell is all this chatter about!” she yelled at the pirates. “There’s a penalty for abandoning your posts on my ship!” They all fell still as statues when her voice thundered. It was only one brave soul who dared speak as he slid down the latter on the main mast.

“There’s a Hongerun man-o-war sailing for us, Ma’am!” the lookout boy shouted. “They’ll be on our tail in ten minutes!”

“Ten minutes?” Sera seethed. “How in all the bloody seas did they sneak up on us?” Lhyanne cut her a dry glare for speaking in her place but turned her attention back to the boy as she waited for an answer.

The boy hesitated, looking between queen and captain. “They hid behind the mist o’ the storm, Majesty. It’s thick’r than a curtain on the island’s rear.”

Sera's thoughts began to swirl. She looked past the island to the vessel fast approaching beyond. The ship was massive, larger than the *Hawker* and armed tenfold. What would the Hongerun military think if they caught her aboard a stolen ship? Her gut churned.

A single shout from Lhyanne was all it took to silence the entire deck again. The captain watched with calculating eyes as the fellow gold and red ship grew closer and closer.

"They may think we're damaged from the storm," Sera suggested. "If we raise anchor and start sailing, they may believe we're okay and turn away."

Lhyanne's calculation turned to disgust. "Are you telling me to run like a coward aboard my own ship?" she barked. A burning rage sparked her temper.

"I'm saying we should play it safe and avoid unnecessary battle!" Sera shouted back at the captain. "Even if they're readying to attack us, it'll give us a head start to flee. We can outrun that ship if we set course for the storm."

But Lhyanne was already pushing herself away from the railing and striding through the pirates. "As optimistic as that sentiment is, I'm not killing myself just yet. If the Hongeruns get away, then they'll tell our location to someone who does know the *Hawker* was stolen, and we wouldn't even catch one wave in Vanliar before their whole bloody fleet is on our tail."

"It's suicide to stand and fight, Anne! I'm not dying to add to your ego!" Sera yelled.

Lhyanne marched right to the helm at the rear of the deck and wrapped her hands around the wooden wheel. Her hair caught in the raging wind like a flame in a draft, revealing her scarred eye in the bright sun. "It's a pity how much of a coward you've become, Sera Asselo. But I'm the captain of this ship and we don't have the time to run. They're at our back and we only have one option; we're striking before they're in position to ram us." She shouted to everyone, "Get into

your stations, ladies and gents, all hands on deck. Set a course for north-west—we've got a ship to sink!"

The bellow that roared from the crew thundered in Sera's chest. Lookouts climbed the masts, gunners and powder monkeys split above and below to the gun decks. She was nearly trampled by half a dozen of them before she forced herself to the side and watched the chaos.

The *Hawker* wasn't unarmed, per se. It was lined with cannons below deck and a few above. And the crew was armed to their teeth with guns and swords. But their enemy was fast approaching, and Sera could already see the Hongerun's naval insignia stitched so proudly on all three sails. The heads of cannons poked out of the ship's sides, and hundreds of men garbed in cardinal jackets ran about the deck. A cargo ship against a warship. Sera knew their only hope was to sail windward and outrun the Hongeruns, but instead Lhyanne set a course for them. She was going to die. Or worse, she was going to be caught. A knot formed in her gut, so tight that Sera had to focus on the men raising the anchor just to distract herself. She cursed the world and cast indignation aside as she raced for the capstan and helped push.

Within minutes, the anchor was raised, the sails were lowered, and Lhyanne steered the *Hawker* north-west. Sera was breathless before she climbed to the helm. "What's your plan, captain?"

The pirate lord didn't bat an eye. "They lack the maneuverability the *Hawker* has. If we wrap around this island fast enough, we can use the fog as cover and come up on their rear before they can find us." The ship was already listing portside around the island.

Sera gritted her teeth. The Hongeruns would be almost immobile against the winds with a ship their size...

“Go west,” she suddenly said. Lhyanne looked to her ready to spark another brawl, but Sera took a step westward on the deck. “If you’re determined to sink that ship, the storm is our greatest asset right now.”

“I already told you I’m not killing myself—”

“Don’t sail into it,” Sera cut her off, “just towards. They won’t expect us to be so—”

“Stupid?” Lhyanne scoffed, but then she looked back. The man-o-war had an extra mast on the *Hawker*, which only served them with the wind. If they were forced west, they would be sailing against the wind and falter, but the *Hawker* might stand a chance against it and gain an advantage. “Sera, you’re either a genius or a mad woman,” she growled as she tightened her fists around the wheel. “Adjust the sails!” she shouted. “We’re heading west!”

“But that’s into the storm,” Kadra yelled as he ran up the rear deck. The man was a giant, standing above the rest of the crew by a head with long black hair tied back behind his dark face, depthless eyes to match.

“You don’t think I damn well know that?” Lhyanne heaved as she controlled the rudder. “Stop staring at me like I’ve gone off the deep end and pull those ropes! You’ll all wish for death if I see any lazy rigs!”

Sera nearly cackled. That was all the motivation the crew needed to heed their captain’s commands and adjust the ship right into the wind.

“Sail in a zigzag motion southwest and northwest!” Sera shouted back as she helped Kadra and a dozen other men heave the ropes of the mainmast. “We’ll catch the wind, then adjust to the other direction until we meet the storm’s edge. From there, we’ll have to think of a plan of attack.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Lhyanne said with an eye on the storm. “I’ve got something up my sleeve. Just wait for my command to change direction.”

Sera nodded, tightening her grip around the massive rope. Exhilaration rushed through her veins, a familiar burn building in her forearms. She had missed this for so long.

The commands rolled out as soon as the crew finished adjusting to the last one. Lhyanne shouted above the raging wind and clamor of sailors, and Sera relayed it to the crew manning the foremast ahead where Kadra managed. The winds of the storm were relentless, the pain in her body numbing, but Sera refused to fall to it. The communication between captain and crew allowed the *Hawker* to sail directly towards the storm. The ship bounced and jolted against the crashing waves. The temperature chilled and a growing shadow crept upon the sun. Sera nearly lost her footing with every other wave, but she kept her grip, never letting the sail shift out of position. Nevertheless, the man-o-war kept on their trail.

She clenched her jaw and yanked the fraying rope downward. Her hands bled, the salty splash of the water burning deep. The Hongerun crew behind was more skilled than she had hoped, and though she was one of the finest sailors on the Frosian, this was clearly Lhyanne's first time maneuvering in such a way. The warship hadn't fallen back.

"Whatever's up your sleeve best come to light soon!" Sera yelled, the sails slowly shifting toward portside.

Lhyanne groaned as she held the wheel against the waves. "Just a little further!"

The waves were growing, each one visible above the forecastle before it crashed into the bow—it was only a matter of time before the rain hit them. Sera leered at Lhyanne's calls over her shoulder when suddenly the captain smiled at something ahead.

Sera looked forward and gawked. The wave in front of the ship was a wall, at least half the height of the mainmast. A small crest peaked the rolling surge as it drowned everything in its path. And Lhyanne was sailing straight for it.

Whatever happened to not killing herself! Sera thought, but she didn't have the time to voice it. Lhyanne's commands thundered over the *Hawker*.

"All hands adjust sails to starboard! Gunners, get ready at your cannons and wait for my command!" It was an order that offered no room for question. Lhyanne had already turned the wheel clockwise to its limit when Sera began pulling the rigs in her hands. Every pirate with a free hand soon followed.

The boom of the masts swung violently across the deck. Sera ducked beneath its sweep and narrowly missed it slamming into her head. All too quickly the ship listed starboard as the entire vessel turned. She barely caught her balance when the base of the rogue wave crashed into the opposite side. Wood groaned and splintered. The aggressive list became violent, but by the grace of the sea dragons they didn't capsize. The wave directed the *Hawker* true north, parallel to the warship closing the gap, and suddenly in the perfect position for attack.

Anne, you genius.

"Fire!"

Her cry resonated through the vessel. Sera echoed it to the gunmen around her, and Kadra like so further up the deck. A hail of cannon-fire erupted like a volcano, a second wave firing from the gundeck below. The Hongeruns met it head on. Sera heard the shatter of wood before she saw the holes in their hull. A fog of gunpowder engulfed the *Hawker*, stinging her eyes and burning her throat. But she didn't ease her breath until she saw one more round of chain shots fired. The lot of them missed their mark; however, one struck the man-o-war's foremast. The towering beam snapped like a branch and crashed overboard, the sail sweeping along a dozen men into the deep blue below. The entire crew of the *Hawker* loosed a victorious cry, the men and women jumping where they stood at the sight of the splintered beam. But they were silenced within moments when

they realized the man-o-war still had two more masts, and the *Hawker* had lost all of its momentum in that turn. The warship slowly adjusted its course, turning parallel to the *Hawker*.

The warning left Sera's lips at the same time Lhyanne grabbed the wheel.

"Brace yourselves!"

The explosion of gunpowder across the sea cleaved open the air between them. Hundreds of cannons fired from the man-o-war turning north. Lhyanne shouted to adjust the sails, but all too suddenly the *Hawker* was swarmed with cannonballs, chain shots, and explosives. The entire ship quaked. The pirates around her raced for more gunpowder, to reload cannons, but the Hongerun warship had ten times the amount of firearms.

The deck was a mine field. Men and women were hit with the explosives hailing down from above. Sera took cover behind the mainmast. The screams of those not as fortunate shattered the sea below. Crimson splattered on the deck like water. She tried to find Kadra but couldn't see a thing through the smog of gunfire. Then she looked back to the captain desperately trying to pull the ship out of this hell. Sweat beaded down Lhyanne's brow, a vein protruded from her temple from teeth clenched so hard. But despite the progress she made in pulling the *Hawker* out of this parallel run, another explosive struck the rear of the helm. The wood of the stern splintered like glass. A plank projected through the air, hitting Lhyanne in the back of the head. The captain crashed unconscious.

Sera cursed the world sideways as she rushed to Lhyanne's side. She rolled the captain onto her back and pulled her away from the wheel, but Lhyanne didn't flinch. A line of blood trickled down the back of her head; she was out cold. Sera desperately looked for Kadra amid the smoke and horde of battle-drenched pirates. He was at the bow, directing the madness at the front of the ship and firing cannons. Too far to hear.

Her heart pounded with each explosion. Frantically, she cast caution to the wind and jumped to the wheel of the *Hawker*.

She's going to have my head for this, Sera thought to herself, grasping the handles, and pushing counterclockwise. Gradually, the *Hawker* pulled away from its parallel course with the man-o-war and turned northwest.

“Grab the rigs! Adjust the sails back into the storm! If we’re going to live to talk about this day then we need all hands on those ropes!” Sera shouted to the deck below. But only a few pirates heard her command, and they ignored it. So did the crew running back and forth near the helm. They were all too busy loading cannons. Blood boiling, Sera snatched the shirt of a young swab running past her and dragged him close enough to feel her hot breath as a cannonball barreled through the air mere feet away.

“Did your ears get blown off in the cannon fire? I said get your hands on those ropes! Grab everyone you can and get those sails turning if you want to live!” She didn’t wait for his answer before she threw him forward. To the pirate’s credit, he was smart enough to heed her warning and run to the nearest rig. He called for the help of everyone around him. It wasn’t long before enough pirates waited for her call from the helm and she steered the *Hawker* against the wind once more.

Back and forth she steered, catching the wind one way, then shifting to the next. They managed to pick up enough speed to create a gap from the man-o-war once more, but the Hongeruns continued their fire by following parallel. The further into the storm they sailed, the heavier the rain plummeted. It was so thick that Sera could barely see ahead of the ship. She was sodden and struggling to shout above the storm. Kadra ran back to the helm expecting Lhyanne, only to find her unconscious, and Sera giving orders. He barely batted a questioning eye.

“Reef the sails, your Majesty,” Kadra’s deep voice cleaved through the rain. “They’re under too much stress against the wind.” The entire vessel was lifted and then dipped downward as they rode another feral wave.

Sera gritted her teeth. “I’ll throw you overboard if you even think about touching those rigs. The push of the wind is the only thing keeping our ship above water right now.” She looked over her shoulder at the warship. “They’re falling behind without a third mast. If we sail into the eye of this storm, we might have a chance.”

But the deck was a smoke field of chaos. A woman bleeding from her eyebrow ran up to the wheel from the commotion not a breath later. “We’re taking too much water below deck. The damage is getting worse the longer we stay next to that ship—”

A lookout suddenly cried warning from atop the crow’s nest. “Incoming!”

Another round of cannons fired from the man-o-war, this time hitting low on the hull. The entire boat shook, and Sera didn’t need to see to know a flood was drowning the bilge. Then suddenly, she heard a whipping noise. She barely saw the chain shot whirl through the air before it made impact with the *Hawker*’s foremast. The towering beam suffocated beneath the chain, snapping midway up. The entire ship listed sideways as the mast swung down, but it didn’t fall overboard. The sails caught the wind and whipped it backward, falling on the mainmast. Sera and Kadra grabbed Lhyanne and took cover as the unmasted beam tore through the entire rigging of sails and crushed the helm. All too quickly, the *Hawker* halted, but its list in the torrential storm continued.

“It was a good run, Your Majesty,” Kadra groaned, bracing himself on the shattered railing. “But there’s nothing left to do but prepare for a boarding. We don’t have enough able hands to row, and even then, we wouldn’t get anywhere with these waves.”

Sera clenched her teeth together and stared at the Hongerun vessel. She pushed her soaked hair out of her eyes. It was all for nothing. She was going to die out here or be captured for *nothing*. Whatever Lhyanne was so desperate to retrieve would remain in the hands of Hathard Goddray and by the dragon's grace, Tiramis would be excused from any punishment coming her way—

The dragons. Sera's eyes darted to Kadra, a small hope trickling in her chest. "Where is the cargo you were sorting through below deck?"

The giant of a man stared at her like she spoke in tongues. But her urgency persuaded his response. "In the orlop. Why in all the names of the sea—"

Lhyanne's eyes barely fluttered open before Sera threw her into the first mate's arms, then sprinted for the *Hawker's* cargo. It was a maze of death and frenzy below deck. Water flooded up to her shins, but she didn't stop running until she found a mass of crates and barrels scattered about the floor. She searched the cargo back and forth until she saw a finely painted blue coffer lined with silver inlays. She ran to it and nearly cried in joy when she unlatched the top and found a mountain of silver scales glittering in the lantern light. No one questioned the frantic queen rushing up the stairs to the main deck with a large treasure chest in her arms until she nearly rammed into Lhyanne.

The captain was helping to push the debris of the *Hawker* against the starboard railing, building a barrier for the pirates to take cover behind when the Hongeruns tried to board. Flintlock in one hand and cutlass in the other, when she saw Sera, even Anne the Dreaded couldn't keep her jaw from hanging. "You've gone off the rails."

Sera didn't stop running until she reached the edge of the deck facing the warship where the fallen mast crushed the railing. Her arms were growing tired of the weight, her cold fingers numb around the chest's handles. The treasure chest dropped to the floor and she fell to her knees. She

swung the lid open and grabbed a single silver scale. The cool material seemed to shine even in the shadow of the storm. Sera closed her fist tight around it, praying for a quick death should this fail. She sucked in a deep breath, closed her eyes tight, then tipped the blue chest overboard so the entire mass of dragon scales cascaded into the crashing waves below.

A ripple of energy suddenly thrummed through the ocean. It spread far into the dark horizon, sending a shutter throughout both ships that reverberated through the masts. The *Hawker* and the man-o-war jolted to a stop so abruptly that she almost fell off the edge. The raging wind fell still, the untamable waves of the ocean calmed, and the rain stopped all at once. The crew of the *Hawker* faltered in their preparation for battle, and from the looks of it, so did the Hongeruns.

Lhyanne appeared at her side, but Sera didn't take her eyes off the water. The captain's voice was mute to the overbearing tranquility that engulfed the ocean. She held her breath. But the pirates around her became restless, as did the Hongeruns. All too soon, Sera saw the foreign sailors beginning to stir on their deck. She heard them shouting and preparing cannons. She even saw men surrounding a harpoon aimed at the *Hawker's* stern.

It should have worked... Her shoulders hunched as a sickening sway seized her head.

Lhyanne rested a gentle hand on Sera's shoulder. "Only the summoners chosen by dragons can expect an answer, Sera—"

Sera opened her mouth, but instead a piercing roar that rattled the ocean replied. Every soul aboard both ships paralyzed at the call. She looked down into the depths of the still water. Another roar cried, only this time it was much closer. And so suddenly like the flash of lightning, a creature larger than either vessel erupted from the calm waters.

The dragon's long body was covered in slick silver scales, radiant even in the gloom of the storm. Its massive head donned four pearl-white horns, curved backwards towards its spine lined

with teal spikes. Powerful wings webbed from its back; a split fin sat at the end of its tail. The dragon leapt straight into the air; its long, sleek body arching before it dove back down. The water didn't shift, it didn't even stir while the serpent lurked within.

Sera felt Lhyanne move, but she grabbed the pirate lord's hand bearing the pistol before she could order an attack. "Just watch," the queen whispered.

Another screech rippled through the water, filling the entire ocean all at once. Not even Sera could trace where the dragon was. Not until its monstrous head and elegant neck suddenly surfaced on the far side of the man-o-war, its tail tearing through the air between the two ships. Its nostrils flared silently above the razorous teeth in its jaw. Motionlessly, it watched the men with red eyes and slitted pupils before shifting its gaze right at Sera.

The Hongeruns' terror was palpable. But their paralysis faded into urgency all too late. Just when the first shout to attack sounded, the dragon let out one final guttural cry and swung its tail onto the deck. The ship splintered like a plank of wood. The dragon wrapped its entire body around the man-o-war, its talons tearing through the ship like warm butter. And finally, the creature unhinged its narrow jaw and huffed a breath of illuminous blue fog over the drowning crew. Before Sera could hear a single scream above the decimation, every single sailor aboard the warship fell dead where they stood.

The *Hawker* watched in stunned silence. The man-o-war was in ruins. They hadn't even fired a single shot before they fell. Sera's breath hitched in her throat, her blood icing in her veins as she beheld the unparalleled might of this creature. And before she knew it, that radiant dragon fell still. Its head protruded from the surface; the rest of its body hidden below the water. Slowly, Sera rose to her feet. As if it sensed her presence, the dragon turned its long neck to the *Hawker*. A fear thicker than wax seized the entire crew. But when the monstrous dragon suddenly waded through

the water in the *Hawker's* direction, Sera didn't flinch. In fact, she took a step forward, as far as she could without falling. When the dragon calmly stopped in front of the ship and met her face to face so close she could see each individual scale, she couldn't help but smile.

"Thank you, old friend," Sera said proudly, looking up to the magnificent beast. "I do not have anything worthy of your kindness right now; I hope the return of these scales will be enough."

The serpentine creature watched her a moment more as if wishing to say something in return. But after a thoughtful silence, it dipped its gargantuan head, no roar or hum in response. The dragon simply regarded the battered *Hawker* one last time, then turned around and dove into the ocean. It wasn't until the tip of its tail dipped beneath the water and the dragon was out of sight that a collective breath released on board. When Sera turned back to face the crew, not even Lhyanne could hide her disbelief.

The pirate lord shook her head, taking her hat off and pulling her tangled hair out of her face completely. "You," she said in a breath. "You have a lot to explain, Sea Serpent." She looked at the queen with both her good eye and bad, a smirk curving the edge of her lip.

Sera grinned at the captain, and the rest of the speechless crew for that matter. "You were just asking how I survived that shipwreck, weren't you?"

Lhyanne clicked her tongue. "So while you were drowning in a storm after your ship sank, a dragon appears out of nowhere and decides to make you the sole survivor by carrying you to a deserted island that just so happens to have all the resources you'd need to survive a month on your own?"

Sera frowned. “Well when you say it like that, it just sounds made up.” She sat with her back against the kitchen’s warm hearth below deck, a shiver holding her bones. The pirates around her huddled beneath blankets and tarps, some were even wrapped within pieces of the sails that were ripped beyond repair.

Lhyanne sighed. “If I didn’t just watch you summon a dragon with my own eye, I would say the summer heat’s gotten to your head.”

Sera shrugged; she couldn’t argue with that. “I think the strife of a dying crew caught the dragon’s attention. By that point, I was holding onto a piece of debris for dear life. I might have been the only one left. I thought the dragon was going to kill me, but instead of biting my head off, it grabbed me and carried me to an island. After I was able to flag down a passing cargo hauler and ask for a ride to Plathiah, I went back to my crew and renamed my ship the *Sea Serpent*. Eventually they started calling me that too. An air of good luck followed me from that day forward whenever I stepped onto a ship.”

“How do you know it didn’t stir the storm to cause your shipwreck in the first place?” called a man somewhere out of the fire’s light.

Sera thought for a moment. “Because there was no reason for it to attack us.”

Lhyanne scoffed. “It sure found a reason to attack the Hongeruns.”

Sera eyed the captain, a sudden tension lining the air between them. “When a dragon first saved the life of a human hundreds of years ago,” she said loud enough for everyone to hear, “the human took advantage of its kindness and stole some of the dragon’s scales. Ever since, an agreement is met when a dragon blesses a human: the human will spend the rest of their life searching for the scales that were stolen from these mysterious beings and returning them. But sometimes the human is still greedy and steals the scales for a profit, starting the process over. By dumping those scales

overboard, I summoned the dragon to retrieve them, but it wasn't a certainty that it would help us. That," she said in a low tone, "was all thanks to the dragon's mercy."

Lhyanne stood up and paced in front of the hearth. "So that beast helped us escape out of mercy?" she scowled. "How naïve. It probably attacked the Hongeruns because it needs you alive to return more of its stolen scales."

Sera watched her pace in the firelight. Her voice hardened as she addressed the pirates keeping dry in the kitchen. "We're alive because of that creature. Take from that what you will but know that the dragon didn't owe me anything."

"Heed her words if it'll keep you cozy at night," Lhyanne sighed, "but don't expect any more mercies for the rest of this journey. It's almost time for our shift again."

Sera nearly groaned at the thought of going back to the main deck and picking up the mess from the battle. The last three hours felt like a blink. She only hoped the other crew managed to attach the sails of the fallen foremast to the mainmast without any issues. They were lucky the *Hawker* was even able to sail at all after hours of patching holes and carrying buckets of water out of the orlop. Her muscles protested as she stood up and stretched. "It's odd," she muttered as the other pirates scattered out of the kitchen, "I've never told that story to anyone but Haelin."

Lhyanne threw some extra kindling into the fire. "Did she believe you?"

"Oh, not at all," Sera smiled. "She thought I'd lost it at sea until I showed her this." She lifted the bottom of her blouse to reveal a scar of scales imprinted into her skin wrapping around her torso. "This is where the dragon grabbed me. Kind of like a brand of the agreement."

Lhyanne barely regarded the scar before she picked her coat off the peg it dried on. "She's definitely more practical than you. I'm sure it's a breath of fresh air for your court."

Sera's stare fell to the floorboards. Her lips straightened. It had been five weeks since she last saw her wife. "Actually, most of the court officials refuse to acknowledge her as my wife. They've never told me to my face, but I hear the whispers when she passes. They rarely listen to her if I don't personally enforce what she says." She paused; the following silence thick as fog.

"So throw them in the dungeon," Lhyanne suggested.

Sera shrugged as they walked upstairs side by side. "I relieved an advisor after he told me to remarry so other kingdoms would consider it legitimate and save Tiramis the strife, but I can't rely on that. If I throw everyone in the dungeon that disagrees with me, I'm suddenly a tyrant. I want their view to change without a flintlock to their head. I do my best to enforce respect, but at this point I'm balancing my relationship with running my kingdom." Sera stepped foot into the moonlight shrouding the surface and examined the progress. The *Hawker's* fate was finally beginning to look hopeful again. "I would rather give up the title I fought tooth and nail for than give up Haelin, but I don't always know which battles to choose to honor both her and my kingdom." She sighed, flagging down Kadra where he supervised the restoration. The first mate met their stride in the middle of the deck as she continued. "I led with the confidence of the sun when I was the Sea Serpent. The people who followed me followed me on their own free will, and I wasn't afraid to make the hard calls and throw caution to the wind. But now I'm leading people who barely know me, people who have no say in it. I'm afraid of making the right call for myself and Haelin, but at a terrible cost to my people. I'm trying to be what's best for Tiramis without giving up a part of myself in the process."

When Sera looked back to the captain, she was surprised to find Lhyanne's stare softened. She looked into the breeze of the night, a forlorn expression suddenly seizing her face. "What you and Haelin have is something that most people drive themselves mad trying to find, Asselo. I would

personally hang myself from the gallows for something like it again.” The captain of the *Hawker* shifted her copper eye to the queen. “Pick every battle in favor of it, and never let it go. Love like that is worth more than an empire.”

Without another word, Lhyanne Clissaire walked away. Sera was left watching her back as Kadra stood at her side. When she looked at him, there was sadness in his eyes.

“We raised the sails and finished most of the patchwork, Your Majesty,” he reported. He addressed her with the same esteem he did Lhyanne ever since she had taken the wheel.

Sera nodded, pulling her hair out of her eyes, and staring into the starry night. “We can start moving while we finish. Hopefully, the rest of the journey will be smooth sailing with one mast.”

“We better hope.” Kadra dipped his chin before walking down the stairs. “Because we pass into Vanliar’s rocky sea soon, and our lives will be at your mercy yet again.”

Anne the Dreaded slowly lowered the telescope from her eye. “I’ll be damned,” she smiled, “you didn’t get us killed after all.”

Sera rolled her eyes and walked away from the railing facing Plathiah’s white walls. “I just snuck us through one of the Hongerun’s private trade routes—at night, avoiding Vanliaran checkpoints—and *that’s* your compliment?”

The captain was quick to remind her, “You also nearly carved up the keel of this ship by sailing through a shallow pass in that archipelago yesterday.”

“We didn’t sink,” Sera berated. “And need I remind you that *I’m* not the reason the *Hawker* has been held together by a hair’s breadth for the last two weeks.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” Kadra cut in from behind as he passed by, “but my dear captain wouldn’t know genuine gratitude if it shot her in the forehead.”

“Just take what you can get before I find something else to chastise,” Lhyanne muttered, but she never took her eye off of the lights of the city beyond the grassy hills two miles inland.

Sera chuckled as she found a place at Lhyanne’s side beneath the dawning sun. “So what’s our next step? I assume you’re extorting my knowledge of the city too.” The jest was evident in her tone, but Lhyanne didn’t laugh.

The pirate lord’s smile never faded, not even when she finally tore her gaze off the city. “No, Your Majesty. What happens from here on out requires nothing from you.” Lhyanne’s stare fell to the floor, pure joy intoxicating her expression. It was a sight that furrowed Sera’s brow. “You can officially consider your debts paid.”

Sera nearly scoffed. “Seriously? You don’t need me for anything else? How are you going to get through a city you’ve never been to before?” Lhyanne really thought she could sneak through the most strictly guarded city on the Frosian’s shores? Vanliar’s authoritarian approach to order wasn’t too kind to wanted pirates, especially the type that thrived on infuriating everyone around her.

Lhyanne peaked at Sera over her shoulder. “You sound like you want to stay on this ship.”

Sera fell hushed. She’d be lying if she claimed she didn’t miss sailing, more so if she claimed she hadn’t enjoyed her time helping to manage the crew, sharing stories during mealtimes, and rebuilding the muscle she’d lost on the throne. Her sea legs had sat dormant for too long. In fact, when she returned home, she might entirely abandon her skirts and only wear pants from now on. “It’s dangerous in that city, Anne,” she eventually said. “For your sake and the crews, I think it’s wise if I help you to the end.”

For a moment, Lhyanne seemed surprised. Her eye widened, and her smile warmed. But her head shook. “The crew is staying behind as well. What lies in Plathiah concerns me, not them. I’ll leave alone, and the rest of you will sail back to Tiramis.”

Sera scoffed without regard for respect. “Are you insane? How will you get away after you take back what Goddray stole?”

No matter the disbelief or rudeness, Lhyanne was unaffected. “I already have it all figured out, Sera. I won’t be caught. But you have affairs you need to get back to. I promised Haelin that I would bring you back to her, remember? You don’t need to concern yourself with me anymore.” She smiled at the queen, soaking in the morning sun. “Go home and forge that respect.”

Sera was ready to argue this pirate into the grave. But Lhyanne didn’t talk with swagger, she didn’t smirk, or mock her. Lhyanne Clissaire merely took a deep breath and looked at the city. Whatever it was she was after, she was confident she would find it without any problems.

Hesitantly, Sera finally nodded. “Fine, have it your way. I’m taking your quarters when you leave though.”

Lhyanne’s laugh danced in the air. “You and Kadra will have to fight over that.”

Without much more said, the helmsman set a course for Plathiah in the early morning tide. Sera stood at the bow of the *Hawker* until they anchored just beyond the city’s harbor on the coast. Before this journey, Lhyanne discovered maps of the very sewer system that Sera had used for years to sneak into the city. It drained Plathiah’s waste into the sea from the rocky coast and led straight into town.

Before she knew it, Sera was standing at the edge of the *Hawker*’s plank, shaking hands with its captain.

“Take care of yourself,” she warned. “You don’t want to be caught by these people; I once knew some of the best pirates on the seas that were caught and broken here. They won’t offer a quick death.”

Lhyanne stood on the edge of the plank without her overcoat, tricorne, or even her sword. “I won’t go down so easily, *Oh Greatness*. I managed to sneak past your guards, didn’t I?” She smirked. “Your security could really use reworking.”

“You know, they might regret bringing you into custody once you open your mouth,” Sera chuckled. “Your insufferable self might save yourself the suffering.”

Lhyanne sucked in a deep breath of the morning air. “You turned out to be different than I expected, Asselo. Maybe you haven’t spoiled away in that castle after all.” Lhyanne looked deep into Sera’s eyes. “Tiramis is lucky to have you as its queen. Stay true to yourself, my fearless friend.” The pirate lord winked, releasing their hands. “Keep my crew safe, Your Majesty.” Lhyanne then turned towards the sea and dove into its turquoise water.

“Stay safe,” Sera whispered.

Before long, Lhyanne was out of sight in the rolling waves, the sun was higher in the sky, and the *Hawker* sailed into Plathiah’s port to sell its stolen cargo without any suspicion after telling of the storm that near wrecked the ship. Around an hour later, Sera sat in the captain’s quarters with Kadra, going over the journey home with the sitting captain as they waited to leave the harbor.

“We can commandeer another ship once we reach open water. But please, for the sake of the headache it will cause me later on, can we steal it from a kingdom that I didn’t just make an alliance with?” she groaned, falling back into the lush chair facing the captain’s desk. The young sun filtered through the hazy windows, pouring warm light into the quarters, but a candle was still lit on the desk Kadra sat behind.

Kadra smiled, resting his folded hands on the desk. “Fine. And for the sake of your future alliances, we’ll try to avoid any bloodshed if we can help it. We’ll give them the *Hawker* and be on our merry way before they ever reach anyone in Vanliar that can help them.”

Sera eased with relief. “You know, its unnatural for you to agree with me so easily. Lhyanne would be at my throat for ever having suggested such a thing.”

A shadow suddenly fell over Kadra’s eyes. He looked down. “Aye, she had a fire in her spirit like no other. Once her mind was set, there was no changing it.”

Sera wrinkled her nose. “You sound like you’ll never see her again.”

Kadra fell silent, his eyes closing for a long moment. “Lhyanne Clissaire is no longer the commander of the Reaper Fleet.”

Sera caught her mouth from hanging ajar. “What in heaven’s name are you talking about?” Her body pushed back into her chair as the *Hawker* suddenly started to move away from the port. She waited for Kadra to answer, a hollow greedily gnawing at her stomach.

“I am now the commander of the Reaper Fleet, Your Majesty.” Slowly, Kadra opened a drawer behind the desk and pulled out an envelope closed with Lhyanne’s seal. He rested it on the desk between them.

She stared at the golden wax of the seal, her heart beating uneasily. She’d have failed as a pirate if she hadn’t known the deed to Lhyanne’s fleet was in that envelope. “Explain,” she demanded, gritting her teeth.

The new captain of the *Hawker* and commander of the Reaper Fleet let out a heavy sigh. “Lhyanne has chosen to retire her title. Once she touched Vanliar’s shore, the change of leadership was official. It’s all written in here.” He tapped the envelope. “I’m sorry I can’t open it for you. I need it to be untampered with when I meet with the rest of the Reaper captains.”

Sera shook her head. “I don’t understand this,” she muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Why would she retire? She’s at the peak of her empire. Didn’t you guys just establish a deal to guard the fishermen of Na’bia from other pirate threats? Why would she...”

Sera’s voice trailed off as she recalled the last two weeks she sailed alongside Lhyanne. Something had been off with the captain’s demeanor; like a melancholy air had settled over her. Sera assumed the battle with the Hongeruns simply sobered her reckless behavior, but a decision this grand... it was in order long before Lhyanne ever called for Sera’s debt to be paid in Tiramis.

“She—she’s not planning on making it out of Plathiah,” Sera whispered, shifting her eyes to Kadra. He refused to look up. “But why? She was so devoted to reclaiming this treasure. What about it—” Sera paused.

‘What he stole from me is more priceless than a dragon’s scale.’

Seven weeks’ worth of exchanges suddenly played over in her head.

‘I’m not killing myself just yet.’

Her heart thundered in her chest.

‘I would personally hang myself from the gallows for something like that again.’

Again.

Heavens, Sera had been so blind. “Goddray captured someone dear to her...” The words were barely a whisper.

Kadra opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Slowly, the rocky coasts outside the windows pulled away until he finally spoke. “West Alder was one of the best pirates out there with you and Ms. Clissaire, Your Majesty. Anne loved him like the sea loves the horizon, and she trusted him with her life. He was the one captaining the *Leviathan* when Hathard Goddray attacked it.” His voice was quiet, like the memory was still fresh. “It was Anne that Goddray was after—never

forgetting that damn grudge against her. But he knew she was too sly to be caught. Then the bastard learned that she and West had married. West's first mate sold him out to the admiral while Anne was conducting business in the north. They weren't even in Vanliar's territory—Goddray conducted warfare on foreign waters where he had no jurisdiction. But Anne wasn't familiar with Vanliar's rigid sea, and her ship crashed into the maze of islands because she was rushing. She missed his execution because of it and wasn't able to save him. She never made it to Plathiah."

Sera was speechless. It all suddenly made sense, and a sickening weight fell over her shoulders. The only treasure in Plathiah was the blood of a murderer. "We have to go back," she gritted her teeth. "She's going to get herself killed!"

Kadra rested his elbows on the table, steeping his hands in front of his face. "Lhyanne Clissaire was my dearest friend, Your Majesty. But this is her choice. And once her mind is set—"

"There's no changing it," she muttered.

Kadra's head weighed down. "She spent eleven years blaming herself until it finally became too much last year on the anniversary of his death. This is her choice and I will honor it, but I am not willing to die by the hands of the Vanliarans to help her."

Anger quickly boiled inside Sera's veins. "Does the crew know what she's doing? Surely they'd run back to help even if it meant mutiny!"

"The crew knows that she retired," he said coolly. "She didn't want anyone else knowing a detail more so as not to endanger them. And I'm sorry," Kadra's voice suddenly hardened, his stare cold, "but if you try to tell them, then I will have to silence you. Anne's last wish was that I return you home safely, but I will gag you and throw you in the brig until we reach Tiramis in order to protect my crew."

Sera clenched her teeth. Her nails dug into the wood of her chair. “Take me back; I’ll go after her alone if you’re too much of a coward.”

Hurt flashed through Kadra’s expression. This couldn’t be easy for him. He no better than left his best friend to die, but Sera didn’t care! She wouldn’t just let Lhyanne be tortured to death!

“I’m sorry,” Kadra said with a tremble in his voice, putting the envelope back into the desk, “but I can’t risk docking again. I promised Anne I would take you home.” The giant of a man hung his head down, grief apparent in his eyes. “It’s the last thing I can do to ease her pain.”

Sera watched the commander of the Reaper Fleet in disbelief. She shook her head, holding back the burn of tears in her throat. Haelin would never leave her like this, nor would Jonathan. She reached for the mug of ale he had offered upon her arrival.

“I won’t allow her to die alone,” she growled before taking a sip. It took Kadra a moment too long to realize what she said. Sera suddenly jumped out of her seat and spit the ale all over the desk. She grabbed the candle faster than Kadra could react and threw it down. The flames erupted between them, and Sera sprinted to the exit before Kadra could shout a word. She slipped out and bolted for the stairs to the main deck while shouting like a madwoman.

“Fire! Fire in the captain’s quarters!” she screamed on the top of her lungs. The pirates she passed dropped what they were doing and bolted to the captain’s quarters. Kadra was stuck in the crowd before he made it out the door. She ran up the stairs and across the deck to the edge that faced the rocky shore where she last saw Lhyanne. She didn’t look back until she heard Kadra shouting behind her.

“Sera, please!” he pleaded, holding his arms out in truce. “She just wants you to be safe! You’ll have no way to make it back home without being recognized!”

Sera looked at the commander over her shoulder apologetically. “Don’t you know her and I never saw eye to eye?” She offered him a smirk. Before he could grab her, Sera dove headfirst into the sea.

She hit the rolling waves with barely a splash. Sera saw the shadow of the *Hawker* quickly sailing overhead and stayed below the salty water until she was sure it wasn’t stopping. Kadra had his crew to take care of, she understood that, but she refused to let Lhyanne suffer at the hands of the Vanliarans before they finally gibbeted her battered body along the shore.

The tides were violent, and Sera was being shoved towards the coast whether she liked it or not. When she finally caught her breath on the surface, it seemed the dragons still favored her. She just happened to jump into the ruthless sea near one of the sewers leading into the city. She barely took another breath before she swam towards the coast. The tide hadn’t pulled so far back that the sewers were unreachable, and Sera climbed into them with ease.

The pungent stench assaulted her nose immediately, her boots splashing filthy water as she ran. It was an effort to remember which turns to follow along the dark tunnels. She finally came to a cross section and almost doubted her direction until the murky water receded enough to see fresh footprints in the muddy sewage leading right to a dislodged sewer cap above.

Sera climbed out and drank in the fresh air, but dread still saturated her gut. The alley she stood in was empty. A warm breeze pushed through the stucco buildings and tiled roofs, licking up the sweat on her neck. Sera shuddered, but her heart leapt when she saw footprints of mud leading out of the sewer and down the cobblestone road.

She followed Lhyanne’s trail right to Hathard Goddray’s house without a care to the Vanliarans staring at her as she sprinted down the streets. But the sudden aroma of smoke assaulted her when she reached the estate that stretched for miles. The grand house in the center shined like a white

star in the daylight. And behind the star? An inferno reaching for the sky. Hundreds of servants and guards rushed through the black smoke to extinguish the fire wreaking havoc in the gardens, so many that there were none around to watch the house. Lhyanne must have set the fire hours ago, yet it still raged in the dry summer heat. Sera seized the opportunity and ran for the house.

In her pirating career, breaking and entering was nothing new. But after staking out the perimeter of the house and locating the window left open to Goddray's study, Sera realized she had never scaled three stories before. So after pleading to the dragon that blessed her for one final straw of luck, she grabbed the lattice woven fence that had overgrown with ivy and heaved herself up onto the wall. When she finally pulled herself to the window and leapt in, her eyes widened.

The office looked ransacked. The shelves on the walls were knocked down; the books all over the floor. Papers were strewn about the entire room along with the chairs. And on top of the lavish desk rested Hathard Goddray with a pistol in his hand. His wrinkled face was expressionless, his dark eyes wide, but his pale neck was sliced open and stained red. A knife stuck out of the middle of his chest.

Sera looked at the blood smothering the office. It made her head throb. But suddenly a draft danced past her. She spun around expecting a guard, but relief washed over her when she found Lhyanne Clissaire on the ground leaning against a cold hearth. Her red hair was matted to her forehead. Her nose bled like a faucet, and her white blouse was drenched in crimson. Her arm was wrapped around her abdomen. Slowly, she opened her eye.

"Sera Asselo," she whispered, her voice hoarse and raw. "I thought I told you not to worry about me."

Sera couldn't help a grin. "And I told you to stay safe." She knelt down to the pirate's side.

"It seems we both have trouble listening," Lhyanne smiled. "Why did you follow me?"

Sera removed Lhyanne's arm from her wound, and her heart clenched immediately. The bullet shot straight through. It was a miracle she was still alive. "Because despite your best efforts, I have become endeared with your insufferable self and refuse to let you die by the torturous hands of the Vanliarans."

Lhyanne's smile straightened suddenly. "I haven't lived a day since I got West killed eleven years ago, Sera. Death makes no difference to me."

Sera tore off the sleeve of her shirt and began tying it around Lhyanne's waist. "Death won't be an option if you're caught."

"Then so be it," Lhyanne winced. "My sacrifice allows him to finally rest in peace. But you'll be caught too if you stay."

Sera took hold of Lhyanne's arm and wrapped it around her neck. "I'm not leaving you," she seethed and heaved the pirate's deadweight off the ground. "You avenged your husband, Lhyanne Clissaire. You don't have to do this to yourself anymore." Sera took one last look at the dead admiral, then walked to the door with Lhyanne on her side. "The fire won't last much longer; we have to move quickly."

Lhyanne exhaled a laugh. "You fool."

"We'll go to the sea," Sera groaned, pushing the heavy doors open and leading them into the empty hall. Finding the cellar would be their best bet to the sewers. "I'll try to summon the dragon again."

"You have no more scales," Lhyanne interrupted. "I'll receive no mercy from those beasts."

"You don't know them," Sera hissed. "They aren't mindless monsters like you claim."

Lhyanne shook her head as they rounded the corner leading down a staircase. "You aren't the only human who's met a dragon, Sea Serpent. The rest of us just don't gloat about it."

Sera paused her step and looked at the pirate. “What?”

Lhyanne bit down on her grimace. “I met a dragon a long time ago. I was starving in the Prospering Isles when I found the wounded beast alone on the coast. Someone must have tried hunting it for its scales before it escaped because it was mangled and barely breathing. So I put it out of its misery.” She paused, heaving a breath. “No one would have been able to save it, and I was starving. So I sold its scales and used the fortune to buy the *Leviathan*—the very ship that would lead to West’s death.”

Sera resumed their escape when she heard footsteps far off in the house. She kept her voice low, picking up their pace. “You didn’t cause a dragon to damn your fate or West’s fate by selling its scales, Anne.”

“And how would you know that?” the pirate bit back.

She chose her words as carefully as her steps. “Because fate is just a lie people tell themselves to explain things they can’t control. I wasn’t fated to rule Tiramis because I made a deal with a dragon. I won my throne through my own commitment and tenacity. The same goes for West’s death—it wasn’t fate that killed him, it was the cruelty of someone who abused his power.”

Sera led them to the bottom of the last staircase. After tucking behind a wall in the back of the kitchen and waiting for a maid to pass, the two crept to the cellar door just beyond. Sera rested Lhyanne against the wall and lifted the trap door.

“Your husband died because Goddray was a sadistic man who broke as many rules as he needed to in order to get what he wanted.” She swatted away the dust that puffed in the air. “The *Leviathan* was captured during a parley in Tiramis’s water. A ship of fishermen was asking the crew for protection while they worked in an area known for attacks. Goddray ambushed both ships during this cease fire—outside of Vanliar’s jurisdiction without permission from Tiramis. When I

heard about this massacre eleven years ago, I was so outraged by my father's refusal to make Vanliar pay for the bloodshed of our people that it was the final straw that led me to be exiled. Anne," she looked at the paling pirate leaning against the wall, "it is not your fault that he died."

Lhyanne's stare fell to the ground. Her breaths were labored, her face drained of all color. The wrap acting as a bandage around her waist was stained with too much blood. She said nothing as Sera carried her down the stairs to the sewage outlet. A scream shook the entire house three floors above as they jumped down.

They trekked through the sewers for the better part of an hour. The pirate said nothing more, and Sera was too focused on figuring out a plan to speak. But Lhyanne's weight pressed heavier against her the longer they walked, her breaths became too ragged. Until finally, she tugged on Sera's arm.

"Stop," Lhyanne gasped, "just... stop." Sera swallowed a dry breath and paused their step. "Not in here," she spat, holding firm to her waist. "Being tortured to death is one thing, but this is just pathetic." Weakly, she pointed a finger toward a ladder leading out to another access point.

Sera wrangled control of her emotions. Lhyanne was right: she could do nothing to save her. No one in Vanliar could. They had been walking long enough, they were sure to be outside of the city's walls. It was a stumbling and tedious effort, but Sera eventually heaved Lhyanne out of the tunnel. They were far from the city, atop one of the rolling hills near the coast. They could see the guards on the docks to the east, and the shadow of fish schooling in the bright sea beyond the jagged shore.

Lhyanne carried herself to the shade of a tree overlooking the sea and sat beneath it. "He and I were going to sail off the map together," she reminisced. "I wonder what undiscovered places we'll be able to see together now."

Sera sat next to her old rival on the soft grass. Her breath hitched in her tight throat. “It’s funny,” she forced herself to say, letting the sea breeze ruffle her hair, “there was a time I would have killed you on sight.”

Lhyanne chuckled softly. “I’m surprised you didn’t.”

A harrowing spell of silence fell over the queen and the pirate. Sera felt her skin crawling against it. Hesitantly, she brought herself to speak. “Are you okay?”

Lhyanne glanced at her, then rested her head against the tree and closed her eye. “I’m more alive than I have been in years, Sera Asselo.” Her breath was calm. “Thank you.”

Quietly, Sera reached for the pirate’s cold hand. “What are you going to say to him?” she asked, looking out to the sea.

Her eye was closed, her body still as stone. But the purest joy stretched across Lhyanne Clissaire’s face. A smile that rivaled the sun. “I guess I’ll have to figure it out pretty soon.”

The docks were crawling with Vanliaran guards. Sera watched them draw closer to the barrels she crouched behind. It wouldn’t be long before they found the Queen of Tiramis and put two and two together.

Loosing a heavy breath, Sera sat against the barrels. She was emotionally and physically spent. It had taken hours to dig a grave with nothing but her hands and a sharp rock. But finally, she buried Lhyanne Clissaire on the tranquil hill overlooking the sea. And the pirate lord that Sera had grown to admire was now at peace. But Sera knew she could not linger in sentiment. There was

no doubt that word of Hathard Goddray's death had spread like wildfire and the entire city would be searching for their revered admiral's killer.

Sera grimaced as someone walked past her hiding spot. She was alone in an enemy land without a way out. She felt light-headed. Her thoughts drifted to her silver castle atop the ocean. Haelin would be holding court hearings this time of day. That woman held the deepest love for the citizens of Cliffson; she was sure to have gained their love in return after this summer. And soon, they would mourn together. It was never part of his promise, but Sera prayed that Kadra would deliver the news of her demise to Haelin in person. She couldn't bear the thought of her wife merely receiving a letter, or worse, never hearing a word of it. Sera's gut churned as she heard someone approaching.

She sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes. Surely this was her end, and she readied her mind to die. But Sera Asselo, Queen of Tiramis, would not go down easily. She was prepared to fight to the death for her own beloved treasures: her life as a pirate, the dragon's favor, her kingdom, her beautiful Haelin, and the amazing Anne the Dreaded. Footsteps crunched on the other side of the barrel. A shadow lurked overhead. Her heart pounded in her ears as she opened her eyes. And for a moment, Sera couldn't move. She just sat there meeting the stare of depthless eyes.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty," Kadra's deep voice said in a hush, "but I promised my captain that I wouldn't keep you from your wife."