



TO
WIN
A
WITCH'S
HEART

ANDIE J
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DANGEROUS TIDES

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CONTENT WARNINGS

Public sex, kidnapping (multiple), violence, threats of violence.



“My men told me that you’re refusing to use your magic.”

Mercy huddled in a corner of the *Scarlet Cow*’s musty state room, as far as possible from the Dutchman. She feigned interest in a tome on the hazards posed by swarms of mermaids but couldn’t focus on the words, as essential as they might be to her chances of surviving this little adventure.

Weeks ago, she would have fainted at the idea that mermaids weren’t the realm of delusion. But now, she could accept it as surely as she could accept that the faint tingling she’d felt all her life was a sign of her inherent magic.

Mercy put the book down and turned towards the man. She had to look up at him, but she tried her best not to appear intimidated. Men like him—convinced of their own greatness—liked that too much.

“It’s not so much a refusal but a very steep learning curve.” She hated to admit she was not quite as adept at harnessing her magic as the Dutchman had been led to believe, but she hadn’t so much as managed to conjure a light breeze since boarding the ship weeks ago. And she’d only learned the true nature of her magic shortly before that.

“We’ve been through this before, and nothing I’ve tried or you’ve tried has worked.” For the first week, he’d treated her horribly and urged his men to do the same. She rubbed the cheek that one of his men had slapped when she’d taken a sip of rum before making sure his cup was full. But the revulsion she’d experienced cleaning up after them and having only their scraps to eat had not aroused enough emotion to free her magic.

The Dutchman stared her down for a long moment before a deeply disturbing smile cracked his sun-damaged visage. The curl of apprehension that had resided in her stomach from the moment that the Dutchman had revealed he was really more her captor than rescuer turned into a knot of dread as the man approached her. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood as she felt his body heat. He'd largely ignored her in the time she'd been aboard the ship, which had bewildered her.

"Perhaps you haven't had enough to eat. I know I have a hard time focusing on my craft while hungry."

Mercy wasn't sure that witchcraft and piracy could be compared as crafts, but she really wasn't in the position to argue. And she was hungry. It looked like there was more on offer than dried fish and oatcakes.

But she didn't want him to know how desperately she needed sustenance. "I am feeling a bit peckish."

The Dutchman extended his arm towards the small table at the center of the room. "Please. Sit."

Mercy's stomach overtook her apprehension, and she tucked into the fish and warm bread on the plate. The lightness and freshness were nearly intoxicating after what she'd been eating of late. She might have moaned.

The Dutchman cleared his throat. When she looked up from her plate, there was a lascivious look in his face that she wasn't entirely comfortable with.

"Wine?" He gestured with a bottle that seemed to appear from nowhere.

He poured some in his own glass, so she doubted it was poisoned. She did need to keep her wits about her, but some wine sounded divine after all the rum she'd consumed of late. She nodded, and he leaned a little too close to her as he poured.

She was suddenly grateful that he'd largely stayed away. There was something about the ship's captain that made her recoil, and she was committed to listening to her instincts going forward. He'd promised her freedom—saved her life—but she was starting to believe the cost was too high.

"Are you trying to seduce me?" She wasn't sure why she asked outright, but some more direct questions at the outset might have saved her from hopping from one form of captivity to another.

The Dutchman laughed, and it sounded menacing. "Did you want me to seduce you?"

Mercy's dinner threatened to come up.

Her abhorrence must have at least flashed on her face, because the Dutchman sobered immediately. "Do you really find the idea so offensive?"

He scooted his chair closer to her, and she gave a small thanks that he seemed to bathe with more frequency than the rest of his crew. Still, his dingy wig and pinched face weren't the least bit attractive to her.

"You're not intrigued by me at all?" he asked. "I am the fastest racing pirate in the world." They both knew that had only a marginal relationship with the truth. "At least this past season."

Then he extended a finger and caressed her cheek. At this point, Mercy was sweating with the effort of staying in her chair and keeping her food down.

"Too bad I know you're not a nervous virgin," he said, referring to the existence of her former fiancé. "Or I would assume your reticence was on account of your innocence."

"I—"

He leaned back, and Mercy took in a full breath. Her stomach settled slightly, and she reached past him for her wineglass. She took a sip as he stared at her silently.

"You're not going to let me unlock you, are you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I'm not a door you can pry open."

Her powers had begun to awaken as she and her beloved—former beloved—had started to explore each other. But that didn't mean just any man could use her sexuality to obtain her power. She didn't know much about her magic, but that felt like the truth in her bones.

"Well, I had to try." His smile was back, and this time it was quite sinister. "We'll just have to find a way to elicit some other strong emotion."

As he reached towards her, she thought, *I should have let them burn me at the stake—or let myself drown when they tested me in the river—back in England.*

The Dutchman actually shrugged before he grabbed her by the hair and pulled her from her seat. The table fell over with a clatter of breaking glass and splashing sounds of spilled food and drink.

He held her close to his face, her scalp screaming for relief. "I'll find a way to use you to win if it kills me."

They were in the middle of the ocean, and there was no one to protect her. Mercy closed her eyes and mustered the fear that her helplessness evoked.

The moment seemed to stretch and extend. Even her racing heartbeat slowed. And then something—something big—hit the side of the ship and knocked her loose from the Dutchman's grip.

And then everything sped back up. Mercy scrambled to her feet and raced for the door while the Dutchman staggered behind her. She imagined she could feel his breath on the back of her neck as she made her way to the deck.

When she emerged from the bowels of the ship, she saw the giant purple ship with its guns fixed on the *Scarlet Cow*. Another volley of cannons went off, and the impact of the blasts against the ship knocked her off her feet.

She was again faced with the choice between dying by drowning, dying by fire, or—even worse—being taken by the pirates about to board the ship to loot before it sank.

Crushed by the weight of that terrible, impossible decision, she sat on the deck and waited for fate to choose for her. She wished she had honed her powers sufficiently to make a spell that would save her, but she had not.

Her time as a witch had been spent trying to convince people she wasn't a witch, and her time at sea had been spent fending off the advances of the Dutchman's crew. Honestly, if the Dutchman wanted her to make his ship faster, he should have made sure she could work on her powers without a syphilitic cock waved in her face every five minutes.

Thinking about the number of cocks she would have to fend off if the new pirates took her sapped the last of her will to fight. She lay down and looked at the stars and then watched the flames lick their way up the mast of the ship towards the sky. The purple of the cumulus clouds and black of the sky were truly beautiful in contrast to the chaos of the fire and the sounds of the sailors' screams and pirates' yells. The coppery smell of blood in the air fit with the smoke and impending doom of the moment.

On second thought, this was a much better death than burning at the stake. The only screams then would have been her own, and the contrast would have been with the giggles and gossip of the magistrate's daughter, who would likely be married to Mercy's beloved vicar by now.

The sound of heavy boots hitting the deck near her made her body still. It even made her heart rate slow. And the beat of approaching footsteps prompted her to attempt playing dead. The steps stopped at her feet, and she could feel a gaze raking over her body. Her eyes were closed, but the energy of this attention skipped across her skin like an electric current, powering a heaviness in her lower belly and a tingling in her extremities. She felt as

though she were under a spell and creating a spell all at once.

When the sailors hadn't been harassing her, they'd shared stories about the man she was sure was standing over her. The Hammer was a knight of the realm who had come from nothing. He'd been the fastest sailor in the British navy, and now he was the most fearsome pirate on the water. Until recently, he'd won every championship he'd entered. But, last year, the Dutchman had come from behind during the last race of the season and won. After the race, it had been revealed that the Dutchman had cheated. The Hammer hadn't been pleased and had been chasing the Dutchman all over the globe since, intending to seek his revenge. He hadn't caught the *Scarlet Cow* until today.

When she'd pressed the sailors for more information about what the Hammer would do to everyone on the Dutchman's ship once he found them, they'd pressed their chapped lips together and resumed talking about their dicks.

So she knew it was bad.

She wouldn't open her eyes for fear that she would see the face of her death or destruction. But hadn't fear of looking into the face of death gotten her into this situation in the first place?

"I know you're not dead, little witch." She'd expected his voice to be deep and booming, but it was quiet and almost gentle. "Open your eyes for me."

"How do you know I'm not dead and a witch?" Granted, he would know now that she was alive because she was speaking in full sentences, but she still didn't open her eyes. If just his gaze and his voice had the power to turn her insides more molten than the fire currently consuming this ship, looking at him would surely be a bad idea.

"Well, I know you're not dead because you're breathing. And talking." She stopped doing either of those things and still felt his gaze on her tits. "And your hair curled as soon as I looked at you."

A flush heated her bosom when he referred to the reason she should have known she was a witch right away. There had been flashes of it since before she'd come of age and started freezing time. For as long as she could remember, her hair had curled every time she felt a strong emotion. Her father had explained it away as a curse that would go away if she committed herself to study and prayer, but she now knew he'd been obfuscating the truth—that she was a witch from a long line of witches. That she was more innately powerful than her mother and grandmother. That she could not

access and control her powers adequately because her mother had died in childbirth and failed to teach her anything. That all the apothecary remedies her aunt—who her father had forbidden from revealing her legacy—had taught her were really potions, and they had lived their lives in the village at the whim of those who chose to ignore their powers.

But power coursed through her now, for some unknown reason. At the moment she was most vulnerable, she felt as though she could tear the sky in half. All because of one man's voice.

Because she simply had to see the man, she opened her eyes. She was not prepared for the sight. The man before her wasn't as tall as she'd expected—from what the sailors said, he should have been the size of a door. But his physicality was tightly coiled and efficiently muscled. He was imposing for reasons that had nothing to do with his size. He wore his hair in neat braids gathered atop his head in a casual knot. And, unlike the raggedy pirates on the Dutchman's ship, he wore a vest made of chartreuse silks and matching trousers made of a heavier material. It seemed impractical for a pirate, but it certainly made an impression.

Back home, he would have been written off as a dandy, but that wasn't what this man was. No, the Hammer was so comfortable in the power he bore like a mantle that he could wear whatever he wanted, and his clothing would only enhance his impact.

Mercy looked into his eyes, and she couldn't breathe. They were dark and fathomless, but they burned with intensity. Anything and anyone standing in his way would wither in the face of that gaze. She let herself take in the rest of his face. He was both pretty and handsome, and she didn't know how to process that. She'd never seen anyone who looked like him before. He had a stud in his nose and hoop earrings—she hadn't even read about anything like that in novels.

Markings finer than the drawings in her favorite botanical text covered the skin she could see around his clothing, including the hands that reached for her now. She flinched out of instinct. Every touch she'd experienced since the morning her whole village had turned against her had been harsh, and she'd quickly learned to shy away from contact.

“You don't have to be afraid of me, little witch.” His words sounded sincere, but she had very little reason to believe him. His face was beautiful but also full of fury and fire. Her gut wanted her to trust him, but was it telling her in the interest of short-term survival? Would this man see her as a

tool to be used for his own advantage and discarded if she didn't give him what he wanted? What did he even want with her? It wasn't like she had a reputation for effectively making boats go really fast.

"Don't I?" she asked as he grabbed her by the arms and pulled her to sitting and then standing. He had big hands, and he was a little taller than her. But she could meet his gaze without craning her neck. That fact didn't make him any less intimidating. And his closeness didn't help her confusion about her reaction to him. He smelled good. She hadn't been around a man who smelled good since she'd left the village—and the only man who smelled good there was her forsaken fiancé, the vicar. The magistrate smelled like stale tobacco and unbathed flesh, and all the farmers reeked of manure.

Now that she thought about it, she preferred the scent of manure to rum sweat and pox.

As soon as she thought of her former paramour, she tried to take a step back. She had to remember how untrustworthy men were. But the Hammer didn't let her go, which stirred a streak of temper she usually kept locked down. "Gee, I'm not sure, Mr. Hammer. Maybe it's the fact your men set fire to the ship I've been residing on and are currently dispatching most of the crew with swords."

He smiled, and she instantly regretted talking back to him. His smile was even more overwhelming than his scowl. Even the way the brown skin of his cheeks crinkled was appealing. And his teeth were clean and white. His breath was fresh. "We're not here to harm you."

She shook her head, trying and failing to convince herself she was only drawn to this man because he didn't smell of sweat, rum, and tooth decay. He was clean and well-dressed. And he hadn't tried to talk her into sucking his cock immediately. Therefore, she was only having a reaction to him because he wasn't a disgusting lout.

His smile disappeared, and he cocked his head to the side. His large hands were still fastened to her arms, and the need to escape hit her more urgently. The way he looked at Mercy made her hot all over, and the tendrils of her hair danced around her face. Something told her he was a spark that could make everything inside her explode, and she didn't want that.

She wanted her old life back—growing vegetables and herbs, making soaps and ointments. Delivering babies and healing wounds. It had been a small life, but she'd had purpose. And she'd thought she had been loved. The loss of that was a knife in her heart.

“You don’t believe me, but you will.” He sounded sure of himself. His calm amid the violence and chaos was almost alarming. She was in such a high state of arousal that she felt like a squirrel in the path of a runaway carriage. Needing to flee but completely frozen.

“After what I’ve experienced on this ship, I know better than to believe the promises of a pirate.” She lifted her chin and stared him down. She’d amused him when she’d talked back before. But this time, there was only the hint of a smile. “And I can’t do any truly effective magic. I’m fairly useless in that regard.”

She kicked herself for telling him that. He would probably toss her overboard. She should have just pretended she was so all-powerful that he had no choice but to release her. Then again, if she were actually all-powerful, she wouldn’t have found herself in the service of the Dutchman.

But he didn’t move to throw her overboard. He raised a brow and said, “You may not have power, but you are power.”

She was so stunned by his statement that she forgot to fight him off when he pulled her towards the railing to the gangplank his men had set up between the two ships.

Finally, her senses returned to her, and she dug in her heels. He still took her a few more feet—he was deceptively strong—but stopped when she put the full momentum of her weight backwards.

He turned to her, and all the humor had faded from his face. “I may throw you overboard if you truly prove to be useless, but I’m not going let you burn on the ship. That would be uncivilized.”

At that moment, the glint in his eye made him seem anything but civilized despite his urbane manner and fastidious appearance. He appeared to be exactly what he was—dangerous.

As she pondered her options, the Dutchman let out a high-pitched yelp, and she looked over to see one of the Hammer’s men had him hog-tied to carry across the gangplank. Even if she’d wanted to stay on this ship, it was burning as it sank. There was nothing for her here.

The fight went out of her body, and she followed the Hammer onto his boat.



She was certainly a pretty little witch, and he liked her spark. Xavier was alarmed at how much he liked holding her hand while leading her off the gangplank to his ship. The last time he'd liked how a woman's hand felt in his, he'd gotten so lost in her, his former best friend had nicked the championship from him. He'd had to fight his way to the front of the pack again—only to lose last year's championship. If he wanted to regain the ground he'd lost, he needed a clear mind.

He had to keep Nadine and the chaos their relationship had caused at the front of his mind if he was going to resist this comely witch's charms.

"Where are you taking me?" She had a lot of questions for a woman with very few options.

"Someplace safe." He felt her relax, and she followed him with less reluctance after that. Regardless of any threats to toss her overboard, he had no intention of harming her. He felt enough guilt about alerting the Dutchman to her existence so he would become consumed with harnessing her power and fail to notice Xavier on his trail.

Just like every bit of adversity in his life, Xavier had learned from the Nadine debacle and used it against his enemies.

He led Mercy belowdecks and showed her to a cabin normally used by guests on the ship. From time to time, he was required to obtain investment in this venture, and some men who gave him money wanted to see what sort of operation they were paying for. His first mate, Anorra, had put clothes—left by one of his investors' wives when she returned to make a pleasurable side

deal with Xavier—in the room. Though he wanted Mercy off his ship as soon as possible, he didn't like that she was dirty and tired. He would make her comfortable and then figure out what to do with her.

She stopped when he opened the door, as though he was putting her in a dungeon. Something odd shifted in his chest when she wrapped her arms around herself. He told himself that it was just the blood running to his cock because she'd pushed up her rather impressive bosoms, but it was a tenderness he did not have any intention of indulging.

“Get in the cabin, Mercy.” He sounded more impatient than he'd intended to. “I promise you'll be safe here.”

“But I'll be locked in a little room.”

Damn it all, he hadn't thought about how being locked in a room might evoke memories of the witch trials he'd indirectly sent the Dutchman to rescue her from. Sure, it was in order to gain an advantage in the Atlantis Regatta, but he'd still helped her after hearing from a friend back in England that there was an available, yet inexperienced, witch in trouble, one who might be the most powerful in the world.

“That's merely to keep you safe, little witch.”

Still, she hesitated. They stared at each other for a few moments, and he allowed himself to sink into the depths of her hazel gaze. Guileless and innocent to this world. But there was something there. A spark that said she would not capitulate to his whims and machinations as easily as one might assume.

The moment broke when she walked into the cabin, and he closed the door behind her.

Minutes later, Anorra gave him a look when he walked into his office and sat at his desk with a sigh. They'd been together at sea since right after Nadine, and she knew what it would take to put him together again if he lost his heart and his focus to another witch.

“It's nothing like that, Anorra.”

She looked down at the chart she'd been examining. “I didn't say anything about anything.”

“But you were thinking things.”

The corner of her mouth tipped up. She had most definitely been thinking things. “I'm just thinking about all that prize money and the spell and how unhappy the men would be if you lost because your head was up the skirts of another witch.”

Xavier rather liked the idea of putting his head up Mercy's skirts, but he didn't say that. "I'll endeavor to control myself."

After all, he was known for his control. He rubbed his temples for a moment, hoping to get his brain back in his head and out of his groin. Until Nadine, he'd never been derailed in any of his endeavors by a woman. Despite his humble beginnings, he'd become a knight due his service in the Great Pirate War.

"You know, they started the regattas to keep you all from starting another war." She clicked her tongue but didn't look at him. "Your machinations might just lay that effort all to waste."

Anorra was right, in one sense. Though he didn't believe for a moment that the Dutchman had any interest in starting another war. He just wanted to win. They were alike in that way. But Xavier remembered what the war had done to him and his fellow sailors. After he'd gone from a street urchin who hung around the docks to the captain of his own ship to a knight of the realm during that turbulent time, he'd lost his taste for war. But he—along with many other sailors—had not lost his taste for adventure.

During the war, the sailors had found other realms to slip into and out of to hide from their enemies. After the armistice, a group of sailors and shipbuilders had organized a series of regattas that allegedly served to commemorate the goodwill between the countries formerly at war. But it was really meant to keep the former combatants busy with something that mimicked war and didn't usually entail casualties.

Xavier hadn't hesitated to relinquish combat for sport. He'd thrived for years, traveling the realms and earning prize after prize. Until Nadine had boarded the ship after one Atlantis Regatta and thrown his entire ship and crew into chaos.

"I've learned my lesson about witches, Anorra."

She looked up at him then. "Witches are just women with power."

His first mate and closest confidante had pinpointed his greatest weakness—women with power appealed to Xavier in a way he found hard to resist. "She'll be off the ship as soon as we reach Atlantis."

Xavier stood to leave the office. This conversation had left him restless and irritable. He needed to put that energy somewhere, and he had a rival aboard the ship he could delight in humiliating by doing what he couldn't.

"Are you going to check on the witch?" Anorra really wasn't going to let this go.

He crossed his arms over his chest. He was going to check on the witch, but it wasn't about how drawn he was to her. "I am going to use her to gain an advantage. And to gain that advantage, I may have to interact with her. It won't cause any problems. She is not a distraction."

Anorra smirked at him, but he would not explain himself to her anymore. He was the captain of this ship, and he was in control of everything aboard. Including himself.



THE ACCOMMODATIONS on the Hammer's ship were sumptuous compared to those on the Dutchman's now-sunken schooner. Mercy had a bed and washbasin with fresh water. There had even been a change of clothes waiting for her. She would never admit to the Hammer how grateful she was for the pleasure of taking off the corset she'd been washing and re-wearing for a week now. And she wouldn't think about the fact the dress she currently wore probably belonged to a woman the Hammer had found little use for and thrown overboard.

She was grateful to be alive and clean in this moment. Perhaps she would even be able to get some rest on this ship. After they'd crossed the gangplank, the Hammer had decreed that anyone who molested her aboard his ship would be considered a traitor, and his men had thus far listened. And he hadn't killed all the Dutchman's entire crew the way she had expected him to. Most were in a dinghy with enough food and water for at least a week. Another ship would likely pick them up. It was almost a shame she would probably run into some of them again. Only the Dutchman and his first mate remained aboard the Hammer's ship awaiting some sort of—likely violent—pirate justice.

But after waiting for what felt like hours, she was tired of not knowing what her fate would be. She looked out the porthole in her temporary cabin and saw sunny skies and calm waters. A huge contrast to the state of her own mind.

She was cold, but her skin was somehow on fire. She hugged herself and rubbed the skin of her upper arms, trying to warm up. Being confined had always made her a little jumpy. Especially now. She paced the small cabin

until she was afraid she would wear out the timber floor. The sun had started to dip below the horizon when someone knocked on the door.

“Enter.” She was a prisoner, and she had no power to prevent anyone from entering. But it still felt good to say it as though she had any agency here.

The Hammer entered the room and looked her up and down. Her cheeks heated as he slowly inspected her from head to toe. He slowly walked towards her, and she fought not to back up. After all, he’d made his men promise not to touch her.

But he hadn’t made any such promise himself...

“What will you do to me now?” She couldn’t keep the fear out of her voice. Just because he made her feel safe didn’t mean she was safe.

That made him stop in his tracks about a foot away from her. His face transformed from hard to soft, but his brow furrowed in something she would have interpreted as concern if it had come from anyone who could possibly be concerned about her.

“I think the real question is what happened to you on that ship?” He cocked his head and waited for her to speak.

“Nothing, really. I wasn’t ravished.” She blushed because now this incredibly virile man was asking about her relatively limited sexual experiences. She’d known a lot because of her midwifery practice, and she and her vicar fiancé had done more exploring than the Lord would probably approve of. But she wasn’t used to talking openly about sex with a man she was attracted to. “The Dutchman told his men they could harass me and make me clean up after them, but they couldn’t touch me. Yet it didn’t stop them from accosting me whenever I was alone, and he did nothing to intervene. He was trying to seduce me when you attacked.”

The Hammer looked to the sky and then looked back at her, his face clear of the clouds that had marred it moments before. “He didn’t marry you?”

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything?”

Frustration bloomed in her chest when he didn’t answer.

“And he left you untouched.”

“That also doesn’t have anything to do with anything.” He chuckled, and then she started to get angry. “I just want—”

“What do you want?” That was the first time anyone had asked her what she wanted since the vicar had asked for her hand in marriage. At that moment, the only thing she wanted was to escape the hardscrabble existence

she'd found herself in after her parents died. She'd wanted the respect and safety of being the vicar's wife. She'd thought that if she was attached to one of the pillars of the community, no one would dare spread malicious gossip about her anymore.

But that hadn't happened. As soon as they'd become engaged, the whispers had intensified. Old grudges against her family resurfaced after years of dormancy. When she'd been nothing but an apprentice to the midwife and apothecary, she hadn't been a threat, and the townspeople had left her alone, aside from a few sneers and mean remarks. But when she'd tried to change her life, the whole town had punished her.

The betrayal cut deep.

"Not knowing what you want is your first problem." She had forgotten he was there, but he'd moved closer to her. Having him in her space was overwhelming, and she couldn't take anything else overwhelming right then. "If you don't know what you want, then how can I give it to you?"

"Why would you give me anything?" She shook her head and turned away from him. "And what do you want in exchange? What do I have that you want?"

The heat of his body close to hers made her shiver. The feel of his breath against the back of her neck was powerful enough to blow her over. "Maybe we can help each other." His voice was laced with something feral and dangerous, and he pulled on a strand of her hair. "And I think maybe you're not opposed to that idea."

She cursed below her breath. With this man, her hair gave her away.

"Almost like you're part mermaid."

"If only." She scoffed. "If that were the case, I would have swum away from the Dutchman's boat once I realized what he wanted from me. From what I read about them, I would have caused some damage on my way out."

He was silent for a moment, but his anger came off him in waves. She could see his reflection in the porthole glass, and his menacing grimace was back. It was less scary when it wasn't directed at her. And she'd done nothing to make him angry in the past few minutes. "You said he wanted to make the ship fast. Did he give you any indication of how to do that?"

She shook her head. All the frustration and impotent anger at herself and her predicament rushed up and caused tears to form in her eyes. She did not want to cry in front of this stranger she should rightfully fear, but it didn't seem like she could stop it.

“Don’t cry, little witch.”

“I don’t think I can help it. I’ve been through a lot.” She hiccupped. “And my name is not ‘little witch.’ And I’m not little at all. I can look you dead in the eye.”

He smiled at her. “I know your name is Mercy, and I am hoping you will display some of your eponymous virtue on me. And you are little in this world.” Then he sobered. “I did not mean to make you feel small.”

She felt safe with him. It made no sense, given how they’d met, but it was still the truth. “How did he find me?” It seemed like he might know, and maybe he would tell her.

“He’s resourceful, and he’d do anything to win. He’d go to any lengths to beat me in the Atlantis Regatta.”

She sniffed. “If he’s resorted to rescuing random witches from certain execution to win a boat race, he seems somewhat desperate.”

“A regatta.”

He was being nice, so she tried not to roll her eyes. “A regatta.”

“There’s a very large purse,” the Hammer explained. “And he’s been trying to beat me for years. Last year, he barely succeeded, through nefarious means.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.” She sighed. Her whole life seemed to be ruled by the whims of men who wanted something they couldn’t have. First, the magistrate tried to kill her because his daughter had wanted the vicar. And the magistrate had wanted Mercy. Her burgeoning magical powers had likely only been an excuse. Next, she’d been saved by a pirate who wanted her magic. And now she’d been stolen from that pirate’s ship by his rival over a purely theoretical advantage in a boat race. “I couldn’t help either of you gain an advantage given the sorry state of my magic.”

She turned to face him, and there was strange light in his eyes. “Ah, but if I can help you hone your magic, you can help me win. Or at least taunt him with the fact I will always succeed where he failed.”

“But didn’t you burn and sink his ship? Wouldn’t that mean he’s out of the race—I mean the regatta?”

“He has a fleet of ships at his disposal, but that one was his favorite. At most, my attack will cost him money for ship improvements and replacement of provisions. He will spare no expense in beating me. This will leave him extremely angry, though. And when he’s angry, he makes mistakes.”

“You seem to have quite the obsession with beating the man.” She

probably shouldn't have said that, and she hoped he wouldn't throw her into the sea. Now that she wasn't at risk of burning, she was kind of attached to remaining alive. "And is your name actually 'the Hammer'? Somehow, I highly doubt it."

"My real name is Sir Xavier Nigel David Aston, but if you call me by my full name in front of my men, I'll have no choice but to toss you overboard."

This man was exasperating. "Then why did you even tell me?"

"Because, my willowy witch, I kind of hate it when women scream out 'Hammer' when I fuck them." His smile was wolfish.

Did he think he could swive her right after threatening to kill her? The threat of death was not an aphrodisiac, thank you very much. Granted, she was feeling a level of lust she'd only read about in tawdry novels before, but that was in spite of the danger, not because of it.

"I wasn't aroused when the Dutchman let his men harass me, and I'm not turned on now."

The dark look was back on his face again. "That won't happen on this ship. When you come to my bed, you will do so willingly." He closed the distance between them a little bit more. "Enthusiastically. Ecstatically."

"You're very erudite for a pirate. Almost as though you were a gentleman in another life." She supposed that if he was a sir, he was of a higher class than she was. She knew he hadn't come from means. What had he done during the Great Pirate War?

He clicked his tongue and tutted at her. "No more information for you today. Though I promise to treat you as though I am a gentleman until you ask me not to."

That, she could live with. She kind of wanted him to stop acting like a gentleman right now. Another unwise impulse. He had total power over her, and she still didn't know what he wanted or what he planned to do with her.

"What did you come in here for? Checking on your prisoner?"

"I needed to confirm the Dutchman treated you poorly."

"Does he have a history of treating women poorly?" The Dutchman had mostly ignored her, but she had never quite trusted him. "I only went with him because it was preferable to the stake."

"I can't believe they're still doing that," he said with a shake of his head. "One of the many reasons I left England. Far too little imagination."

When she did nothing but stare at him in confusion, he added, "Witches are just women with power, which most people back home find threatening. I

find it...appealing.”

She shivered. And then she remembered the look on the magistrate’s face when they pulled her out of the river—terrified rage. He’d wanted her because the vicar had her but then shied away when faced with her power. “But if I don’t perform sufficiently, you’ll throw me into the sea?”

He shook his head and looked up. A dimple popped out on his cheek, and she found it arresting. She was lying to herself thinking that she didn’t find everything about this man appealing. It was seductive: the way he smelled, the cut of his clothes, the faint bit of stubble on his jaw. She couldn’t control it, but she could try to minimize it in her own mind.

“I find you amusing. For that alone, I won’t throw you into the sea.”

“You find me amusing, and you are attracted to women with power. What kind of pirate are you?” She would really have to break her habit of questioning everything this man said. As amusing as he found her, he was still a pirate. And pirates were known for their ruthlessness.

He leaned in and whispered in her ear, “How much do you hate the Dutchman?”

With every fiber in my being. He’d lured her onto his ship under false pretenses, expected her to work miracles with her magic, and hadn’t lifted a finger to protect her from his randy and lecherous crew. “A whole lot.”

“Do you want to see me make him walk the plank?”

He said that like he was asking if she wanted him to put his big hands all over her.

“More than anything.”



This man had an honest-to-goddess throne on the deck of his ship. Again, she found herself fighting the urge to roll her eyes at the ostentatious display of authority. From what she'd read in novels, pirates and privateers were notoriously democratic. And yet, the Hammer—Sir Xavier—had a blatant display of his own power and authority over every person on the ship.

He didn't need it. The power emanated from him. The sailors aboard all bowed their heads—seemingly unconsciously—as he passed with her trailing behind him. When they reached the throne, he pulled her onto his lap. She let out a shocked squeal, and all the sailors on the boat snickered. In that moment, she wished she were a better witch so she could turn them all into toads with one sharp glare.

Until she let herself feel the hard thigh she was perched on, the giant hand on her hip, holding her in place, and the fact her hand was directly on his cock. His very hard cock.

Given that she'd spent the past month slapping cocks out of her face, she hadn't thought she could feel anything but negative feelings about one. But her body very much enjoyed the feel of him underneath her. Her body was a traitor.

"I can perfectly well stand." When she moved to get up, he squeezed her ass, and she squealed again.

She shrieked when he leaned in and nipped her earlobe with his teeth. "But this is the best seat in the house."

“He’ll think we’ve....” Even though they were thousands of miles away, she felt the censure of the people she’d thought were her friends when she and the vicar hadn’t waited for marriage to come together. The idea that she would succumb to this man’s charms within a few hours...

“Do you care what he thinks?” That was a good question. She didn’t really care what the Dutchman thought of her now that he didn’t have any power over her. But there was still a little bit of that girl from a small village inside her, the one who cared desperately how people saw her.

But she wasn’t in the village anymore. She was in the domain of pirates, on the high seas, in a world where her skills and favor had been fought over. And the man sprawled underneath her, as insouciant as a young Poseidon, was the master of all he surveyed. He was going to make a man who’d used her, and failed to keep his promise of protecting her, toss himself into the sea.

In this moment, Sir Xavier was her hero.

He must have felt her body soften into him. He made a satisfied grunt before yelling, “Bring out the prisoner!”

An earsplitting cheer erupted over the crowd assembled on the deck as two of the Hammer’s men brought the Dutchman from below. If he hadn’t been such a total ass to her for weeks, she might have felt sorry for him.

As soon as he saw her, he yelled, “What are you doing with my witch’s hand upon your cock, you ignorant pig?”

The man had balls on him, she’d give him that. But maybe not for long given the way Sir Xavier tensed under her.

But the Hammer surprised her by squeezing her ass, sending her entire system haywire. “She’s my witch now, and there seems to be very little you can say or do about it.”

“Well, I have a marriage certificate that says she’s mine.”

“What?” she screeched at the Dutchman before she turned to Sir Xavier, who could have conjured a storm with the look on his face. “I never married that man, nor did I agree to marry that man.”

“That’s not what the magistrate said when I agreed to take you far away from your village. They really didn’t want you there anymore, and I’m honestly relieved you won’t be on my boat either.”

Sir Xavier said, “You don’t have that boat anymore. And soon, your marriage certificate won’t matter because you’ll be shark food.”

She hated herself a little for how gleeful that proposition made her. Especially now that she knew she’d essentially been trafficked to a pirate

because no one in her village wanted her there any longer.

Still, she felt the need to explain. “They were going to burn me at the stake but then became distracted when the Dutchman’s ship landed. He must have made an agreement with the magistrate before approaching me and offering me a place aboard his ship. It was my only way to avoid death.”

Sir Xavier put his finger across her lips. “It doesn’t matter. I would make him walk the plank regardless.”

The sky grew dark, and the ship’s rocking became more pronounced as something warm and tingling formed in her chest at his words. Purple clouds and white-capped waves resonated from the very core of her. Something about this man’s protection unleashed powers she hadn’t quite been able to harness.

Sir Xavier held a strand of her hair as it curled around his finger. “You’re more powerful than you know, little witch,” he whispered in her ear.

“I’m doing this, aren’t I?” Sure, weird things had happened around her when she lost her temper before, but she could feel the power in this. Her anger combined with Xavier’s assurances that it was righteous fueled a growing storm.

“I’m not sure why the little witch bitch couldn’t make this happen for me.” The Dutchman sounded like a petulant child, and she hated him all the more. A wind gust almost blew the Dutchman off the deck of the ship. But only the Dutchman. The Hammer smiled at her, and she laughed a little. A bubble of delight filled her.

“I wouldn’t call her a bitch again if I were you,” Sir Xavier said. He motioned with his free hand to his crew, and one of them retrieved a plank and balanced it on the ship’s railing.

The Dutchman watched their progress and yelled, “Seriously! You’re going to make me walk the plank? Wouldn’t that be cheating in the regatta? This is just because you know you can’t beat me fair and square.”

Mercy leaned over and said into Xavier’s ear, “Could we gag him? I’m sort of sick of hearing him talk.”

He laughed softly. “We could, but I’d hate to miss his screams as he plunges into the water.”

“That’s a very good point.”

He winked at her. “I’ll show you a very good point.” He shifted on the throne, and she felt that his cock was even harder than before. The idea of him showing her his cock, making her touch it made the place between her

legs grow wet and soft. It was a vulnerable feeling, but she welcomed it. Where she'd bristled when he brought her down into his lap before, she now settled further. Something about this very dangerous man made her feel incredibly safe. "You can touch it if you want."

"Right here? In front of your crew and the Dutchman?"

One corner of his mouth tipped up. "You think all these men haven't seen me having my cock serviced in brothels and houses of ill repute all over the worlds?"

The idea of someone else touching his cock didn't please her. Not at all. "I'm sure they have."

His smile widened. "Jealous?"

She glared at him.

"You can touch my cock now, if you'd like."

She was not sure why his teasing enticed her. She should have felt shame or embarrassment, maybe. She would have even a week ago. But now she didn't care what all these people watching thought. She reached for the front of his breeches and cupped his erection in her hand. No one else saw the shudder that went through his body when her hand touched his skin. However, she wasn't quite as cool when she wrapped her hand around his heated erection. He'd just said that this was rather routine for him, but she grew wet with the wickedness of this whole scenario.

"That's a good little witch." She liked the way his voice caught when she squeezed and stroked. It filled her with power.

"Is she rubbing your cock?" The Dutchman was whining now. *Gross.*

Sir Xavier tipped his chin and smiled. "Best hand job I've ever had." Then he lowered his voice. "You know you can manhandle me, little witch."

Mercy reached farther into his pants, gripped his cock harder, and stroked him. A bit of liquid came out of the tip and eased her movements. He groaned and grunted, and she would have thought it was partly for show if his breathing weren't so fast and erratic.

The Dutchman watched in horror while inching his way down the plank. She smiled and winked at him, filled with the power of holding Sir Xavier's cock in her hands as the man who'd assumed he owned her shuffled his way towards an uncertain fate.

"Jump, you fucking coward!" one of the Hammer's pirates yelled.

"Are you going to stop touching me when he jumps?" Xavier whispered in her ear.

She hadn't thought about it. She wasn't sure if she was doing this to get under the Dutchman's skin or for her own pleasure at this point. The way Xavier's big hand flexed against the flesh of her ass sent delightful shivers through her body. She wanted to be alone with him. She wanted him naked. She wanted him.

Had she ever wanted anyone like this in her whole life? She was lost in him, and everything else happening around them disappeared.

At least until the yells from the crew intensified. "Jump, you lily-livered pervert!"

"My people don't take kindly to those who mistreat the vulnerable," Xavier said.

Despite the fact she felt rather invulnerable at the moment, she was heartened. "And yet, here I am, rubbing your cock, when you admitted to me just moments ago that you make a habit of fondling people in taverns and brothels in front of your crew."

And then she rubbed harder. He groaned, and she shuddered. "The difference between me and him is that I only fondle the willing." He grazed the side of her neck with the tip of his nose. She gasped. "And you can stop anytime you want."

"Do you want me to stop?" She didn't think so, but she couldn't be sure. She'd done this with the vicar multiple times, but it had never been this arousing for her. And the way Xavier moved his hips against her led her to believe he'd much prefer she continued.

"What do you think?"

"This is just unprofessional." She had almost forgotten the Dutchman was there.

Xavier shocked her completely by planting a kiss on her neck and chuckling. "You're not jealous, are you? You claim she's your wife, but you've never touched her."

"I had plans for her. Plans that didn't involve molesting her in public." No, they'd only involved molesting her in private.

It seemed the Hammer read her mind and wasn't pleased with the color of its contents. "It's time you became acquainted with the bottom of the sea, Dutchman."



Xavier waited until the Dutchman's screaming stopped and he heard a splash before displacing his stolen witch from his lap and gingerly pulling her hand from his breeches. He hadn't planned for that to happen, and he hadn't anticipated her nearly making him come whilst he was in the process of punishing his enemy. But now that he had her on his ship and the scent of her in his nose, he had no plans to let her go. At least not right away.

When Xavier had planted the seed that led him to Mercy, he'd underestimated her powers. She truly didn't know that she could change the course of history with her innate abilities. And it wouldn't even take much training. As eager as the Dutchman had been to win, he'd had no of what the untrained witch was capable of.

Of course, they were all desperate to win the Atlantis Regatta. It was the most generous purse of the entire race series—a hundred thousand pieces of gold and a spell of the winner's choice. And the winner always surpassed the purse with lucrative shipping contracts during the off-season.

Xavier did not plan to use nefarious means to win—he'd learned his lesson about having witches aboard his ship and the havoc they could wreak—and he wasn't sure what to do with Mercy now that she was aboard. He knew what he'd like to do: take her down to his cabin and spread her out on his bed. He wanted to consume her whole and set her passions loose. For all her sarcasm-laced fear, she'd rolled with the punches quite admirably.

And he lusted for her more than he'd ever admit to any of his people. He

couldn't afford to show any weakness when the championship was on the line. And he couldn't afford to have Mercy aboard his ship, which might imply he was cheating and couldn't win the final regatta of the season without fraud.

So, instead of letting her finish him off, he stood her up and tucked his cock back in his pants. He lowered his voice, for her ears only. "For the record, I didn't *want* you to stop."

She blushed so prettily that it almost stopped him in his tracks, her curling hair seeming to move across her cheeks to shield her from his gaze. "But my hand in your breeches served one of its purposes?"

He found himself smiling again, which was an alarming occurrence around her. "Not the most important one, little witch."

He took her arm and led her belowdecks. His crew was occupied with the giddiness of taking out their fiercest opponent—or at least delaying him. Xavier didn't kid himself that the Dutchman was dead or even injured. His crew had likely picked him out of the water as soon as he'd drifted away from the *Rake's Revenge*. It would take the Dutchman's crew until the Atlantis Regatta to refurbish another ship and transport it to the hidden island outside of time and other dimensions, so they would be at a disadvantage.

Instead of thinking about how much he wanted to dive under the little witch's skirts and not come out until after the ship race was over, Xavier should be taking advantage of this head start. But at this moment, watching her hips sway as she made her way into the ship's hold, he didn't care if ever won a race again.

He imagined whisking her away to the private island he'd purchased with the winnings of his fifth Atlantis Regatta and feeding her fruit and rum drinks until she wasn't afraid of anything. As soon as he had that thought, he shook his head. When they arrived in Atlantis, he would head straight for the brothel to avail himself of someone willing and enthusiastic whom he would never think about again.

Once Mercy was in his room, he stepped out and closed the door behind him to gather his thoughts and attempt to control his lust. He almost didn't notice Anorra until she was right in front of him. "You should have killed him before sailing on."

Xavier respected his first mate—he respected all his crew. And they ran the ship as democratically as possible. But there were times—like these—where he needed to set limits and boundaries. Xavier would go far to win the

regatta and reclaim the championship, but killing other sailors who had not done him or members of his crew deadly violence was a step too far.

“He didn’t draw his sword when we cornered him on his ship. To kill him would violate the rules.”

His first mate shook her head. “If the situation were reversed, he would have killed you without a second thought. Guted you and let the sharks take care of the rest.”

Xavier didn’t doubt it, but something—someone—had stopped him. “He’d already lost his favorite ship and the witch he thought would help him win. I didn’t need to take his life.”

“You want the witch then?” There must have been something on his face when he talked about Mercy telling Anorra that he felt things about the witch.

“It doesn’t matter whether I want her or not.” He hadn’t meant to snap, but there were limits to how he would be questioned.

“Don’t let anyone—even a bonny woman—distract you from your goals.”

Xavier sighed and looked down. He only had sailors aboard his ship for whom he would lay down his life. The reason they had been so successful was the team he’d had around him, and it wouldn’t do to discount their warnings. They knew him better than anyone else and had been through more with him than most of his own family.

But they were wrong if they thought he would let a woman come between him and a victory. He would not allow himself to become distracted like he had before.

He couldn’t keep the little witch. That just wasn’t practical. All his focus needed to be on winning regattas, securing his legacy, and making sure the folks who’d sailed with him for over a decade were set up for the rest of their lives. There was, of course, a venal and petty part of him that needed to see the Dutchman lose. But it was mostly about recovering his reputation as the greatest of all time after losing last year and filling the Dutchman’s coffers.

Having any woman who wasn’t a member of his crew aboard, especially one who could interfere with his results in unpredictable ways, wouldn’t work at all. If she weren’t so compelling in her contradictions—he’d felt and seen the racing pulse of her throat—he might suggest that they slake their lusts before they paid their piece of eight and entered Atlantis. But she had to have been displaying more bravado than she truly felt.

The right thing to do was to leave her be during the remainder of their

journey together and to set her up to go wherever she wanted once they reached Atlantis. He'd have her gone before the qualifying round of the ship race.

He intended to tell her this as soon as he entered the cabin but found her facedown on his bed, humping one of his pillows. He stood in shocked silence for long moments as she swirled her hips and moaned into his bedding.

If she hadn't been awake and in his arms just moments ago, he would have thought she was asleep and having a salacious ream. But this could only be the result of what they'd done on the deck. Maybe she wasn't as innocent and terrified as he'd thought. Maybe she'd simply been turned on.

He moved towards the bed, deliberately knocking into a trunk on the way so she would know he was there. Although watching her stimulate herself had revived his cock to full mast, he wasn't about to watch her without consent. She froze and looked over her shoulder at him. Her curls were mussed and tangled, and he suddenly wanted to bathe her and brush them out.

Maybe later.

"Are you feeling restless, little witch?" He smiled at her and tried not to sound as predatory as he felt. There was something about this woman that made him want to cover her body with his and rut. She set something loose in him that he should probably fear. As a sailor, he respected forces of nature, and he certainly recognized her as one.

He'd been with more beautiful women. Of course, he had; he was the fastest ship racer this world and many others had ever seen. He was fearless against storms and waves—or so it seemed. He'd simply seen enough fear and hardship growing up that he did not balk in the face of something as trivial as a gale-force wind. His daring tended to garner power and wealth, and those things tended to attract lovers—regardless of how patriarchal a culture was.

But he'd never been hesitant to take what a potential lover had offered. Not before Mercy, the witch.

"I'm sorry. I—"

He held up a hand and stopped her from making excuses. She truly didn't know her own strength and the unleashed potential she held in her slight body. "What do you need?"

"I'm embarrassed."

"You weren't embarrassed when you nearly made me come in front of

my whole crew and the Dutchman.” She winced. Shit. He would need to take more care with her. “I wasn’t ashamed of what happened at all, and I was the one you were leading around by the cock.”

“I was?” She sat up, and he could have groaned about her ample breasts spilling out of her bodice. She was more well-endowed than the paramour who’d left these clothes behind. But pondering her cleavage would not make her feel safe or comfortable. “I thought you were just putting on a show to anger him.”

“Is that what you were doing?” He really needed to know if his consuming lust was one-sided or not. “Were you acting as though you enjoyed stroking my cock because he’d harmed you?”

Although he’d never heard of the Dutchman harming women in a systematic way before, the man cared about very little other than winning. Xavier did not doubt he’d do anything in order to prove he was the better racer and the better captain. And the idea that the Dutchman had hurt the woman lying in front of Xavier filled him with a holy rage he hadn’t felt since he’d been a much younger man.

“He didn’t really hurt me. He did get me onto his boat under somewhat false pretenses, but I should have looked that particular gift horse straight in its mouth. And he didn’t prevent his men from harassing me, but none of them crossed the line. I mostly hated that I’d allowed myself to believe his lies. I feel as though I’ve been used and manipulated in ways that I should not tolerate—even though I am merely a woman, and we live our lives at the mercy of men’s manipulations.”

“Not every place is like that,” Xavier said. He knew England wasn’t an oasis of enlightenment or progressive values, but there were other worlds out there that were. He wanted to show them to her.

But he would not. He would get her to Atlantis and probably provide some guidance for how she should proceed through the dimensions to find a place that was safe for her to hone and develop her magic. He would not use her and manipulate her to win this regatta. He did not need to do that. He’d already hobbled the Dutchman, and he had a better ship than any of his other competitors.

“And I’m not like him. I won’t use you to win.”

“I don’t think you want to use me. Or, if you do, we want to use each other.” She looked down at the front of his breeches, which did nothing to hide his erection. “For pleasure.”

Her words drew him towards her. So close that he could smell her arousal. He wanted to taste her. To give her pleasure. And yes, he wanted her to return the favor. He was hungry and feverish for the touch of flesh and sound of her moans.

He'd had more beautiful women draped across his bed, but he couldn't remember one of their faces right now, even if it meant he would never lose another race. There was something about this little witch that made him forget his purpose in life. For that reason alone, she was dangerous. He should walk out of this cabin and sleep in the racks with his men until they docked in Atlantis.

But then she reached out and undid the buttons on the front of his breeches. She pulled his shirt out and reached in for his cock. If he didn't stop her right now, they would fall into bed and not leave until he had to for the qualifying round. It wouldn't be wise.

"Hold on."



Mercy froze, and another wave of shame washed over her. She still couldn't believe he'd caught her masturbating in his bed. But when she'd walked down to the cabin as instructed, he hadn't followed right away. And then she smelled his scent on the sheets. She hadn't had a drop to drink, and yet she'd become intoxicated on just the scent of this man.

She might be the witch, but he weaved some rather dangerous magic all on his own.

When he'd walked in on her, she'd thought he would want to continue what they'd started on the deck. She might be a relative novice to sex, but she'd thought his erection meant he would be willing.

But the way he was looking at her now, with his chest heaving and nostrils flaring, made her realize she knew even less about men than she'd thought. "I'm sorry."

He looked up at her then. "Why are you sorry?"

"You seem angry."

"I'm angry at myself, little witch."

"Why? You've been nothing but accommodating since I arrived on the ship. And you got rid of the Dutchman."

"He may still come back for you." He shook his head. "There are a million reasons, including that one, that I shouldn't throw your skirts above my head and drown in your cunt."

She gasped when he said that. And wanted it more than her next breath. If she ever returned to a boring life in a boring village where she would never

feel adventure like this again, then this might be her only chance to feel this kind of passion. This kind of freedom. She certainly wouldn't be dallying with any more vicars, even for a thrill.

"I doubt he'd go back to England to find me." When she said the name of her home, it didn't feel like home anymore. She'd spent the whole time she'd been away plotting to return, but she didn't really have anything to return to, did she? "He might have said I belong to him, but that's not true. I never consented or stood in front of a vicar and took vows. He may have a piece of paper saying I am his wife, but he never consummated the union. Besides, I think the sort of drowning you just described sounds much more pleasant than the kind of drowning he almost did."

She didn't know precisely why she said that, but it probably had something to do with wanting to test this man's control. He commanded this ship, and sailors far and wide whispered his name with hushed reverence. He was more than a pirate—he was a demigod. And to have him on edge and hungry for her—wanting her so much that he was angry at himself—made her feel brazen and powerful.

"Like I said, there are a million other reasons."

She knelt up on the bed and brought her torso flush with his. The heat of him scalded her, and yet she couldn't bring herself to move away, to lessen the burn. "Tell me the other reasons, and I'll refute them, one by one. Unless one of the reasons is that you don't want me. Then I'll be a good girl and leave your cock alone."

He closed his eyes when she said "good girl" and took a deep breath. Her only warning was a single grunt before he took her mouth with his. She'd never, ever been kissed like this. Vicars probably didn't know kisses like this existed. Being a pirate, the Hammer plundered her mouth. His tongue dueled with hers, and the battle was so sweet that she melted into his hard body. His hands tangled in her hair, molding to her skull and holding her mouth in place as he took his time exploring its depths.

Mercy took the edges of his shirt in her hands and pulled him even closer, wanting to meld their bodies into one being of writhing lust. She'd been thirsty aboard the *Scarlet Cow*. And hungry. But the need she felt for him was so all-consuming, she wondered how she'd ever survive without him.

But he didn't want to want her. Eventually, she'd have to. Light-headed and lust-addled, she pushed that thought from her mind as Xavier moved his hands from her head to the front laces of her corset. Again, she moaned her

approval into his mouth when he untied the bottom lace and relieved some of the pressure against her ribs and organs.

Methodically, he pulled each lace loose until her corset was off. She felt each pull like a stroke against the tender flesh between her legs. She protested when he pulled his mouth from hers. "You're still going to leave the ship in Atlantis."

Although she was disappointed that one kiss hadn't changed the implacable pirate's mind, she didn't want this to stop. "I still want to do this."

"Tell me, little witch, in great detail, what do you want me to do?" He smiled against her lips, and she felt as though the entire contents of her body went liquid. But then there was panic. She didn't have the words to express what she wanted from him. The ship rocked beneath them and pushed her body farther into his. He stood strong and steady. A life at sea had given him the ability to stand through any storm.

She'd admired his pettiness towards the Dutchman, but that's not what she found most attractive about him. The most attractive thing about him was how his crew looked at him, with awe. But, unlike the magistrate, he didn't use his power over others as a cudgel. His kind of power appealed to her. Perhaps she should be more cautious, and this would come back to bite her. Maybe this intense attraction was simply a result of the events of the past month. Perhaps it was just an apparition.

But she wanted to grasp at piece of this ghost. This spirit was manifested in hard, uncompromising flesh and heat.

He brushed her hair away from her face and said, "Tell me what you want, and you'll have it for two nights." Then he ran his nose against the tendon at the side of her neck again. How did he know that it was like flint against stone, sending sparks through her entire nervous system?

"I want more."

"More what?" He licked a path across her collarbones. "Do you want me to remove your chemise and your skirt? Or would you like me to fuck you with your clothes on, as though we haven't the time to waste disrobing?"

They didn't have any time to waste. He might want to avail himself of her body, but she wouldn't delude herself into believing he had any real interest in her.

"Do you want my fingers on your clit? Or my mouth? What will it take for you to get you so wet that my cock slips right in?"

She could not imagine his cock slipping right in, as she could barely fit

her fingers around it. But the fingers and mouth stuff sounded great. “I want both. Both is very good.”

But he didn’t tip her back onto the bed and dive right in, as much as she wanted him to. Xavier simply untied the top of her chemise and opened it. And then he didn’t even touch her. He looked at her breasts as though he were examining a painting he was considering purchasing—not even plundering. It made a blush creep over the surface of her chest, the heat of everything she believed she ought to be ashamed of reaching her skin. Only then did he reach out and run one long finger against her. She shuddered and leaned closer.

“Shh.” She hadn’t even realized she was moaning for him. “I want to look at you.”

“Why?” She hadn’t meant to ask, but in her admittedly limited experience, looking almost always led to touching. That’s what made it dangerous in most cases and desirable in this one. If they only had two nights together, then she didn’t want to waste any more time. “You can touch me. I want you to touch me.”

Her pleas came out as a whine because she couldn’t keep a lid on her desire for him. She supposed he was known for his fierceness and iron will on the high seas, but she wished he weren’t using that willpower on delaying fucking her at this very moment.

“I take pleasure in looking at your pretty breasts. They move every time you fidget.” She stilled, not wanting to deny him pleasure but made self-conscious by the fact he seemed to notice every minute detail of her. “I am mapping out a plan of attack, thinking about how I will plant kisses on each of your ribs and hold your waist in my hands as I take your pretty cunt.”

“How do you know it’s pretty?” The way he smoothly used vulgar language made her grow so wet, she could feel it on her thighs.

He reached out and brushed one of her nipples with a single finger. It sent sparks of pleasure through her whole body. “Every part of you is pretty. That’s why I’m looking. I’m planning my attack the way I plan shipping routes and survey the charts before a regatta.” The idea that he viewed her as a challenge, like a race, excited her. “I’ll want to remember every centimeter of your pretty skin as we proceed.”

“What are you trying to win right now?” Her voice sounded as though it scraped against her throat. There was a chance she was only reacting to him this way because he’d rescued her from a terrible situation she’d used as an

escape from certain death. But she didn't care.

"The memory of your screams of pleasure for years to come." Well, she didn't need the reminder that this was very temporary. But he made dark thoughts of a lonely future disappear when his mouth descended on the nipple he'd been touching.

His hands became frantic as they pulled against her clothes, nearly ripping the chemise off her shoulders to expose her entire torso. After he'd sucked her nipple to an angry peak, he kept his promise of kissing each of her ribs. The rough callouses of his fingers on one hand rubbed her other nipple until she squealed and pulled at his braids.

Again, she could feel his mouth curve into a smile against her skin. "Too much?"

It was too much. All her senses were in a critical state of overload. But it was also not enough. She wanted to scream at him to give her more. To skip to the good part. She knew the good part would be better than anything she'd experienced with her own hand between her legs in her lonely bed. Or anything that had happened with the vicar. He made her feel as though lightning and thunder originated from the place between her thighs.

"I need you to go faster."

He chuckled. "As fast as you went when your hand was around my cock?"

"Yes."

She reached for the front of his pants again, but he shifted his hips so she couldn't get to said cock. "This is about me exploring what I've stolen from the Dutchman."

Where she'd hated that several men in the past week had been under the impression that they owned her, she rather liked the idea of belonging to the Hammer. But she wanted to belong to him completely, and she wanted that right now.

"Xavier. I need." She needed everything he'd already given her—his rough hands and commanding mouth, his stern words and giant cock. It was wild how the needs she felt with extreme urgency now hadn't even been a shadow in her mind hours ago. "I need everything."

Finally, finally, his hands went to the fastenings of her skirt and relieved her of the garment. And then she reached for his shirt and pulled it over his head. She took long moments to admire the markings on his flesh. He was nearly covered in tattoos. She knew they told a story, and she wanted him to

tell it. She imagined long nights and mornings in his bed where she'd point to a marking, and he'd tell her a tale of daring that would have her panting for another round of him giving her pleasure.

She shook her head to rid herself of the fantasy that she could ever really know this man. They didn't have time, and this was probably just a way for him to relieve the pressure of months at sea and the punishing schedule of regattas. He'd mentioned brothels, so he was probably used to seasoned lovers who were paid for their ability to give pleasure. She was merely a magically deficient witch with little sexual experience. A novelty. He'd only want to remember so he would have a story to tell in a tavern somewhere, long after he'd left her in Atlantis to find her way into a future.

"I got in trouble for only looking, and now you're doing the same." His finger rubbed the crease that had formed in her brow. "Do you hate the tattoos?" He didn't sound unsure of himself, merely seeming as though he wanted more information.

"No, they just all seem to have a story, and I wonder if I'll be no more than a story when I'm gone."

"You're here right now. I'm here right now. And the only story I care about are the stories you'll tell about the talented sailor who gave you screaming orgasms during your adventure at sea." He pulled at the bottom of her chemise, tugged it up and over her head, and pulled off her drawers. He was still wearing his unfastened breeches, but she was completely naked. When she moved to cover her bits despite what he'd said about wanting to memorize every inch of her, he caught her wrist, shaking his head.

"That won't do." He took a step towards her that had their bodies flush again. "The only thing I want covering your body for the next few days is my own body. I want every inch of you visible and accessible to me. I need to know that this pussy"—he cupped her mons and must have felt how wet she was—"is mine for the taking."

"What about what I want?" She tried to keep her voice teasing and light so he wouldn't think she was serious, but his hand halted.

"You'll have whatever you want, too." When she chased his hand with her hips, he chuckled again. She knew she would always respond to that sound of mirth by getting wetter. "But I think you like what I want, little witch."

Mercy caught his earlobe with her lips before running her tongue over the gold hoops he wore in a row. "I think I will. Please touch me. I feel like I'll

burn alive if you don't."

This was the only way she wanted to burn alive. In this moment, she was glad she hadn't drowned or been burned at the stake back in England. She wouldn't give up this experience for all the uncertain journeys into unknown futures in all the world.

He pushed a finger between the lips of her pussy and found her clit. She gasped and bit down harder against his earlobe until he grunted. "Greedy little pussy you have. So wet for me." He held her up by the back of her head, using his hand to angle her head back and take her mouth again. Somehow, he coordinated his finger's ministrations against that delicious bundle of nerves with the explorations of his tongue. She mewled into his mouth from the intense pleasure, grasping his broad shoulders with her hands.

He took his finger away for a moment, and she might have let out a wail of displeasure, but then he pushed that finger inside her sheath and covered her clitoris with his thumb.

"More," she murmured into his lips, and he immediately complied by adding a finger. She felt full of him, her abdomen heavy and hot. She gave herself over to the kiss and sagged into his body.

He moved his mouth to her ear. "That's a good little witch." She clenched around his fingers. "You like to be a good girl? Why don't you come for me, and I'll give you a treat."

She wondered if his cock was the treat, but she didn't care. She was incredibly close, and his words sent her over the edge. Everything in her tightened and released. She felt as spacious as the sea and as powerful as she'd ever been.

When it was over, she was suddenly boneless and laid out with his body over hers. "I think I'd like another one of those treats very soon."



Xavier was wrecked by his little witch and nearly at the edge of his control. He ripped his breeches the rest of the way and was inside her lush heat in the blink of an eye. In that moment, he was unprepared to ever let her out of his bed. He couldn't even conceive of it.

He laid kisses all over her flushed chest as he levered his torso up. She was so tight and so hot that he was only halfway inside her and at risk of spending. Even more so when she lifted her hips to take more of him. He put his hands against her hips to stop her, and she whimpered.

"I'll give you as much as you can take, little witch." She bucked against him as he continued to keep her still. Fire raged up and down his spine as she struggled against him. He didn't usually like sex to be a fight, but this was different. They were both fighting for ultimate pleasure.

Had she noticed the skies had darkened and the waves beneath the ship had picked up when he'd first kissed her, had eased when she came, and were now picking up again? The Dutchman hadn't been able to release her power because she hadn't felt anything for him or around him. Her hair curled in a sensual halo around her head as he rocked his hips and pushed farther into her body.

"Let me in," he said, urging her to yield to him. And yet she only squeezed him tighter, trying to milk his come. She clutched at his shoulders and moved beneath him, her breasts against his chest. His flesh burned more than when he'd gotten any of his tattoos. It was like she was inside him, making a path to the center of every hope and fear he'd ever had. He wanted

to plunder every bit of her and let her conquer every inch of his body. Being inside her felt so right that he didn't know how anything else could feel right ever again.

Suddenly, her flesh yielded, and he was balls deep inside her.

Her voice was a whisper. "I've never..."

He froze. "You've never done this before, sweet little witch?" Even though he could barely contain himself, he would do anything to prevent hurting her. "Do you want me to stop?"

In response, she dug the tips of her nails into his shoulders and said, "If you stop, I think I'll die." And when he moved, she added, "Let yourself go. I need it as much as you do."

He wasn't one to follow instructions, but he couldn't deny her. Wouldn't. He fucked into her as though he was starving for his orgasm—because he was. The ship could have capsized, and he wouldn't have noticed. The only thing that held him back was that she might not come with him. He reached down and rubbed her clit, and she wrapped her legs around him and pulled him even farther inside her. When her body contracted with him inside, and her body arched like a rigid bow, he was lost.

As she came, she started to scream his name. "Xavier—"

He put his hand over her mouth. He didn't want to give any credence to his crew's suspicions that he was enchanted by this witch. Even though, with his body nearing completion, it certainly felt as though he was under a spell. The feel of her, the smell of her, the way she sighed--it filled him and could make him forget his purpose.

Part of him wanted to forget. He wanted to flood her with his seed and tie her to him forever. Part of him was already lost to her, and it would leave him when she did. But he held on to just enough sanity in that moment.

He pulled out of her body and spent over her quivering belly. He remained poised over her for long moments, fascinated by the pool of spend on her skin. The only sounds in the cabin were their heavy breaths as sweat cooled and evaporated. He didn't want to speak. If he spoke, this spell that they'd created in this room would be broken.

"The waters are quiet," she whispered. When she began to move, he stopped her, found a cloth, and cleaned his seed from her belly. Again, she blushed prettily, but she didn't move to cover herself or clean herself off.

"Yes, because you're satisfied." He didn't know if she'd noticed the connection between her inner state and the weather until she sighed and

smiled at him, looking directly at his rapidly reviving cock.

“Yes, for now.”

Before he'd gotten a taste of her, he'd thought fucking her once would be enough. That he wouldn't feel this need building again so quickly. It had never been this way for him before. Not even with Nadine. The feelings he was having for this witch should terrify him, but he only wanted more. This should be the first and last time for them. They couldn't just fuck for two days. If they did that, he would never let her go. “We have to talk.”



Mercy didn't want to talk. She'd never felt so embodied in her life, and she wanted to explore that more. For the first time, she felt the power coursing through her veins in a way that made her feel in control of it. It was as though the power fed upon the pleasure they'd shared and rose in her chest. Even before she'd discovered her powers, she'd been a witch; when she'd worked for a "master" apothecary, she'd made potions and tinctures that had surpassed his skills. But she hadn't been able to truly feel it, much less summon the power at will. And though she hadn't willed her power into action while Xavier had been touching her, she had never felt it more.

"Please, let's not." She didn't want to beg, but she would. If they talked, he would just tell her he was going to leave her behind.

He sighed and rubbed one of his hands over his face. Did she imagine he lingered because he could smell her on it? Or maybe her mind was just grasping at anything that would tell her he felt something for her other than a vague sense of responsibility?

"I'm afraid it's necessary."

Mercy panicked a little bit then. She'd felt lonely before the engagement to the vicar and the village turning on her. On the Dutchman's boat, she'd felt even lonelier because she was the only woman, and every corner had hidden a new and perverted risk. But now, after she'd felt at one with the man who had saved her—Xavier had vanquished her enemy—she didn't know if she could go back to feeling alone.

“Please don’t leave me on Atlantis. I don’t know anyone there, and it’s in another dimension. What will I do?” Her voice was almost an inarticulate shriek by the end of that question, but she couldn’t help the dread clawing at her insides. “I’ll do anything. I’ll learn my magic faster and help your ship win. And I’ll hide so no one knows I’m here.”

“Race officials inspect the ships. That won’t work. And your previous captors are going to tell them I had you the last time they saw the *Rake’s Revenge*.” He was so calm that she was sure he didn’t feel anything for her at all.

“But couldn’t I just as easily help from the shore? Now that my powers have grown, maybe I could manage it?”

He tipped up her chin with the side of his index finger. That point of touch gave her hope, while the look in his eyes—stony determination—took it away. “You know that much about controlling your powers?”

She tried to look away, but he wouldn’t allow it. “I never said I know much about controlling them. I only know how they’ve malfunctioned before. Before you and I met. But the more time I spend with you, the more control I have. There’s plenty of time before the regatta—”

He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. More than the idea that he would dump her on a mystical island and never look back, these mixed signals he was sending threw her for a loop. It was unkind and unfair of him to give her the affection she was so starved for before cruelly taking it away.

She pushed at his chest. “Xavier, I—”

“Shhh.” He stroked her hair, and it stoked her anger. But she did her best to tamp it down so he would consider her offer. “I don’t want to let you go either. But I don’t see how we have a choice. I’d promise to come back to you after the regatta, but I’ve made a commitment to my crew. It’s not just your magic that makes it impossible for you to stay. My entire focus has to be on winning. If it strays to your safety or well-being for even a minute—and it will—it puts everyone on the ship at risk.”

“So you’ll give up anything to win.” He winced as though she’d hit him, and that made her curious. “Why is winning so important to you?”

He chuffed. “The money doesn’t hurt.”

“That’s not the only thing. It can’t be.” She looked around the luxuriously appointed cabin. “You clearly like to spend money. I mean, look at your clothes. But I think there’s more. If you’re really a knight, you could make money by exploiting villagers or something...”

She paused, waited for him to respond. The silence lingered for long moments, and she felt his pulse speed up against the palm of her hand, which rested on his marked chest. What kind of man subjected himself to hours of pain to mark his skin with meaning? What kind of man walked away from privilege and luxury to risk his life and fortune at sea every year?

Mercy's curiosity about him was boundless, and her time was limited. She would probably never truly know him. Forever and ever, he would exist in her mind as a luscious question mark she could turn over in her mind on the many lonely nights ahead of her.

"When I was growing up, everyone in my provincial little village said I would be nothing. And all the people around me, they expected nothing from me. But, at sea, I am completely in charge. I'm not nothing. The money and the awards are something, but it's the recognition—"

He broke her heart. "You're not nothing. I don't have any power to see the future or inside anyone's thoughts, but I can see that. I knew you were someone the moment you approached me. Of course, I'd heard whispers of the ruthless pirate who would kill us all, but that's not what I felt. As soon as you spoke to me..."

She wasn't willing to tell him he'd saved her from more than a burning ship. That she'd immediately felt a kinship with him that she'd never formed with anyone else.

"And I'm addicted to the adventure of it. After last year's Atlantis Regatta, I thought about giving it all up and sailing away to an island somewhere, never to be heard from again. But what would *I* do?" He looked her in the eye, cupping her face far more gently than she'd imagined he was capable of, and his gaze held a vulnerability that she was sure few had ever seen there. "I could obviously start a family and live on land, but there would be a piece of me missing."

"And you can't have both? Adventure and home?" Mercy had only ever craved home, but she was coming to realize that her ideas about home had only ever been an illusion. But something about being with Xavier made her crave more. He'd unlocked something inside her that made her want to make her own mark in the world.

They looked different on the outside, but they were truly the same in so many ways. Both had been severely underestimated and had chips on their shoulders that drove them. But she wished he could see that they could push forward together. That having someone in his corner wouldn't hold him back.

But the stubborn set of his mouth was back, and she knew now was not the moment to change his mind.

Mercy shrugged and tried to sound more nonchalant than she felt. “Will you show me some of your ship?”



XAVIER DIDN'T TRUST himself not to sail off into the sunset if he spent much more time in bed with Mercy. He wouldn't lie and say he wouldn't dive under her skirts again and again until it was time to enter Atlantis and prepare for the race, but he was grateful that she'd asked for a tour of the ship. It saved him from unintentionally sharing any more intimacies with the only person he'd confided in for a long while.

Of course, he shared feelings with his inner circle, his first mate. But Anorra did not inquire as to the sensitivities he'd acquired from his childhood or the ways those traumas motivated him. It simply wasn't relevant to his performance. They pushed forward as a team, and that was something he'd always deeply appreciated about her.

Xavier and Mercy dressed. Multiple times throughout the process, he considered abandoning the ship tour and taking her back beneath the sheets. He viewed his body as a tool, and his clothes were part of that—they inspired fear and awe among his competitors. Several had tried to imitate him over the years, but none had succeeded. It was truly his signature.

When they ascended to the deck, Anorra looked at him suspiciously, with one eyebrow raised. Because he didn't want to arouse doubt with the rest of the crew, he kept himself a good distance away from his little witch. His fingers itched to touch her the whole time. He considered asking Anorra to give Mercy the tour, but he couldn't stand to be that far away. He knew he had preparations to make, but he wasn't willing give up this time with Mercy. There would be plenty of time to be without her when they departed Atlantis.

“I'm showing Mercy the ship,” he said to Anorra. He knew it was a thin excuse. Mercy had spent a week aboard the Dutchman's ship, and his was less dangerous in atmosphere but much the same.

In response, she raised both brows. “We have preparations to make for the regatta. Unless she wants to pitch in by levitating the ship to remove

barnacles.” Anorra turned to Mercy. “It improves the aerodynamics.”

“I trust you’re capable of overseeing those tasks whilst I am unavailable with this very important guest.” Mercy looked between him and Anorra while they had a silent conversation. They’d been together so long, they could almost read each other’s thoughts—no magic required. Right now, Anorra was telling him he was being a dipshit and would lose the regatta if he didn’t regain his focus. He knew that, but he also wouldn’t manage to focus if Mercy were out of his sight. Anorra pursed her lips and turned away from him in a sign of disapproval and acquiescence.

“She really doesn’t like me, does she?” Mercy asked when they had crossed the deck and were out of earshot.

He cleared his throat. Though he didn’t want to lie to Mercy, she’d had enough of people not liking her after being ostracized from her village and suffering ill treatment on the Dutchman’s ship. He wondered when he would stop feeling enraged about that and how he might take it out on his rival and the man’s descendants. “She doesn’t like anyone.”

“She likes you,” Mercy said, and he could hear the tentative question in her voice before she asked it aloud. “Have you two ever been involved—romantically or sexually?”

Xavier laughed. When he’d first had Anorra aboard the ship, his whole crew and the whole fleet of racers and their crews had asked that question. Repeatedly. But Anorra was happily partnered and had several children with someone else. Of course, that wouldn’t have prevented them from becoming involved if that had been her agreement with her partner. She was an attractive woman, and they understood each other on a deep level. Yet he’d always preferred his entanglements to be much simpler—as in, an exchange of services for money—especially after Nadine.

“She’s a member of the crew, like any other. And I don’t fuck my crew.”

Mercy shook her head and bumped him with her shoulder. “I’m sort of glad I’m not a member of the crew.”

He delighted in the fact she was comfortable enough with him to tease him, and yet he wanted to warn her away from settling in. But he kept his mouth shut. There was no reason to cause her more hurt in this moment.

After that, she stopped asking questions. He paused, but she walked ahead, unconscious of the fact he’d stopped to admire her. She took a deep breath of the sea air and tipped her pretty face to the calm sky. He tried to memorize the way the sun had pinkened her lovely cheeks and the tip of her

nose. And then he tried and failed to keep himself from reaching out and touching the long strands of her hair dancing on the wind.

When he made contact, she looked back and smiled at him. He knew in that moment that it was pointless for him to pretend he could stop touching her at every given opportunity. The torturous thoughts about not having her would distract him just as much as her presence.

“Would you like to drive the ship?” He hadn’t meant to ask her that, but it would be a great excuse to demonstrate how to steer the ship—in very close proximity to her lush body. He would have the best excuse to smell her skin and feel her breath.

Those thoughts of her rocked him. He scarcely knew who he was anymore.



Above deck, Xavier turned into the Hammer, and it excited her. Mercy was deeply attracted to them both, but their postcoital chat led her to believe she would only capture Xavier's heart if she knew the Hammer inside and out. Deep inside, she knew he was determined to give her up, whether he wanted to or not. The small part of her that hadn't been disillusioned by the abandonment of every important man in her life almost felt that it was romantic. Her whole village had discarded her on a whim. Xavier had a purpose, and he couldn't be with her. *Couldn't* felt terrible, but it didn't hollow out her insides like *didn't want to*.

He led her to the helm of the ship, took both of her hands, and placed them on the spokes of the wheel. Though he might have said something about navigation and how the spokes worked with the sails and the jibs and a whole bunch of other words she didn't understand, the only thing she could focus on was the feel of his hard cock and his body pressing her to the helm. His breath against the shell of her ear. The smell of their bodies commingled on his skin.

"The sky is darkening, little witch." He nibbled on her earlobe. "As much as I wish I could return belowdecks with you and rut you into the mattress until we reach the point at which we'll enter Atlantis, that won't do."

"It won't?" To Mercy, it seemed like the best idea he'd ever had. Maybe the best idea anyone had ever had.

He chuckled, and she felt every vibration of it. "You didn't miss the stern warning my first mate gave me. We have to behave."

Somehow, that last word sounded like a naughty promise. True, she hadn't dressed him down in so many words. But the other woman's warning gaze had been clear. Xavier had shirked his responsibilities as the ship's captain because of Mercy, which made Mercy a danger to their victory. She didn't sense the other woman would look as kindly upon Mercy if she caused them not to secure first place in the regatta.

"Every person on this ship depends on me for their livelihood." Xavier was trying to explain, and it was making her feel guilty. "Most of them send money to their families, and this is the only legal, honorable way they can do that."

"But the pillaging?" There was just so much Mercy didn't know about the world—specifically his world. "That isn't legal, is it?"

"It is when it's done within the regulations."

Mercy giggled. It seemed so odd for pirates to have regulations. "There are regulations for pillaging?"

"Why do you think I didn't kill the Dutchman or his crew?" He nudged the side of her head with his chin and cuddled her closer. "Although I would have run him through had he given me the slightest regulatory cause."

"What would 'regulatory cause' have been?"

"If he'd caused one of my crew a mortal wound probably," Xavier said. "The regulations are in place to prevent another pirate war from breaking out, and so they minimize the reasons we can kill each other."

Part of Mercy was unhappy that her harm hadn't been enough cause to run the other man through with a sword. Even the egalitarian world of pirates—at least on this ship—didn't value her pain as much as it did profit. But a larger part of her was glad Xavier didn't have to face consequences for the violence he'd done. After all, it had still been very satisfying to hear the splash as the Dutchman landed in the water. And the other man had been quite irked by what Mercy's hand were doing in the Hammer's breeches.

They were both silent for a moment, but Mercy was conscious of a few members of the crew paying close attention to them. She didn't want to be a distraction to him. Especially if it cost him the trust of his crew.

"Will your crew mutiny if you don't win the regatta?"

Xavier stiffened, and she knew the ship losing because of her would cause him problems. "Probably not. We have enough years of trust and victory between us. I've done enough to retain their support."

"But their livelihoods—"

He cut her off. “I’ve made them all very rich.”

Mercy closed her eyes and felt the man at her back and the breeze on her skin. She wished she could keep this, but it was clear to her that she could not. She wished she could use her power to help them, but it was only accessible in the throes of passion or tantrum.

As a witch, she was rather hopeless. At least when it came to control. It made it difficult for her mind to relish a moment her body was enjoying very much. She hadn’t felt safe and cared for in so very long she went lax in his arms. There was no possible way she could help it.

Although she knew this sense of safety was entirely temporary and would shatter at any moment, she didn’t expect it to disappear immediately. But, in a split second, she felt a hard jerk, Xavier’s warmth was gone from her back, and she was in the air. Something wrapped around her waist and lifted her high above the ship. With no time to react, her body whipped around like a rag doll.

The crew seemed tiny below her, and her stomach tried to crawl into her throat. She opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. The cold wind whipped at her face, and she closed her eyes as she reached back down to Xavier.

All the oxygen seemed to leave her lungs as she flew. Then whatever had her pulled her down towards the water’s surface. It was funny how it took everything in her just to open her eyes. They very much wanted to stay closed, but that wouldn’t help her survive what was happening.

But when she opened her eyes to find a tentacle wrapped around her waist, pulling her to what was her apparent watery death, the only thing she could think was that she was glad she hadn’t died on the deck of the Dutchman’s ship. She was glad she had felt safe in the arms of a man who seemed to care for her—even though he could not keep her.

Frantically, she looked around to find Xavier near the helm of his ship. She wondered how she’d gotten so far in the air and realized that whatever had her was the stuff of myth. She hadn’t read about this one in any of the Dutchman’s books. So she was well and truly screwed.



XAVIER WAS ONLY STUNNED for a few seconds when the sea monster knocked him away like a chess piece it had won and then snatched Mercy from the helm of the ship. But a few seconds were all it took for him to meet her frantic gaze and fear he'd lost her forever.

The kind of all-encompassing terror he'd never known before—not in the harshest storms that had tried to kill him and his crew—ripped through his body. Something else, the will to fight and a superhuman strength, coursed through him as he stood on the deck and started for the taffrail on the stern of the ship.

The monster wouldn't kill her. Couldn't kill her. Because if it did, it would feel the wrath of the Hammer. And there were no regulations against him turning the monster into calamari for the whole of Atlantis. He would cut the bastard piece by piece and feed it to its own young. He would—

Anorra grabbed his arm before he leapt over the side of the ship. The look he gave her must have given her a degree of pause because she let him go and stepped back.

“If you do this, then we will not have enough time to make preparations, and we will lose the regatta.”

He growled at her, and she looked shocked. Before Mercy, she'd rarely questioned his intentions or orders. And although a rational man might appreciate her concern in this moment, Xavier was currently not a rational man. Every care and concern he'd ever had was consumed by the animal rage he felt and his need to save Mercy.

“I will have her back.”

Anorra backed off and nodded. “Whatever you need.”

Xavier nodded, checked for the knife at his thigh, and jumped.

The sea monster was massive, about half the size of Atlantis, so it wasn't hard to find it. But it was also fast, and it could put a lot of distance between them with very few strokes of its tentacles. From the lore, he knew it could stun its victims with the poison from its tentacles and keep them alive with oxygen from the same suction cups it used to crawl across the ocean floor.

Xavier would cut them all off. He would render the sea monster useless and make it quiver in the fear Mercy surely felt before he cut off its head and presented it to Mercy as a trophy and a gift. Filled with purpose, he swam as fast as he could, taking too few breathing breaks. If he didn't find her soon, the sea monster could pull Mercy into a distant sea in another dimension, and he would never find her again. The monster hunted magical creatures and

would feed on her magic and then kill her. He would not let that happen.

His lungs burned, but he didn't need air; he needed to reach Mercy. It should have occurred to him that he could not keep her, that she might be better off wherever the sea monster took her than making her way in a human world that hadn't been kind to her. Before her, he'd been compassionate in a general sense but utterly utilitarian in his approach to life. Before, he would have seen her inability to harness her power as weakness. He simply could not see her that way anymore. Her innocence and willingness to try surviving was beautiful to him.

Allowing any more of that to be stolen was unthinkable. He would not be yet another person who had failed her. He pushed on, even though his lungs were screaming.

When he reached the monster, which thankfully hadn't reached much depth in its haste to put surface distance between it and the *Rake's Revenge*, he didn't hesitate. When he found the tentacle holding Mercy, keeping her alive with one of its suckers, he struck. He drew his knife and began cutting. A muffled scream filled the water, and the beast released Mercy.

Another wave of panic made its way through Xavier's chest as she fell slowly in the water, her body limp, while he tried to reach her. They had limited time before the sea monster recovered and struck back at him. If he didn't retrieve Mercy, she might drown, or the sea monster might kill them both. And then the sea monster would probably be so angry that it would take his entire ship to the depths.

He'd known what could happen when he jumped over the taffrail moments ago, and it hadn't given him pause. He didn't know why this particular witch affected him this much, and he would question that later. He just kept pumping his arms and diving deeper into the sea.

Finally. Finally, he grasped at Mercy's skirts and pulled her close to him. Once he'd gathered her to his chest, he swam towards the surfaces as hard as he could with one arm and kicked his legs towards the surface with all his might. His lungs ached for oxygen, and his mind would start growing fuzzy in mere moments. But Mercy in his arms limp in his arms, not breathing because of the stunning toxin from the sea monster, spurred him on.

She would survive. No matter what.

They reached the surface just as he was starting to see flashing lights in his vision. He made sure her face was above the waterline before looking around for the *Rake's Revenge*. But he didn't see that. The first thing he saw

was Anorra in a dinghy with her arm outstretched. She didn't even grimace when he put Mercy in her arms before levering himself into the small boat.

He was even more surprised to see several members of his crew with her.

"She's not breathing," Anorra said.

Xavier looked down at his little witch's limp body. He only wanted to see her like that if she'd passed out from the massive pleasure he'd given her. She *was* breathing now, but just barely. "Give her to me. Giving her breath will not help her. The toxin has to wear off." But he needed to hold her now. No one else would have her.

"We should get her to Atlantis."

Xavier nodded. "As soon as we get back to the ship."

It didn't take long to get back to the *Rake's Revenge*. It had anchored where the sea monster had snatched Mercy, and the weather had thankfully been calm. They'd enter the island with a piece of eight without delay.

He'd already made the required leap of faith when he jumped off his ship in the hope that he could save her. Because she was lying in his arms. Regatta be damned. The championship could get fucked. He wasn't letting her go.



After going below the surface, Mercy didn't remember much. Just flashes: Xavier's face. The way he brushed her hair away from her eyes and laid his lips against her forehead. The sky and sea air as his crew pulled a dinghy up to the deck of the ship.

She slipped in and out of consciousness, so she didn't know if the warp of time and space moving through her body was a dream. The toxin wore off in fits and starts, but her exhaustion eventually won out before she could see anything about Atlantis.

Mercy woke slowly. She still felt as though she were underwater, not breathing in stasis for long moments before she realized she was taking in air on her own and had opened her eyes. The first thing she saw and the first thing she felt was Xavier. His arms were around her, and he cradled her head against his chest on a bed that wasn't swaying back and forth on the open sea. His bare feet were crossed at the end of the mattress, and his breath was steady and soft.

The absence of rocking waves was slightly disconcerting but was tempered by the comfort of his arms. They were on land, and he was here with her.

"You're here." Her voice was full of wonder because she'd truly thought she would die when the sea beast had taken her under the water. And she hadn't panicked about never seeing home again; she'd been deeply sad at the thought of losing him. But here he was, holding her while she breathed.

He didn't respond right away, and she craned her neck to see he was

asleep. Without thinking too long about what a bad idea it was to grow even more connected to this pirate, she kissed him. He didn't stay asleep for long because his arms tightened around her, grasping at her flesh as though he couldn't decide whether to check her for injuries or take her. He seemed to make his decision when he burrowed his hands under the—she guessed—borrowed chemise and pulled her ass into his hands before turning her and settling her on top of him, leaving her straddling his hard cock.

“Where are we?”

“A room above the bar on Atlantis—the Siren's Call.”

She closed her eyes. They had actually crossed into a different dimension. “Why aren't we aboard the ship?”

“I wanted you to be safe and warm.” He kissed the sensitive skin right above her pulse. “Comfortable.”

Although they should probably discuss her being snatched by a sea monster and his rescuing her—probably the fact he was here instead of aboard the *Rake's Revenge* as well—he didn't stop kissing her. It was as though he couldn't stop kissing her. This was a good thing because she needed his kiss too much for him to stop. And she didn't really want to talk either.

When Mercy bit into his bottom lip, he went feral, thrusting his hips against her, rubbing her clit with his cloth-covered cock until she moaned and squirmed against him. Even though it provided the opportunity to talk and break the spell, she took his face in her hands and kissed his jaw and neck and chest.

The first time he'd fucked her had been almost frantic—unplanned and surprising to them both—that she hadn't gotten to savor his body the way she wanted to. Knowing it was only a matter of time before he left her here added so much intensity to her desire. He was like Christmas candy she needed to eat now before it spoiled and became inedible. And that candy had to keep her alive for years to come because at this moment she couldn't bear the thought of having anything else.

All she knew was that this brush with death made her want to live even more than her first in the village. And all that mattered to her was that she was in a bed with a man she was infatuated with right now.

“I'm here,” he whispered as she trailed her tongue along his collarbone. “You're alive.”

She was happy to be alive in this moment, and it felt worlds apart from

when he'd found her on the deck of the Dutchman's ship, waiting for fate to take her. Of course, this time, she'd relied on him to save her again. But she couldn't be expected to locate her will to live in conjunction with the means to survive being snatched by a sea monster.

She'd figure that out after Xavier made her come a few times. She knew he was on board with that plan when he pulled her chemise over her head, leaving her naked above him. He used his thighs to hoist her farther up his body and took one of her nipples into his mouth, sucking and biting in turn. She ran her hands over his braids, which hung loose. She wanted to entwine herself with every part of him so he would never let her go.

"You're delicious everywhere, so I understand why the sea monster would want to eat your power."

It was news to her what the sea monster had wanted from her, but that made sense. Ever since she'd figured out that she was a witch, everyone had been interested in her for her power.

Only Xavier had been interested in her for more than that. It might just be the pleasure her body could offer his or a little bit of revenge—but at least he wanted her for who she knew herself to be instead of what he wanted from her.

She must have drifted on that thought because he stopped sucking on her nipple and looked up at her. "Where did you go, little witch? The sea monster can't get you here. We left it behind outside Atlantis. No harm will come to you in this place."

"I wasn't worried about the sea monster." She took the side of his face in her hand. "I was just thinking that this is the first time since I left home that someone wants me and not what I can do for them. You really aren't interested in using me for my power, are you?"

Instead of looking her in the face, he took her nipple between his teeth again, sending sparks down her spine and scattering her thoughts to the four winds. "I'm interested in the power you have over me, and I want you to embrace your power. It will make it easier..."

He didn't have to say that it would make it easier to say goodbye to her. But hadn't things changed when he'd risked his life to save her from the sea monster? And he was here with her instead of aboard his ship. That had to mean something. But maybe it didn't. What did she really know about love? At least he wanted her to be able to keep herself safe. That was something, she guessed.

“I don’t want to talk about his anymore.” She didn’t want their affair to end. She didn’t want to be alone again. And she didn’t want to think about where she would go or if there was any dimension that would possibly embrace her.

“What do you want?” His wolfish smile returned and fueled the fire in her lower belly. “I can’t say I have the wherewithal to deny you anything when you’re sitting on my cock.”

“I want you to make me forget.”

“Forget what?” he asked absently as he licked a path between her breasts.

“Everything—my own name, the fact we don’t have this forever—” His fingers tightened against the bare skin over her ribs. “Make me forget I was almost drained by a sea monster and everything that happened before and after. Make me able to forget everything that will come next by recalling these stolen moments with you, in this room.”

“That’s a tall order.” He rolled her over so he loomed over her. It stole her breath, and her chest heaved, making her nipples brush against the skin of his chest. She reached up and tried to touch him again, but he took her wrists and pinned them to the bed. “Okay?”

“More than okay.” She craned her neck and licked a path from lips to the pulse at his throat. “I’d be even more okay if you removed your breeches and fucked me.”

She felt his cock grow harder as he rubbed it against her center until she panted. He seemed to like her telling him what she wanted, so she saw no alternative but to continue. She licked a trail across his broad chest. “You taste like salt and the sea. I would drink your sweat as though it were wine.”

That made him move her wrists into one hand, stretched over her head. With the other, he stroked her breast, her flank, and her hip on the way to unfasten his breeches. “I was going to eat your cunt. It’s sweet as the rest of you. I’d like that for my wine—I swear it gets me drunker than the most potent rum I’ve ever had.”

“You can do that instead.”

He shook his head, and his braids hit her face. Her curling hair entwined with them and brought his lips back to hers. “You’ve asked for my cock, and you’ll receive it.”

“I’d like your mouth on my cunt later.” She’d never said that word before, but something about being with him made her feel brazen and powerful. It made her even wetter and more eager for him.

Instead of feeding his cock into her and rutting, as she'd pretty much ordered him to do, he rubbed her clit with his thumb while he worked two and then three of his fingers into her. Even being full of him wasn't enough. She wanted more. He made her greedy. So she kissed him again, needing his mouth on hers if it couldn't be in two places at once.

Her orgasm came as a surprise to her. One moment, she felt as though they were both floating above the bed. The next, she screamed his name into his mouth as her body quaked around his fingers. While she recovered, he removed his fingers and sucked them into his mouth. It was the most obscene thing she'd ever witnessed: his swollen lips around the most intimate taste he could have of her and his tongue seeming to search for more.

It made her needy for him again, yet he sat on his haunches and stared at her as though she were a ship he'd conquered or a race he'd won. She certainly felt conquered and like she'd won something. She let herself look at him, the lion on the skin over one pectoral muscle and the compass on the center of his chest. A quotation about loyalty over his ribs that she reached out and touched. He shivered, but that didn't stop his perusal of her.

Only the sound of a ticking clock interrupted the silence of the room. She wished it would stop so she could have this without the reminder that it wasn't permanent. And then it did. The dust motes in the room stopped falling through the rays of sunlight. They were both breathing, staring at each other and alive. But nothing else progressed through time.

“Quite a power, little witch.”

She smiled at him. “I guess I really needed you to eat my pussy.”



Xavier sighed, pretending to be put-upon. But he wished his purpose in life were to serve this woman in any way she asked. His cock was painfully hard, but he could forget that momentarily in the face of needing to consume her, lick by lick.

He moved down the bed and spread her lush thighs wide. For long moments, he looked at the blooming flower of her cunt, wet and open from his fingers. He laid kisses on the juncture between her thigh and pussy, making her shudder and moan. She threaded her fingers through his braids and pulled his face towards where she wanted him. She didn't need to do that. He wasn't a sadist, and he wouldn't make her wait anymore. He licked the inner lips of her pussy and ran his teeth over the skin there. She gasped and arched into his mouth, edging her clit closer to him impatiently.

That made him smile into her skin before he took that bundle of nerves between his lips and sucked. It was as though they were one because he could feel the way a lightning strike of pleasure swept through her as he savored the loamy taste of her pleasure wetting his entire face. After she came for him the second time, he eased off her clit but petted her sweet center with his tongue until she pushed him away.

“Xavier, if you don't fuck me right now, I will never forgive you.”

She wouldn't forgive him for any of the things he'd yet to tell her, but that was a problem they would never face. As inherently powerful as she was, she couldn't stop time forever. It would march on, and they would part.

He ignored the pang of loss he felt at the idea of being away from Mercy.

As much as he loved looking at her, he wouldn't give up another millionth of a second of having his body enmeshed with hers. They both sighed when he lined his cock up with her entrance and eased into her.

He was lazy about it at first, feeling what made her tighten around him and what sounds he could elicit from her lips if he stroked her from one angle or another. Then he lost the ability to do that because of the way her cunt squeezed him as though she were trying to wring the seed from him.

It didn't take very long. When she wrapped her legs around him, hooking her thighs over his ass to pull him deeper, he was lost. She arched again, exposing her pretty throat in a way that practically begged him to bite down on the tendon between her neck and shoulder. And then she squeezed him from the inside, pulling him closer. That was what broke him. He couldn't stop the orgasm barreling towards him. He could barely pull out of her in time to spend on her thigh.

True to her word, she licked the sweat from his shoulder, which made him shudder. And when he rolled away from her, she shocked him by putting her fingertips into the come on her thigh and putting those fingertips in her mouth.

When she was done tasting his seed, she licked her lips and said, "Really more of a chaser." He slapped the side of her thigh, and she started. He was still relishing the way her supple flesh jiggled from the impact when she asked, "What was that for?"

He smiled down at her flushed face, wanting to memorize it. "For ripping the seed from my cock before I was ready."



WHEN XAVIER RETURNED to the ship, it was the Hammer time. There would be no more idyllic afternoons in a room above the Siren's Call. There would be no more sucking warm and welcoming witch's teats. No more pleasure or fun. At least until after the regatta.

Anorra gave him a look when he boarded that could have peeled the paint off the hull of the ship. Any thoughts that didn't involve becoming ready for the regatta retreated into his body along with his balls.

He set about checking the rigging and the setup, ensuring that they'd off-

loaded the appropriate amount of cargo according to the regulations. Anorra could have done this, but she'd trusted he'd return to the ship to do so. That was a relief. The last thing he wanted was to let his crew down. He'd made a commitment to them, and the last time he'd let a lover turn his head, they'd all paid the price. He'd promised never to allow that to happen again.

"How is she?" He hadn't expected Anorra to even to ask that. He looked away, knowing his long-time friend would see the entire story written on his face. "Well enough for you to have a shit-eating grin on your face, apparently."

How the hell did she do that? Maybe she was really a witch who read minds? It would track. "She's at the Siren's Call."

"Great, Seiko can regale her with tales of your victories, and she'll fall even further in love with you." His friend never stopped coiling rope while reading him for filth. It was really quite impressive.

If he didn't know for a fact Anorra was not and never had been attracted to him, he would think she was jealous. She did care about him as a person as well as an employer, but her concern for his well-being did not travel below his waist or several inches above his knees.

"She is not in love with me," he said to convince himself as much as to reassure Anorra. "She is discovering who she is without the limiting expectations of her provincial upbringing and learning to control her magic."

Anorra snorted. "All with a little help from your cock." And then she dropped the coil of rope and walked away.

He hated that she knew him so well. Xavier angrily picked up the coil and put it in place. He then walked the perimeter of the ship and checked items off the pre-race list he kept in his head.

Anorra found him again.

"Did you buy the spell to raise the ship so we could remove the remaining barnacles?" He knew she would have done this without his asking, so he merely posed the question to annoy her.

She just shot him a hard look, but pushing her buttons lightened his mood.

He greeted each member of the crew and asked for status reports on improvements they'd made to the boat since the last regatta. Everything was in order. And yet he still felt out of sorts.

He'd ordered food to the room he'd put Mercy in before leaving, but there was still an empty pit at the bottom of his stomach. It had formed as

soon as he'd walked out the door to their room, intensified as he'd walked down the stairs, and become a true distraction as he'd walked through the door of the bar and into the public square near the docks.

Mercy might not know what she was doing with her magic, but she'd certainly cast a spell over him. A spell so strong that he didn't notice the Dutchman's shiny new ship entering the portal until it slid right next to the *Rake's Revenge*.



AFTER CONSUMING the meal Xavier had ordered, washing up, and staring at the wall for an hour, Mercy ventured down the stairs into the tavern. There was an East Asian woman with pointed ears and the bottom half of her head closely shaved behind the bar, drying glasses and trying not to stare at her.

Mercy assumed this was Seiko, the owner of the *Siren's Call* and the person who had procured dry clothing, food, and medical attention for Xavier when they'd arrived. When he'd left her in their room at the inn, he hadn't said when he would return, just that it would be late. He'd also told her not to leave the building and to trust no one inside it—not even the proprietor.

But Xavier didn't own or control her. Even though she was kind of obsessed with how he could make her feel, she didn't have to listen to every word he told her. After all, she was making every attempt to be her own woman from now on. That meant she could figure out who to trust on her own.

Unlike with the Dutchman, she would listen to her intuition this time. If she didn't find the woman trustworthy, she would not trust her. But she simply needed more information about the world she'd walked into.

"He told me not to allow you to leave, but you can go if you need to," the elven woman said with a smile. Mercy liked her immediately.

"Are you not loyal to the Hammer?" Mercy felt a little bit weird using Xavier's moniker instead of his real name. But he was known by his fearsome reputation on Atlantis.

"My only true loyalty is to my coin." Seiko shrugged. "But it's not like you could get very far."

"You're Seiko," Mercy said as she sidled up to the bar. "And he told me

you know everything about everyone on the island.”

“True.” Seiko nodded. “What can I get you? I’ll put everything on his tab.” She looked Mercy up and down in a lascivious manner. “Or I’ll take payment in kind.”

Mercy smiled at her. She wasn’t interested in having sex with anyone but Xavier at the moment, but who knew what kind of lonely nights she would face when he sailed away and left her here? “You can put it on his tab since he’s appointed himself my temporary keeper.”

“Offer stays open.”

Mercy looked at the selection of liquor when her eye caught on the specialty drink. “In that case, I’d like a Siren’s Kiss and some information.”

Seiko nodded again. “One Siren’s Kiss.” She squinted and examined Mercy’s face closely. “And information about Sir Xavier Nigel David Aston’s sordid past.”

Mercy was pretty sure her eyes had bugged out of her head, because the barkeeper laughed as she poured spirits Mercy didn’t recognize into a cocktail shaker with some otherworldly looking ice. “You know a lot about him. All his middle names.”

Seiko placed the luminescent drink in front of Mercy. “You can only have one of those. After that, you can have as much straight rum as you can stomach, but two of those will put you into another dimension.”

Somehow, Mercy didn’t think the other woman was speaking metaphorically. And once she took a sip of the drink, she knew more than one of these would send her on a fantastic journey. She’d had enough of those lately.

“And yes, I know everything about everyone on the island. I know things about the Hammer that he probably doesn’t suspect about himself. He’s very private about his affairs, but I’ve survived on Atlantis by having information of a quality even higher than that of my spirits. A knight sailing in a pirate race has quite the target on his back. It’s bad enough that he’s different from the rest of them on almost every level without them knowing the ins and outs of his weaknesses. Well, the weaknesses he had after—”

The barkeeper stopped, but Mercy was hungry for as much as she could find out about her rescuer and lover. “After what?”

Seiko looked around the bar to make sure no one else was listening. But there was no one there. When Mercy looked at her quizzically, she said, “Sometimes we get wood sprites paid to spy, but we’re in the clear. Are you

sure you really want to know the whole story? It could shatter that look of love you've got going on."

It would be good if she learned information that would shatter everything she felt about Xavier. It would hurt less when he abandoned her. "I have to know everything I can. I feel as though my life depends on it."

"If the Dutchman discovers your location, it just might."

"He's here?" Panic nearly clogged her throat, so she could barely squeak, "On Atlantis?"

"Of course he is. He just sailed up a few minutes ago." Seiko rolled her eyes and sighed. "The Hammer really told you nothing, did he? Figures."

"No, he didn't. I just figured when they burned his ship and he walked the plank, it would take some time for him and his crew to regroup."

"I guess that I can fill in some blanks," Seiko said. "The Dutchman only cares about racing. He lacks the curiosity and imagination to grok that your magic is fueled by sex. That's why he didn't try to seduce you right away. Or successfully. And that's why he let his crew harass you and make you clean up after them while you were aboard."

How did she know that the Dutchman had tried to seduce me?

Mercy had come to strongly suspect there was something specific to her attraction to Xavier had unlocked something about her magic—something that even her feelings for the vicar hadn't awakened—and that made something wooden settle in her gut. Did that mean her magic would fade when they parted?

"How do you know all this?" Mercy wondered whether the drink was actually truth serum and she'd told this woman everything about her life and simply forgotten.

"There were rumors of you going around for months."

Mercy was starting to get angry. "How were there rumors about a witch from another fucking dimension for months?" The timbers shook, and Seiko gave Mercy a hard look. If she wanted information, it wouldn't do to rock the tavern off its foundations.

Seiko looked down, and Mercy waited for the other woman to gather her thoughts or decide how much information she was going to share. Mercy's heart raced, and trying to have patience was going to make her pop a vein in her forehead if Seiko didn't start talking soon.

"Atlantis is outside space and time. So your mother visited Atlantis when she was pregnant with you, but it wasn't that long ago here."

“She never left the vill—”

Her mother hadn’t told anyone in the village that she was a witch either, so what was a trip to an island between worlds while heavily pregnant?

“She went to get the blessing of the seer in the woods.” This just kept getting weirder and weirder. “The seer foretold that you would be the most powerful witch the worlds—all the worlds—had ever seen and that she would do well to hide you away for as long as she could. To train you in the ways of the witch so you wouldn’t cause multiple dimensions to collapse—”

“Too bad my fucking mother died giving birth to me.”

Seiko pointed at her. “See, that’s why I’ll never have children. There’s no way to guarantee you’ll even be able to survive it, much less not fuck up a kid.”

Mercy took a sip of her drink. “I mean, the whole possibility of hemorrhage is why the first spell I taught myself was long-acting birth control.”

“Good move. You could sell that at the apothecary down the street.”

Mercy hadn’t considered staying in Atlantis for long, and the possibility of earning a living using her magic didn’t exist in the world they’d come from. Maybe there were other dimensions where witches were welcome? She’d ask Seiko later, but she was so lost in her lust for Xavier that she needed more information about him and his connection to her powers.

“Even Xavier knew of me?”

Seiko shrugged again, and Mercy interpreted this version of the gesture as a yes. “The Hammer is a tough nut to crack. He used to be a whole lot different than he is now.”

“How so?” Mercy could barely imagine him any other way. Of everyone she’d ever met, he was the most him version of himself.

“Well, for one thing, he didn’t have the hair and all the muscles. He almost looked like a choir boy. He only started paying close attention to the theatrical part of being a pirate after...”

Seiko shot her a look.

Mercy realized a lover was probably at the root of Xavier’s shift in persona. It’s not that she’d expected him not to have any lovers before her, but she still wanted to rip their faces off—especially if they’d hurt him.

“Nadine was—quite something. I guess that’s why I was so surprised when he showed up with you.”

Yikes. That felt like a knife cutting into her skin. The barkeeper must

have realized Mercy had taken that personally because she quickly added, “Nadine, his ex, was also a witch, but she’d always known she was a witch. She knew exactly how to wield her power practically since birth. And that was the problem. She could manipulate almost every facet of reality, but she could never get the Hammer to put his full focus on her. And he hated how much their relationship distracted him from racing. They fought all the time.”

Although she’d always thought of herself as a simple village girl, Mercy was a powerful witch. And the idea Xavier had been with an even more powerful witch bothered her more than the fact he’d had other romantic partners.

“Where is she now?” This might be looking into her future. Everything Xavier had said about not wanting any distractions on his ship had been rooted in this experience. And even if he’d allowed himself to become entangled with this other witch, he wouldn’t permit that to happen again. No wonder he’d done his damndest to push her away emotionally even if he couldn’t bring himself to do so physically.

Seiko hesitated to speak, but Mercy willed her to continue until she did. “She’s several dimensions away. I don’t know exactly what happened, because the crew of the *Rake’s Revenge* knows how to keep their mouths shut. The rumor is that, when she wouldn’t go quietly, Xavier called in reinforcements and got rid of her.”

Several dimensions away. Mercy really should have taken the Hammer’s threats to toss her into the sea a whole lot more seriously. He actually would have done it had she given him enough reason. Though she didn’t think he would discard her so easily now, she clearly didn’t know as much about him as she’d thought.

But Seiko wasn’t completely done with her benevolent emotional terrorism. “That’s why I think he put it in the Dutchman’s head that you were available and probably going to be amenable to a rescue. He knew what kind of havoc a powerful witch could wreak on a ship during regatta season, and that man will do anything for a strategic advantage.”

Time stopped again, but only in her own mind. It wasn’t just that she didn’t know everything about Xavier. It was that she knew nothing.

“He was trying to use me as a weapon?” Pure rage rose into Mercy’s throat as the full implications of Sir Xavier Nigel David Aston’s plan sank into her brain. She felt so ridiculous for how she’d viewed him as her savior when all along he’d just been using her as a tool to win.

He'd never even expected her to come into her powers. All those soft words of encouragement and commanding touches were ways to manipulate her. Once he'd captured the Dutchman's ship and hurt the other captain's chances of winning the regatta, he'd played with her like a cat with a particularly oblivious mouse.

And she'd fallen right into his trap. She'd been so starved for love and affection—acceptance—that she'd drunk up his attention without question. She stood so quickly that the barstool clattered to the wooden floor. Seiko jumped but didn't react as Mercy marched to the door and exited the Siren's Call.

Mercy would have pinned the other woman in place using the power of her rage if Seiko had tried to stop her. She had business aboard the *Rake's Revenge*.



A cold wind hit the back of Xavier's neck, and a shiver went down his spine. This time, it had nothing to do with the fact his opponent had showed up to the regatta with a brand-new ship in perfect condition, acting as though nothing had happened. His body knew that Mercy was near and that she was angry.

The ship was currently being levitated by a spell while the crew cleaned barnacles off the hull to improve aerodynamics. But, in a flash, it dropped back into the water, causing a huge splash that flowed over the docks but somehow avoided Mercy's skirts.

He turned just as she marched up the gangplank and onto the deck. The purpose in her steps was a warning as sure as a shot fired from a musket into the air. In this case, she was the loaded gun, and he was the target.

He'd known she would eventually find out he'd used the unfortunate predicament of her witch trial and orchestrated her "rescue" by the Dutchman, but he'd hoped Seiko would keep her mouth shut. He should have known better.

He also should have shunted Mercy to a realm where she would feel safe directly after reaching Atlantis. But he'd become distracted with making sure she was alive and then soaking up as much of her as he could. He'd never been wise when it came to lovers—especially witches. It seemed he'd been wrong about learning his lesson.

"I should have tied you to the bed so you'd stay put." It probably wouldn't do to anger her, but he couldn't seem to help it. He craved the zap

of electricity through the air when she was filled with righteous and beautiful rage.

“Shut up.”

Xavier felt his lips adhere to each other. Sadly, it seemed that even he’d underestimated her powers and her ability to harness them. He’d truly screwed up in siccing her on the Dutchman. Poor man never would have known what to do—how to unlock her gifts. Xavier should probably have been terrified—she might curse him after all—but his primary emotion was pride.

She stalked towards where he was still coiling rope, and she didn’t stop until they were nose to nose. “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t turn you and your entire crew into the swine you are.”

It would help if he could speak, but he’d have to make do with the skills he still had. He wrapped his arms around her torso and hauled Mercy over his shoulder. Given the tight quarters at the docks and the ruckus she’d made when she’d shown up, the entirety of the Dutchman’s crew was probably listening, hoping to gain an advantage or simply revel in Xavier’s self-induced misfortune. This was an interaction best had in his cabin.

But Mercy wasn’t thinking strategically. She beat his back and kicked her feet, coming dangerously close to hitting him in the face and sending them both flying down the stairs. Because he couldn’t speak, he gave her a sharp slap on her shapely ass, which stunned her for a moment.

His crew, for their part, didn’t even bother keeping straight faces. Barely hidden snickers and full-on guffaws followed them through the ship’s hold. Anorra would hear of this and dress him down as well. At least she would if Xavier escaped Mercy’s wrath in roughly one piece.

They reached the captain’s quarters, and he put her down. He closed the door behind him and leaned on it so she wouldn’t make a run for it since she’d left him without the ability to issue orders.

“You are a monster,” she screamed. “You destroyed my life!” She paced the very small area of floor, and he would have enjoyed watching the swish of her hips and the way her breasts heaved if the anger weren’t at him. In fact, he was enjoying it. He was probably a bit addled for that. “You aren’t going to explain yourself?”

He gestured at his sealed lips, and she stopped pacing. She looked down at one hand and said a few words to herself. He felt the flesh of his mouth unstick from itself and took a deep breath. A rush of pride that she’d

progressed in her magic hit him, followed by remorse. “That was a fantastic spell. You’re growing more powerful.” She gave him a sharp look that said she was seconds from sealing his mouth again, so he added, “I’m sorry.”

Again, her anger rose, and he could feel it. “You’re sorry? That’s it?”

“That’s all I have to give.” He usually didn’t apologize, so this was more than he’d ever given the last witch to turn his life upside down. He didn’t say that, of course. Maybe she didn’t even know about the other witch.

“Seiko told me everything.”

He winced. Damned half elf. He should have known that none of his secrets were safe.

“I know you pointed the Dutchman in my direction because you’d had your regatta season destroyed by your involvement with another witch.” Her tone was mocking, and he would have enjoyed watching the swish of her hips and the way her breasts heaved if the anger weren’t at him. “She told me you tossed your lover into another dimension because she was too much of a distraction.”

“That’s not what—”

“Don’t make me seal your lips again. Or send your cock into another dimension. One where cocks are food for sea monsters.” She pointed a finger at him, and he was ready to be turned into a toad. But she took a deep breath and seemed to get her anger under a bit more control. “Why did you even save me from the sea monster? Wouldn’t it have been convenient to just let it take me?”

This he couldn’t keep his mouth shut about. “I could not have done that.” He couldn’t have brought himself to let her be drained of her magic and probably kill her, but he couldn’t reveal how he had feelings he didn’t understand about Mercy that he’d never had about his former lover. He’d been naïve and so flattered that a powerful being wanted to be with him, thought Nadine could enhance his brand as a pirate. But there had never been this connection. He’d thought they could part ways peacefully, but to the breakup had gotten ugly. They still couldn’t be in the same dimension. But she had banished herself. Not that correcting the facts would comfort Mercy right now.

Nadine had never made his chest feel hollow as he walked away from her. She’d never stood up to him and then yielded to her own pleasure in the same way. He’d never needed her to melt into him more than his next breath. He’d never wanted to save her from every bit of pain this world and the next

could dole out.

He couldn't gather the words to say any of this, but Mercy saved him from having to when she stopped pacing and asked, "Why did you save me from the sea monster? Was it just so you could interfere with the Dutchman's race? Or was it because you weren't done fucking me yet?"

Xavier looked down at his feet, ashamed for having lied to her. "I didn't expect the Dutchman's crew to recover as quickly as they have." He glanced out the porthole, and Mercy's gaze followed his. He didn't know how it was possible, but the new ship looked faster than the old one. "And I saved you because I had to. I couldn't not save you."

"Because you wanted to fuck me again?" Instead of angry, she sounded forlorn, and he couldn't have that.

When he stepped towards her, she backed up. But there was only so far she could go. She ended up sitting on the edge of the bed. The tension between them was as sharp as a knife when he reached his hand out and gently cupped her jaw. "I used your situation to gain an advantage in what I'm starting to see as a silly exercise."

"It's not silly if it's the livelihood of your crew at stake." She understood why he did it, then. But that still didn't make it right. It didn't make it hurt less.

"All I can do is apologize for hurting you and lying to you. I can promise I'll never do it again." He paused, wanting to throw himself at her feet and beg for forgiveness. His pride wouldn't allow it, and he had the feeling she wouldn't respect it. "I care about you, Mercy. I have since I first saw you. You were a tool before, and now you're a woman who means something to me."

"I'm not just a witch or a tool anymore?"

How could he show her how much more she was without ripping out his heart and presenting it to her on a silver platter?



“**Y**ou spanked me.” Mercy thought it was important to address, and it would divert his attention from the fact she’d essentially asked him if he loved her. “As though I were some sort of troublesome chit.”

“Well, you’d sealed my mouth shut, and I had limited means by which to communicate with you.”

Mercy leaned closer to him, scented the salty air on him. “I liked it.”

“You did?” When Mercy looked up at him, he looked the part of the rake with his lips twisted into a lascivious grin. “What did you like about it?”

He tried to step back, but she hooked the waist of his breeches with two fingers. “I liked the sensation of it. The surprise. And I was so angry that it... it grounded me.”

“You’ve forgiven me, though. So you don’t need me to ground you with the palm of my hand.”

Mercy shook her head. “I wouldn’t say I’ve forgiven you. Not by a long shot.”

“You’re still angry, then.” He chuckled. “And you’ll probably shout the sky down or turn my crew into snorting pigs if I don’t appease your rage.” He tapped his fingers against his lips as though he were thinking about how he could mend the situation, and the skin around his eyes crinkled the way it did when he laughed.

He knew this was a game. And she wanted to play.

“I mean, an orgasm would be a good way to start.” She looked down and then up through her lashes; she’d tried to infuse as much innocence and

nonchalance into her tone as she could, but being near him made her wanton and brazen. However, the game they were playing required the illusion of innocence at least.

“Yes, but you’d have to have been a good girl for me to reward you with orgasms.” He took her chin with his hand and held her gaze forcibly.

“And I haven’t been a good girl.” Mercy looked over at the coil of rope he’d dropped next to the door. “You probably should have tied me up at the inn. And then I couldn’t have learned what a bad, bad man you are and what you’ll do to me if I don’t please you.”

For a second, she wondered if she’d gone too far and said too much. She didn’t know why she wasn’t still enraged at him. On one hand, he’d destroyed her entire life. On the other hand, she would have been burned at the stake if he hadn’t told the Dutchman where to find her. The lying was another issue entirely, and she would extract a pound of flesh for that later. If they even had a later.

And she worried more when the humor dropped from his face. “I am a bad man, but I think a part of me wanted you to find out from someone else all the things I should have told you.”

“The other witch, Nadine, she hurt you, didn’t she?” From the moment she’d first heard his moniker, she’d been convinced he was invulnerable, almost a superhero. But there had to have been hurt somewhere in his past to make him that way.

She thought he might respond, but he shook his head. “She doesn’t belong here.” Some barrier came up over his gaze, and she fought a pang of disappointment that he was still hiding from her even though he’d promised honesty. “You keep looking at that rope. Do you want me to tie you up now?”

The idea of being trussed up and having him touch her at his leisure filled her with a wave of hot lust that took all her doubts away in an undertow. She felt like her whole body went soft and slack, the only thing preventing her from becoming a puddle was his hand holding her chin. She nodded.

“We don’t have that much time, so I won’t be able to get my fill of you.” He sounded disappointed as he let her go, then crossed to the door. He picked up the rope and tested its strength. That was for show. A rope with any wear to it had no place on the Hammer’s ship.

He looked up at her, and the stud in his nose seemed to wink with mischief. “You have been such a bad girl that I’m going to have to keep you

from moving those hands and making any trouble while I fuck you.”

Mercy tried to put on a mask of fear when she truly wanted to crawl across the floor and lay herself at his feet. She scrambled back on the bed as he stalked to her instead. It was difficult for her to take her eyes off his big hands uncoiling the rope.

He didn't say any more and kept her waiting as he tied one end to one side of the massive wood headboard and then moved around the bed to tie the other end in the same way. Then he pulled the large knife from his belt and cut the length of rope in half.

“I'm trusting you to be a good girl.” Her pussy went soft and wet when he said “good girl” the same way it did when he called her “little witch.” “So I'm not going to bind your legs.” He ran a hand underneath her skirts to above where her stockings covered her flesh. His fingers lingered on the sensitive skin of her upper thigh. “That means no kicking.”

His voice was stern, but his touch was soft as he trailed closer to the center of her. She was lost in him again, as though she'd never been angry with him at all. But he reminded her of her rage when he took his hand away just as his finger had brushed her clit.

He stepped back and looked at her as though he were a crew member waiting for inspection. “Do you want to be naked when I tie you to my bed and fuck you, little witch?” He didn't wait for her to respond before saying, “I think you should be naked.”

When he didn't move to help her undress, she realized he wanted her to put on a show. And a show, she would give him. She moved her finger down the front of her body, and the laces of her corset undid themselves. She pulled it off and then made another gesture towards the back of her dress. The button came open, and the skirt fluttered to the floor.

She noticed the candle on the nightstand and smiled wickedly at him. Her chemise would be see-through in the light, so she knelt up on the bed and turned her back to him. She spread her thighs and stretched her arms over her head. He would see the entire curve of her body but not the flesh.

He was so hungry that he growled, “Hurry up.”

Instead of pulling her chemise over her head, lying spread eagle, and begging him to put his cock anywhere he wanted, she swayed to the rhythm of the relatively calm waters beneath them. As she moved, she could feel his tension ratcheting up. She only moved to remove the final piece of clothing when she sensed he was at his breaking point. She didn't quite understand the

specifics of how she could intuit that more teasing would make him lose his mind, but she did.

When her final garment drifted to the bed, his hands came around her waist almost immediately. He gripped her hard and ran his nose up the side of her neck. He did that a lot, as though he were a beast and had to scent his kill. She realized then that she was no longer afraid of him. In fact, she hadn't been since he'd rescued her from the sea monster. He was dangerous to her heart, and she was very likely already addicted to the way he made her feel, but he'd used his dangerous nature for her enough that she didn't fear him. It was like the danger he represented was her tool.

"You drive me absolutely wild, little witch." His voice had an unsteady, feral quality to it that made her shudder. He moved them so they were both kneeling on the bed, facing the headboard. He pulled one wrist and wrapped it in rope before tying it off, testing the strength, and running his finger between the rope and her skin to make sure it wasn't too tight. "I want to leave you with marks, but I won't this time."

She couldn't respond with anything but fast breaths while he fastened her other wrist, and she couldn't make her mouth form words when he asked, "Still with me?"

She nodded, but he wouldn't accept that alone.

"If you want this to stop, just say 'Dutchman.'"

"Okay." She panted out the word, and he chuckled.

He moved her hair off the back of her neck before kissing the skin there. "You're so soft." He moved his hands to her breasts, then cupped them both and pulled her back against him. His erection poked into her behind, and she ground against it, trying to torture him the way he was slaying her with his hands.

He grabbed both her nipples and pinched until she squealed. "This is your punishment, little witch. I'm not going to give you my cock until you've earned it."

Mercy suspected he was truly punishing himself, but that wasn't the game here.

She shivered with raw want as he folded her in half so her chest rested on pillows and her ass was up in the air. Before this point, she hadn't felt helpless. She hadn't felt any urge to struggle. But this position made her shift and tremble. He could do anything he wanted to her.

And he'd lied to her multiple times. The vulnerable way she was laid out

for him made her wonder if she'd been foolish to accept his apology. And then she remembered the look on his face when she'd awoken from the sea monster's poison and the way he'd looked at her after she came. He couldn't have faked that. She would have felt it as certain as she'd felt he was going to snap if she didn't bare herself to him moments ago.

He ran his hand over her spine. "Shhh, little witch. This won't hurt... much."

That was her only warning before he smacked her across her bare ass. She jumped at the sound of it more than the sting. When she'd been wearing clothes, the spank hadn't felt so visceral. It had gotten her attention, but it had felt different. It wasn't that she didn't like it, though. She wanted more.

"Please," she whispered, unable to crane her head far enough to look back at him. As though he knew she needed it, he kept one hand holding her hip as he waited to spank her again.

"Please stop? Or please more?"

It wasn't very piratical of him to ask for permission, but she didn't fully trust him, and he knew that. He was taking care of her. So unlike any man she'd ever known before. "Please, more. More."

He spanked her on the other cheek. She jumped like before, and he rubbed the strike into her skin. He spanked her again and again. She lost count, but he waited for her body to settle between each strike, ever patient. Maybe that was why he won races? He was after something, but he would wait to strike until his opponent relaxed. It made him a better lover. It made her start to float away.

And then he stopped and cupped her pussy with his whole hand. She groaned as he speared two fingers into her. "You liked being spanked like a naughty little witch."

She was a naughty little witch, and she would like whatever he did to her. "Yes."

He chuckled, and it was a dark, sensual sound that wrapped itself around her. "Do you want more spankings?" He lightly tapped the heated skin of her ass. "Or do you want me to fuck you?"

She moaned and hoped it sounded affirmative.

"Use your words, little witch."

"Fuck me."



The sound of Mercy begging him to fuck her would be his ultimate undoing. She sounded sweet, ragged, and on the edge of her sanity. Just like he was in this moment. Nothing existed but the sweet smell of her skin and the slickness of her arousal on his hands. His dick screamed to get inside her, but he knew it would be mere seconds until it was over once that happened.

“I need you to fuck me and come inside me.”

He’d already removed his breeches and positioned himself behind her. That permission made him stop, grab the outsides of her thighs, and flip her over so her wrists were crossed above her head and she was laid out like a sacrificial offering. “You want my seed inside you?”

Her eyes were glass as she nodded. He wondered if she even knew what she was saying. “Yes, Daddy.”

Fuck him. She was trying to kill him. The idea of making this woman round with his child, tying her to him so she could never leave him, was more enticing than he could even admit to himself. He couldn’t have it, probably didn’t even want it. But the idea was deeply erotic to him.

“I have a birth control spell. We won’t really make a baby.”

That rocked him. They could play it out and pretend for a little while that he could keep her, she could keep him, and they could make a life together out of the few moments before she moved on.

He didn’t respond for a long moment, and she said, “I’ll still be your little witch, even if you fill me up and tether me to you forever.” She flexed her

hands in the rope, and he wanted to keep her tethered. He wanted to hold her forever. Nothing had ever felt quite so essential to him.

“Little witch.” He was in pain until he wrenched her legs even wider open to see her cunt blooming for him. “I need to have you.”

“I’m yours.”

That was music to him. Poetry. “Mine to fuck.” He said that more to remind himself that she wasn’t his to keep. Could never be his to keep.

“Yes.” She arched her back, and he leaned down to take as much of her breast as he could into his mouth. He wasn’t gentle with her. He couldn’t be at this point. She moaned and murmured soft pleased words in his ear until he could no longer stop himself. He released her nipple from his mouth with a soft pop and drove his cock inside her.

“The problem with the way it feels to fuck you is that I never want to leave.” He didn’t wait for her to adjust to his size this time, pumping inside her with one hand spread on her belly so he could watch where they were joined and stroke her swollen clit. He imagined her ripe with his child, and the thought almost did him in. She hadn’t come yet, and he needed her to go with him. “I want to pump my come into your pretty, little pussy and then watch it leak out so I can push it back in.”

“That’s so filthy, Sir.” She smiled up at him almost lazily. So he slammed into her again and again until the only sounds she made were those of pleased agony. But then she squeezed the muscles in her pelvis as though trying to wring him dry. He lost it and didn’t know where he was or his own name in the long moments before he spilled inside her as she spasmed around him and screamed.

When it was done, he didn’t roll off her. Still inside her body, he collapsed on top of her, felt her slowing breaths against his shoulder. He waited to feel the urge to leave her, like he’d always had with previous lovers, but it didn’t come. It never came with Mercy.

He needed her like air. Like water. He needed her more than he needed the sea. He wanted to follow her around and worship the ground she walked on. He wanted her to lift that birth control spell so they could have babies. He could see her walking the beach on his home island, holding their child as he fished down the shore.

He’d never imagined these things, not with Nadine. Not with any person from his past. And picturing them now terrified him.



SOMETIME IN THE NIGHT, Xavier had cut the ropes holding her to the bed. She still wore the scraps like cuffs, but she was warm and comfortable, tucked into the berth. The cabin was dark, so it had been hours since he'd said the most lewd and erotic things to her. She moved her legs and wasn't sticky, so he must have cleaned her up before he'd left. Of course, he'd left.

Outside the moments he was inside her, he'd been very clear that she was a temporary amusement. And now she knew she was a failed ploy to defeat the Dutchman. The regatta officially started tomorrow, with the qualifying round. The main regatta would follow the next day. But tomorrow, they would race to see who could round Atlantis once at the highest speed. That ship would have the advantage of starting ahead of the other ships.

According to the chatter she'd heard around the Dutchman's ship and aboard the *Rake's Revenge*, the top qualifier had a much easier time winning the race. Obviously, Xavier wouldn't stay in his cabin with her. He had work to do, which had probably been complicated by her dropping the *Rake's Revenge* into the water.

And he would probably appreciate it if she was gone before he returned. They were lovers, not partners. She would do well to remember that. And she would do well to remember he was the cause of much of her misfortune. If he hadn't told the Dutchman about her powers, she never would have ended up on a pirate ship and then on a gateway between dimensions that she hadn't believed in before now. Mercy would likely be dead had she stayed in England, but losing Xavier—and he would lose him—might kill her regardless.

Earlier today, she'd heard people talking about ships from other planets landing, virgin auctions, and actual honest-to-goddess sirens who could make everyone within a certain radius helpless to their lust.

She wouldn't be here if the Hammer hadn't wanted to beat the Dutchman so badly that he'd resorted to distraction. However, she might have died back home because of the ignorance of her neighbors and the malicious intent of the magistrate. Even though he'd been acting selfishly, and he'd lied to her, he'd also saved her in a way.

She shook her head and lit the lamp at the side of the bed, then went

searching for her clothes. She would leave the ship before Xavier knew she was gone, return to the inn, and figure out how to reach a place that was more welcoming to witches than England. She supposed she could stay on Atlantis, but she rejected that idea right away. There was no way her heart could take seeing the Hammer return year after year, watching him race, and not break into a billion pieces.

Her heart was very, very silly indeed.

She dressed quickly, then blew out the lamp. She opened the door to the corridor and saw sailors at the other end rushing somewhere. They were still making preparations and paid her no mind. So she went the other way, creeping along the hall and climbing a ladder to the deck. She popped her head out and saw the coast was clear. However, there wasn't a gangplank on this end of the ship, and there were people loading and off-loading on the other end.

But there was a rope with knots in it that she could use to swing over to the docks. She wasn't sure she even needed to be quite as sneaky as she was being. But she didn't want to see recriminations on Anorra's face for Mercy fucking up the Hammer's race preparations, and she didn't want him to feel guilty for what they'd shared.

She grabbed the rope and started climbing down. Mercy was clinging to the rope and trying to figure out the momentum to reach the dock when the rope seemed to move on its own.

Frantically, she looked down and met the gaze of the Dutchman.

"Where do you think you're going, witch?"

When one of his men tried to grab her arm, she punched him in the face.

"You vexatious little tramp!"

She felt triumph at the flow of blood from one of his nostrils until he recovered and tossed a bag over her head.



Xavier checked the riggings on the mast one final time. He probably didn't need to, but he felt guilty for how much time he'd spent thinking about Mercy during the past few hours, after taking the time to fuck Mercy for the few hours before that. Despite his best intentions, the woman had consumed him completely.

And there wasn't anything standing between him and indulging in her tonight. In fact, he would rest well with her warm, pliant, well-pleasured body next to him. He was relaxed as he went belowdecks, humming a bawdy tune under his breath.

But when he opened the door to his cabin, the berth was empty. The bedding had been neatly made up, so it appeared Mercy had tidied before leaving him. For a split second, he wished he'd kept her tied to his bed instead of cutting the rope. But he hadn't wanted to hurt her. And she wasn't a prisoner here.

For a few moments, he tried to convince himself it was good that she'd left. He could focus on the race instead of his obsession with her. She'd actually done him quite the favor. Or maybe she'd had all of him that she could stand?

Perhaps she was done with him.

That thought left him staring into space, bereft, until Anorra knocked on his door. "Enter."

She walked in and looked surprised to see him alone. "Where's your witch?"

“She left.”

“You sound unhappy about that,” Anorra said. He couldn’t tell whether she was concerned for his mental state or relieved to be free of the distraction on the ship. “You care for her, don’t you?”

He was probably, most likely—definitely—in love with her. But he wouldn’t tell his first mate that.

Xavier nodded. He could have denied he had any feelings other than lust for Mercy, but what would be the point? He’d spent so much time with his first mate over the past years that she would be able to tell he was lying. She also hadn’t been around the last time he’d let a witch turn his head—she’d been hired directly afterwards to keep his ship in order—so she was right to be suspicious. He’d had fun when there was time in the schedule for it after the other witch, but she’d never seen him grow attached to the lovers he usually left happy and grateful in other ports of call.

“Would a trip to the Bawdy Banquet help?”

“Only if she’s there.” If she was there, he would tear the entire place apart and stab anyone who’d touched her—unless she’d wanted them to touch her—and then he’d have to vanquish them in other ways.

“Jaysus.” Anorra crossed her arms and looked to the ceiling. “You’ve gone and fallen in love with her.”

That word cut into Xavier’s chest like a knife. He wasn’t prepared to hear his feelings aloud. He would put his whole body and soul into the endeavor of making his beloved happy—he was done racing. Racing was simply too demanding to have both, and he knew that. Still, he couldn’t stop the images of the life he and Mercy could have together if only... “If only” wasn’t real, though.

“If it makes you feel any better, I tried really hard not to.”

Anorra put her hand on his shoulder, patting him awkwardly. “I don’t think there’s much helping it if it’s meant to be. And honestly? The harder you try to fight it, the more it comes for you.”

“You make love sound like a dangerous beast.” Yet Xavier agreed with her. In their line of work, love could only be a complication. It was something that could be used as a weapon and kept you from reaching your goals. “And I think I’ve fallen prey.” It was almost a relief to admit.

“I could have told you that when the sea monster took her, and you dove in after her.”

“I wasn’t going to let her get eaten. Not after how I messed up her life.”

Anorra shook her head. “You’d have gone after anyone on your ship, but you would have killed the sea monster if it were anyone else. That would have gotten you glory. It also would have fed your hunger for thrills. But you only cut off the one tentacle you needed to.”

His first mate was entirely correct. Had the sea monster taken Anorra, he would have gone after her, but he would have stayed under and risked his life killing the monster just to make a point. With Mercy, he’d been single-minded in his determination to save her. The sea monster itself was irrelevant.

“Are you going after her?” Anorra paused. “You have the time. Everything here is well in hand.”

Xavier nodded. “She’s probably at the inn.”



How was it possible the Dutchman's new ship had more of a stench than the last one? It was as though someone had spread rotting fish guts and ball sweat all over the space in the hold where they kept her. And she couldn't even breathe through her mouth to lessen the effects because he'd actually gagged her.

It had been pure coincidence they'd caught her leaving the *Rake's Revenge*. Goddess, they were so dense that they'd bragged about how they planned to spy on the Hammer's crew and sabotage their qualifying rounds the next day as they'd hauled her back to the ship. Mercy hadn't even pretended to faint, and they'd spoken freely. Now she just had to get back to the *Rake's Revenge* and tell Xavier so he could stop them.

However, this time that she was held by the Hammer's rival, she was much more panicked. The Dutchman's civilized veneer had been entirely stripped away, and his craven need to win races was all that was left. Mercy couldn't believe she'd fallen for his act the first time.

But, come to think of it, she would have fallen for anything to get out of her village. She was a different witch than the one who'd boarded the Dutchman's other ship. Her time with Xavier had changed her. And it hadn't just been the sex. The calm way he carried himself and how he treated the people close to him had been so foreign to her at first. The way he looked at her made her want more for herself.

The pleasure he gave her—how much he made her feel—had set her magic free. She was no longer unknowingly playing at small spells and

tinkering with potions. She could move the weather. Even though her situation was arguably more hopeless now than it had been when Xavier had picked her up from the deck of a burning ship, she knew infinitely more about herself and how her magic worked.

But that didn't change the fact she was on her own. First of all, no one had seen her or questioned her as she was leaving the *Rake's Revenge*. She'd made the bed and hadn't made any promises to Xavier that she would return. He wouldn't have wanted them, and he probably wouldn't look for her. He would assume she'd gone back to the inn or found a way off Atlantis to start her new life.

The Dutchman had tied together the rope cuffs she'd kept on her wrists out of sentimentality. But, since she was a different witch, she focused on heating the fibers of the rope until they seemed to burn from within. It didn't take long before her hands were free. She pulled the fetid gag out of her mouth, untied the rope holding her feet together, stood, and spat on the ground.

Then she went to the door and found it unlocked. The Dutchman's crew obviously had underestimated her command of her powers and her common sense. She wanted to wipe the grin off that man's face permanently, but she would focus first on getting off this ship and warning Xavier and his crew that the Dutchman was spying on him.

Unfortunately, when she opened the door, the coast wasn't clear. Two members of the crew had been headed right for her holding cell, and a shiver went down her spine at what their plans might have been. After all, she'd refused to fuck a single one of them before, and she'd witnessed their captain humiliated. They probably planned to assault her out of revenge.

She sealed their lips shut first so they couldn't call for help. Then she summoned the rope and tied their feet together. One of the men ripped the sleeve of her chemise with an outstretched grabby hand and ripped it as she scurried past them in the crowded hallway.

But she got away from them.

More sailors passed at the end of the hall, and she flattened herself against the corridor wall until their voices faded. They sounded as though they'd been deep in their cups, so she was hoping most of the ship was either distracted with preparations or celebrating what they assumed would be their victory using the information gained from their spying mission.

They'd stopped loading and unloading equipment, and she walked down

off the gangplank and onto the docks. When a few members of the crew walked up to the ship, appearing to be returning from the tavern judging by their unsteady gaits, she conjured a stiff wind that blew them into the water before they noticed her.



SOMETHING in his gut told him there was something wrong when he couldn't find Mercy at the inn. Seiko said she hadn't returned after storming off towards the *Rake's Revenge* earlier, and Xavier went to check the room to make sure she hadn't figured out an invisibility spell to slip past. But he'd been grasping at straws, hoping she hadn't left him for good. The room was completely empty, and he couldn't feel her presence there any longer.

If she'd left Atlantis, he might spend centuries searching for her. Perhaps he never would. He had his men search the Bawdy Banquet and even look inside the church, but she was nowhere to be found. They looked until Anorra took the pocket watch from her trousers and gave him a meaningful stare. The crew needed to sleep before the next day's qualifying round if they hoped to secure the pole position in the regatta.

He knew he was doing the right thing. If they hadn't found her back at the inn, she likely didn't want to be found. He hadn't told her that not only did he not want to give her up, but he wasn't sure he could. She'd left him, and it was his fault. But he couldn't help the pang of dejection that settled in his gut as they walked back to the ship.

Anorra walked next to him in silence, letting him process his disappointment and allowing him to screw his head back on straight without any recriminations or encouragement. He relied on her for many things, but she knew when he needed to deal with something on his own.

They weren't far from the *Rake's Revenge* when she pointed and asked, "Isn't that your witch?"

Mercy looked disheveled as she ran towards him. He could see her sleeve was torn, and her voice was ragged when she called out to him. "Xavier!"

He didn't consciously start running, but he nonetheless flew to her. He didn't care that she smelled like fermented fish and the scent would transfer to his clothes when he pulled her into his arms. "Where were you?"

“I was going to go back to the inn and wait for the regatta to end before I bothered you again, but the Dutchman took me when I was trying to climb off the ship.”

Later, he would deal with the fact she'd snuck off the ship without telling him because he'd led her to believe she was a burden. Right now, he had a competitor to dispatch. “He took you?”

“And tied me up in the hold of his ship.” Her voice cracked, and he would definitely shove the Dutchman's balls down his throat by the time this was over. “But I used my powers and escaped.”

He held her face and searched for any clue that she was more hurt than she was saying. “Did any of them hurt you? Touch you?”

Reading his mind, Anorra said, “You can't kill him until we leave Atlantis.” There were rules, and when his passions were this high, she needed to remind him of that. There was no way he'd have been able maintain his control and refrain from disemboweling the Dutchman had any harm come to Mercy, but she seemed whole. At least every part of her he could see was intact.

She shook her head, but her eyes filled with tears. “You're glad to see me.”

“I was looking for you, love.” His chest felt full and tight, as though it would burst with what he was feeling in that moment. “You need a bath.”

She looked over his shoulder at the crew that had gathered there. They looked happy to see her safe and sound. “But you lost so much time. I'm going back to the inn. I'll take a bath there. You need rest.”

He kissed her forehead. “Absolutely not. I won't let you out of my sight.”

She didn't need to know he wouldn't let her out of his sight ever again—not even when the race was over. He would never let her go.



Mercy was glad to be back on the *Rake's Revenge* and glad Xavier hadn't commented when she'd told him to take her "home" after he'd insisted she not return to the inn. But she did think of the ship as a home. Anyplace where Xavier was would be home to her. If they did part after the regatta was over, she would feel like she was missing a part of herself forever.

She'd be okay, even if he continued to believe their relationship was an unacceptable distraction. As much as she craved the sense of family and belonging she felt in Xavier's arms, she'd escaped the Dutchman's ship on her own. She was sure she could survive alone somehow. But it would be mere survival, and that wasn't good enough anymore. She needed Xavier, which frightened her more than almost anything.

After she'd told him that the Dutchman had been spying when he'd captured her, Xavier had sent Anorra and the rest of the crew to check every part of the ship from top to bottom for sabotage. Instead of joining them, he'd asked Cook to heat water for a bath. When she and Xavier were alone in his cabin with a tub full of steaming water, he undressed her slowly, inspecting every inch of flesh he revealed.

He didn't mean to seduce her. This was care, and nothing about it was explicitly sexual. But still, her body heated with every brush of his fingers against her skin. When he'd seen for himself that she was unharmed, he helped her into the bath. To her surprise, he did not turn to leave but sat on the edge of his bed, watching her.

“Don’t you have to help your crew prepare for qualifying tomorrow?”

He shook his head. “I trust them to do what needs to be done.”

“But aren’t I a distraction?”

He looked her up and down, his gaze lingering on where her breasts weren’t covered by the water. This look was lascivious, which was almost a relief. She could handle him when their connection was about the chemistry between them rather than whatever obligations he might or might not have towards her. But she knew they couldn’t become lost in each other forever.

He looked torn and lost in his own thoughts for several moments. Part of her was glad their relationship was making him re-evaluate his life, too.

“Do you need help washing your hair?” he asked. His little smile was sweet again. And she couldn’t resist having his fingers tangled in her hair. It was one of her favorite ways to be touched.

“You should get in the bath with me.” She looked up at him through her lashes again, and the wink he gave her made her core pulse in an earnest request that he fuck her again.

There would be plenty of time to talk. To decide they couldn’t be together. For him to send her away someplace safe and heartbreaking. There might not be much more time for this.



CROWDS FORMED all the way along the coast of Atlantis in anticipation of the ship race. Just a few days before, the island had seemed to Mercy like a sleepy outpost, but now it was teeming with fans and merchants of all kinds.

This time, when Mercy had woken up, Xavier had still been in the room. But he might have been a thousand miles away for how much seemed to be on his mind. He held the hopes of the entire crew on his shoulders, and she would in no way add her own. So they were silent as he dressed in clothes made of the finest silks in shades of purple and turquoise. She hated to watch him cover up, but he looked almost as good in clothes as he did without, so part of her enjoyed the show.

He kissed her on the cheek and said, “Look in the wardrobe. There’s something I’d like for you to wear,” before leaving the room.

When she opened the wardrobe, she found the most expensive dress she’d

ever worn. It was made of purple silk, the same shade as the sails of the *Rake's Revenge* and the cravat Xavier had tied around his neck moments before. The embroidery in the fabric was intricate and almost magical. When she looked closely, she found the pattern resembled the compass tattoo on his chest.

She hurried to dress and disembarked from the ship before it had to line up for qualifying. The deck was bustling with crew members making last-minute preparations, which Mercy found very comforting. Xavier's ship was sound and wouldn't end up wrecked at the bottom of the ocean.

Soon after Mercy disembarked, the ships lined up. She stood in an area along the coast reserved for the friends and relatives of the sailors, eating a pastry filled with spiced vegetables and beans and sipping on a steaming cup of tea, glad this dimension had the same addiction to caffeine as her own. The sun hadn't quite risen over the horizon, and a chill remained in the air.

When the ships were in place, a breathless sort of hush fell, only interrupted by a few yells and catcalls from the spectators and last-minute orders from the crews. Even the winds had died down in anticipation.

The marshal for the regatta climbed atop a wooden structure and pulled a watch and a small gun from his waistcoat. He aimed the gun into the air, waited a moment, and shot upward.

The crews were ready immediately, and the *Rake's Revenge* managed to get away from the rest of the field cleanly. Mercy let out a breath when it turned the corner before the Dutchman. And then there was nothing to do but wait for the ships to come back around the island and see who was ahead then. According to the briefing she'd begged Xavier for before sleeping—mostly because she'd wanted an excuse for the night not to end—the order in which the ships finished the lap would determine where they would start in the main regatta the next day. Nerves threatened to turn her stomach into a knot, and she wished she could help push the ship to victory.

But Xavier had warned her to keep her magic under control so he could not be accused of cheating in the race. He didn't want the Dutchman to argue to the race stewards that Xavier had an unfair advantage, even though the Dutchman would have used her magic to win without a second thought.

When the ships came around the final corner and down the stretch to the finish line, which was marked by a checkered flag, her heart was in her throat. She clasped her hands to keep from inadvertently making the Dutchman's ship crash into the one next to it to prevent him from making a

last-second move on the *Rake's Revenge*. Time seemed to crawl in the final seconds of the race, and she couldn't help but jump out of her seat when Xavier's ship crossed the line first.

After that, she knew he would be busy with post-qualifying activities that she'd barely paid attention to when Xavier had described them. He couldn't expect her to retain everything while her naked body was pressed against his, could he?

She weaved her way through the crowds, searching for him. She saw the blonde shock of Anorra's hair through the crowds first and made her way towards that. He would be close to his first mate.

Xavier spotted her first. He turned a smile on her that she'd never seen from him before. He was giddy with the kind of excitement that mostly children displayed. She knew part of it was excitement to see her, but it was also the pleasure of winning. He loved to win. When he did, it gave him purpose. And a kind of deep satisfaction that nothing else could.

She wouldn't let him give this up to be with her. If she was truly a distraction to him, they would part ways. It would tear her heart out, but she would do it.

Telling him this would ruin his moment, and that was the last thing she wanted to do. So, she pasted a smile on her face and hoped he wouldn't be able to tell it was fake.



Xavier could tell something was wrong with Mercy as soon as she smiled at him after the qualifying round. Every time he secured a pole position, he had a surge of adrenaline that made everything inside him light up. It sharpened his focus and made it easier to win the next day. Almost easier than having the pole position in itself.

That surge made Mercy's bereft expression when she found him in the crowd more painful. They could very well have this conversation later, but he wanted to get it over with now so they could celebrate once they were alone.

The paddock was full of gossips who would pounce on any bit of salacious information. They were already practically salivating that he'd gotten himself involved with yet another witch. He gathered her in his arms and whispered in her ear, "Were you afraid I would be hurt, love?"

She shook her head and made her fake smile bigger and brighter. "Never for a moment."

"Then why are you only pretending to be happy for me?" When he said that, she stiffened.

"I love that you won. I can see how happy it makes you." Her voice sounded sad, but she still clung to him.

"And you think it makes me happier than you do?"

She looked up at him, her eyes wet. This wouldn't do at all. "I don't think I make you happy. I may make you mad with lust and worry you when I'm not within your sights. But that's not happiness. That's obsession and desire. It can't last."

She was dead wrong. This was more than a temporary obsession. He'd never felt this way about anyone before. She filled him with a ludicrous kind of lust, and he became anxious when he didn't know where she was. But the idea that she didn't make him happy? What was happiness if there was no risk of losing it all? The reason racing gave him joy was the rush and the risk. It was the daring of needing the win and knowing he might not get it.

"Racing does make me happy." She looked down at his chest and made a small gesture towards pulling away, but he tugged her closer. "But being with you makes me happy for a similar reason. At any moment, I could set you into a fit of pique, and you'll walk away from me. When I'm with you, I feel richer than any prize money has ever made me. If I lost you, it would be so much worse than losing a regatta or a championship."

"I'm not just a distraction?" Her eyes were wet again, but he hoped it was due to more positive feelings about him.

"If you are a distraction, so is the air I breathe. I need you as much as I need oxygen. As much as I need food and water."

She didn't respond, but she buried her face in his chest. He held her to him as he watched the Dutchman stalk past them with a cadre of his crew towards Atlantis's Court, where the regatta's marshals gathered after qualifying. There was rage in the other man's steps. His whole life was racing, and losing tended to send him into a spiral.

He was probably going to complain, and Xavier should probably follow to minimize any damage the Dutchman could do to the race the next day. But Xavier couldn't seem to care.



"YOU'RE SO PRETTY PERCHED on my cock and rolling your hips." Xavier licked his thumb, then rubbed her clit as she rode him. He'd been tired and sweaty after qualifying, but she'd pounced on him as soon as they'd entered their room at the inn. He could have been on the ship, but he'd wanted privacy to reassure his woman that they didn't have to part for him to be successful. The people he worked with were professionals. He trusted them to take care of the ship. And he wouldn't be able to win if he was worried that Mercy would leave him.

The witch he suspected he couldn't live without arched her spine and threw her head back as she approached her orgasm. She braced her hands on his thighs and ground into his pelvis.

"So good, Xavier," she gasped. "Love this."

It was good that she loved this, because he loved her. The feeling had fully enveloped him earlier in the day when his post-lap high had been threatened by her sullen mood—when he'd realized her sadness was more important than anything else. But he wouldn't say it yet. It might spook her. Everyone who'd ever claimed to love this witch had lied to her, used her, or abandoned her. And he'd done the first and the second. He had amends to make before she would believe he loved her.

"Use my cock, little witch." She soaked him more with her arousal when he said filthy things to her, so he planned to say plenty of filthy things. "Milk me dry until I'm inside you so deep. Make me a daddy."

She shifted so her hands were on his chest, and their gazes locked. "I want you to pump me full of you, Daddy."

He growled and rolled them over, never losing the connection. He slowed the pace and pushed inside her slowly, crushing all their naked flesh together and making her whimper every time he hit bottom. He laid kisses all over her cheeks and forehead before taking her mouth while driving deep.

"Make you mine forever." The words didn't make sense, but they were as close as he could get to the truth. She could leave him, but her scent would be written into the fabric of his soul. As long as he had breath, she would be inside him.

She clenched around his cock and screamed in pleasure, and he drove inside her for a few more strokes before he went under, too.

They lay in silence for a few moments before she started laughing.

"What's funny, woman?" He pulled back and looked at her face, wet with sweat and, he hoped, not tears.

"I just wouldn't have thought you had the energy."

"My cock isn't even soft yet, you're full to the brim with my come, and yet you question my stamina?"

"Not anymore."



Mercy was pulled from the bed and her slumber by her hair. She screeched and clawed at the person who'd grabbed her. If this was Xavier trying some sort of novel seduction technique, it would be his fault entirely if he lost an eye.

“What the actual fu—”

Her exclamation cut off abruptly when she opened her eyes and saw three strangers standing in her room. They were all in black and seemed to mean business. Some part of her intuited that the person near the door was in charge. They were of mixed race, like both she and Xavier, but Mercy could sense they were not human.

“That’s Remel. They are the monarch of Atlantis, and you were required to pay them court when you arrived.”

Mercy tried to pull away. She was thoroughly tired of learning new things about Atlantis and its rules at this point. “And who the fuck are you?”

The person still holding her by the hair yanked harder so that their faces were very close. Too close. “I’m River, and you should refer to me as “xe” or “xyr.” Xe was voluptuous, with lilac skin and violet-colored hair. And when xe opened their mouth, xyr teeth appeared to have grown into or been sharpened into vicious points. Clearly one of the fae that Mercy had read about aboard the Dutchman’s ship. Then xe pointed to xyr counterpart with pink hair. “That’s Brynn. She and I are muscle for Remel—.

“You should really be bowing to our leader, Mercy.” Brynn spoke, pointing to the person clearly in charge. “River, let her go.”

River released Mercy, and she fell to the bed and scrambled for the covers. Xe hissed at her and said, “We’re not here for that.”

Remel, the monarch—what was with all the strange names in this dimension?—took one step towards the bed. Mercy marshaled all her internal fortitude not to scramble back like a trapped creature. Yet that was exactly what she was.

“There are far more interesting things about you, little witch, than your considerable physical charms. Isn’t that right?” Remel speaking Xavier’s nickname for her made her shiver. All this felt very wrong.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Mercy thought it best to play at ignorance, even though it was anathema to her at this point. But it wouldn’t do for these obviously dangerous people to know she was valuable or powerful.

“It’s hard to believe the great Hammer would think I would be so ill-informed not to know he’d brought the most powerful witch in all the realms to mine.”

Mercy panicked at the thought of Xavier being punished for bringing her here. “To be fair, it was the Dutchman who took me out of England. And mistreated me.”

Remel turned abruptly and pinned her with a stare. Even their pair of muscle took a step back with wary looks on their faces. The monarch stepped into her space, and Mercy fought to stand—or sit—her ground. “Trust me, I know.”

Brynn spoke up then. “The Hammer well and bloody knew he was required to bring you to meet the monarch within a few business hours of reaching Atlantis.”

River smiled, and Mercy didn’t need to know anything of fae smiles to know it was dangerous. “Instead, he kept you all to himself.”

Remel nodded and then looked her up and down. “Not that I blame him, but we have policies and procedures for a reason.” They turned away from her, looked up to the ceiling, and said, “I shouldn’t even be here. I don’t leave the castle. I am the monarch.”

“What are you going to do to him? He was just trying to keep me safe.” Mercy didn’t know why she wasn’t more concerned for her own safety. But Xavier was so important to her that she didn’t know if she could bear harm coming to him.

Remel turned abruptly and pinned her with a stare. Their grin was

menacing. “If so many of these sailors want you, then maybe you should be added to the prize at the end of the regatta.”

“Xavier is on pole position, so he’ll definitely win the whole thing.” However, her relief was short-lived.

“But Xavier has to be punished. He’ll be sent to the back of the grid.”

“No, that’s not fair!” Mercy’s magic rose, and everyone in the room took notice.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Brynn shook her pink curls.

Mercy forced the magic down by counting to ten. “If Xavier wins, he won’t be punished for not introducing me at Court?”

Remel raised one brow and made a dismissive gesture before resting their face in their hand. “Sure. Whatever.”

Then River tossed a simple black dress towards her. “Get dressed. You’re coming with us.”



THERE WAS likely steam coming out of Xavier’s ears at this point. Remel’s people must have been watching the Siren’s Call, waiting for an opportunity to seize her, while he and Mercy were there. Xavier could kick himself for leaving her alone for a few minutes to make a few final checks on the ship.

Starting from the back of the grid was not a problem. He’d won from there before. But the idea that Mercy was the prize did not sit well with him. It being all his fault for not bowing and scraping to Remel was just extra salt in the wound.

If the Dutchman won and claimed her—a very big if—Xavier would merely steal her back. And then he would kill his rival, consequences by damned.

“You need to calm yourself before this race,” Anorra said, keeping step with him by his side despite the disparity in their size.

He didn’t respond as they arrived at the helm of his ship. It wouldn’t do any good to assure her there was no possible dimension in which he’d be calm under these circumstances. He wasn’t capable of it.

Instead of calming, he might ram his ship into the Dutchman’s—it would be much easier to steal or trade for Mercy if one of the other entrants won

her. None of them would hold on to her out of spite, and most of them were deathly afraid of him.

But he would not do that. He owed it to his crew to win this race. He would keep his promise—to both the crew and Mercy. Even if it killed him.

“Is everything ready?”

Anorra narrowed her gaze at him and nodded.

That was all that mattered. He steered the boat to the back of the grid and readied for the race.



This was humiliating. Even more so than the time she'd spent soaking wet in the town square's stocks. Her tits were pushed up to her eyebrows in the corset and gown the monarch and their henchpeople had forced on her. Instead of the turquoise gown she'd planned to wear in support of the Rake's Revenge, she was draped in the most lurid black dress she'd ever seen. She looked as though she were attending the funeral of a husband she'd murdered.

After dragging her out of bed, River and Brynn had hauled her to the Bawdy Banquet, where one of Eloise's employees had been paid quite a lot to paint her face and wrestle her hair into a mockery of the styles worn by the aristocracy back in England.

Mercy protested at first, but then kept her mouth shut when River pointed xyr knife at her. There was still a chance—however slim—that Xavier's ship would win the race and she would be given over to him. She would cooperate unless and until she had to do something drastic.

But even that thought left her sick to her stomach. As the entertainer—Maud—arranged her hair and painted her face before forcing her into this atrocity of a gown. At least she looked sorry to be doing it. It didn't even make sense that they'd painted her whole face when they'd then covered half of it with a gag.

As she ascended the steps of Remel's section at the point of a sword, her hands bound behind her to seemingly suppress her magic, she wondered if Xavier would give her up if he won her. Or would he keep her as proof of his

prowess along with all his other trophies? Would he leave her in another dimension as he went off to win more races? Or would he fold her into his life?

When she'd been in his arms, she'd assumed it was the latter. But maybe she should have given more consideration to the idea that it was the former. He'd said all the pretty words, but he'd lied to her before.

Should the worst happen—should the *Scarlet Cow* win—she could likely escape the Dutchman if she tried hard enough. His only investment in her was due to his ego. He wanted her because Xavier had her. Spending weeks on the Dutchman's ship had taught her he was more interested in winning than anything else. If she couldn't or wouldn't help him win, he wouldn't have any use for her. And she could probably bargain her way into being go.

She sat on the bleachers and pointedly ignored the people in the crowd staring at her with disdain. Mercy met their gazes and narrowed her eyes at them, memorizing their faces and vowing to seek some nonviolent retribution.

She hadn't chosen this, and she hadn't helped the Hammer win pole over any of the other racers. She also hadn't chosen to be a pawn in this ridiculous sporting event between the egotistical overgrown children who participated in it.

And she was going to get herself free of all it and away from Atlantis as soon as she figured out an appropriate punishment for anyone who'd put her in this position. But first, she summoned her magic to burn through the rope at her wrists.



XAVIER FELT sweat coming from every millimeter of his body. The sun beat down as he steered the ship around Atlantis in the heavy waters. He'd made his way through half the field, but the regatta was more than halfway over. And he'd been helped when one of the ships ahead of the *Rake's Revenge* had been swarmed by mermaids and taken under.

He'd started to become more daring with his maneuvers, but his rivals could likely feel his desperation to win. If he weren't quite so distraught, he might have commended Remel for their ingenuity in making Mercy a prize. It

was something Xavier never would have thought of in his youth, and he'd played dirty before acquiring the skill he had now.

Maybe all of his haters had been right, and his time had passed. That thought lasted about a split second before he came upon the next ship he had to pass, and the drive to win reawakened in his gut. The crew knew what to do, and they moved the sails without him even having to shout the order as he heaved the wheel to the side and took the impact of dropping off the crest of a wave at an odd angle.

The descent shook his bones like it hadn't when he was young, but he shook it off and steered the boat for the best aerodynamics in the wind.

The crew of the *Rake's Revenge* passed eighteen other ships the same way, methodically, one by one. Until the only ship ahead of theirs was the *Scarlet Cow*.

It was about a mile ahead of them and holding that distance. There were only three laps around Atlantis left in the race, and Xavier could feel the victory slipping away from them. A sense of desperation he hadn't known since he'd lost the last year settled over him.

And then, as he passed the stands where the spectators watched on each lap, he couldn't resist looking for her through his periscope. She was hard to miss—bound and gagged next to the monarch. Anger that she'd been treated that way made him rack his brain for any way to win. He couldn't lose her to the Dutchman. Xavier might be able to win the championship without this win, but losing Mercy would cost him a piece of his soul.

Suddenly, time seemed to slow and then stop. For a moment, he thought Mercy had somehow done this. But then a moving image flashed before him. It was so full of horror that he knew she could not have created it. It was too awful. Mercy was bound by magical chains in a dungeon somewhere. Her beautiful face was caked with dirt, and the lustrous locks of her hair were matted. She was dressed, but barely, in filthy clothes. The Dutchman stood over her with a menacing smile on his face. He'd won her in the regatta, and now he could keep her forever.

Remel had magicians and witches at Court who could predict the future. If this truly was Mercy's fate, and Xavier was the one who had caused it, he would lose his mind. He'd kill everyone who hurt Mercy—including the Dutchman and Remel—the rules be damned. And then he would banish himself to some lonely realm where he could forever flagellate himself for his failure to protect her.

He was broken and frozen. Desolate. For the first time in his life, he was completely helpless. The love he felt for Mercy was the only thing keeping his heart beating in that moment.

As soon as he sank into the reality of that emotion, it disappeared.

And then Anorra came to the wheel and took some of the steering. It was then he realized the race had gone on while he'd been standing stock-still.

“What do you want to do?” his first mate asked.

Steely determination replaced his panic in that moment, and he nodded. “Keep pushing.”

Anorra gave him a nod in return and started shouting orders to the crew. The gap between the *Rake's Revenge* and the *Scarlett Cow* halved and then quartered, until they were side by side.

He could see the sweat on the brows of the Dutchman's crew as each team tried to squeeze every bit of speed out of their vessel. The yells and grunts of the crews blended and seemed to crescendo. For Xavier, nothing could drown out the drumbeat of needing to win.

The last lap of the regatta seemed to last longer than the rest of the laps combined as the *Rake's Revenge* inched ahead and then the *Scarlet Cow* overtook them, over and over. On the final straight, *the Scarlet Cow* was a half a ship's length ahead until a gentle wind seemed to help only the *Rake's Revenge*. If Mercy could use her magic, it might have been her.

When the checkered flag fell, it was for the *Rake's Revenge*.

He could barely wait for the ship to dock before he leapt from the deck to the wooden dock. Xavier wanted nothing to do with the throngs of well-wishers. He marched right to where Mercy sat, his heart in his hands.



A victorious Xavier was the most lust-inducing sight Mercy could conjure. The way his shirt clung to his sweaty skin, revealing some of her favorite bits of him. The swagger with which he moved as he marched up the stands, intent on reaching her. Even the smell of ocean breeze and exertion on his skin called to the primal bits of her.

It would only make letting him go that much harder, but let him go, she would. As she'd sat in the stands, hoping against hope that she would end up here in his arms, she'd decided her fate would never be left in another person's hands again.

During the closing stages of the race, when the monarch had instructed a magician to project images of the consequences of their failure to both Xavier and the Dutchman, Mercy had decided to act. Not even royalty and social power would keep her in a chokehold. And she wouldn't allow Atlantis's ruler to decide where and how she would end up. So she'd ripped the gag from her mouth momentarily and softly whispered a spell to stop Remel's magician from interfering in the race, then sent a soft breeze to push the *Rake's Revenge* to victory.

But there were consequences to the realization that she wanted to own her future. She would determine the outcomes of her life, even if she had to do so alone.

However, she couldn't tell her lover that yet. The moment he reached her, he wrapped her in his arms, removed her gag, and took her mouth with more passion than he ever had before. He tasted like pride and victory, and she

would have drunk both like mother's milk had he kissed her like this yesterday.

But there was no way she could know if he kissed her like this because he wanted her or because he was glad he'd won a race. Did he truly want her beyond measure? Or was this all just the adrenaline of victory? Still, she allowed herself to sink into this kiss and pour everything she felt for him into it. It didn't matter if she told him how she felt with her mouth and hands if she didn't say the words.

When he finally put her down, he untied the burned rope left on her wrists and smiled at her. She melted inside, suddenly unsure whether she could leave this man. Would her need to determine her own life and stand on her own two feet rob her of this feeling—that she was the center of his universe—forever? Or would she find this again in the arms of another? In her own arms after making her own way?

She couldn't know for sure.

And he didn't give her time to tell him she was no one's prize when he grabbed her hand, turned, and walked down the bleachers. She didn't have the opportunity to tell him when they reached the podium where he'd be given his prizes—including her—either.

Mercy smiled at the well-wishers. Their faces were probably some of the same that had looked on her with antipathy, but they all melted together. And it didn't matter. She wouldn't see any of them again.

She might have slipped away if she weren't a part of the prize-giving ceremony. She didn't want the sulking Dutchman to see she wasn't entirely happy with his defeat. He muttered about Remel's interference, and Mercy realized the monarch had only used magic to make the race more interesting. They were certainly a character. And just another person who had used and manipulated her to suit their fancy.

That discovery made it nearly impossible to dutifully smile and accept the kiss Xavier gave her for show on the podium before the top three captains all poured champagne on each other, themselves, and her. But she played at participation and feigned joy. All the lies she'd been told her entire life served her well in that moment.

There was also the worry that Remel would go back on their promise not to punish Xavier if he won the race, but the monarch handed over the prize money, the voucher for a spell, and Mercy—as though they had the right—without incident. They probably only did it because they didn't want word to

get out that they'd tampered with the race, but Mercy would take it.

It was only when Xavier tried to pull her towards the *Rake's Revenge*, where the crew's celebrations were set to continue that she resisted him. He hesitated a step and stopped, turning to her with a concerned look on his face.

"What's wrong?" He looked her up and down and seemed to notice she wasn't wearing his colors. "We'll find other clothes for you to wear aboard the ship. Or none at all."

When she didn't respond to his innuendo that they would engage in another public sex act aboard his ship, his posture hardened. She pulled her hand out of his, surprised by her own reluctance to give up his touch, and said, "We need to talk."

"What's wrong?" His brow furrowed, and she knew it was best to get this over with as quickly as possible. His worry and concern made her chest feel uncomfortably tight. "Other than the clothes."

She gave him a small smile but put her hand up when he stepped closer to her. "I never wanted to be a prize, Xavier. I don't want to be at your mercy anymore. I can't be 'your' Mercy. I have to be my own." Would he understand what he was trying to say? Why was she messing this up?

"You don't want to be with me?" He sounded bewildered about that, and it wasn't ego. He'd left hundreds of women in thousands of ports, and most would have been happy for him to haul them all over the worlds to watch him race. But she couldn't do that.

"I do, but I can't." She looked at him, pouring everything she felt for him into her gaze. She hoped he saw the love there and the pain at having to give him up. "I went straight from my mother's womb to my father's house, to the vicar's arms, to the stocks. And then to the *Scarlet Cow* and the *Rake's Revenge* and back again. I didn't know this world existed, and a little over a month ago, I didn't even know who I was."

"But you know who you are now. You're the most powerful witch in the worlds, and my—"

"You lied to me."

"You forgave me."

Mercy shook her head. "I forgave you, but you I don't know if I should have. I was just so used to living according to the whims of people who lied to me that I never learned to trust myself. I don't want to be anyone's prize. I need to be my own person. If I went with you now, as your prize, I would never know if you respected me and cared for me or if you won me to

assuage your own ego. I'm not a tool, and I'm not just a witch. I'm a woman who needs to determine her own fate."

He looked down and seemed to be working to control his anger or searching for a response. She'd never seen him at a loss for words before or truly addled with anything but pleasure.

"Besides, you said that having a permanent lover was too much of a distraction." She would try anything to soften the blow. He would haunt her dreams if they couldn't make a clean break. She loved him, after all. The thought didn't shock her. If she didn't love him, this wouldn't hurt. If she hadn't fallen in love with him, she might never have come into her power. Her lust for him had unlocked her magic, but the love had opened the door wide. She would keep her love for him precious and close. It would be the source of her magic, and it was the thing that gave her the courage to move on.

"I won the race today for you. Because of you. Because I had you to come ashore for."

She shook her head again and took another step back. "You won today despite me. You are the superior sailor in a superior vessel. Trying to distract the Dutchman by finding him a witch was unnecessary in the first place. If he'd never taken me from my village and you'd never taken me from him, you would have won. With a lot less pain and heartache."

"I know I was wrong, but you have to forgive me." And then he dropped to his knees. Her heart dropped to her stomach, and the sting of tears threatened to overtake her. But she stared him down and stood strong.

"Xavier, my love, I don't have to do anything except find a way off this island and wait for my life to start."

"Please. I'm begging. I love you."

If she didn't leave now, she never would. Somehow, she found the strength to turn and walk back to the inn.



Three days after the ship race, Mercy was nowhere to be found, and Xavier felt marooned—stuck in this place of heartache and unable to leave. The rest of the ships and crews had left Atlantis, ready to use their positions in the race to bid for cargo. But the *Rake's Revenge* stayed there, almost looking lonely and forlorn in the image of her captain.

Xavier sat in the Siren's Call and pickled himself in rum. The rest of his crew had retired to the Bawdy Banquet to use some of their winnings on the pleasure they'd missed during months at sea. But Xavier didn't have it in him anymore. The only pleasure he ever wanted again had gone through a portal in the forest after leaving him kneeling on the beach. He'd been too stunned to chase her, giving her time to gather her things from the inn and procure a map of the portals.

Part of him was proud of her. The witch he'd first met wouldn't have taken a leap into the unknown without anyone at her side. He was glad she was brave enough to leave him, which was the only thing that kept him from chasing her.

But the rest of him was cloaked in a sadness he'd never felt before. The first day, Seiko had looked at him with something as close to sympathy as he'd attribute to her. The second day, the barkeeper's face had been impassive. And now she was approaching disdain every time she brought him another drink.

"I'm just going to charge you for a whole bottle," Seiko said. "Per day."

He merely grunted at her. He might buy the place with his winnings and

never leave Atlantis again, on the off chance that Mercy returned one day and regretted leaving him.

“She’s not coming back.”

He swiped his rum off the bar and took another swig. “Since when can you read my mind?”

“I started being able to read your mind about the moment you became so transparently heartbroken.”

He grunted again. “I really fucked up.”

The half-elven bartender snorted. “I’ll say.”

“I lied to her.”

“That you did.”

“Before that, I told the worst person I know where to find her.”

Seiko nodded, unwilling to alienate members of the *Scarlet Cow*’s crew by maligning them aloud to anyone, even him.

“And then I fucked her while I was still lying to her.”

“Are you sure the Dutchman is the worst person you know? You could try looking in the mirror.”

Shit. He’d behaved abhorrently towards Mercy, and there was no number of orgasms that could ever eclipse that. Telling her he loved her after all that was a poor balm for the pain he’d caused her—that he’d started causing her before they’d met. “I also told her she was a distraction and that I’d lose because of her.”

The door to the bar opened, letting in sunlight that burned Xavier’s eyes. When had he last gone outside? Anorra sat next to him at the bar and tapped twice. Seiko brought her a glass of champagne.

“What is he whining about now?” His first mate didn’t even look at him.

Seiko laughed again. He was glad someone was finding pleasure in his pain. “He was telling me all about how he lost the love of his life.”

“As far as I know, he can still sail in regattas,” Anorra said.

“Mercy,” he said it quietly. “Mercy is the love of my life.”

His first mate looked him up and down. “You would give it up for her?”

“I don’t—” He shook his head. “I would if I could find her. But it doesn’t matter. She doesn’t want me to find her, and now I don’t want to sail anymore. Anywhere I go, I want her to be with me. She’s a part of me.”

Anorra drained her glass of champagne, motioned for another, and turned to face him. “If you love her and want her with you, why can’t she be with you?”

“First of all, because she doesn’t want to be.” Then he thought of all the good reasons why being with her wouldn’t work in the long term. “Because she’s a distraction I don’t need. I’m worried about her safety, if she’s happy. Goddess, if we have children, how will I have the focus I need to win?”

“We won with her this time, decisively, when the odds were not in our favor with her as a ‘distraction.’” His first mate made air quotes with the last word. “What makes you think she’ll distract you from winning? The way I see it, what you feel for her fuels you. It drives you to keep pushing. She’s not like Nadine. She takes nothing away from your ability to perform. She gives you a reason.”

He knew Anorra was right. Why was he even racing anymore if he couldn’t live the life he wanted to live? If he had to shrink his life down to only racing in order to win, then was it even worth it? He was already the greatest to have ever raced a regatta. Who cared if he walked away?

His thoughts were interrupted when a dark-skinned woman with long dreadlocks and skin even more tattooed than his leaned on the bar next to him. He was prepared to blow her off when she said, “You all might want to sail away or head inland in the next hour or so. There’s a siren on trial, and you know how sirens can get messy.”

“Can you please shut up?” Seiko snapped. “That siren used to work here, and she’s my friend.”

Xavier’s spine stiffened with his decision. “Take the crew out of the harbor,” he told Anorra. “Come back for me tomorrow.” Then he turned to Seiko. “Do the portals still hold the imprint of the travelers for five days?”

“It’s going to be pretty weak by now,” Seiko warned. “But I’m probably not going to change your mind, am I?”



XAVIER SPENT SO MUCH of his life at sea that he’d forgotten what it was like to dodge randy wood nymphs. He was breathless by the time he came to the clearing in the forest where most of the portals to other dimensions were. He’d only ever left Atlantis by spell before—it was possible to tow a ship to the center of the forest, but no one did that. And the portals were notoriously unreliable.

When he finally made it the clearing, without losing his clothes or his dignity to the various wood nymphs who had tried to entice him with their magic, he closed his eyes and conjured the feeling of being with Mercy.

He pushed away all his regrets and self-recriminations and opened himself to the feeling of her soft skin against his fingers, the scent of the ocean on her hair, the taste of her lips, and the lush earthy essence of her pleasure in his throat. From behind his worry that this wouldn't work—that he'd lost her forever—he pulled the warm feeling of being home that stirred in his chest whenever she was near him. He pushed the hollow sadness away for the time being and immersed himself in the love he felt for Mercy.

After a few long moments, he was pulled to one edge of the clearing. As he approached, the feeling of Mercy got stronger and stronger. The veil between worlds thinned, and he could see a sort of pastoral scene—with sheep and goats and little cottages on a hill. Exactly the life Mercy had left.

For a moment, his doubts crept in. If that was the life she wanted, was it wrong of him to lure her away? She'd wanted him to leave her alone. What if she was happy without him and he ruined that again?

The portal flickered as his doubts strengthened. But this was probably his last and best chance to find her. He could go, and if she didn't want him, he'd wander until he found his way back.

Decision made, he took one more step towards the portal. But a force suddenly stopped him. The portal bulged, and Mercy stepped out.



Mercy breathed the air of the loamy forest at the center of Atlantis for the first time in three years, uncertain whether she'd made the right decision. When she'd walked into another dimension that Seiko had promised was just like England but much friendlier to witches, she'd been so sure of herself.

For the first eighteen months, as she apprenticed with a group of badass witches and established a village apothecary, which made enough money for her to purchase a small cottage and three goats, she didn't regret her decision. Sure, she was terribly lonely. She turned down every suitor who approached her, and there were quite a few. In not-quite-England, witches were prized romantic partners.

The longing for a certain pirate never left her. It only strengthened as her anger with him faded. Her body longed for the sea and for him. When the pain of missing him became unbearable, she started investigating spells that would bring her back to Atlantis. Though some of her sibling witches had warned her it would be impossible, Mercy knew she had the power to succeed where others had failed. Yesterday, she came upon a spell that would allow her to return to Atlantis without a piece of eight, a mere three days after she'd left.

She thought about returning three months or three years in real time after she'd left—perhaps Xavier needed to suffer as much as she had. But then she thought about how he'd made himself suffer after the previous witch had left him. He'd wandered the world without love for years. And she didn't want

that for him—or for herself.

For a moment, as she passed through the portal, she'd worried he might have already left the island behind, and she would have to search for him. But, as soon as she stepped through, there he was. Flat on his ass, disbelief written all over his face.

"You're here." She should have spent more time thinking about what she would say when she saw him, but he'd surprised her.

"You came back." His voice was laced with relief. "I missed you so much."

She stepped towards Xavier and sat on the forest floor next to him, but she didn't touch him—not yet. If she touched him, she would be lost. She would never have the chance to maintain the boundaries she'd so carefully erected in the time she'd spent away.

"Come on. I was gone for three days."

He reached for her, and she moved back a little, wrapping her arms around her knees. He grimaced and said, "It was like walking around with no heart in my chest for three days."

"So you're sorry for the lying and saying I'm a distraction from your focus, then?" She raised one brow, but she ached to touch him even more now that he was so close to her.

He crawled towards her. "I have no focus without you. I don't want to race without you by my side anymore. If you hadn't come back—"

His clothing was dirty, and his waistcoat was buttoned wrong. He was visibly distraught just thinking about it, and that broke her. "You would have come to find me."

"I would have searched from the beginning to the end of every dimension to find you, little witch."

Her heart sang in response to the pain in his voice. "I was gone for three years. I made a life, and it was a good one. But I could never move on from what I felt for you."

"Three years?" He was taken aback.

"I loved you every single day of them." Silently, she gave him permission to approach her and lay back after he crawled over her body. "This is the second time you've been on your knees for me."

He nuzzled her throat, and she shivered. "It's the first of a million times if that's what it takes for you to believe I love you with my whole heart, that you mean more to me than anything."

“Even the *Rake’s Revenge*?” Mercy didn’t know why she was pushing this, other than that she still felt a bit of doubt in her heart.

“I sent it away with Anorra.” He straightened, and she immediately tried to pull him back down on top of her. “I’ll leave the ship for good and walk right back through that portal with you. I’ll live a life with two feet on the land, plow fields, and fight your battles. And I won’t look back with regret for even a moment.” He was just as full of conviction in that moment as she’d ever seen him.

“I don’t want to go back. I was kind of bored without the constant danger.”

Xavier smiled piratically down at her. “So we’ll take over the world together?”

She wrapped her fingers of one hand around his neck and hooked her leg over his hips. “Forever.”

They kissed, and it was like there were exploding stars in all her limbs. She’d longed for his touch for so long that she didn’t know where to start first. She grasped his strong shoulders as she rolled her hips and felt his cock grind into her. After being without his touch for so long, she felt something delicious reopen in her.

Then it was like a bomb hit. An impact far from them but that she could feel reverberate over the whole island.

“Oh shit,” Xavier said against her skin.

“What is it?” Mercy clutched at his shoulders, hoping whatever had just happened wasn’t going to get between her and Xavier’s cock—or his mouth or fingers for that matter.

“A sex bomb.” He said it like it was something that happened every day. Not that she would ever be surprised by anything that happened on Atlantis.

“A sex bomb?” Even as she asked the question, she felt it—an irresistible urge to fuck. Never in her past three years of not getting laid or her years and months of not getting laid before she’d met Xavier had she felt anything like the cataclysm of lust trying to strangle her in this moment.

Considering Xavier’s cock grew even harder, it was affecting them both. They hadn’t consciously started dry humping, but they were totally dry humping.

“How did *this* happen?”

Xavier screwed up his face in pain, and his muscles bunched under his clothes. He was trying and failing to restrain himself. “There was a trial

having something to do with a siren, and they must have set off a sex bomb.”

“That sounds too wild to be true, but I feel it.” She wrapped her legs around his thighs to pull him closer. If he put just a little more pressure on her clit with the ridge of his cock, she would come. “And reunion sex as a result of a siren’s sex bomb would be a great story to tell, wouldn’t it?”

“Mmmm, yes.” He pressed harder against her. “To the children we are going to give each other.”

Some of the most egregious tension left Xavier’s body. He pulled back long enough to push up her skirt and free his cock. He looked down at the center of her, which she knew was wet and blooming for him, said, “Daddy’s home,” with a feral smile, and drove himself inside her.

She felt lightning through her entire body when he fucked into her as if he wanted to join with her permanently. It would have been enough just to have him inside her, but then he freed her breast from her gown and latched his mouth to her nipple. She was filled with fire and floating. Everything about this moment—the taste of his sweaty skin and the rum on his lips, the way the forest air started to smell like the musky scent of their sex, and the weight of his body against hers again. Even the sound of his hips slapping against her inner thighs was delicious and romantic because of its urgency.

He didn’t let her float for long because he laced one hand through the hair at the back of her head and forced her to meet his gaze. “You belong to me.”

She smiled at him. “You don’t have to sound so pissed about it.”

“You are mine.” And then she realized he was really saying that he was hers.

She shook her head as much as she could manage. “We belong to each other.”

His face softened, but he continued fucking her as though angry about the fact that he had semen in his body. “I want you so much.”

“You have me.” He might have only spent three days without her, but those three days had been torture for him. She could see it written all over his face. She’d chosen to leave him for a time, and she hadn’t given him any input in the matter. And one thing she knew about him was that he hated feeling out of control. “I’m not leaving. Make it so I never can. Make me yours.”

She said that more for herself than for him. Sometime later, when she wasn’t about to have an orgasm that might shake the leaves from the trees above them, she would tell him that she couldn’t bear to leave him. Right

now, she would simply tell him with her body.

“Never leaving.” His words were closer to grunts now, and his strokes were more erratic. “Need you to come.”

Mercy would give him everything he needed. She screamed when her release hit her, and he spilled inside her.



Rutting into the love of his life on the forest floor during a sexual natural disaster wasn't what Xavier had planned. But it was sort of perfect.

After they both came, he attempted to roll off her, but she clutched his shoulders to keep him in place, even as his cock softened inside her.

"Stay," she said.

He looked down into her startlingly beautiful face, attempting to memorize every plane and curve of it to savor in case they were ever parted.

"Always."

"I love you." She smiled at him. "You missed me."

"Missed" didn't even begin to cover the pain of the fact he'd thought he'd lost her forever. "I thought you were gone someplace that I would never find you."

"But I came back, and now we have to figure out how we're going to do this."

"What's 'this'?" He was afraid she would say it was an affair, that she would have enough of him and then hop back through her portal.

"Being together." She said it so matter-of-factly, as though it weren't going to determine his whole life. "If I'm a distraction on your ship, you'll just have to figure it out."

"You're not a distraction." Anorra and Seiko had straightened him out on that fact. "I'd been feeling very rudderless—a huge problem for a sailor—before I met you."

"Before you stole me from the Dutchman, who you tipped off on how to

find me.”

“I don’t regret it.”

“You’re trying to take your apology back?” She gave him a skeptical look that would have made him laugh had this discussion not been so consequential.

“I’m sorry about what I did and any pain or fear it caused you. I’m not sorry it brought you to me. If you really want to be together, then it had to have happened the way it did.”

She stroked the side of his face with her hand, rubbing his bottom lip with her thumb. Sticking it in and letting him suck on her flesh. His cock hardened again, but they had to talk, so he withdrew from her and pulled her up to a seated position.

“Loving you gives me a purpose. The monarch sent me an image at the very end of the race. Of the consequences if I didn’t win. And do you know what it was?”

Mercy shook her head.

He couldn’t help but catch one of her pretty curls. “It was of what would happen to you if the Dutchman won you.” He would spare her the details. He’d had nightmares involving that image each night. “And suddenly, my own glory didn’t matter anymore. My love for you gives me more to fight for than wanting another chest of prize money or another trophy.” He laughed. “I don’t even know where my trophies are. I have to know where you are at all times. You’re more than a trophy. You’re everything to me.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, and he felt as though his heart would beat out of his chest waiting for her.

“I think I want a life at sea with you.”

“No more longing for home?”

She shook her head, her curls dancing around her face. He grabbed the end of one strand and held it to his nose, breathing her in. “You’re my home now,” she said.

And then she kissed him.

BONUS EPILOGUE

A YEAR OR SO (DEPENDING ON THE REALM) LATER...



“The witches aren’t supposed to sink the ships,” the monarch whispered to Xavier, giving him a healthy dose of side-eye as they handed over the metal jug Xavier would put with all the other metal plates and jugs he’d won over the years. Xavier hoisted the Atlantis Regatta trophy over his head.

He smiled at Remel, wary of arousing the anger of the island’s ruler. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Almost all the ships have witches now.” The governing body had changed the rules so witches could be aboard all the racing ships, as long as there was a consent form signed in the witch’s blood and verified through magic. The governing body had decided that the inclusion of witches aboard the ships made the racing series more interesting and provided more opportunities for women.

“Interesting that the only boat that sank—due to an unforeseen weather event—belonged to your archrival.” Unfortunately, the Dutchman did not have a witch because he could not find one willing to tolerate his crew.

“That could have been anyone’s witch,” Xavier said, knowing for a fact Mercy had decided to enact a smidge of revenge by splitting the *Scarlet Cow* with lightning during the final lap of the race. “Besides, he wasn’t in contention for the championship during this race. No harm. No foul.”

“There is such thing as the letter of the law and the spirit of the law,” Remel stated. “And you very well know that I hew to the letter.”

Xavier scanned the docks and found the Dutchman’s alternative transportation departing from Atlantis. “He’s not even here to complain about it, Your Majesty.” That didn’t precisely comport with the regulations, but

Xavier wanted this discussion to end. He had celebrating to do. When the monarch seemed to hesitate, Xavier extended the trophy to them. “I could give this back, if that would please you.”

That worked. The monarch’s mouth closed into a thin line, and they stepped back to smile at the screaming throngs of well-wishers. Xavier was beloved, and the monarch responded to the will of the crowd. Monarchs were powerful, but they weren’t all-powerful. Taking back Xavier’s win and the championship along with it wouldn’t sit well with all the people here.

Xavier sought out one person among the crowd. The moment he found her, standing in the front row, right next to a smiling Anorra, everyone else disappeared. It had been a long season, and they hadn’t been able to get lost in each other as much as he would have liked.

Their gazes remained locked when Xavier put down the trophy and picked up the magnum of champagne they were required to spray all over themselves and one another. He was still amazed that becoming bewitched by her had not diminished his desire or capability to win. It had only intensified both. The love he felt for her was born from their desire for each other but sustained through something much more powerful and ineffable. He would never cease to be amazed by the ways her presence lit him up. She never—especially today with her vengeful little move—ceased to surprise him.

The overture to *Carmen* began to play, and Xavier dutifully popped his cork. He sprayed the two other captains on the podium, took a long gulp of the cold champagne, and then jumped off the podium.

Still holding the neck of the magnum, he marched straight over to his witch, bent at the waist, and hauled her over his shoulder.

Shouts and catcalls from the crowd followed them all the way to the *Rake’s Revenge*.



“LITTLE WITCH,” Xavier said with a lilt in his voice that said Mercy’s machinations during the final race had not gone unnoticed. “Why did a bolt of lightning take out the *Scarlet Cow* on that last lap? The monarch is on to you.”

Mercy sat on the berth in the cabin they shared and looked up at him

through her eyelashes. “I go by ‘pirate wife’ now.” She’d claimed that title as soon as the *Rake’s Revenge* had returned from sea after the siren sex bomb. Anorra had officiated their wedding on the deck.

Xavier looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “You can’t keep destroying his ships. Eventually, the stewards won’t be able to ignore it, and they’ll punish me.”

“I don’t see why I have to.” Mercy began untying the laces of her corset, hoping to distract her husband. “I’m a force of nature. The regulations say forces of nature aren’t governable under the rules.”

Xavier put one knee up on the bed and Mercy scooted back. She wasn’t ready to give up yet. “I’m sure the rules will change next year to account for that sort of force majeure,” he said.

“But you would have been the champion anyway.” Mercy shrugged. “I just made him suffer at the back of the grid a little bit more.” She smiled up at Xavier, giving him her best doe-eyed look from underneath her lashes.

He sighed, but she knew he wasn’t as put-upon as he would have liked for her to believe. “And moving that iceberg out of our path and directly into his in Antarctica was really more of a defensive move?” He sat back on his heels, and she took a long moment to admire the man she could now call her husband. His fine white shirt was open, allowing her gaze to devour the markings on his chest—including the new one. She’d spent hours tracing the letters of her name directly over his heart.

“Exactly, my pirate husband.” Mercy smiled at him as she removed her corset entirely. “This is nothing like what I did to the magistrate and that poor vicar.”

Xavier laughed and grabbed her feet. A thrill went through her body at the idea that he might actually dole out some corporal punishment. She had been very naughty after all. “It was pretty cruel, putting them in stocks and turning them into various farm animals until you grew bored.”

“It was only cruel to the pigs and cows. Counting those men among their numbers greatly decreased the quality of the flocks.” Mercy shrugged one shoulder so her chemise would fall. Xavier’s gaze fell to her mostly bare breast. “And I turned them back.”

“Right before I warned them at the point of my sword that I would hang their bloody heads from the mast of my ship if they ever uttered your name aloud again.” He crawled over her and kissed her shoulder.

“You’re lucky there’s no regulation about that kind of thing.”

“I don’t want to talk about them anymore, though.” He pulled her skirt off and allowed it to float to the ground. But then he seemed to lose his patience and ripped the front of her chemise in half so she was naked in front of him.

She would never tire of the way he looked at her—as though she was the best present he’d ever hoped to receive. He treasured her, and he wore his wonder in her all over his face.

“So, I know you get off on being the captain of the ship in bed and out of bed, but I do have a suggestion.”

Xavier loved her suggestions. “And what is that suggestion, my little witchy pirate wife?”

“I think you should take off the rest of your clothes and get inside me now.”

“You’d like me to disrobe for you?” He ran his finger from her collarbone to above her clit. But he didn’t touch her where she craved yet. And then he got off the bed and pulled his shirt over the back of his head in one smooth motion. She would also never tire of the way he moved. He pushed his pants off and was on her before she could blink. If she didn’t know better, she would think he had magical powers. “Suggestion accepted.”

In one movement, he opened her thighs and plunged inside her. It was so good, every time. For three years, it had felt like she was missing a piece of herself—even in moments when she had felt complete satisfaction with everything else in her life. Now that she had him back, she couldn’t get enough of being joined to him.

The smell of his sweat and their sex mingled and wove a magic she hadn’t quite mastered. It was mystical to her, the way he groaned as her tightness gave way to his hardness. She linked her hands behind his neck and brought his mouth down to hers. She wouldn’t be satisfied unless they were of one breath. The wedding vows he’d written had said as much. She was the air he breathed, and she’d never been so sure anyone was telling her the truth in her whole life. There was power exchange in their relationship, but it was always balanced. It was as though they were ordained by nature.

“Want this forever, little witch.” Her husband was losing his ability to speak in full sentences, and that was a sure sign that he would fill her to the brim with his come again. “Want you to make me a daddy.”

Mercy hadn’t brought it up yet, but she wanted that, too. She’d started to dream about little miniature pirates and witches sprinting around the deck of the *Rake’s Revenge*, running effigies of the Dutchman through with wooden

swords.

“I want that, Daddy,” Mercy breathed. Xavier must have sensed that this was different from the usual way they played with the idea of her having his children, because he stopped. Mercy nearly cried out in protest.

But Xavier grabbed the sides of her face, forcing her to meet his gaze. Their chests both heaved to take in breaths, and his body was so tense that she thought it might explode. “Do you really want that?”

For a split second, she hesitated. What if playing this game was all he needed? She was already tied to him forever because of the words they’d spoken on the deck of this ship. Did she really need more? Could she dare to wish for more?

But, despite their beginning, Xavier had never denied her anything her heart desired. She was whole when she was with him. She didn’t *need* to turn the fantasies they spoke of into reality. But she did want it. She could see it. Feel it. Taste it.

“Do you want it, my pirate?” She reached up and gently moved one of his braids out of his face. “Do you need to make a baby with me to secure your legacy?”

He closed his eyes briefly. “No. I don’t need it.” Disappointment threatened to choke her before he said, “But I want it. I want to give you babies. Give us children.”

Now that she felt completely safe in saying it, she said, “I want that, too.”

He opened his eyes again and began moving his hips in earnest. “Can you lift the birth control spell now?”

Mercy nodded. She’d learned how to lift that spell almost as soon as they’d been married. The deepest part of her had known this moment would come—when the last thing either of them had thought they would want would become the only thing that mattered.

“Lift it.” That was a captain’s order, so she closed her eyes and whispered a few words to herself.

As he fucked into her, she could almost feel herself ripening with every stroke. Without consciously doing it, she pulled him in deeper as she clutched and clawed at his shoulders.

“You’re going to rip it out of me, you naughty pirate wife.” He didn’t sound entirely displeased about it. His hips lost their smooth rhythm when she contracted around him as everything in her being clenched and released.

They would be lucky if this ended with the ship intact.

“Fuuuuck.” The word came out of him as a long moan as he spurted come inside her.

After a few moments of heavy breathing and several more curse words, he wrapped his hand gently at the base of her neck and released his body onto hers.

Mercy sighed, stroking the letters of her name into the sweat on his back. “I’ll always be your little witch.”

Xavier turned his head and stroked the side of her damp neck with his nose. “Always.”



THANK you so much for reading *To Win a Witch’s Heart*! If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a review!

Ready to return to Atlantis? Be sure to check out [To Conquer a Bride](#)! Niall is set to walk down the aisle...but her fiancé’s brother shows up to kidnap her from the altar!

Keep reading for a sneak peek!



HOLY SHIT.

I’m getting married.

I inhale, and slowly exhaling, glance out the glass wall of the companionway. In the distance, Nelson Dock Pier is a silhouette against the steadily deepening purple sky, and through the cracked door in front of me, the fresh, salty scent of the Thames lends a fragrance sweeter than any flower to me. I’ve grown up on ships, on the water. It’s fitting that I marry on both.

Initially, I’d balked at the wedding taking place in London. Though this is my fiancé’s family’s home, mine is in Boston. But now, I’m glad I compromised.

This day is perfect.

“Thank God for the UK’s Environmental Act of 2057,” my grandmother

mutters next to me with a sniff. “If not, we would be breathing in shit right now.”

Biting the inside of my cheek, I swallow a snicker. “You’re horrible,” I whisper. “Be good, woman.”

Luce Hudson snorts, and this time I can’t hold in my quiet laughter.

Her signature lavender and vanilla fragrance teases me, and I hug that sense of familiarity close. As of today, everything in my life will change, and if I could, I’d hoard that elegant yet calming scent. Take it out and hold it close like a safety blanket whenever I needed to remember where I came from—who I came from.

“Are you sure, baby girl?” Mama abruptly turns to me, and her fingers press into my shoulders. “I don’t give a damn about the people waiting for us on this yacht. If you tell me right now that he isn’t the man for you, that this isn’t what you want, I will jump ship right now and won’t stop until we hit Boston.”

She’s not bullshitting.

Three things my grandmother doesn’t mess around about—her husband and my grandfather Marcell Hudson, the family company Crown Shipping, and me. She will turn around and leave this ship, the wedding be damned. It’s just one of the reasons Grandad loved her. She’s the original ride or die.

Lifting my hands, I cover hers. And squeeze.

“I miss him, too,” I whisper.

My indomitable grandmother’s face crumbles for just a moment before she ducks her head. But she can’t hide her throat working as she convulsively swallows, no doubt battling back tears. The tears that glisten in her eyes when she looks back at me seconds later.

“I wish he was here,” she rasps. “He *should* be here.”

Yes, he—Marcell Hudson, my grandfather and her husband—should be here on today of all days. He should be here to walk me down the aisle and give me away alongside my grandmother. Since our family is matriarchal, tradition dictates not only that the males who marry into our family take the last name Hudson, but that this would be my grandmother’s duty and honor.

But to hell with tradition.

Grandad became my father when my own died in a plane crash with my mom when I was two. From the archived news records and clippings, the media found it as ironic as the world that my father and my mom, the heir to Crown Shipping, met death in the air instead of in the water. I didn’t give a

damn about the where. Dead is dead.

Just as missing is missing.

And my grandfather has been missing for two years.

In a way, him being missing is worse than if he died. Death has finality, an ending. Missing...doesn't. There's always a question about if he's truly gone. If he will one day walk back through that door, yelling for us with that deep, booming voice with one of his many fantastical stories about where he's been for the last seven hundred and fifty-two days.

Yes, I've counted every single one of them. So has my grandmother.

Mama clears her throat and freeing her hands from mine, lifts them and cups my cheeks. Lowering my head, she brushes a kiss over my forehead.

"I know with every piece of me that your grandfather would climb out of hell itself to be here by your side. Nothing would keep him away from his precious Niall."

"I know."

I squeeze her wrists and note their fragility. She might curse like a sailor but there are moments like these—when I look into her grief-heavy eyes, when I touch her delicate bones—that I'm bluntly reminded that she's eighty-one years old. Mama is one of those women blessed with superior genes. Her smooth, mahogany skin remains mostly unlined, but she's done nothing to surgically remove a wrinkle or line from her face or a pound on her petite body. No, she proudly displays them. She calls them proof of a well-lived and loved life.

Yet, the last two years have been...difficult. My grandparents were a true love match and being without her other half has taken its toll.

I worry. Grandad going missing damn near destroyed me. Losing Mama would...

I shut my eyes, as if the gesture would block out the thought. The possibility.

But if my life has taught me one lesson time and time again with a casualness that's breathless in its cruelty, it's that death doesn't give a single fuck. It comes for everyone with no respect for who the person is.

Mama presses the pads of her thumbs into my cheekbones and I open my eyes, meeting hers.

"He would've been so proud of you, Niall. And I say 'would've' because you and I both know only death would've kept him from being here today." Her voice hoarsens, and my heart thrusts against my rib cage like a fist

attempting to throw a wild punch. My lips part but she shakes her head, a small ghost of a smile curving her lips. “No, baby girl. You’re about to be a married woman, a wife. It’s time we both admit what we refuse to say to anyone else, even if it’s just to each other.” She pauses, swallows, and a sharp, terrible sadness flashes in her eyes, and my breath snags in my lungs. “Your grandfather’s gone. He’s dead.”

A screaming objection climbs up from my soul and echoes inside my head and chest. *No!* The terrified little girl deep inside me slaps her hands over her ears. I don’t want to hear this. As long as we don’t voice the words aloud, then there remains the possibility that he can return to us.

“Mama” I croak.

“No.” She lowers her hands, clasps my shoulders again. “Today, we’re facing the truth together. We both know heaven or hell couldn’t have kept him from handing his little girl over to the person who she’s choosing to bind her life to. The person who will protect her just as she protects him or her. And he would’ve walked you down that aisle with tears in his eyes, a smile on his face, and with a hug for the person waiting at the altar. That’s who he was. *Was*, baby girl. But I’m going to be the only person with that honor today. And I’m not telling you anything you don’t know when I say I’m cut from a different cloth. I’ve never sugarcoated shit a day in my life. And just because you’re standing here in this wedding dress, I’m not about to start now.”

She tilts her head, studies me, and I’ve seen grown men cower and crumble under that merciless stare. But I’m the woman she raised me to be—I’m Luce Hudson’s granddaughter.

But fuck. I can’t lie.

I want to hide.

From that gaze and whatever she’s about to say.

“Are you sure, Niall?” she repeats her earlier question. “Is this what you want? More importantly, is Deion the man you want to spend the rest of your life with? Is he the *right* man?”

I lift my palms, shaking my head.

“Of course,” I say. No, hedge. “I’m marrying him.”

“That doesn’t answer my questions.”

I huff out a low chuckle and shrug. “Mama, of course. I wouldn’t marry him if I wasn’t certain.” *Truth*. “And if he wasn’t the right man.” *A version of the truth*.

I know what she's asking. Do I love Deion Ito, my fiancé. I won't lie to her—I can't. She wants that for me because that fairy-tale love is what she and Granddad had. And I wish with all my heart I could tell her yes, I love Deion and my life would be empty without him. God, I wish I could give her that.

But I experienced that kind of devotion once...and I lost it. Now, after grieving that loss, I've accepted that not everyone is meant to spend the rest of their lives with their soul mate. If they were, then that once-in-a-lifetime love wouldn't be so special. Wouldn't be sought after like a fabled treasure.

No, I have my reasons for marrying Deion Ito. And they may not include head-over-heels adoration but they're just as solid. Just as time-honored and steady.

Legacy.

Power.

Respect.

"Mama, I'm sure." I smile. "You don't have to worry. Deion's a good man."

For a long moment, she doesn't speak, just continues to look at me. Finally, she dips her chin and lowers her hands and returns my smile.

"You look beautiful, baby girl."

Smiling, I smooth my palms down my hips. The corset top of my white mermaid-style dress lifts and cups my small breasts while the lace conforms to my narrow waist and generous thighs, and the satin skirt flares from just above my knees to the floor in a wide, elegant bell.

My thick, natural, shoulder-length tight curls are parted down the middle, and white, maroon, and gold silk roses are pinned behind my right ear. Mama's teardrop diamond chandelier earrings are my only jewelry, my something borrowed and old.

The blue is the garter belt...and the new is the stainless steel dagger strapped to it. Both are gifts from my grandmother. She hadn't only made sure I would be able to run Crown Shipping when she either stepped down or left this earth; she ensured I could defend and protect myself because, in her words, "this world won't." And I guess giving me this gorgeous weapon on my wedding day is her way of reminding me of that.

It does. It also reminds me that I'm hers and always will be.

"Thank you," I murmur and smile. "I'm ready."

She leans forward and presses another kiss to my cheek.

“Okay. Let’s go get you married.”

Hooking her arm through mine, she lightly knocks on the door and it swings open, revealing the large, exquisitely decorated upper deck of the sleek, huge super yacht that sits like a sparkling opulent jewel on the Thames. It’s modern, gorgeous, luxurious—the epitome of Ito International Ltd.

Still, I prefer the old-fashioned brigantine with its massive sails docked back at the pier in the distance. *The Luce*, my grandfather’s. It’s classical, historical, and fantastical. It’s him.

Suddenly, she looks at me. Concern and a wild fierceness glitter in her eyes, and I’m reminded of a video I’d once seen. A tiger protecting her cubs. Ferocity. Love.

“I want you to promise me something, baby girl,” she rasps, the heels of her palms pressing into my jaw. “Promise me you won’t lose yourself. Promise me you won’t forget who you are and *whose* you are. Swear you won’t allow anyone to steal your voice, and that you won’t ever shrink so someone else can grow. Promise me, Niall.”

“Mama, I promise. Nothing will change.” I cradle her arm against my side. “Everything will be *fine*.”

She kisses my forehead in answer and guides me forward. Nerves dance through me as we glide down the aisle, strewn in pale pink petals, my and Deion’s families seated on either side in plush, satin-draped chairs.

And at the end, immaculately dressed in a black tuxedo, stands my fiancé, Deion Ito.

I can’t help but admire him. With his tall, imposing build, wide shoulders, lean waist, and long legs, he’s every inch a successful business mogul. Even with the distance of the long aisle separating us, his charisma and dominance reach out to me. His nearly black gaze strokes over my bare shoulders and the tops of my breasts, and it leaves a pleasant warmth behind, like the touch of spring sunshine.

Pleasant, a voice that sounds a hell of a lot like my grandmother’s whispers in my head. *Can you live with pleasant for the rest of your life?*

Mentally shaking my head, I focus on reaching Deion, and after Mama places my hand in his strong grip, the ceremony begins.

Tilting my head back, I stare into his dark eyes, take in his scalpel-sharp cheekbones, his smooth, tawny skin, full mouth, and strong jaw. He’s a beautiful man.

And I will myself to feel...*something* other than appreciation.

There's respect.

Respect won't keep you warm, give you orgasms.

Esteem, admiration won't break your heart.

They won't give you the dizzying heights of love and joy either.

Oh God. My subconscious is arguing with itself at the altar. And I can't tell which side is winning.

I force myself to concentrate on Pastor Huron's words that will bind us together as husband and wife. *My choice*, I declare to my subconscious...my mind...fuck me. *My choice and this is what I want.*

"...present know of any reason why this couple should not be joined in holy matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace."

A pregnant pause falls over the ship, but everyone here knows this is only formality. After all, who in their right mind would interrupt the wedding of the formidable Deion Ito and Niall Hudson?

Pastor Huron acknowledges the silence with a dip of his chin then holds out his hand to us, palm up. "If you would please face each—"

"Oh fuck. I hope I'm not too late. I hate being tardy for shit."

Shock crashes over me in an icy wave and I gasp, the power of it pummeling the breath from my lungs. I spoke too soon about someone being crazy enough to crash our wedding. Apparently, there's someone possessing a death wish.

Murmurs and whispers from our guests ripple in the air, and well, this was supposed to be the wedding of the decade. But not like *this*.

"What the fuck?" Deion growls, his hand tightening around mine to the point of pain.

I slowly turn toward the stern of the yacht and that deep, rumbling voice damn near vibrates with dark, hungry menace.

Don't you look, part of me screams. *Don't you dare look!*

But I've never been one to turn away from a dare, from danger, and I don't start now, even when my heart pounds out a warning that this one glance will be like looking into the eye of a storm that will tear my life apart.

And I'm not wrong.

Trepidation trips down my spine.

Trepidation because even though I've only seen a picture of this man, I know him. Know *of* him.

And his presence means no good for me. And definitely not for Deion.

The shit is about to hit the proverbial fan.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Deion snaps, voice as cold as the icy shock still slicking through my veins.

“Giving my congratulations, of course. I figured my invitation got lost in the mail, so I came to give my cheers in person,” his brother drawls in his clipped British accent, striding up the aisle as if he’s strolling through Hyde Park on a sunny day. “Cheers, brother.” Zaid Ito pauses several feet away from us, bends at the waist in a small mocking bow, then turns toward the front row where his parents sit. He bows again. Deeper. “Oto-san. Mother.”

Go Ito doesn’t respond, just stares at his son as if he isn’t standing there. Emotion flickers in Marian Ito’s hazel eyes, but like her husband, she doesn’t react to her older son’s greeting.

The corner of Zaid’s mouth curls up, but it isn’t a smile, and it isn’t nice. There’s nothing about Zaid Ito that’s *nice*.

If Deion is painfully proper sophistication, then his older brother is everything raw, wild, earthy. Where Deion’s hair is perfectly styled and cut close to his head, Zaid’s long strands fall in a tangle of loose, wavy curls below his shoulders. While Deion’s warm brown skin is flawless, Zaid’s almond skin tells a story of violence, with a scar slashing the end of his right eyebrow and another across his jaw that his thick black beard doesn’t cover. Instead of an elegant tuxedo, a long-sleeved, cotton white shirt clings to his broad chest, the open collar revealing a strong throat and the rolled-up sleeves displaying powerful forearms roped with muscles. Every inch of visible skin, from his neck to his fingers, is covered in black, red, and blue ink. Black pants mold to lean hips and powerful thighs that resemble the carefully preserved oak trees in Mama’s Martha’s Vineyard home. Scuffed boots that belong to a laborer cover his large feet as compared to the formal, shiny black shoes that adorn Deion’s.

Where Deion’s gaze is cool, assessing, Zaid’s gold, brown, and green stare is hot, fierce. Glowing. Like a predatory eagle spying his prey.

I shiver. Like that prey.

Zaid is the hated and scorned outcast to Deion’s revered heir.

He’s the pirate to Deion’s respected citizen.

And with every step that brings him closer, I want to shrink from all that violent, brutal energy that seems to snap and snarl around him.

“Security,” Deion grinds out. That grit in his voice and the tight, small tick along his jaw the only signs of agitation. “Please rid us of this...nuisance to my family.”

The emphasis on “my family” isn’t lost on anyone there. *His. Deion’s.* Not Zaid’s. And the fact their parents have turned their backs on him and stare straight ahead as if he doesn’t exist kind of co-signs this.

Zaid’s grin grows and another shiver dances through me. A shiver of warning, of dread.

“Deion...” I murmur.

But he ignores me.

“Security,” he barks again.

“Oops,” Zaid whispers. “Did I forget to mention they might be a little”—he pauses—“tied up at the moment? Oh, why lie? Dead. They’re dead. To be fair, though, I did give them a choice. And I have to commend you, little brother. Good choice in crew. Only one decided you weren’t worth dying for. But then I had to kill him for being a disloyal pussy.”

Out of my peripheral vision, I catch movement in the area of the main control room and emerging from the galley. People dressed similarly to Zaid silently slip up behind him and on the sides of the guests, forming an intimidating barricade of flesh and bone.

Oh shit.

Horror screams through my veins, infiltrating my blood.

Mama.

My gaze jerks to my grandmother. Is she terrified? *Please God, don’t let them hurt her. I already lost Grand—fuck.* The prayer on my lips instantly changes on spying her narrowed eyes and grim lips. *God, please don’t let her say or do anything that will get her killed.* I’m ready to bolt over to that front row and throw my body in front of her so she doesn’t do anything foolish.

“You just admitted to murder in front of over one hundred witnesses. I didn’t think even you were that stupid, Zaid,” Deion says, arching an eyebrow.

“Did I? Self-defense. I believe I admitted to self-defense. But fuck it.” His brother shrugs a massive shoulder. “Does it really matter when I’m about to commit a kidnapping?”

Before his words—his confession—fully registers, his long legs eat up the distance separating him from us and his long, hard fingers close around my upper arm.

I gasp. From the shock. From the heat.

And it’s the burn of his touch that sears away my paralysis.

“The fuck?” I tear out of his hold.

Or attempt to.

His grip tightens, and that brutal grip is sure to leave bruises. And as I lift my gaze from his scarred fingers to his jeweled, cruel eyes, I sincerely doubt he gives one single damn.

“What the hell?” Deion snarls, and he yanks on my hands that are still clasped in his.

If the situation weren’t so damn serious and surreal, I’d laugh over being caught in a tug-of-war at my big age of twenty-six.

But there isn’t anything laughable about an honest-to-God pirate trying to kidnap me from the altar on my fucking wedding day.

“Son, this is unseemly...” Pastor Huron objects, his Bible and hand flapping, pale skin stained an alarming shade of red.

“Get your fucking hands off my granddaughter.” Mama shoots up from her seat and charges us.

But in a whirl of motion, two women and three men appear, their guns aimed at the back of Pastor Huron’s head, two on either side of Deion’s head and at Mama’s temple, and a knife at her throat.

“*Don’t*,” I yell. At least in my head, I yell. It emerges as a hoarse, pained whisper.

And Christ, I don’t give a damn about Deion or—God, I’m going to hell for this—Pastor Huron. The sight of that gun against my grandmother’s delicate, blue-veined skin and the blade at her throat has the dirty, metallic grit of fear surging up my throat and onto my tongue. They can’t hurt her. They *can’t*.

“I have nothing but respect for you, Luce Hudson. But I’ll drop you where you stand if you try me,” Zaid warns her.

“Fuck you,” Mama spits, hate burning in her brown eyes, and she surges forward, pressing her neck against the knife. A thin line of red blooms against her paper-thin brown skin. “And fuck you twice if you think you’re going anywhere with my granddaughter.”

He chuckles and my stomach twists, acid churning inside it. I hate him. So much it eclipses the fear, the worry.

Zaid bends his head, rubbing his cheek against my curls. “Oh, I really, really hope your granddaughter is as feisty as you.”

The scream Mama looses would’ve done an Amazon proud, and rage barrels into me, hot and liquid. I throw my head back, hoping I smash his nose right into that tiny-ass thing he calls a brain. But with another of those

laughs, he shifts to the side, evading my head butt.

Goddamn it.

I want blood. *His blood.* My fingers curl into my palm, itching with the need to peel up this dress, grab my knife, and put it to *his* throat, giving him the same red collar his people have gifted my grandmother.

As if reading my thoughts, his tattooed arm lifts and bands my throat, that muscled forearm pressing right up against my windpipe. Right now, it's a threat of cutting off my air. But message received. One move and my access to breathing will be a thing of the past.

Bastard.

My gaze meets Mama's. She's stopped struggling, too. Not for her own sake, though. For mine. Tears burn my eyes. I've become her weakness. I'm weak. And I hate it.

I hate him for making me weak.

"Zaid, what are you doing?" Marian softly calls.

Behind me, his chest rises and falls on a hard, deep breath, and for a second, he stills. But in the next, he jerks his chin toward the man and woman behind Deion.

"Enough talk," he bluntly states, voice no longer possessing that faintly teasing note but cold menace again.

The two press the barrels of their guns harder to Deion's head, dragging him back several feet. Deion doesn't immediately release my hand, and for a long moment fire races up my arm, coalescing in my shoulder. But I lock down the grunt of pain. Not for Deion's sake. I'm not giving Zaid the pleasure of hearing that. Fuck that and fuck him.

"You're not taking her anywhere." Deion strains against their hold even as they tow him back and away. "She's mine."

"Hear that, pet." Zaid chuckles again and wraps an arm of steel around my waist, hauling me against his hard, big body. "So possessive. Let's see if he's still singing that same tune a few weeks from now. Especially since he knows how I like to...play."

His lips skim my cheekbone, and I buck and twist away from both his touch and the threat in those words. Fury sears away my common sense; I see red. I've heard of the phenomenon. Read about it. But never experienced it. My body burns alive, and I'm consumed in flames; it drowns my mind. No one has ever touched me without my consent. In any way. And he's already violated that and is threatening to do more—to do the worst.

No.

A scream rebounds against my skull as he hauls me across the deck, and from a distance, I recognize that it isn't all in my head. That my throat aches from the curses I'm hurling at him. That my body will bear the bruises and tenderness from all the twisting and kicking of trying to free myself from him. It's pointless, and the deep, painful helplessness only stirs and fires my efforts to escape.

Have I mentioned how much I loathe him?

And every person either actively assisting him in kidnapping me or standing by and doing nothing but spectating. It might be irrational, but I hate them all.

"You might want to hold on," Zaid advises me seconds before he releases my neck and leaps up onto the railing behind him.

A scream jacks into my throat and lodges there. On reflex, I clutch the arm around my waist, his big body suddenly the only stable, steady purchase in this crazy-as-fuck landscape my world has become.

"See you soon, little brother."

Faster than my eye can track, Zaid whips a gun out, aims, and shoots. The scream in my throat escapes as Deion's body jerks and he grunts, falling against his captors.

And in the next moment, I'm plummeting through the air toward the dark water below.

Buy [To Conquer a Bride](#) now!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Andie J. Christopher writes sharp, witty, sexy contemporary romance about complex people finding happily ever after. Her work has been featured in NPR, *Cosmopolitan*, *The Washington Post*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *The New York Post*. Prickly heroines are her hallmark, and she is the originator of the Stern Brunch Daddy. Andie lives in the Nation's Capital with a French bulldog, a stockpile of Campari, and way too many books.

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