

TO  
SEDUCE  
A  
SIREN

JENNY  
NORDBAK

# TO SEDUCE A SIREN

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DANGEROUS TIDES

JENNY NORDBAK



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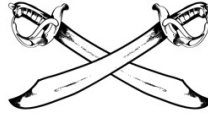
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# **CONTENT WARNINGS**

Explicit sex, violence, murder, threat of sexual assault (non-explicit, briefly referenced), threats of torture, aphrodisiac sex magic (does not compel anyone to do anything they don't want to do), kidnapping

# TALON



**W** *hatever you do, don't start another war.*

It had seemed like a perfectly reasonable request when my brother, the newly crowned king of pirates, made it. How hard could it be to convince a tavern owner to pay back his debt without killing anyone?

We knew he didn't have the money because he'd blown it gambling the night before, but he'd done it so publicly, drunkenly bragging that he wasn't even really losing his money since it was owed to Thorin.

It demanded an answer.

The dimly lit tavern was packed like it was on most nights, but the usual laughter and drunken banter was subdued as every pirate in the place watched my conversation. There was a reason I'd chosen a table in the middle of the room. We were interested in building relationships with the business owners on Ocracoke Island who didn't already support us, but first, the ones who were disrespecting us needed to be put in their place.

Malcolm Asher sat across from me, his ruddy cheeks redder than usual as he flailed his hands in desperation. "Please! I don't have the coin to repay Thorin yet."

A pirate at a table behind me snorted. "Malcolm expects Talon the Destroyer to show mercy? I heard he skinned a man alive."

“I heard he took three days to kill some guy who stole from him. Made the thief into a stew, one piece at a time.”

I sighed. If I was going to kill a man, I didn't need three days to do it. And it was my sister who'd skinned someone alive.

The serving wench arrived at our table, and placed a glass of ale in front of me before moving to the next table without meeting my eyes. Pearl never met my eyes.

Maybe she believed all the stories they told about me. Probably wise to keep her distance since some of them were true.

Her bright smile returned once she moved away from me, and she set drinks down in front of the other pirates, but her smile faltered when she leaned forward next to Edgar Avery. If his hand roamed to her backside uninvited one more time, I was at risk of breaking that oath to my brother.

Avery was a respected member of the pirate crew that had opposed Thorin. Maiming him in the middle of the busiest tavern on the island was sure to start the war I wasn't supposed to be starting.

*And yet...*

I let out a controlled breath just as Pearl twisted out of his grasp with her smile back in place. “Careful, Mister Avery. Startle me like that and you may end up with a drink in your lap.” There was steel in her tone, making it clear his advances were unwelcome.

She leaned forward to pass out the rest of the ale, and the sonofabitch groped her again. For a split second, her expression fell, but then she picked up a full mug and dumped it on Avery's lap. “Whoops,” she said, without a hint of remorse.

I fought a grin at the satisfied look on her face as she breezed back behind the bar like nothing had happened.

“What the fuck, Pearl?!” Avery jumped up from his chair looking enraged. Everyone momentarily forgot Malcolm's plight as they mocked Avery's soaked pants. He couldn't touch



her now, but she'd need to be careful with him later. He wouldn't take kindly to humiliation.

As a rule, I didn't give a fuck about anyone but my siblings and my crew. But Pearl was different. When we'd fled Daneland and come to Ocracoke five years earlier, she'd shown me what we were even fighting for. She wasn't hard like the rest of us. She'd managed to live in this brutal world of ours and not lose the joyful hope that practically glowed from her.

Her spirit sang to me.

The gods had given me a *gift*...the ability to read people's desires. Some days it felt like I was swimming in a sea of all the greedy, disgusting, disturbing desires of everyone around me, and she was a boat I could cling to. Her deepest wants, so full of light, soothed the roiling darkness in me. She yearned for simple things like a quiet, warm place to sleep, a break from the unrelenting attention she got in the tavern...and love. She ached to be loved.

The problem was that anytime she saw me, I sensed her core desire shifting until she thrummed with a need to get away. I was used to people wanting to run from me, but her visceral fear of me was unsettling. I was as drawn to her as she was repulsed by me.

It was fucked.

I'd taken to lurking in the alley behind the tavern like a fucking cutpurse, just waiting to feel her presence. When she didn't know I was outside, I'd catch waves of her hopefulness and drink them in.

It was pathetic.

Everyone else in the tavern thirsted for sex, power, or wealth.

Or her. They all wanted her.

She just wanted them all to leave her the fuck alone. But you'd never have known it since her vivacious mask so rarely slipped. She was the famous Ocracoke Pearl, the most beautiful woman anyone had ever seen, an unspoiled treasure

who drew many a sailor here simply to catch a glimpse of her fiery-red hair and arrestingly lovely face.

She was forbidden.

She was the daughter of the man I'd come to make an example of.

I turned back to Malcolm. "The fuck am I supposed to do with you?"

His face relaxed with relief like he thought I actually wanted his opinion. "I just need more time."

"Don't have time, Malcolm. Not for this kind of disloyalty. The pirates here have been fighting each other for so long we've grown weak. The Saxons will take advantage of that." It would only be a matter of time before they staged a full-blown invasion, and we had to unite the crews before it happened.

Two kingdoms dominated the mainland to the East: Daneland in the North where my family was from, and the Saxon kingdom in the South, where they used their monotheistic fanaticism to justify oppression of every kind. They hated the old gods we worshipped in the North, hated women who did anything but obey, hated anyone who was different, and above all, they hated pirates.

The pirates on Ocracoke were a mixture of people who'd fled the two kingdoms, along with people from other far-flung places and realms. Here, all people were welcome and all people were free. Or at least that was the dream we were fighting for.

"The Saxons have no interest in Ocracoke," Malcolm said, brimming with the desire to deceive me.

"And just how would you know that?" I asked, leaning closer, pinning him with a look.

Malcolm traded with the Saxons, and I'd long suspected he traded in information as well, but until I could prove it, I had to put up with him.

He shifted uneasily. "They've left us alone for years."

The pirates in my line of sight sat up straighter and shifted their hungry gazes over my shoulder. Pearl was making her way around the room behind me, but I managed to resist looking. She seemed to be hovering near my table, which was unusual.

On the occasions when she'd been forced to serve me drinks, she kept her eyes averted like she couldn't even stand to look at me and stayed as far away as possible. As far as I knew, I hadn't murdered anyone she cared about...but it was possible.

As she came back into my line of sight, I sipped my ale and tried not to watch her, but Avery threw out an arm and snatched her around the waist, pulling her onto his soaking wet lap.

"If you're going to get me all wet, surely I should get to do the same to you," Avery said as she frantically tried to twist out of his hold.

Malcolm saw what was happening but ignored it like his daughter being groped didn't matter. "Thorin never said I had to pay him back this quickly..."

Avery's hands held Pearl's hips, so her struggles just meant she was grinding against him. I thumped my glass down on the table so hard, it cracked into pieces, and I was fully ready to use one of the blunt shards to eviscerate Avery.

The tavern fell silent, the tense silence of people who've seen too many fights and know better than to make sudden moves when one is about to start. It was enough to snap me out of the fog of rage...but barely. Pearl used the distraction to get free, and crossed to the other side of my table, putting me between her and Avery.

*Good girl.*

Avery was the worst kind of pirate, but he'd be too useful in the fight ahead for me to kill him over this. Everyone else just saw it as a bit of fun.

*Whatever you do, don't start another war.*

Malcolm misinterpreted my angry gesture and thought I was about to take the debt out of his hide. It was what everyone else assumed too, but no one came to his defense.

His whining pleas intensified. "Please! I don't have the money, but I can get it."

Thorin wanted me to give him three more days, but I'd escalated things too far already, so everyone was watching. I couldn't back down now without showing weakness.

In our world, weakness was death.

I took a deep gulp from his drink since I'd shattered mine, considering my next move. "You've had more than enough time. Seems you need something to motivate you."

When I reached for my blade just to fuck with him, he dropped to his knees on the grimy tavern floor, humiliating himself.

"Please!" He sobbed. "You can have the night's earnings, just please don't hurt me."

The pirate behind me muttered, "Bet he cuts Malcolm's throat right here in the bar." He sounded eager to watch.

Another responded, "Nah, won't kill him yet. My money's on taking a finger or an ear."

Malcolm could hear them too and whimpered in terror.

If I was going to make him bleed, it would be better for Pearl if I did it outside so she didn't have to clean up the mess.

What would happen to her if he were gone?

While everyone else sat perfectly still, their bloodlust thick in the air, Pearl rushed towards the table. She put her hand over mine. "Stop," she said, tone laced with fear.

I looked down at where she was touching me, my heart inexplicably racing at such simple contact. She pulled her hand away like I'd burned her, but she was the one who'd branded me with a touch.

I was ready to obey her command, put the knife away, and weaken myself simply because she'd asked.

Malcolm looked between us and spluttered. “My daughter! Our new king has no one to share his bed. Take my daughter for the night. Offer Thorin her innocence in exchange for my debt.”

Murderous rage twisted through me. If I so much as told Thorin this bastard was bartering his unwilling daughter to pay his debts, my brother would come back himself and burn the damn tavern down. But then the war we started would still be my fault. If we were to survive the enemy on the horizon, we couldn't divide the island again.

I was spinning with anger, creeping closer to losing control. Like she somehow knew, Pearl looked into my eyes, flooding me with her desire for me to stay calm. We stared at each other for so long, the pirates around me started to mutter about it.

What the fuck was I thinking? I'd been sent to make a point and instead all I was doing was making us look weak. I needed to turn down the offer without telling him the real reason why.

I laughed harshly. “You think a lowly tavern wench is a suitable match for Thorin Thorvald? I won't insult him by even suggesting it.”

Pearl broke eye contact, dropping her gaze to the floor, and I wanted to turn the fucking knife on myself.

Malcolm stank of desperation as he scanned the tavern. “Then give me time to find a man who can appreciate her value. Tell Thorin he'll have his money tomorrow.”

Avery met Malcolm's eyes and grinned. Avery easily had the coin Malcolm needed.

Fuck.

*Fuck.*

Godsdamn it.

Avery would break her.

No...she wouldn't break, so she'd endure far more than she should until that light inside her was finally snuffed out.

I couldn't kill him without putting my family at risk. How much harm could he do before I could make it look like an accident?

Too much.

Too fucking much.

"Enough," I snapped. "*Out*. All of you."

There was some grumbling from Avery's side of the tavern, but no one was brave enough to challenge me.

Pity.

It would've given me the tool I needed to save face without breaking my oath.

When all the pirates had left, Pearl stood uncertainly next to our table. Her desire to flee was like a tangible creature in the room, a terrified rabbit thumping its hind legs on the ground in warning that a predator was approaching.

Her father scrambled to get up from the ground, raising his hands in supplication.

Before he could start bleating again, I said, "Your daughter. I'll take her."

She went still.

"You said Thorin wouldn't want her."

"He won't. But I might."

I couldn't reassure her without looking weak, couldn't put an end to the whole thing by forgiving her father's debt without risking my brother's tenuous hold on the peace.

I reached for Malcolm's glass again, and my hand shook. I'd been away from the sea too long, and it was clouding my judgment. Talon Thorvald didn't hesitate. Hesitation got a man killed.

I snapped my fingers, and Pearl brought me another ale, never meeting my eyes.

Her father couldn't know how badly I wanted her or that I was doing this out of some misguided desire to protect her.

The pirates who'd been in the tavern would be out on the street making wagers about the gruesome things they assumed I was doing to Malcolm. If I was letting him walk out in one piece, he at least needed to believe I'd taken her to punish him.

Malcolm squared his shoulders. "She's the prize of the island, and you well know it. Too good for the likes of you."

I sighed in irritation. "I liked you better when you were quivering on your knees. Perhaps I'll like your daughter even better in that position."

"Maybe you should go fuck your whore of a sister instead." He spat on the floor, seeming to forget how close I was to cutting out his tongue.

It was good Thorin had sent me and not the sister in question. Sigrid would've made Malcom fuck his own daughter for that insult. He was backed into a corner, and he was lashing out. If he was trying to get a reaction out of me, he was damn close to accomplishing it.

"Keep that up and I'll make you watch me take her," I growled.

Pearl marched angrily towards the table. "That is *enough*. Both of you. You think bartering me is the answer? Come to terms and get it over with. This pissing match benefits no one."

How could she have come from this piece of shit? She stared Malcolm down, making him face the choices he was making.

Malcolm's expression contorted with rage. "Take her then and consider it a debt repaid. But you'd better have her back in time for her chores in the morning."

She took a step back, looking stunned. She'd thought he'd come to his senses, but he betrayed her to save himself. It would only get worse for her after this. She was the reason anyone put up with his ridiculous prices and watered-down ale. She'd been untouched before, which was part of her mystique, but now he'd see whoring her out as one more way to feed his greed.

*Fuck.*

I couldn't send her back to that fate in the morning. There was only one answer.

I turned to her. "If we do this, you'll belong to me." I couldn't give her a choice in front of him, but I needed some acknowledgment from her that what I was about to do was the path she'd choose.

Seeming to understand, she gave me a tiny nod.

A sneer contorted Malcolm's face. "She isn't a barrel of molasses. You can't just make her your property! Use her and be done with it."

I exhaled, imagining how I was going to explain this moment to my brother later, how I'd tell him that the next words out of my mouth were the only ones that could resolve this without bloodshed.

I shrugged, lifting my mouth into a smile that had been known to make sailors piss themselves in terror. "I can, though. By making her my wife."

His face went from red to purple. "You can't *marry* her!"

I slammed my knife into the table so close to one of his fingers that it drew blood...but not much. More self-control than he deserved.

"Say the word *can't* to me again and see what happens."

Before he could do anything stupid, Pearl said, "I'll marry him." She pulled out a chair and sat next to me like it was settled.

Malcolm wanted to kill me but knew better than to try. He got up and stormed towards the door, but turned back to say, "She's your fucking problem now. You deserve the hell she'll bring down upon you."

He slammed the door as he left, shutting his daughter in with a murderous pirate to save his own skin.

She was trembling, but she didn't try to run, didn't cry. She lifted her chin like a warrior queen of legend and met my eyes,



but quickly lowered her gaze and caved in on herself, wrapping her arms around her body like she'd done something bad by looking at me.

What would she be like if she learned not to be afraid?

She sat there looking calm when I could sense how urgently she wanted to run, but her voice was steady when she asked, "What happens now?"

*I wish I fucking knew.*

In the state her father was in, I wouldn't put it past him to stir up enough drunken thugs to attack me while I was still here alone.

I needed to get the fuck out of there if I was going to keep my word to Thorin.

"We have to go," I said, putting my hand under her elbow to tug her to her feet.

She jerked away so violently, she tripped over the stool behind her, flailed forward, and crashed into me. I caught her in my arms, and a charged feeling passed between us.

Our bodies were pressed together, and something besides fear flashed in her expression.

She wanted me to kiss her.

She looked up at me with pleading eyes, lips parted as she tilted her chin up and arched her body into mine.

*Can this really be happening?*

Her desire was real. Of that I had no doubt, but it was at odds with what I'd felt every other time I was in her presence.

So long I'd wanted her.

I started to lean down for a kiss, and her desire only surged more.

Then it changed in a flash, and the need to flee became overpowering.

She slapped me hard across the jaw.

I was so stunned, I released her.

She gasped, seeming as stunned as I was, but recovered her wits quickly and went to run from me.

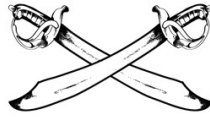
Gods be damned, I'd made too public a spectacle to let her simply escape me with no consequences. And escape me to what? She was my responsibility now, and no matter how she feared me, I was a safer option than running into the night.

So I did the only reasonable thing I could think of.

I caught her before she'd even gotten to the bar.

Then I tossed her over my shoulder and carried her towards my ship.

## ASTRID



“Put me down, you fucking barbarian!” I thrashed against his hold, but I might as well have been thrashing against stone.

Talon Thorvald had slung me over his shoulder and was carrying me gods knew where to make me his wife.

His fucking *wife*.

Fighting him was an exercise in futility, but it gave me something to focus on besides how appealing his shoulders were or the sight of his muscled ass in his form-fitting pants.

“I said I’d marry you and I will. I just had...a moment. But I won’t run again!”

Being anywhere near him was dangerous, though not because he was the most lethal pirate on the island. Touching him would get me killed if I couldn’t find a way to control what he made me feel.

The man I’d wanted since the first time I’d seen him had declared I would be his wife.

My life had never been in greater peril.

The first day I laid eyes on him, I would’ve sworn he was a god stepping onto the docks. Living in Ocracoke, I’d seen plenty of Northmen before, but he towered over most of them with broad shoulders and muscles I had to look away from quickly. Looking at his body made me think about shameful things I couldn’t afford to be thinking. His dark hair was styled in the Viking way, shaved on the sides with a braid that sliced

across the top of his head and down to the middle of his shoulders. A thick, dark beard highlighted his strong jaw, and Viking tattoos curved around his shoulders and chest, winding their way up one of the shaved sides of his head.

With a massive axe in one hand, he'd looked like death incarnate, terrifying and viscerally handsome in a way I didn't understand. It wasn't just how he looked. It was something about the way he carried himself, the way he watched everything around him like a bird of prey.

It made me wonder what it would be like to be hunted and devoured by him.

That was before I learned of his reputation, before I heard endless stories about his brutality and ruthlessness. Somehow, none of the stories made me want him less.

*Wanted* didn't begin to cover what I felt for him. He was the forbidden fantasy I denied myself alone in my bed at night. In the corner of a storeroom that stank of old ale, I closed my eyes and tried not to imagine what it would be like to let him touch me.

Which was why I couldn't so much as look at him anytime he came to the tavern.

When I was near him, I craved that touch, wondered what his big hands would feel like...would he be rough and forceful or surprisingly gentle?

Turns out, the answer was both. He could be rough and forceful while somehow managing to be surprisingly gentle, and it was testing the limits of my control.

He shifted his hold, causing his hand to ride higher on my backside. I gritted my teeth. "Look, I know Northmen have a thing about slinging defenseless women over their shoulders, but I promise I won't run again if you'll just *put me down*."

He grunted and heaved me back over his shoulder before setting me gently in front of him.

I didn't dare look at his face because those hauntingly sharp eyes and his sinful mouth tormented my dreams. Instead, I stole a look at his broad shoulders and muscled torso, taking

in the tension behind his relaxed stance. He was like an adder poised to strike.

“Get in,” he said, holding out a hand to help me into a rowboat. It was late, but there were still plenty of people scattered around the docks, most of them trying to pretend they weren’t watching us. None of them were going to help me.

Getting into a boat with Talon Thorvald seemed like a bad plan, but what other option did I have? Running had proven fruitless. It would only give him a reason to grab me again. At least if he were rowing, his giant hands would be occupied.

Years of misery had taught me that prolonging death isn’t the same as living. Now that my father had offered me up as a bedmate for sale, there would be no going back from it.

He’d been willing to sell me to *Avery* for the night. Horror churned in my gut at how close it had come. Taking the risk of marrying Talon was a better option than having no choice at all.

I stepped into the boat without taking the hand Talon was offering, and he narrowed his eyes at the slight.

*Your ego can take the blow. My self-control can't.*

I was buzzing with sensation from being held by him, and any more touching was a risk.

He picked up the oars and started to row. “I’ll take you aboard one of my ships for the night. You’ll be protected there. We’ll wed in the morning.”

I watched his strong back as he pulled the oars through the water, trying not to think about what it would be like to see him naked.

One minute I’d been serving drinks, wishing for any means of escape from the hollow life I was enduring...and the next I’d been slung over Talon the Destroyer’s shoulder. The gods were cackling out there somewhere.

I needed to stay angry at him. Angry was safe.

“We could do it tonight,” I goaded. “Are you giving my father time to come up with the money so you aren’t forced to marry a ‘lowly tavern wench’?”

Something about facing almost-certain death was making me reckless.

No, I couldn’t think like that. I’d managed to conceal what I was for this long. Surely I had the strength to keep it from him.

His shoulders bunched with tension, and he stopped rowing. “You’re pissed at me? Do you have any idea what fate awaited you if it hadn’t been for me?”

The menace in his tone frightened me, a reminder of the stories I’d heard about him.

I softened my tone. “With respect, Captain, I haven’t the slightest idea what fate awaits me *with* you.”

He grunted.

I expected a rebuke for being mouthy. It seemed like he wanted to say more, but he started rowing again.

As we approached the ship, he said, “Do you need me to retrieve any possessions from the tavern for you? I’ll buy you anything you need, but is there anything you can’t replace?”

Because I wasn’t going back...

It was hard to believe it was real.

The only possession I truly wanted him to retrieve I was too embarrassed to ask for. It was a book of legends and stories that didn’t even belong to me. I’d found it in the tavern a few years earlier, and it had gotten me through many lonely nights.

“There’s nothing I can’t replace,” I said, unwilling to ask him to go back there to get me something so frivolous.

He grunted and didn’t say another word until we reached his ship.

Was I really going to marry Talon Thorvald? I didn’t know the first thing about being a wife, far less this man’s wife. My

mother died when I was still a young child, but she'd warned me again and again that one day I may need to marry, but it could never be to a man who stirred passion in me. She'd married my father when she was young and vulnerable with few other options. He'd made life hard for her, but she'd been obedient to him and managed to shield me from the worst of his drunken anger. When he'd cast her aside, she risked passion with her new lover and it had gotten her killed.

I followed Talon up the ladder, and he helped me onto the deck of a magnificent ship. Her three masts loomed high above us. With only forty guns, she wasn't the biggest ship, but she was the most feared. It took a second for it to sink in. I was standing aboard the legendary *Falcon's Wing*. Despite the terror that had gripped me since my father had offered me as a trade for his debt, I almost laughed at the thrill of it.

How many times had I invented a reason to visit the docks to catch a glimpse of her...and perhaps her captain? How many times had I peered up at her and imagined what it would feel like to stand here?

She was large but sleek, and I could just picture the speed with which she'd cut through the water. I *had* imagined it countless times as I listened to stories of Talon hunting down prey who thought they could outsail him.

The Saxon ships were bulkier. This was the work of a Northman.

"She's beautiful," I said before immediately feeling foolish. As though he cared what I thought of his ship.

He studied me with shrewd eyes. The tavern patrons whispered that he could read minds, and when he looked at me like that, I believed them.

What did he see under the layers he was peeling back with his gaze? I wished there were more for him to find.

His expression hardened. "Her beauty is the thing that matters least to me. She's capable in a fight and strong in a storm. Steady at sea."

My stomach sunk. Beauty was all I had to offer him.

He looked over my shoulder and straightened to his full height, so I turned to see what had caught his attention.

A warrior leaned against the rail, watching us closely. There was no question that was what she was with her stature and weapons, but there was something more to it. She stood like she'd claimed her space by force and had no intention of surrendering it...but she might be amused by the challenge if someone wanted to try.

I'd never seen her in the tavern before, but as she nodded to Talon, I noticed the resemblance between them. Both towered over me and had dark hair and tattoos that marked them as having come from Daneland. With sharp cheekbones and her regal air, she would've been beautiful if she weren't so terrifying.

No doubt this was his notorious sister.

"Sigrid," he said carefully, not seeming entirely pleased to see her.

She smiled like she knew. "Heard an interesting rumor, Brother."

Talon subtly shifted me behind him, and she watched the move with interest. "Cut the shit and tell me what you want," Talon said, more with exasperation than anger.

Sigrid laughed. "You can't marry her."

I stiffened, bracing to be degraded again, told all the reasons I was unworthy.

Sigrid focused on Talon. "We have to unite Ocracoke or face annihilation. You think taking the object of all their desires and claiming her for yourself is going to do that? They see her as shared property, a prize to covet but never claim. The Ocracoke Pearl...the pretty, pure talisman they dream of returning home to when they're too long at sea." The way she said *pretty* and *pure* made it clear exactly how useless she found me. "Marrying her is as good as stealing from every pirate on the island."

Talon growled. "Her father would force her to be with every pirate on the island to pay his debt."



Sigrid blinked and then laughed again, releasing a rich, bubbling cackle from deep in her chest. “You’re doing it to save her?” She was laughing so hard, she had to pause to breathe. “I thought it was a power play, your way of making them all acknowledge who the alpha on the island is. But you don’t need a wife to do that.”

He was doing it to protect me?

Disappointment churned in my stomach. Some childish part of me had been thrilled he wanted me badly enough to take me from my father by force, but of course there was more to it. He’d already told me beauty didn’t matter to him.

Sigrid punched his chest lightly. “This is the kind of softhearted shit I’d expect from Axel.”

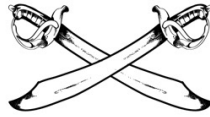
Talon rolled his eyes, and she grinned at him, delighted at teasing him. The sibling love between them was palpable in the look they exchanged, and it made my whole body tremble with fear.

*What if they discover my secret?*

Would I doom us all?

Sigrid’s smile dropped, and her eyes swiveled to me. In a flash she flipped from playful to predator, and in two quick strides, she was on me, forearm pressed against my throat as she pinned me to the rail of the ship. “What the fuck are you hiding, little wench?”

## ASTRID



**T**alon's growl promised violence as he pulled Sigrid off me, letting air back into my lungs.

Sigrid shoved him back. "She reeks of fear. She fears you. She fears me. She fears the whole godsdamn world. But she fears her secret more than any of it."

Talon gently nudged me towards the stern with a hand at my back. "Don't need your help, Sigrid. Unless you want to actually be helpful and report back to Thorin." He patted her on the head on his way past. "There's a good sister."

Her eyes narrowed to slits as I scurried past her, happy to have the wall of Talon between us.

When we reached the stern, I clutched the rail, sucking in the fresh air.

Once my breathing relaxed, I asked, "Are the rumors about your sister true? Is she a witch?"

He placed his palms flat on the bulwark, seeming calm despite Sigrid accusing me of treachery. "Not in the way you mean. She's tuned to people's fears and must've felt a shift in you." He stared out at the water for a moment. "Are you hiding something from me?"

I tried to slow my racing heartbeat, feeling as though it was thumping so hard he might hear it. "We know nothing about each other. Would you consider all the things I don't know about you to be things you're hiding from me?"

“There’s much you’ve yet to learn about me. But none of it I fear you discovering.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Of course not, Captain. You have all the power. What do you have to fear?”

He kept his gaze fixed ahead, nodding. “We’ve sacrificed to build something for all of us here, something the Saxons can’t take from us. A place where all people can be free. Here, we need not bend to the laws of the Saxons or the Northmen. Need not fight the endless wars of greedy kings.” He turned to face me, and I felt obligated to look him in the eye even if it terrified me. “Need not be forced to marry. We finally left Daneland because our father was going to force Sigrid to marry again.”

“Again?” I asked in surprise. “She was married before?”

He smiled. “Aye. She killed the first two.”

I tried to hide my alarm. “I see.”

He shrugged like a little spousal murder was irrelevant. “The bastards deserved that and worse. But the point is she shouldn’t have had to. *You* shouldn’t have to. Say the word, and I’ll find a way to get you out of this and away from your father.”

I was gripped with terror at the idea of being out in the world unprotected. “Where would I go?”

He gestured out to the sea. “Wherever you damn well please.”

I’d be friendless, with no money and no skills beyond serving drinks. My mother taught me to sail before she was executed, but no captain would take the Ocracoke Pearl on for fear of the conflict it would cause in their crew. My looks were my only asset, but I couldn’t work in a brothel for fear of someone learning what I was.

There was more to my hesitation, though.

For so long I’d endured my life rather than lived it. Being Talon’s wife would offer a shield like no other.

“Your sister is right,” I said softly. “I am scared of the whole world. But I don’t want to be.” I hung my head, feeling pathetic. I wished I were brave like Sigrid, someone he could respect rather than take to wife out of pity.

He put his hands on my shoulders gently. “You’re safe with me. You have nothing to fear. Not me, not Sigrid, certainly not the whole world. I won’t let a godsdamn thing touch you.”

It was too good to be true. I wanted to trust him, but it was too great a risk.

My mother made the mistake of thinking she was safe, and they’d burned her at the stake and scattered her ashes to the wind.

His thumb stroked across my shoulder. “Trust is hard. So I’ll trust you with one of my secrets first.” He paused. “My family are all berserkers.”

The word fell between us like a cannonball, its significance jarring me into looking up at him. Berserkers were descended from the gods, nearly invincible in a fight. So much of what I knew or had heard about the Thorvalds suddenly made sense.

He looked into my eyes intently. “So when I say you have nothing to fear? I mean *nothing*.” The word was a growl that promised death to anyone who dared to threaten me, and my thighs clenched together with need.

I recoiled from him, ashamed I couldn’t repress those urges. Marrying him was a path to a new life, but only if I could resist the shameful feelings he stirred in me.

He took a step back, raising his hands defensively. “The stories they tell about berserkers aren’t all true. I can control myself.”

He thought I was recoiling because of what he was.

The problem wasn’t his control. It was mine.

“It’s not that...I’m sorry. It’s just...” What was I supposed to say? “It’s a lot to take in.”

And it was. If he was only part human too, would he be more forgiving of what I was?

I wanted to reassure him somehow. “In the stories I’ve read with berserkers, they take a mate and not a wife. What happens if you marry someone who isn’t your mate?”

His eyes flashed with something unreadable. “A berserker can marry someone and make a life with them. But a mate is something else entirely. It’s a soul bond. We don’t pick a mate. The gods choose for us and all we can hope to do is find them.”

I was too scared to ask what would happen if he found his mate after we were already wed.

Silence hung between us before he said softly, “I’ve noticed you at the tavern.”

I sighed. “Everyone notices me. That’s the whole point of being the pearl.”

He shook his head. “No, I notice how much you hate it. How everyone is constantly watching you. I notice that your smile falls as soon as you think no one can see you. I see the bruises you can’t always cover after the nights Malcolm has had too many.”

*Not* what everyone else noticed.

I wouldn’t let him think I was a victim or that’s all he’d ever see me as. I flashed him a playful look. “They watch me less when you’re there because they’re too busy staring at you. Most of them like to sit at the walls or facing the door, but you make it a point to sit with your back to the door like there isn’t anything that could walk through it that you’d even consider a threat.”

His mouth twitched, drawing my eyes to the sinful curve of his lips. “So you’ve noticed me too, then?”

“Perhaps,” I said coyly. “It’s different for you, though,” I said, needing to distract myself. “Your notoriety is a weapon.”

“And your beauty isn’t?”

I couldn't help leaning closer to him, mesmerized by the tension crackling between us. "A dangerous one, Captain. One too easily turned on me. I walked on the razor's edge tonight provoking Avery like that."

He closed the distance a little more, like he couldn't resist this invisible pull either. "Not anymore. Now everyone knows you're *mine*."

I shivered at the word, at the possessive rumble of his voice.

This is what my mother had warned me about! My father had taken me to her execution to make sure I knew exactly what would happen if I didn't control myself.

I turned away from him, breaking the tension.

He exhaled slowly. "You should get some rest. I'll take you to my cabin and leave you to sleep."

He put a hand on my lower back to guide me, and just that touch made my heart race again. I shrugged away, and he dropped his hand, putting more distance between us.

I gripped the wood of the rail, taking deep breaths. I wanted him to put his hand back where I could feel how steady he was. Why couldn't I take the safety without wanting things I couldn't have?

The moon was close to full and so bright, it cast shadows on the ship all around us. Because of what I was, I was more tied to her cycle than others. The urges were the hardest to ignore when she was closest to full.

Nights like tonight.

My wedding night couldn't be on a full moon. It was asking too much of my control, especially with him.

"Can we wait a week? To wed."

"Why?" There was no annoyance in the question, only confusion.

I scrambled for a reason that made sense. I had no friends to invite. No other family. I didn't want him to think I cared

about something as frivolous as a wedding dress when I was already going to be a useless pretty object in his life.

Then the truth clicked. I could help them to realize their dream of stability on Ocracoke. “I know the island from a different perspective than you, understand it better than your family ever will as outsiders. You’ve been here for five years, but you’ve spent most of it at sea or at war with the other pirates. You can turn our wedding to your advantage.”

He fixed me with the intimidating force of his full focus. “How?”

“Sigrid was right about the ripple effect of marrying me. You’re taking something from them. Soften the blow. Give them a wedding feast to drown their sorrows, and they might still grumble, but they’ll start to see you as one of their own.”

“A feast?” He said it like he’d never heard of such a thing.

“A party, Talon. Let the ale flow, and they’ll love you for it. I hear everything in the tavern. The pirates fear you Thorvalds, but they don’t see you as one of them. Show them you’re a proper pirate. It’s not a pirate wedding if the guests can walk afterwards.”

Maybe if everyone got drunk enough, they wouldn’t notice if I lost control.

“And this is what other pirates do when they wed?” He was taking my idea seriously. I’d been an ornament for so long, I’d begun to think I didn’t even have ideas worth listening to.

“It doesn’t happen often, but for a notoriously wealthy pirate captain not to indulge in a wedding feast would be seen as a slight. Treat them as equals...as friends...and you’ll earn their trust.”

“I’ll see it done,” he said, gesturing for me to follow him. We walked in silence until he swung the door to his cabin open.

Belowdecks, there was little space, and he was too big. I had to skirt into the room awkwardly to avoid pressing my

body against his, something I wasn't sure I could handle right now.

He noticed and looked confused. "And you? What would it take to earn your trust?"

He thought I was doing it because I was scared of him or didn't want him to touch me, but I had no other reason to offer in place of the truth. He seemed so uncertain, so hesitant about what to do next, like I was a spooked horse that might bolt at the wrong move.

He deserved better than this.

I wanted to be able to give him better than this.

"You could stay with me," I blurted, wanting him to know I didn't fear him because of what he was.

He blinked in surprise.

"Not...like that," I quickly amended. "It's just...I'd feel safer knowing you were here."

It was a lie. I felt safe from everyone else when he was near but the most vulnerable to myself.

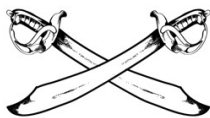
His eyes lit with a small smile that was worth whatever torture I was about to endure trying to control myself.

"Then I'll stay. You can sleep in the bed, and I'll string one of the hammocks. Sleep soundly knowing a berserker guards your rest."

It was going to be a long fucking night.



## TALON



**S**taying with her was a bad idea.

She was skittish. So skittish that it was making me skittish, a state of being I wasn't used to.

I kept harvesting the threads of her desire to make sure she didn't want me to leave. Had I ever doubted myself like this before?

She lay in my bed mere feet away, aching for me to come over there and take her. She wanted my hands to run up her thighs and push them apart. Wanted to know what it would be like if I touched her there.

She wanted me to lose control and claim her tonight.

I scrubbed a hand across my face. The people I fucked were simple. None of them wanted anything from me but pleasure, and I could deliver it. It was a transaction with little intimacy. Most of them wanted a rough fuck with a barbarian, the promise of my reputation, and that worked for me.

If I sensed what she was feeling from anyone else, I might give them what they wanted, send them on their way, and never think more of it.

But what I could feel she wanted and what she said she wanted didn't align. I had no doubt I could bring them into alignment with my tongue on her cunt, but what if *that* wasn't what she wanted?

The gods were testing me.

Reading people's desires wasn't like reading text. Sometimes I got no more than a vague notion of what they wanted, and other times I was able to parse the specific desire.

In this case, she might as well have been standing in front of me screaming, *Fuck me, Talon!*

Out on the deck, I'd been ready to tell her I could read desires because it felt wrong to keep it from someone who was going to marry me. But she'd reacted so strongly to learning I was a berserker I'd known I couldn't drop more onto her in that moment.

How the fuck had we ended up here?

I adjusted my pants, trying to make room for my aching cock.

Her soft voice broke the silence. "Do you remember the first time we were alone together?"

I turned to face her even though it was too dark for her to see me. There was only one time in the past when we'd been alone. "That late night when everyone left the tavern?"

Amusement danced in her tone. "If by 'when everyone left' you mean 'when everyone ran away because you burst in and scared the shit out of them', then yes."

I huffed a laugh. "Yeah, I remember."

Some of the patrons were lingering long past when the tavern had closed. I'd gone in and pointed at the table of pirates. "I've been looking for you!" I'd said, murder in my voice. The drunken fools scattered and fled, leaving me alone in the tavern with her.

"Why were you even looking for them?" Pearl asked with a laugh.

I hesitated, but decided to tell her the truth. "I wasn't. Didn't even know who they were. I walked past and could see you were half asleep at the bar and they looked like they were planning to toast the sunrise in the tavern. I knew Malcolm didn't let you kick paying customers out."

“You did it for me?” she asked, all amusement in her tone gone.

Had I given too much away? “It was nothing,” I said, hoping I hadn’t freaked her out.

“It wasn’t nothing,” she said decisively. “I offered you a drink...but you left.”

“Unlike the drunk fucks, I can read a room. You were scared of me, and I chased them out so you could get some sleep, not so you’d have to put up with me instead.”

Something in the air had changed that night as the awareness we were alone sunk in. She’d kept her eyes cast down and moved farther down the bar, putting distance between us.

“May I get you a drink, Captain?” she’d asked, voice quavering like she was terrified I’d say yes.

I wanted to stay and make sure she got to bed safely.

She wanted me to leave.

So I sat outside in the shadows, making sure no one came back, waiting for the threads of her desire to fade into sleep.

Pearl’s voice was barely louder than a whisper. “I was scared...but not of you. I wanted you to stay, and *that* scared me.”

People didn’t surprise me often, but sometimes their desires were complicated and contradictory. Reason could want one thing and the soul could want another.

“Does it scare you now?” I asked, hardly daring to breathe.

“I’m terrified...but still not of you.”

My heart pounded in my chest. If she wanted to tell me what she was scared of she could, but I wasn’t going to pry.

There was more to the story of that night, I didn’t dare tell her yet. As I’d waited outside for her to sleep, and she’d lain there on the other side of the wall from where I sat, she yearned for company, for someone to ease the loneliness of her life. My berserker had rattled and raged with the need to hold

her, but I'd sat there with my head in my hands, showing more restraint than I'd known I had.

When I'd finally left, I was so wound up, I'd sought Thorin and pulled him from his bed, unable to reasonably explain why. He instantly understood how close I was to losing control and threw me against the wall. We beat the hell out of each other, but I managed to stay away from her.

A few weeks later, I waited until she was serving drinks to sneak into the storeroom where she slept. Under her pillow, I hid the only thing I had left of my mother. A book of stories from Daneland she'd read to us as children, stories of the gods and demons, of warrior princesses and pirate kings. I'd known I couldn't keep Pearl company, but I could give her the stories that had always held the loneliness at bay for me.

Over on my bed, she sighed, pulling my thoughts back to the present. The sheets rustled as she shifted, probably rubbing her lush thighs together when she could be squeezing my head between them instead if she'd only make up her mind.

One minute she yearned for my touch, and the next she was pulling away from me in disgust, desperate to run.

Her soft voice broke the silence. "You shouldn't have to either."

"What?" I asked, confused.

"Be forced to get married. I'm not your responsibility. I could live with it when I thought you were doing it for your own reasons...but you don't need to bind yourself to me out of pity."

I blew out a breath, wondering whether it would do more harm than good to tell her it wasn't *entirely* out of pity. If I could've thrown her over my shoulder and dragged her to the altar purely to spend a lifetime fulfilling my own selfish desires, I would've done it.

I searched for words less likely to frighten her, something more articulate than dropping my pants and sinking into the hot, tight heat of her, showing her just how many of my own reasons I had.

I didn't just dream of fucking her, though. I dreamed of shielding her from the world until she learned to want something more for herself than just safety. I wanted to be the one to coax the fire out of her.

I couldn't tell her that either, so I said, "The gods gifted me with strength enough to protect those who can't protect themselves. What kind of man would I be if I left you to such a fate when it's in my power to stop it? Besides...being married to the Ocracoke Pearl doesn't sound like such a punishment." I meant to sound playful, but it came out tinged with the dark rumble of something more.

The threads of her desire turned molten, practically licking my skin with need. My soon-to-be-wife was so consumed by lust that I couldn't tell where her desires ended and mine began. This passion between us was ready to combust, but she held back, not giving me a single outward signal.

Did she think I wanted her to be a virgin on our wedding night?

I cleared my throat. "We can wait a week for the wedding, but you know we don't need to wait a week for the wedding night?" I said, struggling to get the words out around the need to crawl between her knees and satisfy her.

She whimpered, and her threads shifted, and suddenly she wished she didn't want me as she did. She wanted to be strong enough to resist what she felt for me.

Why would she deny us both?

"I...can't," she said in a ragged voice. "Not tonight."

I softly drew in a breath and released it, hoping she wouldn't hear the toll this restraint was taking. I'd spoken the truth about being able to control my berserker, but such a primitive urge was difficult to ignore altogether. The rational part of my brain could listen to what she was saying, but the berserker part of me could only feel what she wanted.

In that moment, she wanted to be pure enough not to have such shameful thoughts. And I wanted to rip the shame from her and devour it so she never felt it again.

I stood from the hammock and closed the two steps it took to reach the bed.

Her desire surged, making my steps unsteady with the force of it.

She thought I was going to take her, and she desperately wanted it.

*Gods*, so did I.

To stop myself from climbing on her and doing just that, I sunk to my knees beside the bed. There was just enough moonlight coming through the window for me to make out her features in the dark. She looked so uncertain.

“You’re safe, Pearl.”

She closed her eyes. “Astrid. My name is Astrid,” she said, opening them again but staring at my chest.

“I’m sorry,” I said, wondering how I could’ve gone all this time without knowing her name. “I’ve never heard anyone call you anything but *Pearl*.”

She shrugged, still looking down. “No one ever bothered to ask. Astrid belongs to me, and Pearl belongs to them.”

My berserker rumbled with satisfaction that she’d given me her real name, something she withheld from others.

She reached out and touched the copper coin that hung from my necklace. “What is that?” she asked, almost like she was trying to change the subject.

I lifted it so she could look more closely at the elaborate design. “Piece of eight. It’s the key to Atlantis.”

Her eyes grew wide. “You’ve been to Atlantis?”

Few in our realm had ever seen the mythical island that existed out of time and place. Many said it was an embellished tale of the sea, which suited the Atlanteans just fine. Keys like mine were rare and powerful.

“I’ve been many times,” I said. “Their monarch’s been an ally to my family since we left Daneland.”

She touched the coin carefully like she thought it might take us there now. “How does it work?”

With her holding it, I couldn't pull away. I liked being this close to her, liked that she wasn't desperate to run from me for once.

“It's a leap of faith guided by your intention. I could go alone or take a whole ship with the right willpower out in open waters. It takes you to Atlantis, but once you're there, you have to find other means of getting back—a spell or a ship, unless there's a portal back to where you're going, but that's risky. I'll take you one day if you want to see it.”

Her eyelashes flicked up. “I'd like that,” she said, still holding my necklace. She tugged it closer, bringing my mouth painfully close to hers. She looked uncertain again, like she didn't dare close the distance, but she'd already done most of the work. I could be bold enough for both of us.

I cupped her cheek and claimed the kiss she burned for, slanting my mouth over her soft lips.

She melted into me as I lifted myself onto the bed over her.

Then she went rigid, and the conflicted maelstrom in her swirled anew.

There was nothing wrong with anything she was feeling, but I couldn't tell her that without first telling her I could feel it. Telling her might send her into a panic.

The familiar urge I'd long felt from her reemerged. She wanted to run from me. And in the background of it all was the thread that kept getting more pronounced...a desperate need for me not to discover something.

Could it be that she already belonged to another?

If she did, the bastard had left her defenseless, and now I had no choice but to take her from him. The cowardly fuck didn't deserve her if he couldn't protect her from another man's unwanted touches.

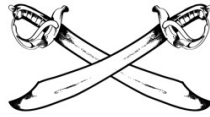
My berserker raged within me when I stumbled back from the bed.

“You’ll be safe here,” I said through gritted teeth before leaving the cabin and locking the door behind me.

In a week, I’d make her mine...



## ASTRID



I *can't breathe.*

*Oh gods, I can't get enough air!*

And yet there I was sucking in huge breaths even though I felt like I was sinking beneath the sea, crushed by the weight of what I'd just done.

I stood in the shadowy alley outside the gathering hall where our wedding feast was being held, fighting back panic. The feast was already underway, and the lively beat of the music was almost loud enough to drown out the revelry.

Revelry to celebrate my *wedding*.

I'd married Talon fucking Thorvald.

Talon, whose name was synonymous with death, had looked into my eyes and sworn to honor and protect me.

But he wouldn't be able to protect me if he found out what I was.

Talon's brother Thorin rounded the corner from the street and approached the door to my left. He looked out into the darkness around us then back at me. "Talon know you're out here alone?"

I shrugged. "Just needed a moment."

He was similar to Talon in coloring and build, same dark hair and tanned skin from the sun, but he wore his long hair loose most of the time. He was less menacing but more

intense, and he stared at me with eyes that saw too much. “Give him a chance. All of the stories about him aren’t true.”

I nodded silently, not trusting myself to speak, and he walked through the doorway, leaving me alone again.

He thought I was scared of his brother, but I was scared of myself.

For the past week, I’d barely seen Talon but managed to cling to my self-control when he chose to take meals with me. He never stayed long, and he never made another move to kiss me.

That night in the dark, he’d given me my first real kiss, the first true test of whether I could control myself. It had been thrilling and terrifying, and I thought he was going to continue...but then he abruptly pulled away and left for the night with no explanation.

He hadn’t kissed me after our wedding ceremony either. Was I that bad at kissing?

He’d only given me a moment to try. I’d been so focused on holding back the tidal wave of lust that perhaps I’d been an unappealing partner. I lay awake that night wondering if it meant he didn’t want me anymore, if he’d call off the wedding, but the next day, he asked questions about the feast as though nothing had happened.

For a week, I’d hardly spoken to him, but being on his ship had given me a chance to watch him from a distance.

He was a different man with his crew. There was still no doubt he was in command and that they would obey his every order, but they adored him.

I saw him laugh for the first time one afternoon. He tossed his head back and roared with laughter at something his quartermaster said. It was unguarded joy, and I wanted to be the cause of it.

He looked at me across the ship the very instant the thought crossed my mind. I thought I’d gone unnoticed, but his eyes found me...and he smiled.

At me.

For me.

At the promise of things to come between us.

My stomach somersaulted like a ship cresting a waterfall and I'd known then that his smiles would be far more dangerous than his touch.

Now...I was his wife.

I fought back tears at what I'd done.

I'd put Talon in danger. Put his whole crew at risk because I was too much of a coward to run. I wanted to believe I was strong enough to fight what I was, but surely then I would be strong enough to run.

*Run now, you fucking coward.*

"It's too late." The low rumble of Talon's voice from the shadows in the alley to my right made me jump.

He stalked closer until his body formed a cage around mine against the wall. "If you run from me, I'll hunt you. Spare us both the trouble, and *come back inside.*"

He hadn't been this close since the night he'd kissed me, and it sent my pulse racing. I wanted my husband, and I was going to be executed for it. It was a fact I needed to resign myself to because there was no holding back my arousal with him...but I didn't want to die. Not yet. Not when it felt like I'd barely lived.

A tear streaked down my cheek, and he watched its path and swiped it away with his thumb. He kissed where it had been, a soft brush of his lips on my damp skin that made me shiver.

He leaned his forehead to mine, intensity etched into every line of his body. "I don't care who came before, Astrid. Banish him from your thoughts, and this could be good between us."

He thought my tears were for another, but they were for him, for the dream he was promising but I couldn't have. I

opened my mouth to deny it, but maybe it was better he had some other explanation for why I was holding back.

I absorbed the feel of him towering over me, an arm bracing against the wall on either side of my head. I should've felt trapped, but it was more like being in a cocoon, like nothing could touch me in there.

Could I trust him with my secret?

More tears slid down my face as sobs wracked my body. I shook my head, wanting so badly to let him lift the weight of the burden I carried, but once I told him there was no going back.

He growled in frustration. "We're wed before the gods, Astrid, but it isn't binding until we consummate it. Before letting me make you mine, know this...my berserker blood means you'll be mine and mine alone. Let another touch you and condemn them to death." He leaned down and claimed my mouth in an angry kiss, slanting his lips across mine like he could chase away the phantom lover he was jealous of by force. It left me breathless and desperate to know what came next.

A hot open-mouthed kiss on my neck had me panting, breathing his name desperately, though I wasn't sure whether it was a plea to stop or keep going.

He smiled wickedly and shook his head. "But I'll see to it that you won't want another after you've known my touch."

Talon slowly sunk to his knees before me and took a dagger from his side. I flinched and his eyes narrowed, but he flipped the blade and offered me the handle. "As much as I'm a pirate, I was a Northman first. Words mean nothing. In the North, we bind ourselves with blood and body. Will you join with me in the old way?"

He put his palm to the tip of the blade and waited.

*I'm a coward.*

*A selfish coward.*

*I should be brave enough to let him go. Let him find someone worthy of this devotion.*

A surge of possessiveness drove me to slice the knife across his palm, the first time I'd ever drawn blood from another person.

*My first blood.*

*My first love.*

*Mine.*

Fierce satisfaction glittered in his eyes as he closed his fist and let the blood drip onto the ground. "With my blood, I vow before Odin to protect you. I claim you as my own."

He held out his other hand, and I placed mine in it, lost to the power of the moment as he drew the blade swiftly across my palm, leaving a burning sting in its wake. I welcomed the pain, clung to it to clear my mind of wanting him.

I didn't know the right words to say since I couldn't vow to protect him, so I spoke my heart's truth.

"I am yours as you are mine."

*I have to tell him the truth.*

He cupped my bloody palm with his, and I moaned at the energy that flowed from him into me. The power of the old gods thrummed between us.

Talon took my moan as invitation and rose from his knees to claim my mouth again, a devastating kiss that made me forget why I couldn't want him. It was only for a split second, but that was all it would take.

My mother's screams echoed in my mind, stripping away the romantic notion that there was any possibility we could overcome this.

If only I could face death stoically, resign myself to my fate and drink the life out of this one night. Instead, I was still terrified.

Panic consumed me.

“Stop it! I don’t want to kiss you.” I thrashed my head, and he reared back in surprise.

Talon narrowed his eyes. “Yes, you do, but you’re still haunted by another. I’ll kiss you until I’ve chased every thought of him from your memory.”

He tried to take my mouth again, but I blocked him with my hand, smearing his face in blood. He looked like he’d come straight from battle, covered in the blood of his enemies and ready to claim his prize.

*Oh gods, I want him.*

I panted, waiting for him to take what was his by right.

“Soon,” he growled, tucking me against his body as he led us back inside. “Soon you’ll be mine, and you’ll deny me nothing. But first we have to get through this godsforsaken feast you insisted upon.”

He hadn’t bothered to wipe the blood from his face, and all three of his siblings seemed to materialize at his side when we entered the hall. The youngest brother, Axel, looked concerned. Sigrid was murderous. Thorin showed no emotion at all, but his posture was tense and ready for a fight.

All three of them simultaneously saw our palms, and both brothers’ faces lit with identical grins. Sigrid shook her head.

“The old way, is it, Brother?” Thorin said, slapping Talon on the back approvingly.

Axel folded me into an embrace. “I have a gift for you... Sister. Come.” He nodded his head towards a side chamber, pale blue eyes alight with childlike eagerness.

Axel was the only Thorvald who didn’t scare me. He was also the only one of them with the pale blond coloring of the North, his eyes such an ice blue that they should’ve been cold. Instead, he glowed with warmth, laughing easily, rarely without a smile. He was still a warrior through and through, but he possessed a defiant joyfulness everyone was drawn to.

He retrieved a sheath from a cabinet and drew from it a blade so magnificent, it took my breath away. It was a

delicately curved cutlass with a basket hilt made of beautiful layers of twisted steel.

Axel bowed his head and held it out to me. “A wedding gift, forged by my own hand. A Thorvald tradition to welcome a new member of the family.”

I was overcome with emotion at the gesture and struggled to find the words to thank him. I looked at Talon for help, but his eyes brimmed with feeling too.

Sigrid huffed a sigh. “It’s wasted on a timid thing like her. A blade that fine deserves to be more than decoration.”

Axel’s smile dropped. “As does she.”

Sigrid scoffed and turned away.

Axel nodded for me to take the blade, smiling brightly again. “You see only what holds people back, Sigrid. I see what can be.”

I held the blade uncertainly, marveling at how light it was in my grip. I’d never held a real weapon before, and it was a heady feeling.

Thorin smiled. “A beautiful blade for a beautiful bride, though you have no need to use it unless you choose to learn. You’re one of us now, under our protection.”

I bowed my head in thanks to Thorin, king of thieves, the most stoic of the siblings.

Sigrid cocked her head and opened her mouth to speak, but Thorin cut her off. “*Sigrid*. Threaten her, and I’ll consider it a threat to me.”

She approached slowly and kissed me on the cheek, somehow even making a kiss feel threatening. She watched Thorin as she did it. “You might be king here, Thorin, but you’re still my little brother. Swing your proverbial dick at me again, and I might be forced to cut it off. Besides...” she purred. “I don’t need to threaten her. She knows what I’ll do if she crosses my second favorite brother.”

I instinctively stepped away from her but met the reassuring wall of Talon’s body behind me.

Axel broke the tension with a laugh. “It’s like the three of you have forgotten how to have fun! Enough of this. I’m stealing my new sister for a dance!”

Mischief lit his expression as he offered his hand. The moment I took it, he swept me out of the room and into the swirl of the dance floor. The raucous chaos of the room was infectious, and within moments I found myself laughing as he twirled me through the steps of the dance.

When the song ended and the beat slowed, he pulled me close for a hug. Against my ear, he said, “I’m glad we got to meet before I have to go on my voyage.”

“Where are you going?” I asked in surprise, disappointed. In braver moments, when I’d dared to hope I might live through the days to come, I’d been looking forward to spending more time with him.

He winked. “To see my aunt for a while, but I’ll be back.”

“I’ll look forward to your return,” I said, hugging him back, hoping I was still here for it.

As I started to pull away, he said, “That which you fear is a weapon too, Sister. When you feel powerless, don’t be afraid to wield it. I’m only sorry I won’t be there to see you bring him to his knees.” Before what he’d said had even sunk in, he laughed and spun me out wide, then let go just in time to release me into the arms of my new husband.

Talon pulled me close, leaning down to steal a quick kiss that was over before I could even panic.

The dance floor erupted with cheers and ribald commentary about our wedding night.

I smiled despite my nervousness. “You see?” I whispered in his ear. “They tease you like one of their own.”

He winked. “My clever wife.”

A wink. From Talon the Destroyer. I wasn’t ready.

Instead of fanning myself in the glow of his compliment, I said, “I’m parched. Let’s get a drink.”



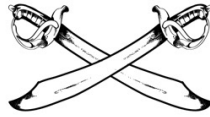
I'd seen to it that the ale was the imported kind intended to be cut with water before being served. Then I'd seen to it that no water was added.

How much ale would it take for him not to care that he'd married a monster?

There were many who thought berserkers were monsters too. If I told him what I was, there was a chance that he'd still accept me.

I poured his glass to the brim and toasted him. "To peace on Ocracoke."

## TALON



“If I didn’t know better, wife, I’d think you wanted me drunk for our wedding night.”

I stroked a hand down her back, and she shivered deliciously, leaning into my touch.

“Apologies.” She smiled sheepishly, putting space between us again. “Habit.”

I swallowed another gulp and almost coughed. “This ale is strong...”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “You were muttering about my father’s ‘watered-down ale’, so I saw to it there was no watering happening. Does it displease you?”

She looked up at me from under her lashes, and I couldn’t help imagining her looking up at me like that while she did... other things.

I cleared my throat. “No...but I want to have my wits about me when I take you upstairs.”

She shrugged and gave a forced laugh. “Tonight is your wedding night! No wits necessary.”

She said it lightly as though she were jesting, but she truly did want me to imbibe to the point of drunkenness. I harvested the desire from her more deeply, pulling it into myself until I could feel the shape of it better.

She didn’t just want me drunk. She wanted everyone on the island drunk so that if she lost control with me, they

wouldn't hear her.

I chuckled darkly into my ale, deeply pleased by the direction of her desires. *I'll make you come so loud, you'll wake them from a drunken stupor, little wench.*

I relaxed and took another drink, satisfied that she wasn't still thinking of running.

Across the hall, Thorin sat at a table alone, pretending to enjoy himself, but I knew better. He noticed me looking and raised his glass.

Into my mind he said, *You did well, Brother. The island is more united by this feast than it would be if we'd spent a year negotiating.*

He could speak to the three of us, but none of us had been gifted with the ability to speak back mind to mind. So I nodded down to Astrid, acknowledging again that it was entirely her idea.

He said, *Aye, you did well there too. She's bright and has a stronger backbone than she realizes.*

His smile was tinged with sadness, and I wondered, not for the first time, if he was lonely. To rule, he'd given up his ship and crew to stay on the island until things were stable.

I followed the direction he'd been looking and was unsurprised to find Layla across the hall, sitting on another man's lap while he fed her bites of cake.

Astrid tapped her glass against mine, claiming my attention. "Should I be concerned my husband is staring longingly at the madam of the brothel in the middle of our wedding feast?"

I smiled, liking that she sounded jealous. "We've known Layla all our lives. Thorin's been in love with her for as long as I can remember."

Astrid gasped. "But she doesn't want him?"

I chuckled. "It's a little more complicated than that. Back in Daneland, she'd always been destined to be a courtesan, so she was forbidden to him no matter what they felt for each

other. He kidnapped her from the House of Pleasures and brought her with us when we fled the North.”

Her jaw dropped, but her expression was delighted. “You Thorvald brothers sure do think throwing a woman over your shoulder is the best way to save her.”

I slung my arm around the back of her chair, tucking her against me. “Ah, but our kidnapping story ended with marriage. Thorin had a similar aim, but when we got here Layla chose to start a brothel on Ocracoke instead of marrying him.”

“Ouch. And he never moved on?”

I shook my head. “Neither of them did.”

I sifted through the maelstrom of desires that raged in the room and found hers, constant as ever. She may have been draped over another captain, but she knew exactly where Thorin was sitting and was imagining exactly what it would feel like if she were instead draped over him. She wanted my brother as badly as he wanted her.

“But they both want the other to change,” I said to Astrid, flicking my head at my brother to go and do something about his misery.

Thorin saw where I was looking and shook his head. *It's not to be. She won't accept my berserker, and I don't accept that she needs to fuck half the island to be happy. Focus on your own wife, Brother. Her heart's thread is deeply loyal. Once she belongs to you, she'll be yours forever.*

I toasted him and felt him release his connection to my mind gently.

*Once she belongs to you, she'll be yours forever.*

All through our wedding, I'd been on guard, waiting for her other man to come and claim her. There wasn't a force in the world that would've kept me away if she'd been about to marry another. My berserker rumbled inside me at the thought, promising crushed windpipes and crumbled walls before we'd let it happen.

But the other man never came. If he'd even existed at all.

I expected to be relieved, but part of me had relished the thought of him charging in to challenge me. If he was still out there somewhere, I had to keep wondering if she was pining for him, thinking about running back to his arms. Arms that were too weak to hold on to her when it mattered.

If the son of a bitch tried to take her from me now, I'd wipe him from existence.

But she wasn't thinking of him.

She was thinking of losing control with me.

I smiled absently, wondering how much longer I had to wait.

A pirate lost his footing in the dance and crashed into our wedding table. The music stopped abruptly, and silence fell as all assembled watched in fear, waiting to see how I'd react.

My instinct was to take him outside and thrash him, but my woman was unharmed and looking at me with pleading doe eyes. The point of the feast was to unite the island. She'd put such thought into accomplishing that goal.

I summoned a smile that wasn't entirely forced. In her I had an ally of a different sort than I was accustomed to. She couldn't stand beside me in a physical fight, but she'd bring an even-keeled wisdom that was sorely needed for the challenges ahead.

Brutality was the solution I knew best, but it wouldn't unite Ocracoke. She offered a gentler path that was harder to walk but more likely to bring the outcome we sought.

I'd never cared much about peace for my own sake, but I wanted it now for hers. I'd reshape our world to be safer for her even if it meant holding my temper with drunken pirates.

I lifted the man to his feet and chuckled at the way he braced for a blow. Instead, I put my glass of ale into his hand and shouted, "Skol!"

The crowd erupted, another glass was pressed into my palm, and the revelry raged on.

I'd lived among Northmen and then pirates all my life and never seen drunkenness on this scale. There was a staggering level of inebriation buzzing around us, muddying everyone's desires and clouding my thoughts.

Just how strong was the ale?

The question vanished from my mind when I looked down and found Astrid looking up at me like I'd hung the moon.

"Well handled, Captain," she said, glancing down with a flush of pride.

I sat, and she took my hand, stroking it possessively. If not beating people was all it took to please her, I'd be giving far fewer thrashings going forward.

"Can't spoil the feast you worked so hard on," I said quietly.

She beamed, looking prettier than ever with flushed cheeks and hair mussed from dancing. And she was *mine*.

She leaned closer to shout a question into my ear so I could hear her now that the music was back in full swing. "Can Sigrid really best Thorin in a fight?"

She nodded to where my sister stood against a wall, smirking and sipping her drink but refusing to stoop to dancing.

Astrid giggled, sounding a little tipsy herself. "I can't believe she threatened to cut off his cock. Who says that to their brother?"

I choked on my drink, grinning. "Sigrid says whatever she damn well pleases to whomever she damn well pleases. And aye...she can best him in a fight. She's a shield-maiden of Tyr, our god of war. It would be bloody and hard-fought, but she's the firstborn, heir to the throne of Daneland."

Astrid's jaw dropped.

"You didn't know?" I asked in surprise. "The old bastard has somehow managed to keep our escape quiet, probably telling the nobles he's sent us off for some all-important purpose. Those in Daneland hear little of the world outside,

and the outside world hears only what our father wants them to know.”

There was awe in her expression. “In all the legends on the island about your family, somehow the fact you’re a prince of Daneland escaped mention. And Sigrid will be queen?”

I shrugged. “Not if she has anything to say about it. We turned our backs on our father and made a new life for ourselves here. If he wants an heir, he’ll have to look elsewhere.”

She looked thoughtful. “And he accepts that?”

I acknowledged a toast from across the hall and downed the rest of my drink, having forgotten how strong it was. “He thinks we’ll be back. He can’t fathom walking away from power. But power means nothing when you live in a cage.”

There was a flash of something in her expression, but she covered it by handing me another drink. “Skol!” she said with her forced smile back in place.

I’d had enough of the theatrics for everyone else’s benefit. “Would you like to go upstairs?”

She tensed. “The night’s still young. The pirates expect a party.”

I pried the mug from her fingers and set it on the table. “And they can continue to have one. *Loudly* if they’d like.”

I still hadn’t told her that I could feel her desires, so I couldn’t tell her that I knew why she wanted me to keep drinking. She’d been ready to bolt all week, looking for an excuse to run, so I hadn’t given her another reason to fear me.

I wanted her to stay for selfish reasons, but it was also the safest course of action for her.

I had to tell her the truth once we got upstairs, though. She was less likely to run once she learned the advantages of having a partner who could read *exactly* what she desired.

She couldn’t cover the panic on her face. “Surely you at least want to finish your drink first?”

“Do you wish to finish yours?” She’d been holding back, pretending to drink while everyone else fell deeper into a drunken stupor. I didn’t sense a desire to run, but it was difficult to parse every nuance of what she was feeling in so crowded a space.

She took a gulp while I was watching, swallowing reflexively to keep from coughing.

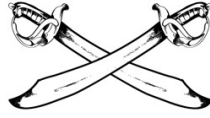
“I’ll tell you what,” I said into her ear. “They expect a show—for me to sling you over my shoulder like a true Northman and carry you upstairs. If you go now, I’ll spare you that spectacle. I’ll follow you once they’ve had a chance to make a few suggestive jokes at my expense.”

She looked around and made the smart choice, slipping from her chair and disappearing for the stairs without drawing much attention to herself.

It was almost time to truly make her mine.



## ASTRID



I stood with shaking hands in the chamber that had been prepared for our wedding night, wondering if it was worse to be drunk or sober for what was to come.

I'd need a clear head to stay in control, so I set the glass down, much as I wanted the numbing comfort it promised. I'd resolved to tell Talon the truth first and let him decide if he still wanted me. He was a creature of the gods too, surely he'd understand.

The door to the chamber opened, and my father came in and closed it before I could object. He'd sold me to someone he considered a monster to save his own skin. I had nothing more to say to him.

He'd been wisely avoiding my husband, so I hadn't seen him since the ceremony.

"We need to leave now, Daughter. I have a boat ready. Quickly!"

I glared, stunned he'd even suggest it. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I'll take my chances with Talon over being your precious pearl ever again."

He let out a cruel laugh. "You think he'll still want you when he finds out he married a siren?"

I shuddered at the word I barely allowed myself to think, but squared my shoulders, shaking off the cloak of fear he always smothered me with. "I guess we'll find out. I'm going to tell him tonight."

My father's face twisted with scorn. "Like hell you are. They'll hunt you like they hunted your mother, and there's nowhere you'll be able to hide. If he doesn't kill you himself, he'll be executed along with you."

I was a siren, part of a race that had been hunted to extinction in many realms because our song drove people to do wicked deeds. Once my song had been awakened for the first time, I'd release aphrodisiac magic that impacted anyone in my vicinity anytime I was aroused. If I lost control of my desires and released that seductive song even once, people would know what I was.

Sirens were outlawed. To so much as shelter one was an offense punishable by death.

Saxons and Northmen had many differences they warred over, and the pirates hated them both, but all of them were aligned when it came to sirens.

There wasn't a place in this world that wouldn't execute me upon discovery.

I heard Talon's promise echoing in my mind. *You're safe with me. I won't let a godsdamn thing touch you.*

"He'll protect me, and no one else needs to know," I said with more certainty than I felt. I wasn't naive. I'd heard the stories about him. He was a thieving, murdering, brutal pirate who didn't abide by the laws of civilization.

But the laws of civilization said I should be put to death.

My father snatched me by the arm hard enough to bruise. "You come with me now and serve me obediently or I'll make sure *everyone* finds out. I'll deny I ever knew."

I'd wondered over the years whether he could've been the one who turned my mother over to the authorities. I'd lied to myself for so long, believing that as cruel as he was, he wouldn't have had his own wife burned at the stake.

But of course he would've. He took a seven-year-old child to watch her mother burn.

I'd never forget my mother's horror when she saw me in the crowd. She'd been brave until that moment. Seeing me had been the thing that broke her.

*Close your eyes, Astrid! Pretend you're somewhere else!*

I rounded on my father. "How does it feel to know that my mother was never once aroused with you? That you never heard so much as a whisper of her siren song until you found her with someone else? She never trusted you! She was disgusted by you, and you didn't deserve her!"

He raised his hand to strike me, and I snapped, "Do it! Hit Talon Thorvald's wife."

He slammed his hand down on the dressing table instead, making me jump.

"You'd better leave before my husband sees you here," I said calmly.

The door swung open again, and Talon filled the doorway, reminding me exactly why he was so dangerous. Those shameful urges nudged unrelentingly at the corners of my mind anytime he was near.

"Get out," he said to my father without a hint of respect. "I'll be alone with my wife now."

My father scurried out of the room, but turned back to sneer at me. "She won't be your wife for long."

Talon slammed the door in his face, but froze as the words sunk in. "Did he just fucking threaten you?"

He lunged for the door, but I got there in time to stop his hand on the handle. "It's not worth it. He meant that he wants me to leave you, but he doesn't control me anymore. If you go after him instead of consummating our marriage, then he wins."

Talon tilted his chin, but released the door handle. "Killing him wouldn't take that long."

I smiled at his dark humor. "No bloodshed tonight."

Somewhere in my soul, I knew I should've let Talon kill him and be done with it. There was no redeeming him, but I couldn't bring myself to condemn him.

No matter how I was trying to downplay it for Talon, my father's parting words had been a threat. He wouldn't expose me immediately. I was too valuable to him to give up that easily. He'd try to manipulate me again first, but regardless of when he did it, there was no doubt in my mind that he'd see me put to death rather than let me go.

*Now I can't tell Talon I'm a siren. Once I tell him, he's complicit.*

It would force him to choose between keeping his family and crew safe or fighting and likely dying for me. If I didn't tell him, then he could truthfully deny any knowledge of it. Keeping it from him was the only protection I could offer.

Talon paced the room like a caged beast, restless and frustrated. In all the times I'd seen him at the tavern, he'd been eerily still, composed in a way that unsettled other people.

I risked a quick look at him and found myself picturing what it would be like to feel his powerful body under my fingertips. Shameful thoughts I needed to push away. *Surely* once we'd done the act and the mystery was gone, they'd go away too.

*Get it over with. Just get it over with!*

He sighed heavily and sat on the chair in the corner.

*Rut me like the filthy tavern patrons do with the whores. They never take long, and it doesn't seem too hard to endure.*

"With respect, *wife*, I won't be able to complete the deed while you're thinking that."

I gasped and turned to face him. "The rumors are true? You're a mind reader?"

"Of a sort," he said, watching me too closely.

*Oh gods, he can read minds, but somehow he must not have learned my secret yet. He's going to know what—I can't*

*even think of it! Think of the sea, the waves, the feel of a strong wind filling the sails.*

I scrambled up to make him a drink, more out of habit than anything else. I poured the ale and took it to him, thinking of anything but what I was hiding.

“It won’t work,” he said with a humorless smile as he took the drink from me. “The only way this works is trust. I can’t read your thoughts as you hear them in your head, but I can feel what you want. And right now, your burning desire is to conceal something from me. Not exactly what I imagined I’d feel from my wife on our wedding night.”

He wasn’t angry, but he seemed disappointed and frustrated.

If he couldn’t hear my thoughts and could only feel what I wanted, then I needed him to believe I wanted what he did. That I wanted to trust him when I couldn’t trust anyone. I willed myself to believe it.

He shook his head. “Now you want to deceive me. I told you. This only works if you trust me. Deception isn’t a game you can play with me.”

Irritation clawed through me. “Of course I want to deceive you! You’re a fucking berserker who can read minds.” Panic was making me hysterical if I was talking to him like this. “Forgive me for thinking that appeasing you is the best course of action in my present circumstances.”

He smiled, and it was devastating. “*There*. That was real. Be angry with me if you must, but give me something true. The feel of deception sickens me, and I won’t tolerate it.”

I couldn’t look at him. “You speak of deception. You don’t think I deserved to know this before now?”

He set the glass down. “Would it have changed anything, Astrid?”

Godsdamn him, it wouldn’t. He was still the perilous path I’d pick if I could go back and make the choice, but I needed him to get this over with before the terror of wondering whether I could control my siren song ate me alive.

He seemed determined to take things slow.

With shaking hands, I dropped my robe and walked towards him.

I'd never been nude in front of a man before. I found myself trembling so much, I was rigid with it, but the naked hunger in his gaze chased away some of the fear.

I didn't have to pretend to want this with him. I burned with need as his eyes swept up and down my bare skin, lingering in all the places I wanted him to touch me.

"I didn't know such beauty was possible," he said reverently. "You're perfect."

I let my gaze wander over him too, unable to help admiring the massive strength of his body. He wore the heavy tall boots favored by sailors and pants that showed the strength of his thighs. He was shirtless, and covered in the tattoos that marked him as a Northman, strange symbols that wound their way across the chiseled planes of his torso and arms.

The muscles on top of his shoulders were so huge, I wanted to sink my teeth into them.

He grunted. "Now *that's* more what I hoped to feel from my wife on our wedding night."

*Oh gods, what am I thinking?*

I tore my eyes from him, and fear nearly made my knees buckle. If I kept thinking sinful thoughts, he was going to find out the truth.

He rose from the chair in a swift movement, and I scrambled away from him until my back met the wall. He was so close, and I was completely naked. I couldn't block out the thrilling awareness of him, the anticipation of the moment he'd touch me.

*Why am I like this?*

"Why do you feel shame for your desire? There's no shame in wanting your husband." He said it softly, a low murmur like he was soothing a nervous horse.

As he drew even closer, the dangerous thoughts were impossible to push away. I gasped for the strength to fight it.

He leaned a hand on the wall next to me, looking thoughtful. “What do you fear I’ll discover, Astrid? I don’t care if you come to our bed having known another. I’ve known many, but none of them matter now.”

He thought I was worried he’d find out I wasn’t a virgin. If only it were that simple.

I shook my head, focusing on boards of the floor, on anything but his nearness.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck! Just get through it. Don’t think about him. Think about the time you broke a bottle of whisky and your father beat the soles of your feet until you could barely stand.*

“Look at me,” he said, but I kept my eyes cast down, counting the knots of wood on the floor, terrified of the feelings I couldn’t suppress with him.

“You’re my wife now, and you’ll damn well look at me when I speak to you.”

When I refused, he pushed me back against the wall and forced my chin up, stroking his thumb across my bottom lip. He was massive and threatening, and all I could think about was the muscular thigh he’d wedged between mine. I whimpered with need. So long I’d denied myself even a thought of pleasure.

He laughed, low and menacing. “You like that, don’t you?”

I felt the tug again, the perilous urge low in my belly that could doom us all. “Fuck you.” If he were angry, maybe he’d snap and take what I didn’t dare offer.

He gave me that devastating smile again. “You want more. You want me to pin you to this bed and fuck you like you don’t have a choice...but want it or not, you always have a choice with me. Do you want to be mine?”

I nodded. Dangerous as this was, I’d rather fight my lust than be forced to offer myself to men like Avery. A swift

execution was better than a torturous death of the soul. We'd come too far to change course now.

I wanted this with him.

That was the problem.

I bit my tongue but was ready to scream at him to just fucking do it.

He grunted. "If only you were that eager for the right reasons."

He leaned down to kiss me, and I put my hand up to block him like I'd done earlier, but this time he was ready and laced his fingers into mine.

He was a berserker sworn to protect me, nearly invincible in a fight. Could that be enough to save me from a death sentence? If I gave in and trusted him with my secret, would his strength shield me from the consequences?

*He might be able to shield me, but who will shield him?*

"That's right," he coaxed, kissing my wrist as he gently pulled my hand above my head before pinning it to the wall. "You want to tell me, want to trust me. I can feel it."

It didn't matter how strong he was, they would come for me, and he'd be condemned to break his oath to me or fight and run forever.

I blocked him with my other hand, and he pinned that one to the wall above my head as well.

*Gods, I want him.*

*I need him.*

*What's the point of living without this?*

He released my hands and sunk to his knees, wrapping his massive hands around my hips. "If you won't let me kiss you there, I'll simply have to kiss you somewhere else."

His mouth was between my thighs before I knew what he was going to do, his tongue stroking the core of my agony. I



shuddered and jerked, unaware my body could produce a feeling so overwhelming.

Bliss like I'd never known unfurled through my limbs as he licked with that wicked tongue.

*No, no, no! This is what I was warned about!*

I choked on a sob, craving it but knowing I couldn't have it, and pushed his head futilely. "Just be done with it! Take me!"

He was getting frustrated now too. "I don't want to force you!"

"What the fuck do you think you're doing now?"

He stood. "Trying not to hurt you." He unbuckled his belt and pulled out a cock that was proportional to the rest of him.

*Holy gods, how is that going to fit?*

"Hurt me. I don't care. Just get it over with."

I skirted around him and lay on the bed with my legs spread, self-conscious and afraid, trying to think of anything but him. Something had to awaken my song before my arousal would trigger it, but I didn't really understand what it would take to trigger it.

"Gods, woman. You can't even look at me. If you wanted a brute to rut you without a thought to your pleasure, you picked the wrong man. I can't."

"Bullshit. Just do it."

He finished his ale in two deep swallows and slammed the glass down. "I won't live with the memory of forcing you when I can feel you don't want it. *Don't ask me to.*"

His voice was raw, and his eyes were wild. It hadn't occurred to me that my feelings would have any impact on him whatsoever.

I sat up and looked at him with new eyes, taking in the worry on his brow and the tension in his shoulders.

“It could be good between us...if you let it,” he said tentatively, sitting on the bed next to me.

I hugged my knees and took a deep breath, fighting back tears, but they poured down my cheeks anyway. I couldn't tell him what I was. It would put him in an impossible position, and once he knew the truth, I'd be in danger forever. We both would.

“I...can't. Let it be good between us. The impure thoughts I have when you touch me. They're...dangerous. You...won't want me.”

He swiped a hand over his dark beard. “Nothing could stop me from wanting you.” He wove his fingers through the braid across the top of his head like he was at a loss, and then he said, “Can I hold you?”

I nodded, and he pulled me into his arms, cradling me with his big body, being ever so gentle.

“You're safe, Astrid,” he murmured against my ear. “Whatever he's told you. Whatever those Saxon fucks like your father have told you, there's no shame in what you're feeling.”

I let my head rest against his shoulder. There was no fighting it. Enveloped in him like this, I couldn't deny the desire humming through my veins.

But nothing bad was happening. I was more aroused than I'd ever been and nothing was happening. Surely, if my song was going to awaken, this would've been enough to do it. How much more aroused could I even get?

Was it possible I wasn't really a siren, that I somehow hadn't inherited that part from my mother?

I let out a shuddering sigh. “Show me,” I said, resigned to the inevitability of whatever was going to happen. “Show me how it could be between us.”

He hummed his approval and ran his rough hands slowly down my arms, pressing searing kisses along the side of my neck. I sighed, but it turned into a moan when he cupped my breasts, teasing each nipple to a taut peak.

I let the pleasure rip through me, and nothing happened. I almost cried from relief.

Was I safe?

Could I give myself to him freely?

Like he could sense the change in me, he dropped one hand to where I ached, then parted my folds and stroked in a rolling motion that had me jerking in his arms. It was too good to bear, too intense to endure.

“Shhh...” he said. “Let it happen. Trust me.”

I surrendered to him completely, crying out as he worked a thick finger from his other hand inside me with tiny strokes.

My whole body was building to something, but I didn't understand what or when it would peak.

“Can you take another?” he murmured, stretching me open with a second finger, preparing me for what was to come.

“Yes. *More*,” I begged.

His laugh was a rumble in his chest. “That's my girl.”

He filled me with his fingers, stroking that sensitive place at the apex of my thighs as he planted kisses along my jaw and collarbone.

I writhed against him, struggling to reach a place I didn't understand. “I need...I can't...*please*, Talon.”

He moved his fingers faster, and I came apart with pleasure, riding wave upon wave of thunderous sensation as it crashed through me like a storm. I was undone, unable to form a coherent thought in the face of what I'd just experienced. Talon held me as I tried to take it in, feeling boneless and liberated. There was no song.

None of it had been true.

I was free.

I laughed at the absurdity of it, that marrying Talon Thorvald gave me freedom.

He kissed my temple and grinned. “It’ll be better next time.”

I laughed again, nuzzling into him. “I’m not sure that’s possible, husband.”

He flipped me back onto the bed with mischief twinkling in his dark eyes. “Challenge accepted...wife.”

He lay between my parted thighs, and I pulled him closer, urging him with my hands on his muscled ass.

He rocked back and pushed his hips forward, his thick cock nudging where nothing but his fingers had ever been. I’d never dared to touch myself there, but his cock felt so good. It was too much and not enough. I fought to relax and let him in at the same time as I tensed to urge him forward. I wanted all of him.

I trusted him. It was the first time I’d ever been able to say that about another person.

The stretching discomfort returned each time he moved, but he patiently worked himself in a little at a time until we both groaned as he sunk all the way inside me.

He rocked back gently to do it again. “Gods, woman. So strong. So brave.”

It was invasive, and there was so much pressure, but as he started to roll his fingers at the top of my entrance again, I groaned and lifted my hips for more, urging him to fill me.

As he stroked my center, the rising pleasure within me produced a song that coursed through my body and poured out into the room, filling the space with the call of my foremothers.

My siren song radiated from me in a hauntingly beautiful melody, seeping out into the feasting hall below. Only another siren could hear it, but anyone who was close enough to feel it would be overcome with lust.

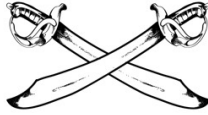
The thing I feared most was happening, and I was powerless to stop it.

The pleasure Talon made me feel must've been enough to awaken it. It was still soft, but if we kept going it would only grow stronger and impact everyone more.

Talon groaned and gripped my thigh tighter, shaking his head as though he could clear it. He thrust harder, and my siren song got louder.

*Oh gods, no!*

## TALON



**M** *y mate.*

My mind was cloudy from the ale and the absolute bliss of sinking into my wife. Nothing made sense except the need to make her come again.

But the certainty of it thundered through my very essence in concert with the need.

My berserker had claimed her as my mate. It had been drawn to her from the start, but I'd been in denial about what it meant. It explained so much...why her spirit sang to me, why the sight of anyone else touching her made me want to leave a pile of corpses in my wake.

The fact a bastard like me had been rewarded with a mate like this defied everything I knew about how the world worked.

The spirit of a Valkyrie was tucked inside a body I could snap without much thought.

No matter.

I was strong enough to protect her.

For berserkers, everything was about our partner's pleasure. My release was secondary to hers. The mate bond had been forged the moment she'd trusted me enough to make her come. In our culture, claiming her meant claiming her pleasure. It had nothing to do with penetrative sex.

She'd trusted me, and I'd made her *mine*.

She gasped as I sunk all the way into her again, and my existence shrunk to making her do it again.

I was consumed by the need to feel her clench around me as she tipped over the edge of pleasure. I had to last long enough to make her come again. It felt more imperative than breathing.

I grinned against her neck as I thrust slowly, drunk on the feel of her.

It had never been like this.

Sex was an itch to scratch. This felt like I'd die if I didn't have her.

I was in a frenzy with little awareness of anything but her.

“Stop, Talon! You have to stop!” She was fighting me, roiling with fear I could feel down our newly forged bond.

I sprung to my feet, tensing to fight an unseen enemy, but whatever frightened her couldn't be beaten with fists or axe.

Thorin's roar ricocheted through my head, and the agony of it forced me to one knee. He'd ripped into my mind like he was in crisis.

*The Saxons landed on our shores! We're under attack!*

Trying to think about anything but Astrid's tightness was like struggling through mud. I couldn't make sense of what Thorin was saying or why I could hear him in my head.

His voice was a ragged mess.

*Axel! No!*

Thorin's sob felt like it tore my heart from my chest. I'd never seen my brother cry before. For him to sob like that could only mean...

*Axel is dead!*

I growled with rage, still trying to make sense of what was happening. This couldn't be real.

Why couldn't I *think*?

Astrid scrambled away in fear, tears streaming down her cheeks even though she couldn't have heard what Thorin said in my mind.

"I'm sorry." She sobbed, shaking her head.

How did she know?

She hugged her body, trying to cover her vulnerable nakedness. "I should've warned you."

*It's fucking carnage, Talon. Everyone's too drunk to defend themselves.*

I reeled, wanting to deny the truth that was staring me in the face.

*She'd* done this. The ale. Waiting a week to have the wedding so her father could plot with the Saxons. Making sure every pirate on the island was too drunk to stand. The way she'd plied me with drink all night.

She put her hands up, pleading as I snatched her by the ankle and dragged her towards me. Everyone was sorry when they were caught, but she'd plotted all this, knowing what the outcome would be. Her father might have ordered her to do it, but I'd offered her my protection. She'd had every opportunity to tell me their plan, but instead she'd manipulated me. She'd chosen a side, and it wasn't with us.

*Axel.*

How could he be gone?

The pain was too much.

He was dead because of her. Because I'd been too overcome to see it.

This was the thing she'd been hiding from me, the deception I'd felt. I was so eager to paint her as the innocent, I'd missed that she was a fucking traitor.

"I would've given you *everything*, and in return you've endangered everyone I care about."

She snatched the piece of eight from my neck, snapping the cord.



Before I could even reach to take it back, she scrambled across the bed, grabbed the blade Axel had given her, and started the shift, fleeing to Atlantis with panic in her eyes.

As she faded from sight, I shouted, “If you ever come back, *I’ll kill you!*”

She was gone.

My mate had just shifted herself completely naked to an island of pirates where she knew no one. I couldn’t reason around the need to follow her, the thrumming, pulsing, visceral urge to go after her and make sure she was safe. I couldn’t follow without the piece of eight.

She’d all but killed my brother. I was the biggest threat to her.

The window next to me shattered, and a flaming torch landed on the floor. I tossed it back out, but the curtains were on fire. I needed to get the fuck out.

I pulled on pants and picked up my axe, storming out into the chaos below. I retrieved as many pirates from the feasting hall as I could, but the Saxons were already coming through the doors, trying to trap us inside.

I let the berserker take me, losing myself to the battle until my arms ran with the blood of my enemies and we’d fought our way out into the night.

An army stood on our shores, ready to overwhelm the island.

“Get to the fort!” Thorin shouted...but I was too far gone.

My mate had betrayed me. I could feel that she was afraid and in danger, but if I found a way to get to her, I was honor bound to make her answer for what she’d done.

I couldn’t hurt her, but I could hurt the army who threatened our way of life.

“I’m wiping these bastards from our shore first,” I growled, defying the order of my king.

I moved through the night on a whisper of rage and betrayal, a swift death that sang through their ranks.

It could've been moments or hours that followed. Time ceased to have any meaning.

When the berserker released its hold on me and I came fully back to my senses, the beach was stained red and not a single foe still stood.

Most were in pieces.

Sigrid stood next to me, panting and covered in blood. She started checking me for wounds like she didn't know what else to do now that there was no one left to fight.

"There's not a fucking scratch on you, Talon," she said, shaking her head in disbelief. We were difficult to beat but not invincible. She had a deep gash across her shoulder and minor cuts elsewhere, but the pain in her eyes had nothing to do with her physical wounds.

"He's really gone?" I said, voice hoarse from screaming.

She nodded, not meeting my eyes.

"How?" I struggled to believe it.

"Ask your wife," she said, violence stamping every word.

She wasn't my wife anymore. I couldn't think of her as that after what she'd done, after the way she'd betrayed us all.

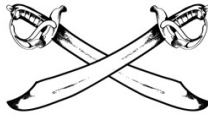
"Where is she?" Sigrid asked, looking exhausted.

Astrid was on Atlantis with no coin, no clothes, and no friends.

"Gone," I said. "And if she stays gone, I'll let her live. For now."

**ASTRID**

SEVEN YEARS LATER



“We can’t outrun them in this wind, Captain! She’s massive, but she’s fast.”

I nodded at my ship master, knowing we were well past running. This hundred-gun behemoth of a warship had been pursuing us since we’d reached the center of the Doldrums. She was flying Saxon colors just like we were, so they wouldn’t yet know we were pirates.

My pirate crew sailed from Atlantis, and we usually would’ve been able to use my piece of eight to escape and get back there...but not in the Doldrums. The magic of the key to Atlantis didn’t work in these waters. To make the leap, we’d have to get back to open water, and we were days away.

“We’ve taken bigger.” I reminded my crew with a wink.

And we had. Every one of them was a skilled fighter, but we used deception as a weapon more than our blades. If we could lure them closer, I could play the helpless merchant’s daughter, a ruse that had worked for us many times. Once they let their guard down, thinking we were simply a vessel carrying the daughter of a Saxon merchant, we’d either be able to demast them and run or take their ship as a prize if the gods were in our favor.

I ran for my cabin to switch to a Saxon gown since I was dressed like a pirate in tall boots, pants, and a sleeveless shirt, and no one would believe I was a merchant’s daughter in those clothes.

“She’s raising the black, Captain!”

I skidded to a stop, watching as they hoisted a black flag I couldn't identify yet.

Revealing themselves as pirates would've struck fear into the heart of an honest merchant, but it made mine leap with relief. We had nothing aboard worth stealing since we hadn't yet taken a prize on this trip. The only reason we'd dared to cut the rest of the way across the Doldrums was because we'd been low on water after getting becalmed for a week. If it was a crew we knew, they might even have water to spare for us.

If it wasn't? Saxons weren't the only ones who fell for the merchant's daughter ruse.

The relief I'd felt shriveled and died as the black flag unfurled, revealing a vicious falcon.

I locked eyes with my quartermaster, Reed, across the deck. He was the only one who knew anything about my past, the only one who knew what I was.

"It's Talon Thorvald," Reed said unnecessarily, and my crew muttered to each other.

I froze for a split second, and Reed shouted, "Get below deck before he sees you, Captain!"

I ran for my cabin. We only had moments to come up with a plan, but some of our options would disappear the instant he saw me. With his berserker abilities, he'd almost certainly sense I was here regardless of anything we tried...in which case I had two choices: stand and fight or throw myself at his mercy.

Talon the Destroyer wasn't known for his mercy. But Thorin had issued a decree that would tie his hands.

"Prepare to be boarded!"

I'd been waiting for the shout from outside, but hearing it still felt like a punch in the gut. Words no sea captain ever wanted to hear, but we'd been outmaneuvered, and I only had one play left.

I reached for my cutlass just as Reed stormed into the cabin behind me. He was tall for a Saxon, strong but lean. I'd

saved his life once on Atlantis when he'd been about to step into a dangerous portal in the woods, and he'd quickly become a trusted friend. We dreamed of starting a crew together, and when we made it a reality he became my second in command. We were both running from our pasts, both concealing part of our identity.

“Did you actually see Talon?” I asked, reaching for hope. The enormous warship out there wasn't *The Falcon's Wing*.

Talon had been sighted in too many places at once for all of them to have been true. If a captured ship thought he was the one attacking, they'd surrender instantly, so some crews had taken to flying his banner as a weapon of intimidation. His reputation was a more powerful weapon than the hundred guns he had out there.

It was a risky move. If he ever caught them impersonating him, they were as good as dead...and it wouldn't be a swift end.

“Aye, it's really him,” Reed said, looking grave.

I'd known this day would come, had endlessly planned how I'd flee and keep my crew safe, but as the years passed and he made no move to hunt me, I'd begun to take chances.

*If you ever come back, I'll kill you.*

I hadn't technically returned, since the Doldrums were no-man's-land, but it was the closest I'd strayed to Ocracoke. It was a mistake that would likely cost me my life, but I'd try to protect my crew from being collateral damage.

My gunner was waiting for orders just outside the cabin, so I called, “Raise the white flag. *Quickly*—before they board us.”

Reed rounded on me. “You can't really mean to surrender. You said you crossed him and he'll kill you if he ever sees you again.”

Reed didn't know I was Talon's wife. The full truth of the betrayal had been too painful and humiliating to speak aloud. How could I explain that I'd opened my heart to a man I married only to have him turn on me?

I sighed. “Surrendering is the only way I can ensure the crew’s safety.”

Reed paced. “Let me challenge him. Safety was never part of the bargain.”

I shook my head. “I won’t risk it. He can’t know who you are. If you challenge him and he bests you, it could start a war none of us wants.”

He slammed a fist down on the desk, being uncharacteristically aggressive. “At least give us a fighting chance, Captain.”

I could order Reed to turn me over in exchange for safe passage, never telling Talon I was their Captain, but my crew would mutiny before letting that happen. Hell, *Reed* would mutiny before letting that happen.

I took a deep, steadying breath. “That motherfucker wants a fight. He’s over there frothing at the mouth, hoping we’ll give it to him. The worst blow we could strike against Talon Thorvald in this moment is to stand down.”

Grappling hooks smacked against the deck outside, and I could see the muscle working in Reed’s jaw as he fought the urge to repel them. I felt the same urge burning in my veins, but I knew our foe better than he did.

Every captain had a weakness. For many, it was greed. Some were vain. Some were drunks or reckless fools with too much pride. My weakness was that I loved my crew. They were the only family I’d ever had.

I could stomach the risk to them that we faced by the nature of our trade, the constant dangers of the sea, the necessary fights. But not this. I wouldn’t send them into a fight we were almost certain to lose, knowing too many would die.

I wouldn’t let them die for me.

Because that’s ultimately what Talon was after. In a way it was a relief to finally stop looking over my shoulder. I’d been living on stolen time, but what a life I’d fit into those years.

Reed took me by the shoulders as boots began to thud onto the deck. “You can’t ask me to stand here and let them take you without a fight. You’re my captain, and I’d follow you anywhere, but you’re still a woman, and his crew are fucking animals. This is madness!”

The trouble with loving your crew is that they love you back.

“By Thorin’s decree, he can’t harm a single one of us if we surrender before being boarded. Thorin doesn’t want the pirates killing each other when he’s got the new Saxon king to fight. Whatever Talon’s doing in a ship that size, he doesn’t want to waste time taking us all to port.”

Reed whispered, “Have you forgotten about the part where he knows you’re a siren? Thorin’s decree may not hold if he can argue the crew was sheltering a known siren.”

“Seven years he’s known a *dangerous siren* has been lurking on the seas and hasn’t made a move to apprehend or execute her? Find me a man of reason who wouldn’t call that sheltering a siren. He’s as complicit as anyone.”

Talon was ruthless and feared for good reason. But he lived by the pirate code, and he wouldn’t massacre a crew who’d peacefully surrendered.

I was gambling their lives that he still abided by it.

I knew from the way absolute silence fell belowdecks that *he* was coming. He walked slowly but with purpose, every deliberate step like a weapon of intimidation.

He could probably already feel what I wanted, so I focused on the memories and my anger. I wouldn’t let him feel how much I wanted to keep my crew safe.

He only got to know how badly I wanted him to fall into the fucking sea with chains around his ankles.

I’d been terrified and alone in the world, betrayed by my father, and left to Talon’s mercy. I trusted him when he asked me to. I believed him when he vowed to protect me. He awakened my siren song and then turned on me the second he discovered it.



The footsteps stopped, but nothing happened—another piece of psychological warfare.

When Talon finally rounded the doorway and ducked to enter, my heart stuttered at the sight of him. His beard was a little longer, but other than that, he'd hardly changed. He was still massive and imposing and entirely too handsome in a dangerous way.

I was struck by a flood of memories. Hope, then terror, then betrayal.

*If you run from me, I will hunt you.*

He didn't even look at me. He settled on Reed, assessing him with a dismissive flick of his eyes. "I hoped you'd put up a fight. So long we've heard legends of the fierce captain of *The Onyx*. And now I find he's just as much a coward as the rest of them. Do you surrender your ship, her cargo, and your passengers?" His head tilted my direction on the last word.

Aggression marked every line of Reed's posture, but one side of his mouth lifted into an easy smile. "You'll have to ask her."

Surprise flickered across Talon's face but was replaced with a sneer. "*You're* the captain of *The Onyx*?"

I glared but forced myself to shrug. His look of disgust was taking me back to that night.

I couldn't help what I was.

He didn't care.

He wanted me dead because I was a siren.

And I wanted him dead because he was a lying bastard who made oaths and broke them.

He stood to his full height. "Tone it down, *Captain*. I'm well aware you want to kill me."

Despite my order, Reed reached for his cutlass, but I grabbed his wrist. For a tense moment, it felt like he was going to draw the weapon anyway, but he stopped with his hand on the hilt, forearm a rigid bundle of tension.

Talon's eyes flicked to where I was touching Reed, and something aggressive shifted in his expression before his impassive mask slid back into place. "Give back what you stole from me."

The piece of eight. The key to my escape that had led me to a new life on Atlantis. I couldn't return it even if I wanted to.

I hesitated. He'd hunted me on a hundred-gun warship armed to the teeth, an excessive show of force against my much-smaller vessel. Was he a threat to Atlantis?

"For what purpose? I won't unleash a war party on my home."

"Your home?" He grunted. "You don't get to question my purpose...but while we're there, it might be a good opportunity to tell Remel about your true nature."

The bastard was going to tell the monarch of Atlantis that I was a siren. They'd execute me and condemn my entire crew to die for sheltering me. No one would believe my crew didn't know.

Five years at sea with a siren, and not once had they heard her call? Because of the legends about the appetites of sirens, it defied belief even though it was true. Reed was the only one who knew, and that was only because I'd told him.

Would my friends on the island be punished as well despite their innocence?

"I can't give it to you," I said, keeping my voice neutral.

He strode closer, getting into my space, completely ignoring the bristling man at my side. Reed's eyes kept darting between us like he was two seconds away from snapping and defying my order.

I held my space. "I demand transport for my crew."

Talon cocked his head. "Haven't taken them captive yet."

Thorin's decree meant that he couldn't keep us prisoner longer than it took to take us to port.

“Nonetheless. I demand we be taken to port and released. We’ve peacefully surrendered.”

He smiled slowly, the deliberate smile he saved for breaking people. “Or I could slaughter every last one of your crew and burn the evidence.”

Reed tensed again next to me.

I raised my chin. “But you won’t.”

Talon reached out and stroked the scar on my cheek from the slash that had nearly taken my eye. I was so surprised by the gentle touch, I didn’t stop him.

“Who did this?” he growled.

I smacked his hand away. “None of your fucking business.”

His expression darkened.

The urge to drive a knee into his balls was overwhelming, but I couldn’t risk it with my crew at sword point.

He let out an amused huff and murmured, “You seem to have forgotten I can read what you desire.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Then you’ll know that my deepest desire...is for you to go and fuck yourself.”

He considered me, still not showing any emotion. Then he called over his shoulder, “Set a course for open water.” When he turned back, he said, “You haven’t fully surrendered while you withhold what’s mine. If you haven’t given it to me by the time we get out of the Doldrums, I start keelhauling your crew until you have a change of heart.” He nodded to Reed. “Starting with him.”

I gasped before I could school my reaction and saw the satisfaction on his face.

“You son of a bitch!” I lunged for him, and this time it was Reed who took me by the shoulders and held me back.

He whispered, “He’s baiting you, Captain.”

A ghost of a smile lit Talon's eyes even though his mouth didn't move. To the men behind him, he said, "Take them on deck, clear the hold, then move them to *The Vengeance* and secure them with the rest of their crew belowdecks. They're not to be harmed. Yet."

Edgar Avery strode into my cabin, another reminder of an era I'd prefer to forget.

For a split second, I forgot I was an accomplished captain in my own right who didn't have to spend the night serving him drinks. It was enough to remind me of what I was fighting for. This life I'd created for myself was worth dying for.

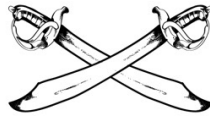
Avery grabbed my wrists far more forcefully than was necessary and pressed my body to his. "Did you miss me?" he breathed into my ear as he shoved me from the cabin.

When I turned back, I caught something feral flash across Talon's face. I'd never seen his berserker take him, but it was a reminder of what lurked beneath his controlled exterior.

He mastered himself and narrowed his eyes, giving me a look filled with hatred. "You have two days."



# TALON



“**W**hy are we waiting two days to start keelhauling them?” Sigrid propped her boots up on the desk.

We were in my cabin on *The Vengeance* waiting for my crew to finish securing Astrid’s in the hold. It had been a lengthy process since I hadn’t been expecting to take an entire crew prisoner and we had to move some cargo over to *The Onyx* to make room.

“You’re a sick fuck, aren’t you, sweetheart?” Avery said with an appreciative laugh.

“Speak without permission again, and you’ll find out,” Sigrid said without bothering to look at him.

To appease tension on Ocracoke, I’d had to bring Avery as my quartermaster, a compromise since I needed his crew to man a ship this size. My crew was no more impressed than I was, but it was a fair concession, and we needed the extra hands.

My sister had insisted upon coming with me too, making me wonder whether she knew my secret.

I’d been too ashamed to tell anyone that Astrid was my mate after the invasion. We’d lost a brother because of my weakness. If I hadn’t been so desperate to claim Astrid, I would’ve realized something wasn’t right.

It was undeniably my fault Axel was dead.

I’d barely been able to look Sigrid and Thorin in the eye for months afterwards.

Each of the Thorvald siblings had the power to see more than we should. Axel had seen visions of people's futures, but they came to him unpredictably and without context. He'd once seen what he thought was my death, but when the moment came to pass, I'd been really lying drunk in the snow following a particularly raucous Yule celebration.

Thorin? None of us really knew what Thorin could see, but he had a deep understanding of what made people tick, like he could see the inner workings of their minds.

I saw the things people wanted most, which could shift quickly and often leaned towards base instincts. The desire to deceive had a particular feel to it, though, so even a strand of its toxic presence would give people away. It was almost impossible to lie to me.

Sigrid could see people's fears. She rarely spoke of what she saw or acknowledged the toll it took, but in a rare moment of weakness, when she'd been deliriously ill, she'd told me it was like living in a landscape of horrors.

Had she joined me because she'd felt my fear about hunting Astrid? My will was steady, but my berserker soul still thought we should be protecting her. I feared I'd balk and put the people I loved in jeopardy again. As long as Astrid lived, she'd be an intolerable weakness for me.

Sigrid, on the other hand, was fully prepared to start dragging Astrid's crew members along the barnacle-crusting keel of the ship, stripping them of flesh and most likely drowning them. Keelhauling was barbaric, but the threat of it was usually enough to do away with the messy formality of carrying out the punishment.

It was the first time I'd made a threat I wasn't sure I could back up with action.

I'd felt she was on the ship before we took it, but I expected her captain to fight to protect her. I'd wanted the fight, needed something to take the edge off my anger before seeing her.

Instead, it bristled under my skin, making me restless.

Since our wedding night, I'd been able to feel her through the mate bond, but that only told me when she was hurt or in danger. For the first time in seven years, I could feel her desires again, and it was unsettling how much it affected me. For a split second on her ship, I'd come close to losing control of my berserker.

The hopeful glow within her was unchanged, steady and brighter than it had been before. But now I was the thing that threatened it. She wanted to live another day, to keep carving out a life of freedom for herself. When I felt it, it was easy to forget why I was threatening to deny her that.

Because she'd taken that very thing from Axel.

If Sigrid had been killed, she'd want me to burn the whole fucking world to the ground to avenge her. But Axel wouldn't have seen taking another life as justice, only the cause of more heartache.

Astrid would be devastated if I let Sigrid torture her crew.

Some part of me wasn't ready to snuff out the light inside Astrid.

Some other part of me *had* been ready to snuff Edgar Avery out for touching her like he had.

I wanted to speak freely with Sigrid, but the slimy prick was sitting there listening.

"It would waste time," I told Sigrid. "In the two days she has to contemplate the possibility, she'll give it to me, and we won't need to muck around torturing people."

She shrugged. "Torture doesn't take that long."

I slammed Astrid's log closed. "We can't afford the delay."

On the other side of the cabin, Avery said, "I can get it out of her while we're underway. Been at sea too long, and I've been wanting to make that one squeal since I first saw her."

The fool was testing me. My berserker raged to life in my chest, but before I could do something stupid, Sigrid jumped up from where she was sitting and knocked Avery to the deck,



straddling his hips. When he tried to rise, she punched him in the face, and his head smacked the deck, leaving him stunned.

She snarled, “You think you’re such a tough motherfucker? You want to fuck someone, Avery? Come on, you can fuck me.”

She grabbed at his crotch, and he tried to push her off, but she backhanded him. “What’s the matter? You can’t get hard when your partner wants it? Fuck me, you coward.”

He roared and flipped them over so he was on top.

Sigrid cackled. “Uh-oh. He thinks he’s in control now—he might be able to perform. Go on then...make me *squeal* if you can.”

He got off her and staggered back, wiping the blood from his lip. “Get your bitch sister under control, or I’ll kill her.”

Sigrid cackled again. “You gonna murder me with your *weapon*, baby?”

He stormed away, cursing her.

“You done?” I asked, grateful she’d given me time to regain my composure.

She sat back on a stool like nothing had happened. “Don’t act like you didn’t enjoy it. You hate that vile piece of shit as much as I do.”

I sighed. “He’s an ally. We need his crew in the fight to come. Don’t forget that, Sigrid.”

She rolled her eyes. “As though we can’t push the Saxons back again. You did it with little help last time.”

I shook my head. “And we lost a brother. The new king won’t take chances. That was a small landing party compared to the fleet he’s assembled. We need to warn Atlantis and get Remel to aid Ocracoke if there’s a blockade.”

“You think she’s still a Saxon spy?” she asked, getting to the crux of the issue with Astrid.

“Someone either intercepted the messages we sent by gull to Atlantis, or they didn’t answer because they’re already

under attack. Seven years, she's kept her distance, only to turn up here at the very moment the messages disappear and the Saxons are about to invade? It can't be a coincidence."

Things had been relatively quiet for years, but the Saxons had crowned a new king after the old one's death. He vowed to wipe out the pirates as his first act as king, obviously determined to prove he was stronger than his father.

For months our spies had been whispering of plans for an invasion, but now an armada had begun to assemble. An attack was imminent, but it was unclear whether he planned to attack Atlantis first or split the fleet and attack simultaneously so we couldn't aid each other.

It would be useful to know how involved Astrid was in the Saxon invasion and what she could tell us about their plans. Torturing it out of her was the obvious solution. But I could more easily remove one of my own limbs than hurt her.

It was an unacceptable weakness.

I flipped through her log again, unable to resist my curiosity about her.

Sigrid said, "How the fuck did she go from timid serving wench to respected pirate captain in such a short time?"

"What if the timid part was an act? She told me herself that she heard everything in the tavern. No one ever thought twice about speaking freely in front of her."

The best spies could play the long game, letting people see only what they wanted to see. I was usually impervious to that deception, but I'd been blinded by my own lust. I ascribed the motives of an innocent victim to what I felt from her instead of seeing that she was eager to escape our island because she was a Saxon spy.

It had been more than lust. I'd been lost in fantasies of having someone to cherish and protect, a reason to fight.

I was pathetic.

"Do you think she's fucking her quartermaster? They sure looked close when they were being led onto *The Vengeance*,"

Sigrid said, not understanding how on edge I was.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, even though it did.

She muttered, “He’s a handsome motherfucker...for a Saxon.”

“*Sigrid*,” I growled.

She put her hands up in surrender.

They’d been too comfortable with each other. He was obviously Saxon with his lanky build and dark, shaggy hair. He had no tattoos, and a short beard. Had a fucking Saxon been touching my mate?

My berserker suddenly roared in my mind as it did any time she was hurt or in danger. It had been a dull grumble since we’d boarded her ship, but it took on a new tone.

How many times over the years had I been forced to grit my teeth and ignore this feeling?

Every time she was afraid, my instincts to protect her raged, no matter the distance. When she was hurt? I sucked in a breath and exhaled, remembering the agony of a moment about a year after she’d fled when pain seared me through our bond and made me ready to annihilate anyone in my presence.

I had to spend three days drunk in the forest to stop myself from hunting her down.

Had that been the day she’d taken the wound to her face that almost cost her an eye?

*Someone is hurting her now.*

I didn’t bother to explain to Sigrid before charging for the hold. On this huge warship, getting anywhere took longer and seconds counted. I sprinted across the main deck and jumped down to the gun deck, then barreled down the stairs to the hold.

I might want her dead, but that didn’t mean anyone else could touch her.

I reached the hold just as my men were about to push her through the barred doorway. She looked fine, but I knew what

I'd felt. My berserker was frantic. I was at risk of humiliating myself in front of both of our crews by worrying over someone I'd just threatened to torture, so I tugged her into one of the storage rooms.

I ran my hands down her limbs, unable to find where she'd been hurt. "What harm befell you?"

She shoved my hands away and looked at me like I'd gone mad. "You mean besides being taken captive by a notoriously brutal pirate and threatened with torture?"

"You were hurt. *Who touched you?*" I'd intended for it to come out as a calm question, but I barked it at her.

She blinked, looking genuinely confused. "I...what?"

I was getting frustrated. There was no denying she'd just been hurt. "Just now. I felt it."

"I fell coming down the stairs to the hold. Too many people pushing, and I lost my footing." She gestured to her knee and a grazed elbow.

I was making a fool of myself over a fucking banged knee.

I turned to walk away, but she said, "*Wait*. You can feel when I'm hurt?"

I stopped and faced her, not seeing any reason to deny it now. "Yes."

She looked uncertain. "You've been able to ever since..."

I resisted the urge to pull her closer. "Yes."

Astrid frowned. "Why?"

"Doesn't matter."

She tilted her head. "Look, I know you hate me for what I am, but my crew doesn't know. Don't punish them."

*For what I am.*

It was enough to snap me out of the trance.

*A spy.* And she was freely admitting it.

She said it as though it weren't a choice she'd made, a choice she was continuing to make.

Why couldn't she have picked a life with me over her allegiance to the Saxons?

She reached for me, putting her hand on my forearm, and for a charged moment, I was back in my chamber the night we'd married, full of hope.

Like she could feel it too, she looked at me pleadingly. "Please let my crew go. Your quarrel is with me."

"Give me the piece of eight."

If she just gave it to me, I could make her someone else's problem and try to move on. Even if I dreaded the idea of letting her go again. Once she was gone, I couldn't check to see if she'd just banged her knee. I'd have to wait and wonder, hating myself for even caring about what was happening to her.

She pulled away, expression shuttering. "I can't."

I took a step back. "Then get in the hold. You have two days."

She held up her hand, showing me the scar on her palm. "You made me a fucking promise. You vowed to protect me and—"

"You betrayed me! You could've told me the truth and prevented all of this. You made a *choice*."

She laughed bitterly. "And trust that you wouldn't react like this?" She shook her head. "So your word is meaningless then. The marriage vow. The blood oath."

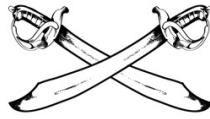
"My word was given before your betrayal. How could you think I'd still want you after that?"

She turned her back on me and let my men lock her in the hold. She was stoic, but I couldn't escape the lash of pain my words had caused.

It was nothing on the agony of betraying my berserker.



# ASTRID



“Did he hurt you?” Reed led me to a back corner of the hold as soon as I stumbled in, frantically looking me over for injuries. We were shut in what was essentially a huge storage area that could double as a holding cell for prisoners if the need arose.

Irritation that had little to do with Reed bubbled up inside me. “Why the fuck does everyone keep asking me that? I’m *fine*.”

Reed put his hands up defensively and then cocked his head. “Talon...asked you that too?”

I took a deep, agitated breath, running my hand distractedly along the grain of the wood on the wall. “Evidently, my berserker husband can feel when I’m hurt... and has been able to this entire time. Which is too fucking weird and invasive. Like, can he feel when I have cramps during my cycle?”

Reed’s eyes were wide. “I’m sorry. Can we back up a second? Talon Thorvald. Talon the *Destroyer* is...your... *husband*.”

I nodded, realizing too late that I’d dumped some extra information on him.

He narrowed his eyes, “When we bared our souls to each other all those years ago and I told you who I was and what I was running from? I hid nothing. And you neglected to fucking mention that you’re his *wife*?”

“Keep your voice down, Bastian. He’s made it abundantly clear he doesn’t stand by our vows, so I’m not even sure it matters.”

He let out a half-hysterical laugh. “Your exact words. ‘I crossed Talon Thorvald, and if he ever finds me, he’ll kill me.’ You couldn’t have thrown a little more detail in there at any point? Fuck, Astrid, he’s an actual berserker? And you…” He cleared his throat. “You consummated the marriage with Talon Thorvald?”

I threw my hands in the air. “We were sort of in the middle of it when my siren song started. I took his piece of eight and fled to Atlantis. I was scared, so I ran, but I thought maybe he’d find a way to come after me once he had a chance to process it. He vowed to protect me, and gods above did I need the protection in those first days on the island.” I expelled a breath, refusing to still feel that hurt. “He never came. The last thing he said to me was that he’d kill me if I returned.”

Reed looked puzzled. “That doesn’t make sense. He’s got unnatural abilities as well. Why would he be that bothered by it?”

I tilted my head. “Maybe the part where I didn’t tell him before we got married and in doing so potentially brought a death sentence to him and his whole family for harboring me?”

Reed wasn’t convinced. “A berserker named Erik tore my great-grandfather’s arm off because he pushed Erik’s husband out of the way at a tournament between the kingdoms. It was the event that triggered the First Ice War. A shove. They aren’t known for being reasonable when it comes to what’s theirs.”

“He told me those rumors aren’t true, that he’s in control of his berserker.”

He looked skeptical. “Sure. Like you’re in control of your siren song? You might both be able to repress it most of the time, but it’s still in there. If pushed hard enough, that control is gone.”



I didn't like the idea of losing control, but losing control and hurting people sounded like a worse thing to be afraid of. "So you're saying he's going to snap and rip me to shreds at any moment?"

Now he'd gone thoughtful. "If he feels your pain, you're his mate, Astrid."

My heart stuttered. "A soul bond? He hates me."

Reed frowned thoughtfully. "They don't get to pick their mate."

I thought of the flicker in Talon's eyes when I grabbed Reed's wrist when they first took our ship.

I lowered my voice. "Promise me if he tries to harm you that you'll tell them who you are. I need to know that you'll speak up if the time comes."

Reed raised an eyebrow. "You seem awfully certain that won't make him more likely to kill me."

"He won't," I said with certainty. "You're too valuable as a hostage."

He blew out a breath. "I think I'd rather be keelhauled."

I smacked his arm with the back of my hand. "Just fucking promise me."

"I promise. But it's a last resort. Why don't you just give him the piece of eight?"

"You know I can't." I'd had the metal ground up and tattooed onto my skin with spells so it was forever a part of me now. I'd never be left without an escape. Unless I was dumb enough to cut across the fucking Doldrums again.

"Then give him mine. We'll be safe on Atlantis."

"Until he tells the monarch I'm a siren and the whole crew gets accused of sheltering me all these years. Remel passionately believes sirens are a threat to the island, and they won't tolerate any threat to Atlantis, no matter that it's my home. And I'm not even sure Atlantis would be safe from Talon." I lowered my voice. "Why does he need to get there so

quickly with his fucking warship armed to the teeth? With Sigrid on board? There's no need for a warrior like her to come with him just to hunt me. I'm worried they plan to make a move on Atlantis."

He looked skeptical. "But they're allies. Thorin wants to unite the pirates."

He was being naive. "Yeah. Under him. You didn't see what he did to the crew he usurped power from. Maybe he's got his sights set on a pirate empire. Who the hell knows? I just know giving that madman the key to our home, when he can condemn us all once we get there, isn't an option."

He pinned me with a look. "And you? What lengths are you willing to go to in order to stay safe?"

"I'd do anything to keep you all safe."

He rolled his eyes. "Didn't ask about keeping us safe. If you get to extract promises from me, I get to extract promises from you. Do whatever you have to do to survive, Astrid. If you're his mate, he'll be especially susceptible to your power. Use it if you have to."

"Are you telling me to seduce him with my song?"

He lifted a shoulder and let it fall. "You've got a weapon in your arsenal you don't want to use any more than I want to use my name. I want to know you'll use it to survive if it comes to it."

"Sure, let's get us all executed," I said, trying for humor.

"Because telling him who I am definitely won't do that." He stared at me and blinked slowly until I sighed.

"Fine. But I don't even know if I could summon my song on command. Too long repressing it and too much fear tied to it."

He cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. "If you need to and there's anything I can do to help, friend to friend, please use me, Astrid. I owe you my life. I'd do anything for you."

I couldn't help the laugh that slipped out. "Are you offering to help me get turned on, Bastian Reed?"

His cheeks flushed with color, an open invitation to tease him. We'd been friends for far too long.

"You think you're up to the task?"

"Might be a bit rusty, but I think I remember how it works, Captain." He nudged me, keeping a straight face, but a smile crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Get some sleep while you can. I'll take first watch."

Sleep sounded impossible, but I hadn't slept the night before when we were trying to outrun Talon, and the exhaustion took over as soon as I closed my eyes.

I slipped into dreams of seducing Talon, of being claimed by his berserker, and woke in a cold sweat, worried I'd released my song while I slept.

"It was a just a nightmare, Captain," Reed whispered reassuringly, encouraging me to lean on him to get back to sleep.

Nightmares weren't supposed to feel that good.

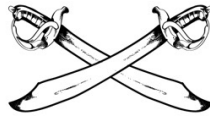
The memory of what he'd done to me with his hands was the only memory of pleasure I had, and it was astonishingly vivid.

Damn him for showing me what I was missing and then stripping it away.

I'd find a way to make him pay for it.



## ASTRID



**R**eed wasn't going to like the escape plan I'd come up with during the night.

He adjusted his position so he could lean against me to take his turn sleeping, but I needed to tell him first.

"If I can find a way to get out of here and create a diversion, you use it to get the crew out. Sabotage whatever you can and get over to *The Onyx*. He's barely left enough of a crew aboard to sail her, and none of them are his best fighters."

Reed didn't open his eyes. "I'm not leaving you here, Captain."

"If I give you the chance, you take it. If his mast is sabotaged, you just have to get out of range of his guns, and it'll be a clear path to open water. Use your piece of eight to reach Atlantis and then get the crew out of there as quickly as possible so they can't be punished for what I am. He has less to threaten me with if you're all safe. I'll escape him."

"We'll find another way." He murmured, then he closed his eyes and promptly fell asleep. We'd been in hellish conditions before, but we both knew they only got more hellish if you were sleep-deprived.

I looked around at my crew in the grey early morning light that filtered into the hold, keeping my expression calm, reassuring each of them with a smile and a nod if they met my eye. They needed to know we had matters under control.

There was nothing I wouldn't do to keep the consequences of my actions from touching them.

A door above us creaked open, and a single set of boots descended the steps with purpose.

*He's coming.*

I didn't give him the satisfaction of seeing me jump up and scurry over the second he appeared.

He wrapped a giant hand around a bar on the door and peered into the hold, finding me instantly, even in the dim light. His eyes slid to where Reed's head rested on my shoulder, and I could've sworn his scowl grew darker.

I gently shook Reed awake, and he blearily opened his eyes. "It's already my watch?" He quickly noticed Talon and said, "Oh."

When I didn't get up, Talon was forced to call, "Captain!"

I stood slowly, rolling my stiff neck as I carefully stepped around my shipmates who were sprawled around the hold.

Talon didn't respect weakness, so I needed him to know I wasn't afraid.

"We'll be out of the Doldrums tomorrow. Give me the piece of eight," he said without preamble.

I nodded, hoping we'd make progress on an arrangement today. "Give me your word my crew will be unharmed."

His voice got lower with frustration. "You don't get to negotiate. You took something that belongs to me. You're going to give it back, or I'm going to motivate you to give it back. The choice is yours."

If he wouldn't negotiate, he certainly wouldn't explain himself, so there was no point in asking again what his plans were once we reached Atlantis.

"I can't," I said simply, not trying to antagonize him.

The next time he came down here, we'd be out of the Doldrums, and I'd be out of time. He'd start keelhauling my crew before I had a chance to come up with a plan. I had to get

the fuck out of this hold to somewhere I could overhear what his intentions were for my crew and for Atlantis.

If he didn't plan to attack Atlantis and my crew would be safe, I'd throw myself at the mercy of the monarch rather than see them tortured.

If I could just get out of this hold, it might not even come to those options, though. We'd escaped worse. He was near invincible in a fight...but we didn't need to fight him. We just needed to escape him. A diversion couldn't be that hard to execute.

"You get one last chance tomorrow, and then you know what happens." His eyes flicked to Reed. "Keep your distance from the rest of your crew if you don't want me to let Sigrid start working on them now."

He definitely didn't like Reed touching me despite what he'd said about our vows being meaningless. If I was really his mate, was it something I could exploit?

"Keep my distance?" I blinked innocently. "How do you propose I do that when you've got us packed in a hold?"

"You know what I mean, *Pearl*."

It had been so long since anyone had used that name with me, a name from another life, an anchor to a time I wanted to leave behind, but he wouldn't let me. It made my temper simmer that he could pull me back to it with only a word, that he still had the power to make me feel small.

I had nothing. No plan, no weapon, no way of keeping my crew safe. But I wasn't the only one who couldn't let go of the past. He might have just given me a tool I could use against him. We'd been thinking about it wrong. I didn't need to seduce him. I simply needed his berserker not to want to leave me in here.

I leaned close to the bars, close enough to see the flecks of amber in his eyes. "If you leave me locked in here, I might be forced to fuck every last member of my crew."

He swept his eyes over the hold slowly, then looked back at me. "There's not a soul among them who'd force you."

I huffed a laugh.

He'd misunderstood me, so I looked him dead in the eye. "Who said anything about *them* forcing me?"

His expression darkened. "Then you'll watch every last member of your crew die."

"Oh yeah? Why's that? Is there a 'no fornicating' rule on your ship? Is that going to be your explanation to Thorin when you tell him why you defied him and murdered a bunch of pirates?"

For him to forbid me from such a thing would mean admitting that I was *something* to him even if he didn't like it.

"Thorin ordered me to retrieve the piece of eight by any means necessary." He gripped the bar tightly enough that I was surprised the steel didn't bend, then seemed to realize his mistake.

*Let another touch you and condemn them to death.*

His fingers uncurled from the bar, and his shoulders relaxed. It was like I could see him mastering himself, closing off the weakness he'd flashed at me. I fought to keep my breathing steady, recognizing I'd just stepped into a match I might not win.

He took three steps back and perched on a pile of crates. "Go on then." He gestured to the hold.

*Fuck.*

If I buckled now, I'd look like a fool and lose my chance to get out of here. He was the one bluffing, I was sure of it. He'd reacted too dramatically.

"Don't think I won't do it," I said with far more confidence than I felt.

He leaned forward, looking smug. "Well, if you're going to fuck *all* of them, it seems to me it shouldn't matter who goes first. I'll pick, shall I?"

How the ever-living fuck had I dug myself into this hole? How were we even having this conversation?



The morning before started as a blissful day at sea, and now somehow I was threatening to...have sex with my crew? In a day, Talon had undone a decade of careful boundaries.

*You did that all by yourself, genius.* I was beyond desperate. I couldn't give him the piece of eight without knowing his intentions, and I was never going to learn that down here.

So desperate that when Talon barked, "Reed," I didn't say a godsdamn word.

My quartermaster jumped up and shuffled between the other sitting forms to get to me.

"Captain?" he said, glaring at Talon, then looking to me for orders.

Talon ignored him, eyes locked on me, testing. There was more at stake here than my pride and our safety. He was waiting for the answer to a question that lingered in his eyes. Just how deep did the bond with my quartermaster run?

Why did Talon care if he wanted me dead?

Bastian Reed was my right hand, the person I trusted most in the world. He was like a brother to me.

Talon raised a brow, and I glanced up at Reed. There was no denying how handsome he was with his chiseled jaw, short beard, and shaggy dark hair. He was leaner than Talon, but a little taller. He was stoic and buttoned up but easy to talk to and loyal to a fault.

And despite all that, the boundary between us was a solid wall. Neither of us had ever done anything to make the other wonder if there might be something more there. If I did this, would that change forever even if Reed had all but told me to?

If I didn't do this, would it matter? We'd all be dead.

It went beyond the boundary between us. If I kissed him and felt that unmistakable spark, then everyone here would discover what I was. They'd discover the closely held secret I'd guarded for so long, and I'd be stripped of my captaincy and banished...at best.

I couldn't bring myself to do it.

Like he could hear my thoughts, Talon smirked and stood to leave.

*None of it matters if they're all dead.*

Fuck. This was my one chance. There was no guarantee he'd even come back down to the hold.

I took Reed by the hands. "Kiss me," I hissed.

He hesitated for the briefest second, looking like he wanted to make sure he'd heard me right. Then he pressed his mouth to mine, at first just mashing our lips together, but when I grabbed the back of his head and pulled him closer, he parted his lips and gave me a real kiss, a kiss that would've made most people weak at the knees, but I was too focused on Talon's reaction to enjoy it.

I opened my eyes enough to see that he'd sat back down on the crates. Gods be damned, it wasn't enough. His smile dropped like he hadn't expected me to do it, but he didn't stop me.

*Fuck.* Half measures were never enough with him.

I took Reed's hands and put them on my breasts, then sucked in a breath when his thumbs swept over my nipples through the fabric.

Now *that* caught Talon's attention. He went rigid even if his expression remained impassive. But he didn't say a word, just kept watching me.

He wasn't going to buy this if I didn't. He'd feel the desire to deceive him. I closed my eyes and focused on Reed. On the feel of his lips, his hands, the hard bulge pressed against my stomach. I tangled my fingers into his hair, and he seemed to be catching on because he broke the kiss and dropped his mouth to my neck, kissing the sensitive spot just below my ear.

It felt good to be touched, but my siren song stayed silent.

It was looking at Talon again that made me moan breathlessly. The *hunger* in his expression.

The haunting melody I'd fought so hard to keep at bay whispered out of me, a gentle hum in the air that no one else could hear.

Reed groaned and seemed to forget he even had an audience. He wedged one of his muscular thighs between mine, and I ground against it, not having to fake my eagerness.

Reed's right hand dropped to my backside, pressing me against him harder so he could grind his thigh between mine. His teeth grazed my neck, and I gasped again.

I refused to look directly at Talon, but I could feel his eyes on me and see the mounting tension in his shoulders.

He was seething with jealousy. I still had that power over him no matter how much he wanted to cast me aside in disgust. My siren song hummed a little louder at the knowledge.

*I hope you're as tortured by the memories as I am, asshole.*

It was still subtle, a gentle stirring through the room. They wouldn't know what it was yet, but if things kept going, everyone would know.

Talon's voice sounded like murder. "Get her out of there. *Now*. Take her to my cabin."

Reed broke away from me when the door to the hold creaked open. His eyes were frantic, looking from Talon to me.

I pulled him close and whispered against his ear, "If I manage to create a diversion, you use it to get the crew to safety. If he tries to retaliate against you for this, you remember your promise."

He shook his head like he was still trying to clear it of my siren song. "And you? What's going to stop him from retaliating against you?"

"Just wait for my signal."

His expression spoke volumes about how much he hated this plan, but it was the only one we had.

Two of Talon's sailors snatched my upper arms and started dragging me away from Reed. He reeled back and decked the man on my left, causing him to let go of my arm. Three more entered the hold, and for a tense second, I thought there was going to be a riot and we'd be right back to the outcome I'd been trying to avoid in surrendering.

Until a pistol pressed against my temple and my crew froze.

The woman who'd been holding me let go, and suddenly Talon was against me, looming. His massive body at my back had more of an impact on me than anything Reed had just done.

Gods, the *feel of him* against me.

The whisper of my siren song splintered into a chorus of magic, sweeping through the hold with its power. Everyone collectively groaned and looked at one another in disbelief.

Talon practically picked me up and dragged me to the stairs, not stopping until he'd reached a hallway where he pulled me into a cabin and kicked the door shut.

He was like a feral beast panting and refusing to look at me as he fought for control.

It made me want to push him.

"Jealous, Talon?"

He growled, "You are my *wife*."

He slammed me back into the wall, and his mouth crashed against mine hungrily, consuming my ability to reason.

This was bad and wrong, and I shouldn't want him. But fuck, did I want him.

I let my song flow, too far gone to care. What did it matter now that everyone surely knew what I was?

He'd shamed me and abandoned me and threatened to kill me, but none of it made what I felt for him go away, and I was tired of fighting it.

I wove my fingers into the hair on the back of his head and kissed him back harder, and he opened his mouth and stroked his tongue against mine. He lifted me easily, and I wrapped my thighs around his waist, moaning when his hardness pressed against my core.

My siren song became a layered thing of beauty, swirling around Talon.

He pulled back, looking at me like he was trying to make sense of what was happening. He groaned and fisted his fingers through my hair, dropping his head to kiss me, then jerked back again like he hadn't meant to.

*What did you think would happen after last time?*

"A siren?" he said in disbelief, still grinding against me like he couldn't stop himself. He looked down at where our bodies were pressed together, and his face twisted into an expression of such disgust that it instantly silenced my song.

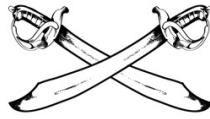
He released me and stormed out of the cabin before slamming the door and turning a key in the lock behind him.

I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling unsteady.

I didn't know if I hated him or myself more.



# TALON



**A** fucking *siren*.

I forced myself to sit so Sigrid wouldn't see how much I was reeling.

How was it possible?

How could I have missed it?

I was having to rewrite every interaction I'd had with her, and none of it was adding up.

Had her father plotted all along to use her siren song to create a diversion for the Saxon attack? He'd offered her to Thorin first. Was that an assassination attempt and they saw the potential for more once she manipulated me into planning a wedding feast?

My wife was a fucking *siren*.

Sigrid leaned against the wall across from me. "The bounty on her head in Atlantis will fund the war."

In typical Sigrid fashion, she could only see the clear-cut strategic advantage.

It should've been a simple solution to so many problems, but my stomach turned to acid. Killing my mate was unfathomable to begin with. Having someone pay me a fortune for it?

I wouldn't be able to live with myself. Executing sirens was fundamentally wrong.

Berserkers didn't fear them as others did. We celebrated the uninhibited pleasure their song could bring. They were outlawed in Daneland because our father, like his father, was cold and cruel, but historically in our family line berserkers were taught to protect sirens.

I folded my hands together to stop them from shaking. "She deserves to die for what she did, not because of what she is. It doesn't sit right with me. The idea of handing her over for a spectacle." They'd display her in the public square, and crowds would flock to watch her execution.

Sigrid pinned me with a look. "The outcome is that she dies. Does it matter? You should be relieved you don't have to wield the blade."

I dropped my head, ready to buckle under the shame. I was incapable of avenging my brother's death. Worse. I still wanted her just as much now as I did then, maybe more.

Moments earlier, I'd been ready to tear the clothes off both of us and finish what we'd started on our wedding night.

With the person who'd betrayed us. The person who'd gotten Axel killed.

I had no honor left.

I was disgusted with myself.

Sigrid's hand was gentle on my shoulder. "There's no shame in it, Brother. You were born to protect your mate."

She knew what Astrid was to me then.

I lifted my head. "We were born to protect those who can't protect themselves. The humans fear anything that's different. You don't think there'd be a price on our heads as well if we weren't strong enough to defend ourselves?"

"Your point?"

"Executing sirens is preying on the weak out of fear, and I won't be party to it," I said.

She pushed off the wall and patted me on the shoulder. "Good. Then pull your head out of your ass. In what world



would I let someone else handle my dirty work? You want her executed, it'll be by my own hand. I just needed to know where you stood.”

A shout from above interrupted us. “Sails! To the east!”

We hurried to see what new pain in the ass awaited us.

My shipmaster—Harald, a towering Northman with dark brown skin—handed me a glass and pointed away from the setting sun. “There, Captain.”

I could barely make out sails on the horizon, and it was hard to count how many. “A fleet. Coming from the east, they must be Saxon. Not the full fleet our spies warned us of. An advance party?”

When I passed the glass to Sigrid, she said, “Still too many to face on our own.”

I put a hand on Harald’s shoulder, appreciative once again for his sharp eyes. “Can we outrun them overnight? Get out of sight by morning?”

“Aye, Captain.”

He shouted orders to the men in the rigging, and a flurry of activity followed.

Sigrid stared out at the sky that was streaked with pink from the setting sun. “To lose a mate is no small thing.”

I was surprised she’d acknowledge it. Weaknesses weren’t Sigrid’s favorite topic.

“To live feeling her pain but not being able to protect her? It’s a kind of agony I couldn’t have dreamed of. Could losing her be worse?”

Harald had done his job well—we were already picking up speed, and the sails on the horizon were gone for now. They might not even have seen us.

“Was it really her fault?” Sigrid asked simply, as if this were an academic discussion with nothing at stake.

“You don’t think that question has haunted me for seven years?”

Had I been wrong to let her run, wrong to threaten her? Wrong to blame her for Axel's death?

Sigrid seemed to sense my weak spots and aimed straight for them. "She was vulnerable. Weak enough that she was forced to marry a scary motherfucker. Did she have another choice?"

I breathed out a deep sigh. "Her actions had consequences. Even if she didn't know Axel would be killed, she had to know the carnage she'd bring down upon our home. She danced and toasted pirates that night who she knew were about to die. She herself made sure the ale was strong enough to impair them. She insisted everyone be allowed to attend so the Saxon fucks landed on our shores unchallenged. We were married before the gods, for fuck's sake." Sigrid let the silence hang until I said, "She could've trusted me."

It was the answer I came back to over and over.

But the picture had changed.

She was a siren.

"Does knowing what she is change any of that?" Sigrid asked.

"Now? I don't know. For her to be a siren, knowing she'd be hunted in every realm, never safe if her secret were discovered? Trusting me was a far greater risk."

Astrid had tried so hard to just hurry through the wedding night, and I'd been determined to give her pleasure, determined to force her to reveal her secret.

But had that been part of her plan?

Was I trying to paint her as an innocent again when the whole time she'd been planning to unleash her song at the right moment as a diversion?

"Maybe the Saxons had offered her safe haven in exchange for our annihilation," Sigrid mused.

I couldn't imagine them making a bargain with a siren. "They'd never let a siren live among them. The very thought of sex for pleasure upsets them. A woman's pleasure?"

Horrifying. A woman who can make them all lose their grip on their religious fanaticism to want the very pleasure they fear? Unfathomable.”

Sigrid tilted her head back and forth like she was considering the logic. “She’d hidden it this long. Maybe they didn’t know. Or perhaps they’d let her live if she kept hiding it or let her live somewhere remote? If she was in on it, there must’ve been an arrangement. If there wasn’t, her father used her and threw her to the wolves.”

We’d have to journey to the underworld to ask him. “He died too easily.”

A smile curved her mouth. “I did tell you that was going to happen. The human body can only take so much. A slower death than that is an art form, and you aren’t willing to practice enough to become a master.”

I didn’t have the stomach for Sigrid’s idea of torture. I had no problem getting bloody in a fight, but I wasn’t willing to perform the kind of slow, calculated torture she was known for drawing out over weeks.

The things that had been done to her before we left Daneland would haunt me forever. I should’ve protected her. She’d always been vicious, but it had taken on a cold edge after her second marriage.

Thorin and I blamed ourselves for not stopping it, but our father had been clever enough to make sure we were at war, engaged on the frontlines against the Saxons, when he gave her to that monster. Our father had used us to make her comply.

Dwelling on the past would accomplish nothing.

Sigrid said, “If she had an arrangement with the Saxons, why has she been on the run all these years, living as a pirate?”

“She and her father promised them annihilation and instead led them to slaughter? Didn’t exactly uphold their end of the bargain. Or maybe she’s still a Saxon spy.”

Pain from my bond with Astrid struck me in the chest. I'd never gotten used to it. I clutched my arm across my body and tried to breathe through it.

"What is it?" Sigrid asked, looking alarmed.

"It's nothing." I cleared my throat, trying to focus on the inky waves out in the falling darkness. "I'm not making a fool of myself again over a stubbed toe or something."

This time it was Sigrid's turn to wince. "Fear like that isn't a stubbed toe." She looked around, hunting for someone. "Where's Avery?"

He should've been at his post on deck but was nowhere to be seen.

Now the fear belonged to me.

Sigrid and I launched into motion at the same time. She said, "You go to Astrid. I'll check the prisoners."

I followed our bond, noticing nothing about my surroundings as I approached the stern, only feeling that Astrid was in danger.

I threw my cabin door open, letting it smash against the wall with a thud. Axe in hand, I roared as I charged in, ready to rid the world of Edgar Avery.

On the bed, Astrid jerked awake, springing upright and reaching for a weapon that didn't exist because I'd taken them all away from her.

She was alone in the cabin.

Still half-deranged with worry, I prowled the room, axe raised, looking for a foe to destroy.

There was no one else there.

*A nightmare.*

She'd been having a nightmare.

Before I could say a word, she seized a lantern and charged at me, swinging it at my head with such force, it shattered against my skull. It might've killed a human.

She grabbed any loose objects in her immediate reach and launched them at me, shattering a bowl and hitting me in the chest with a compass. I set my axe down and raised my hands, but the gesture didn't get through to her.

She'd been torn from a nightmare to find a true terror threatening her.

She snatched a book from the table and lifted her arm to throw it, but the cover caught her eye, and she froze before lowering it slowly as she stared at it like she'd seen a ghost.

It was the book of stories from Daneland, the one my mother had given me. The one I'd left for Astrid all those years ago.

"Where did you get this?" she asked accusingly.

"It was my mother's when she was a girl," I said. "After you left, I found it under the floorboard in the tavern." *And it kept me company on too many lonely nights when I tried not to think of you.*

Her eyes widened. "You...were the one who left it for me? Why?"

There was no point in lying now. "You were lonely, and I could feel how you ached for a companion. I couldn't offer you that, but I could give you the stories that had kept me company all my life."

She set it down and took a step closer with emotion swimming in her eyes. It seemed she'd finally realized I wasn't an immediate threat to her and stopped trying to crack my skull.

Then she drew her fist back and decked me in the face.

My head snapped back with the shocking force of it. "Gods, woman. Someone's taught you to hit since I saw you last."

She swung again, but this time I caught her fist. She thrashed and tried with the other one, but I caught it as well before trapping her arms against her body.

She drove a knee up towards my groin, but I twisted and took it in the thigh instead. She tried again, so I backed her onto the bed, trying to subdue her by pinning every part of her body with mine.

She bared her teeth at me. This had stopped being about the nightmare or me charging in and scaring her.

She was angry with me and wanted me to hurt like she'd been hurt. She didn't understand that it already worked that way.

It was hard to truly hate someone when you could feel their pain.

I released one of her hands to brush the bottom of the scar on her cheek. "Show me the bastard who did this to you, and I'll bring you their heart in a box."

"Do you have a mirror?" She looked away. "You did this to me. You said I was safe, and then you left me to fend for myself. Stop worrying so much about what other people have done to me, and take some fucking accountability for your own actions, you arrogant fuck."

"Accountability for *my* actions? What about you?"

Her expression was infuriatingly indignant. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was a siren before we got married. There! Is that what you wanted?"

"If only that were the worst of your sins. I hate myself for wanting you."

Even now, as she fought me like a thrashing shark, my body responded to holding her.

"I can't help that I'm a siren."

She was livid, but so was I. "I don't give a fuck that you're a siren. We could've overcome that. You don't think I could've protected you? Is that why you did it?"

"Did what?!"

"You schemed with your father to use our wedding as cover for the invasion. My brother died because of your

treachery.”

She went absolutely rigid. “That happened the night of our wedding? I knew nothing of it. I only heard rumors of it months later. How could you think I’d do that?”

It was too convenient, no matter how much I wanted to believe it. “Don’t lie to me! The extra week you begged me to wait. The way you encouraged us to get the whole island drunk. The thing you were hiding that night, so afraid I’d discover your treachery. Don’t fucking tell me you didn’t do it!”

Her voice went soft and serious. “I begged for an extra week because it was too close to the full moon, the time when my magic is most potent. The ale? Was because I wanted your family to cement their place as pirates on the island, and maybe I had the naive assumption that people might be less likely to notice if I lost control of my song. And the thing I was hiding? I was about to have sex for the first time with a man I’d wanted desperately for years, but I knew if I became aroused, I might be *executed*. You don’t think that might’ve made me a little scared you’d find out?”

“Lies again! You didn’t want me for years. You couldn’t fucking look at me. I avoided the tavern because I could feel how much you wanted to get away from me.”

She looked me in the eye, expression grave. “Talon. I couldn’t look at you for fear of my siren song. I wanted you beyond reason, and wanting you meant death.”

I was so angry she was denying it that I almost missed what I was feeling from her. Not a single thread of deception. The only thing she wanted was for me to understand.

Was it possible she hadn’t known?

“Why did you run?”

Her eyes widened like I was asking a stupid question. “You awakened my siren song and then flew into a rage when you discovered what I was. You were going to kill me!”

I released my hold on her and sat up against the wall. “I only learned you’re a siren today.”

She stared, disbelieving. “You raged at me for making the choice to betray you and endangering everyone you care about.”

It had all happened so quickly, and there had been so much at once, it was hard to remember all the details clearly, but the details suddenly felt vital. Could she really not have known? “It wasn’t about you being a siren,” I said. “Thorin can speak into our minds. He’d just told us the Saxons were invading and Axel had been killed. In the chaos of it, I missed your siren song completely. The only explanation I had for your behavior was that you’d conspired with your father to aid the invasion.”

She straightened, leaning against the other wall. “If you’d stopped to ask instead of jumping straight to threats of violence, it might’ve helped.”

“My brother was dead. My new wife had just ripped my heart out by betraying me. You ran instead of explaining yourself!”

She crossed her arms defiantly. “You could’ve come after me! You could’ve found a way.”

“I was scared I was going to kill you for what you’d done. And more scared I wouldn’t be able to and I’d have to live with the shame of being unable to avenge my brother’s death. Worse—the shame of still wanting the woman I thought had betrayed me.”

Sadness softened her features. “I didn’t betray you, Talon. I had no idea what my father planned to do. I’m sorry for Axel and the others and for my part in all of it. But imagine it from my perspective. The thing I’d feared my entire life happened, and the reaction I feared most was what came to pass. The *disgust* on your face when you turned on me...”

I felt like I was coming apart, trying to assimilate new twists into a well-known story. “I don’t care that you’re a siren. I never would have. I would’ve stood between you and anyone who wanted to enforce an archaic law.”

“But you *didn’t*.” The last word was a cry filled with anguish, filled with whatever horrors she’d faced on the run



and the fears that still haunted her dreams.

When I spoke, it carried the weight of the vows I'd broken. "I will now."

I don't know who moved first, but suddenly we were kissing, angry kisses that were a little too rough.

I wasn't sure whether to trust what she was saying, whether I could even accept that I'd been wrong about her all these years. But all reason vanished the moment she parted her lips and let my tongue slide between them.

This time I recognized the feel of her siren song when it started to come from her. I couldn't hear the music, but I could see the song dancing in the threads of her desire, weaving through the room until it was filled with the swirling golden light of her need.

For me.

Her song undeniably pulsed and thrummed for me.

Nothing else mattered.

Maybe she was a spy. Maybe she'd done something ruthless on our wedding night.

But what I felt for her, with her, was a truth I could cling to.

She whimpered and looked at me fearfully, and I would've given anything to take that fear from her. "Let me worship you like I never got to, like I've dreamed of doing too many times."

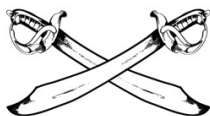
She bucked her hips up but thrashed her head. "I won't have you hating me for this too. You don't want this with me. It's just the siren song."

I took her face between my hands, needing her to look at me. "Your song can't make me do anything I don't want to do. I've always wanted this with you."

She wove her fingers into the braid of my hair and pulled me down for another kiss.



# ASTRID



I 'd thought he was going to kill me, and now he was kissing me.

Or I was kissing him?

How had we gotten here?

Everything he'd revealed was too fresh to make sense of, as though I could make sense of anything with this man intent on bringing me pleasure.

Talon kissed me like he'd spent seven years waiting for this moment. Rough kisses turned to lighter ones, exploring and feather soft.

He brushed the hair back from my shoulder, twining it through his fingers like he didn't want to let go. When he kissed my collarbone and cupped my breast, my song hummed louder, and I froze, unable to let go of the fear.

"Stay with me," he growled. "Don't think about what you are or what it means or anything else. Don't think at all."

"What about your crew?" I whispered breathlessly.

"They won't come to any harm. Not everyone is interested enough in sex to be impacted by a siren song, and even if they are, it only makes people want to give pleasure and abandon their inhibitions. Despite my raging jealousy in the hold, there is not in fact a 'no fornicating' rule on my ship...so worst case, they fuck it out if they want to. Sigrid will stay in control and make sure we stay on course."

What he was saying made sense to my lust addled mind.

“No more thinking.” His voice was deep and rough and held the promise of deeds that were the same.

He tugged my shirt over my head and hummed with approval at the sight of my breasts before dropping his mouth to where his hands had been. While he teased my nipples with teeth and tongue, he managed to tug the rest of my clothes off too, leaving me completely naked under his hungry gaze.

He took in seven years with a sweep of his eyes, catching every scar, and there were many. My early fights as a pirate had been messy and desperate, and I’d never come away from them unscathed.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, inexplicably needing to apologize for having marred the beauty he’d once been in awe of. “No longer perfect.”

He shook his head, lowering it to kiss a ragged scar along my hip. “You’re a fighter with the marks to show what you survived. No less beautiful.” Then he rose and kissed his way down the scars on my arm, tracing his tongue along a burn scar on my wrist in a way that made my song flare louder. “I want to know the story behind every one of these victories.”

I felt too exposed, and it had nothing to do with being naked. He was making me want to trust him again, and I was shaken by it.

He smiled, but it dropped when he saw the expression on my face. He rose on his knees, looking solemn as he stripped his own clothes off, revealing a lifetime of fighting to survive.

He let me trace my fingertips over the myriad marks on his body. I watched with fascination as his cock grew harder, so I wrapped my fingers around it and stroked like I’d seen others do.

He groaned, and my song swirled around us because, gods, did I like making this man groan like that, guttural and low.

He breathed out with a smile. “Later, you can do that all you want, but if I don’t taste you first, I’m going to die.”

I released him, and he slid down into the V between my legs. Like he knew I couldn't handle any more talk, any more thinking about what all this meant, he put his mouth at the center of my desire, letting the wet heat of his tongue drive all thought from my mind.

My entire existence was reduced to the feeling of his tongue on me, to the blissful rolling sensation of him sliding it back and forth until he had to hold my hips down with his big hands.

I lost all sense of time as he pushed me closer and closer to the release I'd only felt once in my life. It had been before he'd awakened my siren song, had been the very thing that awakened it.

This time, my song built and built with the sensation. I covered my ears, wishing I could block out the thundering lyrical roar because it made it impossible to deny what I was and the risks we were taking.

I swore I could hear my mother's screams laced into the music of it, tormenting me with the tragedy that awaited us.

"Stay here with me," Talon said, thrusting a finger inside me and curving it deliciously, driving away the fears.

When he started to roll his tongue over me again and thrust his finger at the same time, I cried out. It was so good, too good for me to survive on this precipice forever, but I couldn't seem to tip over it.

He replaced his tongue with his thumb and kept stroking. "I'll stay down here as long as it feels good for you, and if you can't get there now, we'll try again until you're not afraid of what you are."

I grabbed his hand from my hip, and he twined his fingers into mine, an anchor to his strength. I could come apart, and he wouldn't let anything bad happen.

I tried to let it all go, focusing on the feel of him and the tendrils of pleasure curling out from where he was touching me.

The jarring blast of a cannon from outside shattered my song. Talon sheltered my body with his, but the moment he'd ensured the threat was outside, he tucked me into a corner of the cabin with a sheet and said, "Stay there."

Just then, the door to the cabin slammed open.

Reed stood there holding Sigrid in shackles with a knife to her throat and one pressed to her back. His eyes were wild as he took in Talon's nakedness and the way I was on the floor, clutching a sheet to my chest.

Oh gods, he thought my song was the diversion I told him to wait for, and the noble bastard had come to save me.

Sigrid said, "This asshole knocked out seven members of our vanguard and demasted the ship with a fucking cannon. And yet somehow his most egregious offense is causing me to see my brother's hard dick."

"Release my captain," Reed barked, pushing the knife at Sigrid's back up and forcing her to arch away from it.

Talon grunted and pulled his pants on, calmly eyeing Reed like the fool he was.

More cannon blasts rent the air.

I was frantic to stop this.

"Talon, please don't kill him. He was only trying to protect me," I pleaded, knowing how this was going to end.

When he didn't answer, I stood and grabbed his arm, trying to get him to look at me. "Talon, *please*."

Reed said, "If he does anything but release you now, Sigrid dies."

Sigrid's smile was feline.

Reed was loyal to a godsdamn fault, and he didn't seem to realize how outmatched he was. "I told you to use the diversion to get the crew to safety! Not to come and rescue me!"

His jaw set stubbornly. "As though I'd just leave you here with him."

Talon turned to me slowly and removed my hand from his arm. His face had gone stony, devoid of any feeling. “It was all a fucking act,” he said slowly. “A diversion for them to escape.”

Oh fuck, no! I’d been so afraid they were going to kill Reed, I hadn’t thought about what I was saying. “None of it was an act!”

Talon took me by the shoulders and forcefully moved me back like he needed more distance between us.

“Let me explain this time!” I grabbed for him to try to stop him from overreacting, but he twisted out of my grasp, and I lost my footing, smacking into the table. Reed must’ve made the mistake of focusing on me instead of on Sigrid, and it was all she needed. By the time I’d righted myself, Reed was gasping on the ground, and Sigrid stood holding both blades, inspecting one of them like she might keep it.

As Talon picked up his axe, I threw myself over Reed’s prone form, trying to protect him even though I didn’t stand a chance unarmed against two of the most capable warriors in the world.

When nothing happened, I opened my eyes and found Talon looking at me with bewildered hurt marking his handsome face.

He looked at Reed, at the position I’d taken over him, so similar to what Talon had done for me when the cannon fired. With a tiny disbelieving shake of his head, he turned and started to walk away, swinging his axe up into a fighting stance. “Lock my cabin and take him back down to the hold. I’ll see to the rest of her crew.”

I tried to chase him, but Sigrid put an arm across the door. “Give me a reason to hit you, little wench.”

I stopped short, knowing when I was outmatched, scanning the room for a weapon. “Is he going to kill them?”

She shrugged. “Not if they’re smart enough to surrender. He won’t punish a pirate crew for the foolishness of their superiors.” She looked between us with distaste.

Reed started to get up, but Sigrid kicked him hard in the stomach, and he heaved on all fours, winded and gasping for air.

When she let him get to his feet, he faced her fearlessly, shoulders back, expression stoic. “You’re just mad I stopped kissing you.”

Sigrid took the shackles that had been on her wrists and locked them onto his. “I only kissed you because of this bitch’s magic.”

Sigrid and Reed *kissed*? And he was taunting her about it? Did he want to die?

Reed’s eyes grew hooded, and his tone was like nothing I’d ever heard from him before. “A siren’s song can’t make you want things you don’t want or enjoy things you don’t like. You seemed to be enjoying it quite a bit. I’ve got the claw marks to prove it.”

She lifted a hand like she might slap him, and he didn’t so much as flinch. “I think you like hitting me as much as you like kissing me,” he said. “I can take it if that’s what pleases you.”

“You fucking insolent—” She dropped her hand like she didn’t want to take the bait and dragged him out into the hall before slamming and locking the door behind her.

I stood listening, shaking with terror, but there were no screams, no sounds of a fight. After what felt like an eternity, I heard someone call, “Swept the hold. All prisoners are secure, Captain!”

He hadn’t executed them.

I slid down the wall with relief, tucking my knees to my chest.

Every time I closed my eyes, all I could see was the pain on Talon’s face as he’d left. The betrayal. Disappointment. Shame.

Why did hurting him hurt so much?



After all he'd revealed about the past, it was impossible to still see him as an unreasonable monster. It had never been about me being a siren.

I wanted to hate him, to still be angry with him, but his feelings were more justifiable to me now. He'd thought I'd arranged a massacre, and everything about my actions the week of our wedding supported his conclusion.

*If only I'd told him I was a siren.*

*If only he'd given me the benefit of the doubt. Given me even a moment to explain.*

*What if I hadn't run?*

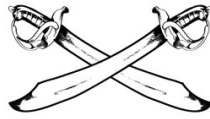
*What if he'd come after me?*

Were we doomed to repeat the same mistakes now for the amusement of the gods?

This time he'd been the one to walk away, and I had no way to follow.



# TALON



“We’ve jury-rigged a main mast that’ll hold canvas, though not at speed. You’ll have to be gentle with her until we get to port.”

We didn’t have time for gentle. We were sitting ducks for the Saxon navy, and I was failing Thorin, leaving our home vulnerable while we floundered in the Doldrums instead of moving swiftly to secure the aid he desperately needed.

Harald sighed, sounding uncharacteristically irritable. We were all strung out and grumpy from Astrid’s siren song ending without her being satisfied. “*The Onyx* is in worse condition, Captain. I suggest taking her across to the Skeleton Islands for repairs, and then they can take her back to Ocracoke.”

“See it done.” I nodded at Harald and thanked him for the report, then waited until he closed the door behind him to throw the jug in front of me against the wall, smashing it.

Harald wasn’t the only one who was ready to snap.

Sigrid stepped through the broken pieces and picked up the intact handle. She held it up, inspecting it. “If you’re going to shatter something, at least fucking commit.”

She tossed it onto the ground and stomped it with the heel of her boot, grinding the pieces to dust. “Otherwise?” She picked up the broom from the corner. “Stop throwing tantrums and clean up your fucking mess, little brother.”

I snarled, but she was right as usual. I'd caused this by failing to do what was necessary, and it was my mess to clean up.

"Get her up here," I said, taking the broom from Sigrid.

She nodded approvingly and went to retrieve Astrid.

I'd barely slept, trying to make sense of her deceit. Was some of it true or all of it lies? Was she a master spy who had me twisted around her deceptions, or did circumstances keep putting us at odds with each other?

By the time they returned, I'd mastered my feelings, at least managing to look calm even if I still felt like a caged beast.

*Commit to shattering her, or clean up your fucking mess.*

The problem was that I didn't know what my mess was. Had I been wrong to betray her in the first place or wrong to trust her again?

As soon as Astrid laid eyes on me, the threads of her desire were like a lash. She wanted to throw herself into my arms, and I wanted to hold her there and forget everything else.

But she knew I could feel what she wanted, and I'd begun to wonder if she was such a good actress that I couldn't feel the deception behind it all.

Everything I'd sensed from her in my cabin the day before had felt real.

She'd been disarmingly raw and vulnerable. I'd forsaken my duty to my family, my crew, and myself in those moments, caring only about driving away the fear I'd helped to instill in her. She'd made me feel like she was mine again.

And it had been a ploy to create a diversion. She'd said it herself.

I didn't blame them for trying to escape, but for her to create a diversion that let her crew sabotage my mast at the critical moment we were trying to outrun the Saxons? That couldn't be a coincidence.

I nodded to the stool in the middle of the room, and Sigrid made sure Astrid sat on it. Then my sister assumed a place against the wall.

“Tell me what you know about the planned Saxon invasion,” I said simply.

Astrid’s face contorted with disbelief. “We’re back here? Because my crew took reasonable steps to escape a madman threatening to torture and kill them?”

I took a controlled breath and let it out. “The Saxon fleet. Where are they going?”

She crossed her arms. “Torture me and get it over with. Maybe when you kiss my new scars, I won’t even have to tell you the story behind them.”

One side of Sigrid’s mouth twitched up with amusement.

I should’ve moved anything breakable off the desk. “You expect me to believe that demasting us when we were fleeing the Saxon fleet was a complete coincidence? That you had no idea you were all but handing us over to them?”

She shook her head in frustration, and the waves of her hair caught the light like rivers of fire. “How would I know that? I’ve been locked in your cabin! When I left my crew, you were threatening to torture them, so I came up with a plan for them to escape if the opportunity presented itself. Tell me you wouldn’t have done the same.”

I put my hands flat on the desk and leaned towards her. “I wouldn’t have allowed my entire crew to be imprisoned to begin with.”

Sigrid winced. “Cold...”

I didn’t want her praise. I felt just how much the words wounded Astrid and wanted to take them back.

She made me fucking weak.

“So you admit you planned it?”

She glanced at Sigrid like she was embarrassed to talk about what we’d done. “I told him to wait for a diversion, but I

didn't plan for *that* to be the diversion. I'd never use my power to manipulate you like that."

Sigrid looked disgusted. "What a waste..."

I'd asked her to stay while I interrogated Astrid to prevent me from losing my head and ending up naked again, but I was swiftly coming to regret it.

I had a plan. A series of questions to test whether I could find a crack in Astrid's facade. I needed to stop deviating from the plan.

"Are you even the captain of *The Onyx*?"

She uncrossed her arms, surprised by the question. "What purpose would it serve to pretend I was if I wasn't?"

It was something that had been nagging at the corner of my mind since we first took their ship. I couldn't reconcile the stories I'd heard about their captain with the woman who sat before me. Half the role of a pirate captain was to embellish your reputation effectively enough that your crew didn't have to fight, but at the end of the day, if someone tested you, it was necessary to back it up.

She was supposed to be lethal with a sword, but I'd never even seen her handle one.

I didn't know why she'd lie about that, but if she was a Saxon spy, maybe she was protecting the real captain.

I ran my fingers along the hilt of the weapon Axel had given her, wondering what he'd think of the mess we were in.

Astrid's eyes followed the movement, and she jerked on the stool. "That blade belongs to me!"

I pulled the cutlass from the sheath, testing its perfect weight in my hands. Not my weapon of choice, but there was no denying the lethal elegance of it.

I didn't have to look up to know how badly Astrid wanted it back, how much it meant to her.

"Fight me for it," I said deliberately. "Prove you're who you say you are."

Words were meaningless. Action was everything. A man could say he was loyal, but until he was put to the test, you never knew. A sailor could claim she was good in a fight, but until you stood shoulder to shoulder with her as you boarded a ship, it meant nothing.

Astrid claimed she was the captain of *The Onyx*. I'd let her prove it.

Sigrid unsheathed the sword from her back and offered it. With no hesitation, Astrid took it from her and faced me, assuming a fighting stance. She'd given her back to Sigrid, which was a mistake no one made twice, often because they didn't live to learn from it.

The broom was still propped against the wall, so Sigrid grabbed it and swung the handle viciously at the back of Astrid's head. On instinct, Astrid spun, raising her cutlass and blocking the handle just before it struck.

It was an impressive parry, and she'd made it appear effortless, proving she might be able to hold her own in a fight after all.

Sigrid tossed the damaged broom aside and pursed her lips, looking at Astrid with newfound interest. "The little wench is fast. I'll give her that."

In a moment that felt like madness, I stood and pointed Axel's cutlass. "Outside."

Astrid followed me out to the main deck without trying anything underhand, which didn't do much to support her claim to be a feared pirate captain.

"Clear the deck," I called, and my crew scrambled up into the rigging or up to the forecabin to watch.

"First blood?" Astrid asked and I smirked.

"Surely a legendary swordsman like you would prefer to the death?"

There was no humor in her expression. "I don't want to kill you, Talon."

I had twice the reach she did, so I lunged, planning to put an immediate end to this, but she took two quick steps back and parried, then executed a quick sideways step as she lunged for me. Her balance stayed centered, and her movements were quick and precise.

She'd obviously been classically trained with the saber, but most pirates hadn't. Boarding a ship that wanted to resist you was dirty work, the scrappy kind of improvised fighting at close quarters that filled the nightmares of even seasoned pirates.

I kicked a bucket at her, but she sidestepped it without dropping her guard. We lunged and parried, swung and blocked, trading steps and blows as I slowly and deliberately moved her across the deck. She was clever enough to deflect my blows rather than try to block the full force of them, but it meant she had to give more ground.

I could see in her eyes that she knew what I was doing and was powerless to stop it as she got closer and closer to the bulwark. When her back met the wall, I lunged carefully, only wanting to nick her to put an end to this, but she snatched the rope ladder and swung up onto the ledge of the bulwark, then launched down at me with such speed, there wasn't time to block her properly, and I felt a sting as her blade sliced across my chest directly over my heart.

She was fucking magnificent, an avenging goddess with her red hair billowing as she stood there panting, head held high.

Absolute silence fell on the ship until someone in the rigging called, "You can murder me next, darlin'!" Laughter broke the tension.

I looked down at the blood blooming on my shirt around the shallow cut.

She could've killed me, but she hadn't.

Her chin jerked like she knew what I was thinking. "You've never been underestimated, so you have no idea how powerful it is."



She'd deliberately let me back her into the bulwark, knowing she couldn't beat me with strength or reach. She needed a way to make me drop my guard, and I hadn't hesitated to give it to her, thinking she was beaten.

Her father's mocking voice echoed in my head. He'd been defiant before I broke him, proud of the carnage he'd caused. *She had you eating out of the palm of her hand, fooling you at every turn. How does it feel to be outplayed by a 'lowly tavern wench'?*

I believed she was the captain of *The Onyx* now, but it was getting harder to see her as a helpless innocent.

"It won't happen again," I said, nodding to Sigrid to take her back down.

I hung back to talk to Avery since he was serving as my quartermaster. Everyone was short-tempered and strung out after the siren's call. Without Astrid's release, we were all still on edge, and it was no good in a crew this size.

"Bitch fooled you," Avery said, nodding to the blood on my chest.

"Ready the crew for some sparring," I said, looking around and seeing the tension. "Everyone needs to blow off some steam."

He grunted. "Aye, Captain."

I turned back. "You can spar with me first." I'd beat the word *bitch* out of him.



WHEN I GOT BACK to the storeroom where Astrid and Sigrid were waiting, Astrid held out a hand and said, "My cutlass."

I held out my hand in return. "My piece of eight. Tell me where you've hidden it."

She rolled her eyes and then wouldn't look at me, like I was the one who'd done something wrong.

How did I keep letting her do this to me? She manipulated me, and still I felt guilty every time she was hurt. I sat back down at the makeshift desk, pouring myself a drink of ale since I'd smashed the water jug.

She let out a sigh. "Tell me your intentions for Atlantis, and swear you'll let my crew go."

As though I'd tell her anything while I was still trying to figure out whether she was a spy. Her crew was the only leverage I had when I wasn't willing to hurt her.

"Tell me the truth," I said. "All of it."

Her eyes glittered with incandescent rage. "I've told you the truth, and you refuse to believe it."

She was as angry as I was, but she didn't have the ache in her chest that I did where I'd let her back in again. She deserved to hurt just as much as I was hurting.

"Would you like to see your father?" I asked.

"He's here?" She went pale, and for the first time since I'd captured her, she reminded me of the downtrodden wench I met in the tavern. It was like watching the wind drop from the sails after a powerful gust.

I toasted her with the cup I was holding made of his skull, watching with a twisted mix of guilt and satisfaction as shock radiated from her.

"You didn't know he was dead."

She cleared her throat. "No."

"It wasn't quick." I tried to sound satisfied, but it came out like a confession.

She stood there for so long saying nothing, I wondered if she'd heard me. Then she straightened her spine.

"Good." She reached to take the cup from my hands and finished the ale it contained in a series of deep swallows. "If we're finished here, I'll see myself back to your cabin."

Sigrid stood with an open-mouthed grin at the doorway as Astrid walked out. “Oh, fuck me. She drank from her own father’s skull. I might take her from you and make her mine.”

“Not helpful, Sigrid.”

She peered at me from where she stood in the shadows. “Still sure she betrayed you?”

“You were there. You felt it. You saw the outcome.”

She was uncharacteristically serious. “You talk about what you feel from people. I...don’t normally. There wasn’t a moment in that fight when she was afraid of you. But she was terrified of hurting you. Explain that to me.”

I released a deep sigh. “If she’d injured me, you wouldn’t have retaliated? She’s outnumbered, and anyone who’d stand up for her is locked in the hold. Of course she was scared of hurting me.”

Sigrid walked closer and took my face in her hands. “She’s afraid you’ll hurt her again. Afraid to trust you. Her fears aren’t the fears of a traitor.”

I shook her off. “How do you know she isn’t manipulating you too?”

She breathed a laugh. “Fears aren’t like desires where you can decide what you want at will or lie to yourself. If a fear isn’t real, I can’t feel it. If it is real, there’s no hiding it from me.”

I rubbed my temples, wishing it would do anything to ease the tension. I sheathed Astrid’s cutlass, running my hands along the intricate design Axel had used for the handle. This was the last weapon he’d ever made. Had he put it into the hands of the person who betrayed him? Or was she really a victim of that night?

Sigrid touched the sheath, face softening like it always did for Axel. She’d never pressured me to hunt Astrid down even though she’d lost a brother as well.

“Did you come with me because you knew I’d fail to avenge Axel?”

She laughed in earnest this time. “Fuck no. Your life, your choices. For what it’s worth, I think she’s telling the truth. I came with you because I fucked Thorin’s girl and didn’t want to be there when he found out.”

That snapped me out of my self-loathing. “You fucked *Layla*? Why?”

Sigrid often spent her evenings drinking at the brothel with Layla, but it had never occurred to me there was anything between them.

Sigrid shrugged. “To make a point. You dumb shits love to get in the way of your own happiness. Also, who wouldn’t want to fuck Layla?”

I shook my head, appalled but in awe of her wildness.

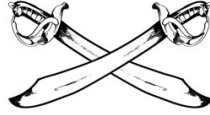
She wrapped her arms around my neck, somewhere between a hug and a headlock. “Nothing will change what he feels for her. They’re meant to be together. The sooner he accepts that, the sooner he’ll be happy. Don’t make me fuck your girl to prove the same thing to you.”

I lovingly shoved her away. “The difference is Layla isn’t a traitor.”

She was halfway out the door when she called back, “Neither is Astrid.”



# ASTRID



Someone was being beaten on the main deck up above. Fists collided with flesh as low voices cheered, encouraging further violence.

The faces of my crew flashed in my mind, people who'd trusted me to prevent this outcome. With every cheer from above, I pictured them bloodied and hurt.

Was this punishment for their escape attempt yesterday?

I screamed and pounded on the door, but no one was coming.

Talon had been angry, but surely he wouldn't punish them for it.

A roar of a cheer rumbled from above, and I started to claw at the door futilely.

Had Talon just executed Reed? I'd made Reed promise to reveal his identity if it came to it, but I wouldn't put it past the stubborn bastard to die before claiming his name.

I'd been vulnerable my whole life and never felt this fucking powerless.

I kept hammering on the door just to have something to do with my hands.

*That which you fear is a weapon too, Sister. When you feel powerless, don't be afraid to wield it.*

Chills skittered down my arms.

The words Axel had said to me that night had been lost in the back of my memory, but they suddenly felt eerily prophetic.

I wasn't powerless.

People just said my power was bad and wrong and dangerous. That I wasn't allowed to use it.

But none of them had any problem using their power against me. I'd learned how to fight, how to defend myself, but before that they hadn't hesitated to use their strength or their status to keep me under their thumb.

Why was it okay for Talon to wield his godlike strength to hurt the people I cared about but not okay for me to wield what I'd been given to stop him?

Something inside me shattered, letting all the rage and resentment bubble up.

My crew's lives were on the line. If I'd willingly kill every last member of Talon's crew to keep mine safe, surely manipulating their feelings a little was child's play.

I lay on the bed, hands shaking as I prepared to do something absolutely forbidden.

Before my hand even dropped between my legs, a flash of my mother's screams roared in my ears. Anytime I thought about doing something shameful like this, I was forced to think of her and remember that awful day.

But I was tired of hiding. Tired of the shame. Tired of being so fucking afraid.

From the depths of my mind, a new memory emerged. My mother again, but this time we were on a ship, and she was teaching me to sail. Her face was turned to the sun, the wind in her vibrant red hair. She did nothing to hide her beauty, nothing to make herself safer from those who looked upon her.

She smiled a sad smile as she leaned down and said, "They'll tell you to be ashamed of what you are, Astrid, but their shame doesn't belong to you. They'll blame you for their actions, but they always had a choice."

I was still a child then, not yet old enough to understand what they'd blame and shame me for. Too young to feel a siren song or have one myself.

I grinned at her, dreaming of one day being as beautiful as she was. "Don't worry, Mama. I love myself just as I am."

She'd beamed at me then, her smile like the warmth of the sun. "Don't ever let anyone take that from you."

Tears stung my eyes as the rest of the memory faded to time, but now wasn't the moment to weep for a loss long gone. Or to weep for what I'd let them take from me.

She'd been brave and lived fearlessly. I resolved to banish the memories of her awful death and focus on how she'd lived.

Fuck everyone who'd taken her from me out of fear of their own desires.

Fuck my father, who'd convinced me it was my mother's fault.

Fuck every man in that tavern who'd seen me as nothing more than an object, their coveted pearl.

Fuck Talon for thinking he could lock me in here while he hurt the people I loved.

I found the courage to angrily drop my hand between my thighs and mimic the motion he'd made with his fingers the day before.

They said if a siren focused on her lover and pleased herself, she could summon them with her call. It could've been another rumor, but it gave me an excuse to picture him without hating myself.

At first, nothing happened and I was frustrated, but when I rolled my fingers and imagined his head between my thighs, my song hummed to life. It didn't feel as good as it had when he did it, but it was enough to trigger my arousal.

I felt like a fool, fumbling and unsure of what I was doing, but I tried to give myself permission to experiment, fighting not to pull my hand away every time it felt good.



Another memory came to me, one of the erotic theatre in Atlantis. When I'd first lived there, I'd been terrified to go inside in case I saw something that triggered my song, but I'd eventually gotten brave, overcome by curiosity.

When I watched the performers on stage, it wasn't arousal I felt. It was gut-wrenching envy and wonder, absolute awe that they could be so uninhibited with their pleasure. For someone who'd had to shut off all thoughts of pleasure even in private, the idea of putting it on display for all to see had been too thrilling to fully contemplate.

Back then, I'd forbidden myself from picturing Talon as I watched them, but now I replayed every lascivious act I'd seen on that stage in my mind and made Talon my costar in the show.

He was the only one on this ship who could feel what I wanted, so I finally let myself want it in excruciating detail...

His cock so deep in my throat, it choked me as an audience watched.

Being turned over his knee and put on display as he parted my folds and speared me with his fingers, making me come for all to see.

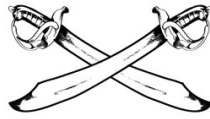
I imagined hearing the gasps of the audience as he spread me open with his thick cock and sunk into me before finishing and then making me lick him clean.

My song became a many-layered, powerful wave that would bring Talon to his knees.

*Come on, motherfucker. Your siren calls.*



# TALON



**M**y dick was going to fall off.

For two fucking hours, I'd been assaulted by the call of a pissed-off siren. I knew she was pissed off because the lovely tendrils of her song were threaded with the barbs of her anger and her need for me to suffer until I gave in to her.

Through the threads of her desire, she fed me images of the things we could do together...painfully fucking detailed images of acts she seemed too innocent for.

My siren wanted filthy, rough, public sex. And I wanted nothing more than to give it to her.

But I refused to answer her summons, refused to let her manipulate me again.

We'd surrendered all semblance of order after five minutes of struggling to reason around the mind-bending lust. Everyone had already been on edge after her song the day before. It was the whole reason we'd been sparring on the main deck when this next wave had hit.

It turned out six of my crew members were completely unaffected, and fifteen or twenty could feel it but were unbothered, bless them all for not being overcome with lust like most of us, so they'd taken watch on deck, much good it would do us if something happened. One was stationed outside Astrid's door, though no one else was drawn to her specifically.

I was the one who needed to be barred from entering.

She was in there touching herself, thinking of me. My dick throbbed, and I gripped the handle of my axe, determined not to touch my cock in front of my sister and a hold full of prisoners.

But I wasn't sure how much longer I'd be able to maintain that inhibition. I swore her call was getting stronger.

The rest of my crew had scattered, finding their way to dark corners alone or in pairs. Or in more than pairs.

There was no faulting them for it. The urge was overpowering, and it wouldn't make anyone do anything they didn't want to. The stories about sirens made it seem like their song drove people to commit heinous deeds, but the urge thrumming through every person on the ship who was affected by it was to give pleasure. To themselves. To someone else. No one wanted to take pleasure where it wasn't offered, not even Avery, which was saying something.

Decorum lost all meaning in the face of this onslaught of lust.

If Astrid thought she could use it as another escape tactic, she underestimated me. I'd taken Sigrid down to the hold and sent everyone else away. With more than a dozen clear heads on deck and the two of us down here, we were at least secure from a coup.

"Can't turn her over for the reward fast enough if you ask me—a woman shouldn't be allowed to have this kind of power." Avery called from where he was chained on the other side of the hold. I still didn't trust him and couldn't think clearly enough to find a better solution. Chains meant he wasn't one of my worries. If only I could get him to shut his mouth. "If you won't answer her call, at least send someone else!"

Sigrid thumped her head back against the wall. "Avery, you sure you want to remind me you're there? Heard the rumors about what I'm into?"

I groaned and covered my ears.

She punched my leg. “He’s right, though. I’m about to answer her call if you don’t. She wins this one.”

I dropped my head in my hands, trying to think, but as soon as I closed my eyes, I could picture her fingers sliding into the slick moisture at her core. After this long on edge, she’d be soaked and swollen. She’d gasp when I pushed her hands away and replaced them with my tongue, parting her folds to stroke the pearl of her desire.

“How is this motherfucker so Zen?” Sigrid snapped me out of what could only be described as a trance of lust.

I tried to focus on what she was talking about and looked across the hold to find Reed sitting with his knees tucked up and his hands on top of them. He looked perfectly at ease, but below the surface, he was crumbling under the power of Astrid’s song. He hated that she was calling me, wanted to stop me from answering, which was...interesting, but as a fresh wave of her power crested, I couldn’t puzzle through why I cared.

Deeper than that, he wanted my sister with an intensity that made me recoil and cast away the threads of his desire. He’d *definitely* heard the rumors about what she was into and didn’t have the same issues as Avery about women having power.

*I don’t need that in my head at the moment. Or ever.*

“He isn’t,” I told Sigrid through clenched teeth. “He wants to satisfy his urges just as much as the rest of us.”

I wasn’t about to tell her what those urges were.

Sigrid moved to stand, causing the air to brush against my skin in a way that made the lust worse. “What are you doing?”

She shrugged. “I’m gonna get myself off.”

“I gave you an order to watch the prisoners.”

She waved a hand. “Relax. You don’t think I can multitask? How hard is it to guard an orgy?”

“You’re going to do it right here?” How was I having a casual conversation with my sister about masturbation?

She nodded eagerly. “Yeah. I’m gonna do it where that stoic sonofabitch can watch. See if I can break him.”

I groaned and rolled to my feet. “I’m not watching this.”

She clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Then for the love of Odin, go...satisfy...your woman.”



ONCE MY FEET started to travel towards her, the force of her call became stronger, like the magic knew. I stopped resisting and walked unsteadily towards my cabin, weaving my way through the ship without noticing anything around me. One moment I was walking, and the next I was outside the door.

That close, the strength of her call was staggering.

“Captain,” the sentry said warily. “You told me not to let anyone in.”

“Didn’t mean me, Dutton. Stand aside.”

There was fear in his eyes, but he squared his shoulders. “Didn’t say that when you was in your right mind, Captain, so how do I know you weren’t asking me to guard against this very thing?”

He wanted me to...think?

Maybe not going in was better. Once I saw her, I’d give her whatever she wanted.

And I was having trouble remembering why that was bad. She needed to be satisfied, damn it.

I hammered on the door. “You’ve summoned me. What do you want?”

“Stop torturing my crew.” Her voice was hoarse.

What the fuck was she talking about? I turned to Dutton. “Did I torture anyone?”

He shook his head.

“Didn’t start torturing your crew. Only one torturing them is you.”

She called back, “The sounds. I know a fight when I hear one. Know what bloodlust sounds like in a crowd.”

I thought back to what we’d been doing when her siren song began. “It was sport. Blowing off steam after yesterday.”

She didn’t respond, but her hypnotic song still poured out of the cabin.

“I was never going to torture them,” I blurted, too far gone to care that I was surrendering my leverage. I’d surrender my sword arm to satisfy her. By the gods, I was moments away from begging to please her. This had to stop before I did something I might regret. Like make love to my treacherous wife.

“If that’s all you summoned me for, fucking finish and put us all out of our misery,” I said.

“I can’t!” It was a helpless plea, a summons as much as her song was. I had to go to her.

I put a hand on Dutton’s shoulder and tried to sound like I was in control of myself when nothing could’ve been further from the truth. “Stand aside, Dutton.”

He shook his head, ready to die to keep his word. “Can’t do that, Captain.”

Before I could formulate another argument, Astrid yelled, “For *fuck’s sake*, Dutton, stand aside.”

His mouth twitched. “As the lady pleases.”

He moved aside, and I kicked the door open, then barred it behind me.

Astrid was naked and writhing on the sheets, looking as strung out as the rest of us, but her mouth lifted into a defiant smile at the sight of me.

“You think this is a game? I should take you up on that deck and let them all watch as I turn you over my knee.”

Her lust surged, and I put a hand on the wall to stop myself from going to her. Her legs were sawing against the sheets, and I desperately wanted to spread them apart and give her something better to grind on.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” I huffed a laugh. “I can feel just how much you’d like that. Maybe I’ll let them watch me fuck the defiance out of you.”

She gasped and pulled the blanket up to cover her nakedness as though she could hide how much my words aroused her.

“No. You don’t get to hide from me now. Let me see.”

She hesitated for another second and then flipped the blanket back, showing me just where she’d been touching.

With my gift, I knew with agonizing clarity that she wanted me to sink my tongue into her cunt and lick her until she screamed my name. Then she wanted me to kiss her, to taste herself on my lips as I thrust my cock into her tightness. The mix of feeling her siren’s call and being able to feel what she wanted was unfathomably powerful.

I swiped a hand over my mouth, fighting to remember why I couldn’t give her what she needed when she was lying there slick and needy, ready for me.

She made a helpless sobbing sound. “I can’t finish. Don’t know how to get there.”

She sounded ashamed, and I wanted to break something. Or someone.

This close, her song had stripped me down to bare berserker instinct, and in that primitive place, I could feel her truth. She hadn’t prolonged things for the sake of a diversion the day before. Her pain and suffering were real. She was hurting and so damn scared.

“Yes, you can. Show me,” I said, pressing my back to the door, letting it be an anchor I couldn’t move from. She hadn’t called me down here to touch her. She’d summoned me because she’d thought I’d been hurting her crew, so I wasn’t going to touch her now if that wasn’t what she wanted.



But I could help her get past this.

“Show me,” I ordered again, slowly. “You listen to my commands and nothing else. Not the voice in your head, not the memories you’re trapped by—nothing exists but your pleasure and my voice.”

She closed her eyes and let the blanket fall.

“Touch yourself,” I said, groaning along with her when she obeyed.

She wanted me to see, wanted me to watch her and be affected by it.

“You like that, don’t you? Knowing what you do to me.”

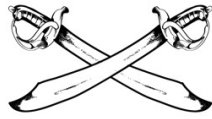
Her eyes were still closed, but she parted her lips and nodded, moving her hand faster. She panted, thrusting her hips and spreading her knees wider to let me see, craving more of the power she had over me.

She couldn’t have more because she already had it all.

She always had.



# ASTRID



“**M**ake me come, Talon,” I begged.

The shake of his head was at odds with the dark, dangerous look in his eyes.

He'd once assured me he could control himself, and now I wished he'd been lying. His control was going to break me when all I wanted was his touch.

“You need to know you can do it yourself. It's yours to give before it's ever mine to take.”

I kept stroking, letting the sensations build to the place where I felt wild, but my song became too loud and frightening each time I got close.

I was so scared to let myself feel.

Too many voices in my head, too many memories.

*They'll hunt you like they hunted your mother, and there's nowhere you'll be able to hide.*

*They'll tell you to be ashamed of what you are, Astrid, but their shame doesn't belong to you.*

*If you ever come back, I'll kill you.*

Louder than all their voices was my song, harsh and demanding, impossible to tune out.

Talon pushed off the door, and I crawled towards him, crumpling with relief that he was finally giving in. He lifted me carefully from the bed before sitting where I'd been and

moving me onto his lap. He spread his knees wide and draped one of my legs over each side, leaving me exposed to the air, waiting for his hand.

With my head against his chest, I could feel the rumble of his voice. “You’re going to finish it, but you’re going to pretend we’re on that stage...the one you tormented me with for the past two hours. I’ve stripped you bare while they watch, letting them see what’s mine.”

He took my hand and placed it between my legs, controlling my finger as he moved it in tight little circles where I ached most. I panted and arched away from his body, but he banded me to him with his other arm. I’d been timid about touching myself, but he helped me to see how it could be.

In the safety of his hold, my song didn’t seem so frightening, and his voice was stronger than its call.

“Now you’re spread open like this with nowhere to hide as they watch and eagerly wait for your release. No one cares who you are or what you are. They only care about that tight, wet pussy. Every last one of them wants to know what it feels like, and none of them ever will.”

He released my hand and sunk two fingers into me while I kept pleasuring myself, crying out incoherently every time he thrust.

I almost wept when he pulled his hand away, but he grabbed my other hand to replace his fingers with mine.

Thrusting into myself felt wicked.

Sinful.

Divine.

The pleasure was mine, my own hands defying everything I’d been forbidden to do and drawing forth the most liberating ecstasy. I started to shake, like my body knew I’d passed the point of no return and my mind simply wouldn’t allow the release to happen.

“Let go,” he growled.

I did, cresting over a wave that had been building for hours, releasing years of denial. My song pulsed and radiated, changing from an urgent rhythm to triumph.

But I craved more; it only fed the fire of my need.

I fumbled with Talon's pants to free his cock and then lifted myself over him. Slowly, I descended until the head of him nudged me open.

He grunted and took controlled breaths through his nose, holding perfectly still, but I could feel him trembling. "You control it. I don't want to hurt you."

I sunk on him, but he was too big, and I was too desperate to be patient. "Fuck me, Talon. Please fuck me. Waiting is what's hurting me."

He put his hands on my hips and thrust up slowly, barely making progress. There was stretching pressure that was almost pain, but when he started to stroke me with his fingers at the same time, it turned to pleasure, and we thrust together, letting him sink fully inside me.

I moaned and thrashed, no longer caring about my song or the rest of the ship or what came next. I only needed more of him.

He thrust in and out of me slowly, and I crested another wave of pleasure, coming apart in his arms and building towards the next peak before the first was finished. It was so intense, I was afraid again and wanted to run from what I was feeling.

He growled and flipped me onto the bed on my back, and then he loomed over me, his massive body like a shield against the outside world.

"I won't let you run from it. Now it's mine to take."

He rocked his hips forward, claiming my mouth as he filled me again. He found a rolling rhythm, somehow controlling his body when it felt like I'd lost all control of mine. Just as he'd promised, he claimed the pleasure from me, not relenting until I cried his name and lost all sense of anything but the feel of him. When I clenched around him, he

bellowed and held himself inside me, his whole body jerking as he surrendered to it as well.

My song settled, and all the tension drained, leaving the legendary aftermath of a satisfied siren. Everyone on board would feel this peaceful sense of well-being.

Talon flopped onto the bed next to me and tucked my body against his. I lay there feeling his breathing slow, not knowing if I wanted to laugh or cry.

“*That’s* what I’ve been denying myself all these years?”

“No more,” he said, planting tiny kisses along my brow before I stole a real one, relishing his soft lips. “You deny yourself nothing,” he said when he pulled back.

I wanted to cling to the magic we’d created together, but what he was saying couldn’t happen. “And what, we’ll slaughter anyone who tries to claim the bounty on my head?”

He shrugged. “We’ll find a way. Thorin will lift the execution order on Ocracoke.”

I pulled away to face him, and whispers of my song fanned out. “You don’t think anyone will object to being flooded with lust anytime you look at me like that? That it won’t be a distraction Thorin can’t afford with war on the horizon?”

He frowned. “I don’t give a fuck, Astrid. I’ve sacrificed everything to make a place where everyone can be free. If that freedom doesn’t apply to you, the Saxons can burn it down, and we’ll find a place where there’s no one to object.”

If only it were that simple, but we both had too many people we cared about, lives we’d fought and bled to build. Places like Ocracoke and Atlantis mattered because they were all that stood between the free people of the world and the oppression of the great kingdoms of the mainland.

In the stolen safety of this cabin, in the sated, drunken aftermath of my song, I was the only thing that mattered to him. But that might not be true when his head cleared and the harsh reality of being married to a siren took shape.

Would his men stand by him with a siren at his side?

Would Thorin allow the danger and nuisance of having me on the island? I wasn't sure I would if I were in his place.

Could I live with knowing I was impacting people's minds every time I was happy?

I wasn't sure I was ready to trust him again. Not when he had too many good reasons to leave me.

I didn't want to make him choose between me and everything else he cared about. Whatever he said about letting the Saxons burn Ocracoke, the island mattered to him. Thorin needed him. I was a distraction at best and a threat to their survival at worst.

Too many people knew I was a siren now, so there would be no hiding it anymore. My choices were to run or stay and fight, but staying and fighting would put everyone I cared about at risk.

I'd been too much of a coward to run before.

Now it seemed like the only answer.

I didn't want to do it, was careful to hold that in my mind so he wouldn't feel it. But I couldn't see another way.

If I could get to Atlantis and take a portal in the forest, he wouldn't know which one I'd taken or how to follow. Once Ocracoke was safe from the Saxons, I'd return to him, but not when it put all of them in more danger.

"Now are you going to tell me why you need to get to Atlantis so badly?" I asked, focusing on how much I wanted to see the eclectic island and not why.

He trailed his fingers down my arm like he couldn't get enough of touching me, and guilt slid down my spine. "The Saxons crowned a new king who says he's on a divine mission to rid the world of pirates. He's amassed an armada mighty enough to do the trick if the pirates can't work together. I sent messages by gull to Atlantis, but there's been no answer. It's possible they're already under attack. If they are, I'll do what I can to help. If they aren't, I need to secure an agreement for mutual aid in case the Saxons blockade us. Once we have the piece of eight, we'll still get past a blockade to Atlantis."

All thoughts of running were suddenly secondary to the potential annihilation of my home. “Either of them could already be under attack. Oh gods, Talon, if I’d known, I would’ve given it to you.”

He pulled me closer. “No sense dwelling on it now. We’ll be out of the Doldrums in the next day or so. The fleet that’s following us gives me hope that they haven’t struck yet.” He lifted his head to look down at me. “Tell me you at least have the piece of eight for when we reach open water.”

I rolled onto my stomach, letting him get a better look at the circular tattoo between my shoulder blades. “I had it tattooed so I’d always be able to escape. Until I got desperate enough to chance the Doldrums.”

He let out a huff of amusement. “Probably best you didn’t tell me. Sigrid might’ve cut it off.”

I smirked. “It wouldn’t work after that. Should you go and check on the rest of the ship?” I asked, worried about what impact I’d had on them.

“They’re fine,” he grumbled. “Harald wants to move us with more speed but is afraid to risk the mast. Dutton wants to check on you but is reassured by the calm. Seems to be smitten. He’s a good lad. Sigrid...I didn’t need to know.”

“And my people?” I asked carefully.

“They’re all safe,” he said.

“Can we release them now?” I dared to ask, wondering if he truly trusted me yet.

He let out a heavy sigh. “It’ll take time to reassure them we’re not the enemy, and we can’t afford more sabotage while we’re being pursued. If you release them now, with them all knowing what we’ve just done, can you be sure they’ll trust your judgment as it pertains to me?”

I imagined what they must be thinking, what they were feeling. I was sure most of them thought I’d seduced him to help us escape. How was I going to explain the truth without divulging the whole story?



They'd hate him for taking advantage of me. If I released them now, they might not trust anything I said, and I couldn't blame them. It was something we'd have to work through, but it was too dangerous to create new problems now.

"How much water do we have left?" I asked.

Talon studied the ceiling. "Enough. Maybe. If the wind keeps up and we don't have to fight the Saxons. But it'll be close."

"Should we—"

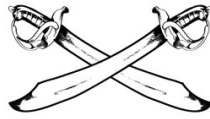
"Sleep, Astrid. Rest. We can't do anything about the water or the Saxons or the whole world being afraid of you right now. But we can have this stolen moment we've been denied for so many years to just...rest." He pulled me on top of him and kissed me, a simple gesture I'd been deprived of my whole life.

I snuggled into his side, fighting the heavy pull of exhaustion.

The next day, we'd face a battlefield fraught with enemies, but just for the night, I'd savor the soft sound of his breathing and the warmth of his body. The aching normalcy of sleeping with the man fate had forbidden.



# TALON



**T**here was a knife at my throat.

If I stayed asleep, I wouldn't have to face what that meant, and maybe she'd cut my throat and be done with it.

I'd fallen for her trap.

Again.

I'd never stop falling for it because it didn't seem to matter what she did—I'd never stop loving her.

There was no one I wouldn't betray for that love. Including myself.

I opened my eyes, and her expression was playful. "I heard it was impossible to sneak up on Talon Thorvald while he slept."

She let me pry the knife from her fingers, and I threw it onto the floor, heart still racing with disbelief, and pinned her to the bed by her wrists. "I must've slept more soundly with my fierce siren guarding my rest." I kissed her smile, making it grow. "Or maybe Talon Thorvald had just never been that satisfied after years of waiting for her."

She laughed and squirmed under me, then sobered, studying my face. "You waited for me?"

I nudged her nose with mine. "There's no one else for me."

"Even when you thought I'd betrayed you?"

I pulled back, wondering how to explain it. “Betrayal is all relative, isn’t it? The ships I’ve taken. The people I’ve killed. In their stories, I’m the monster. All these years I’ve thought I was the monster in yours, the villain you were forced to marry out of desperation or ruthlessness.” She shook her head, denying it, but it was what happened. “Even if you’d betrayed me, you would’ve had your reasons. We all do. For all I knew, I’d killed someone you cared about and you saw it as vengeance just as I would. I was devastated at losing Axel, but death happens in war. I hated you for choosing them when I still would’ve chosen you.”

She wove her fingers into mine so I was holding her hands instead of her wrists, like holding me said more than words ever could.

“We lost so much time,” I said. “That night I brought you back to my ship—”

She fought back a smile. “Are we using the word *brought* to cover tossing me over your shoulder and declaring I’d be your wife?”

I scraped my teeth along her nipple in response, living for the way she shivered and arched into it. Her song returned, but it had a different tone than yesterday, less urgent...more like an offer than a command.

“That night I *manhandled* you back to my ship...I remember thinking how much I wanted to shelter you from the world so you’d learn to dream of more than safety. I did the opposite.”

She squeezed my hands tighter. “And I still learned to dream of more than safety. I might’ve lived in your shadow my whole life if it hadn’t happened, scared of everything and everyone. I would’ve thought I needed you there to shield me when the truth is...I didn’t. I do need you for...other things, though.” She rolled us over so she was on top of me, her hair cascading across my chest.

“I thought we proved last night that you don’t *need* me for other things.” My cock was already hard, and she ground

against it, teasing me by wedging it where I could feel how wet she was without letting me inside.

Her throaty laugh hit me straight in the dick. “Is that what you think you proved?”

I licked my thumb and pressed it against her clit, letting her keep grinding while seeking her own pleasure. I tried to lift her so she could ride me properly, but she shook her head with a smile that promised more teasing.

“It’s my turn,” she said. “I want to see you.”

I’d rip the beating heart out of my chest to let her see it if she’d keep looking at me like that. “See what?”

She lifted herself and moved down my legs a little, leaving my hard cock jutting between us.

“I want to see you touch yourself. You got to watch me. It’s only fair.”

My hand was on my cock before she’d finished the sentence. Her gaze was like a caress, watching every stroke of my wrist.

I tried to reach my other hand out to pleasure her at the same time, but she pushed it away. “I don’t want the distraction. I just want to see you.”

With her hungry eyes watching and the feel of her song, it took me only minutes to get there, finishing on my chest and stomach.

I swiped a finger through my seed and traced it across her nipples. She arched her back, offering them to me, so I did it again.

She frowned, leaving a line of worry between her brows. “Even in pleasure, I can see you holding yourself back. You don’t let go.”

“I can’t,” I said, pulling her back up so I could kiss her, making a mess where our bodies pressed together.

“I said the same thing,” she said, her lips still against mine.

“Not the same thing. It’s dangerous.”

She cocked her head. “And my siren song isn’t?”

“No. It’s not. It makes people stare down the truth of their desires and nothing more. It’s only dangerous because they’re afraid of what they want. In ancient times, sirens were exalted to berserkers, and my mother’s line kept the tradition alive until they became too scarce for the festivals. Layla is said to be a descendant of a siren, though she has no song.”

She laid her head on me, thinking.

“Have you ever known another siren?” I asked.

She nuzzled into my shoulder. “Just my mother. When I was a child, my father made me watch them burn her alive so I’d understand what would happen if I ever lost control of my song.”

*I should’ve let Sigrid handle his torture.*

“I will *never* let that happen to you. I don’t have all the answers, but I’d die before I let that happen to you.”

She blew out a breath. “Let’s talk about something else. I don’t want to ruin this by thinking about that.”

I smirked. “How about you tell me where you got all those fantasies you were feeding me of an erotic theatre.”

She nipped my bottom lip with her teeth. “Golda, the owner of The Pleasure Chest, was my first friend on Atlantis.”

I was afraid to ask but desperate to know about her life for the past seven years. “How did you survive? When you first arrived on Atlantis, naked and friendless?”

She gave me a saucy look. “You’d be amazed how quickly a naked woman makes friends.”

She meant it as a joke, but I pulled her closer. “I shouldn’t have left you vulnerable like that.”

She put a finger to my lips to silence my guilt. “I mean it, though. There are so many good people on Atlantis. Golda caught me trying to steal clothes from the line when I eventually worked up the courage to creep out from behind a pile of barrels on the docks and make my way into town. She’s

terrifying when she wants to be, but she almost immediately realized I was in trouble. She offered me work—”

Something dark and jealous rumbled inside me, but I pushed it down. “At the erotic theatre? I bet she did if you were standing there naked.”

She laughed. “I politely declined for obvious reasons, so she took me to meet Seiko, who owns the bar off the square. She gave me a job and a place to stay until I could get on my feet.”

I narrowed my eyes, sifting through my memories of time spent on Atlantis. “You did not work at The Siren’s Call.”

“The irony wasn’t lost on me.”

“So how did you make it from tavern wench to pirate captain so quickly?”

“In those first days, I was desperate. I didn’t want to be a burden to people who were already helping me, but I needed money for a spell to go somewhere else, somewhere you wouldn’t find me.”

I didn’t know how I was going to live with the knowledge that I’d been the dark specter haunting the shadows for her.

Like she knew what I was thinking, she stroked my cheek. “Regret will only taint what we have now.”

I nodded in acknowledgment, trying to let it go.

“So I desperately needed a lot of money quickly,” she continued, “and since sex work was kind of out for me, the only thing I had to sell was my cutlass. I took it to the weaponsmith, not wanting to part with it but feeling Axel would’ve understood. He ended up training me instead.”

“Zayne?” I asked, remembering a few drunken evenings with the grumpy bastard in question.

She nodded.

“If I ask how you persuaded the least friendly person I’ve ever met to train you, am I going to like the answer?”

Her burst of laughter made me smile.

“He handed it back and said he couldn’t buy it. I started to argue, but he said a blade like that couldn’t be sold. It had to be claimed in a fight to really belong to someone. So he offered to fight me for it. I laughed bitterly, pointing out that I didn’t even know how to hold it. And he just looked me square in the face and asked what I was willing to do to change that. Something about that sword made him willing to train me.” She paused. “I think Axel knew. What would happen?”

For so long, I’d wondered. “His gift from the gods was to see flashes of the future. What makes you think he knew?”

She smiled, remembering. “At the wedding feast, after he danced with me, he told me the thing I feared was a weapon too, that I should use it when I felt powerless. And that he was only sorry he wouldn’t be there to see me bring you to your knees. He spun me straight into your arms before it sunk in, but I remembered it yesterday when I felt powerless.” The corners of her mouth turned down, heavy with sadness. “He never got to go on his voyage.”

“What voyage?” I asked, chills already spreading down my spine.

“To see your aunt. He said he was about to leave to see her.”

Now it was my turn to swipe away a tear. “Our aunt is Hel, goddess of the underworld. He knew. He knew, and he did nothing to stop it.”

She looked upset. “That can’t be what he meant. He said he’d be back.”

For the thousandth time, I wished I could speak into Thorin’s mind and it didn’t just work one way. No one came back from the underworld. Not as themselves anyway. I didn’t want to scare Astrid, though, so I said, “Maybe he was just making it seem like a normal voyage. I don’t understand why he just let it happen if he knew...but it gives me some comfort that he faced his end like a warrior.”

She laid her head on my chest, wrapping her arms around me to offer comfort I didn’t deserve. I’d blamed her for it



when she had nothing to do with it...and Axel had known.

We had another chance that he'd never get.

I drew in a deep breath and released it, letting it be a new beginning. "No more lies between us. No more deception."

She nodded and smiled before kissing me deeply.

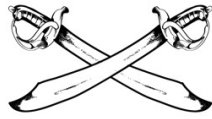
But I could feel she was still hiding something. Would that feeling ever go away? Was it an inherent part of who she was after so long keeping what she was hidden?

The real world was about to shatter the perfect reverie we'd found while the cabin door had been closed. I could feel Avery approaching, desperate to shift the burden of what he knew to me.

His fist pounded on the door.



# ASTRID



“Sails!” A fist pounded on the door again. “They’re hailing us, Captain!”

Talon rolled from the bed and had his pants on in seconds, then used a cloth to clean off his chest. I wasn’t far behind, but it took me an extra few moments before I found my shirt. He watched me pull it down over my breasts with hungry eyes, and my song hummed to life, enveloping us in magic.

His wolfish smile didn’t help matters. “That all it takes, wife?”

My cheeks heated, and I tamped down on those urges. “Evidently...”

He stood at my back and wrapped his arms around me as I pulled my boots on. “There’s no shame in wanting your husband, Astrid.”

Words he’d said to me on our wedding night before knowing what I was. Words he was still saying now that he did.

My eyes burned with emotion, but I was terrified to trust it.

This wasn’t the moment to blurt out my feelings, so I kept my tone light. “It would be nice if I didn’t have to let the whole ship know about it.”

He took my hand and placed it on the massive, obvious bulge in the front of his pants. “You’re hardly alone in that regard.”

The low rumble of his voice triggered my song again, so I pulled away from him with a laugh.

He reached for the door but turned back to look at me before opening it. The smile he gave me lit his eyes, exuding a kind of joy I'd never seen from him before, and all I could think was that I wanted to remember this moment forever.

Us.

Happy.

He sobered. "Whatever waits for us on the other side of this door changes nothing. We face it together."

I nodded, and he swung the door open to reveal Avery, whose stare lingered on me just a second too long before he spoke. "A Saxon ship, Captain. From their fleet. Approached under cover of night."

Talon nodded to move, and we followed Avery up into the early morning sunlight.

His sailing master, Harald, stood with a glass held to his eye, observing a ship that was closer than I'd expected but still too far to make out figures properly. They'd be upon us in no time.

I glanced around the deck, forming a plan, but I had to bite my tongue. This wasn't my ship, and I wasn't their captain.

"Did you respond?" Talon said to Harald.

"Not yet, Captain. But I have the signal book ready."

I looked between them with awe. "How in seven hells did you get your hands on a Saxon code book without them knowing?" The Saxon navy guarded them so closely, it was unheard of. A Saxon naval captain was expected to sacrifice his life to protect it, and once it was compromised, everyone used a new code.

Talon smirked. "How do you think?"

"Is it current?" I asked.

"Let's find out." He turned back to Harald, but I had an idea.

“Tell him you’re carrying a Saxon noble’s daughter.” It was reasonable a high-ranking member of the nobility would’ve been given the current codes for their voyage.

Talon nodded, and Harald moved to flash the code.

While we waited, Talon said, “Why not a Saxon nobleman?”

I smiled. “They’re touchy about their women. Guard them closely. He’ll be more careful not to upset a noble’s daughter and give us time to decide. And everyone is less suspicious of a beautiful woman.”

Harald called, “Code’s current. They’re going to approach.”

Talon nodded decisively. “We engage then. We’re about to lose the element of surprise the second they sight the crew.” The sailors on deck were covered in tattoos and hairstyles that marked them as either being pirates or people from the North. “On my signal, raise the black.”

This was folly. “Don’t you dare raise the black now. It’s too soon.”

Talon looked more amused than annoyed that I was butting in.

I looked at him pleadingly, hoping he’d see reason. “Raise it now and they have the option to run back to the fleet for backup instead of engaging us one-on-one. Let my crew out of the hold to buy time. They can pass for Saxon. Hell, some of them are Saxon.”

Talon wasn’t dismissive, but his expression was intent. “We don’t need the theatre. Raise my banner and they’ll surrender.”

“The moment they realize they’ve got two Thorvalds outgunned in the Doldrums with a jury-rigged mast, you don’t think they’ll bring the entire Saxon navy to bear? They’ll catch us before we ever reach open water.”

Harald cleared his throat. “It’s true, Captain. We can’t outrun them on that mast.”

Talon looked between us like we were missing the point. “I wasn’t planning to leave any survivors.”

Harald said, “They made it clear while they were still out of range that they’ve already signaled the fleet. They sent one fast ship to determine who we were to avoid redirecting the whole fleet in this wind, but they’re definitely in contact with the rest.”

“We could turn over the siren,” Avery said, spitting casually over the side. “Better to claim the reward on Atlantis, but I’d give up the money not to have to fight them bastards.”

Talon looked like he was two seconds from ripping Avery’s head off, so I grabbed his arm, trying to soothe his berserker.

Talon lowered his voice to a growl. “No one is turning her over. Here or on Atlantis.”

Avery smiled. “She don’t belong to you, Captain. Prizes belong to the crew equally. She’s worth a fortune and we get a say in it.”

I grabbed Avery by the shirt before Talon could and shoved him towards the stairs. “We don’t have time for this now! Get the fuck out of sight.”

Talon nodded to Harald, focusing on the immediate threat. “Get everyone belowdecks.” He pulled me out of their line of sight with him. “What’s your plan once you’ve lured them closer?”

He’d promised that whatever awaited us outside his cabin door, we’d face together, and he was honoring his word. He was treating me as an equal, and it was a heady feeling to have Talon fucking Thorvald listen to my plan like it might be better than his.

I smiled. “We’ll be exactly what they expect us to be. Just a helpless lady sailing with a crew. We might be able to avoid a fight altogether.”

He rubbed a hand across his beard thoughtfully. “And if they aren’t fooled?”

“We take their fast ship and get to open water before the fleet. All we have to do is get there first, and then we can use the piece of eight to reach Atlantis.”

He nodded, obviously having come to the same conclusion. We couldn't outrun them on our jury-rigged mast, but we could take their smaller, lighter ship with a head start and make it there.

“Our crews are too big to all fit on that sloop,” he pointed out.

A hundred-gun man-of-war like his had a crew of nearly a thousand, without counting my crew. A sloop like the one they'd sent would hold less than half that.

“If we have to run, we make sure they know who's on the sloop, and the rest head for the Skeleton Islands. That fleet isn't here to hunt us. They've got a bigger purpose, and they're not going to want to split up and chase down another ship in those perilous waters.”

“It's risky,” he said, but there was a devilish smile on his face at the audacity of it.

He moved us fully out of sight and called down to his master gunner, “Ready the guns, but make sure no one touches a gun port. They better not see a single Northman or a sign of hostility. Vanguard at the ready but out of sight.”

To me he said, “Take Dutton down to the hold to pick your twenty best fighters who pass for Saxon, and bring them on deck.”

I hesitated. “Why not release them all?”

He cupped my jaw. “It isn't lack of trust. As far as they're concerned, I'm a threat to their captain and their lives, and there isn't time to explain. If they give us away, we'll all be hunted together. Pick fighters you know will follow your orders without question, and I give you my word we'll release the rest the moment we're clear of these Saxon bastards.”

I didn't like the idea of leaving some of my crew imprisoned if we were potentially engaging an enemy, but what he said made sense. I didn't have time to convince them

all that Talon the Destroyer wasn't really a monster. I didn't even know how I was going to explain it once there was time.

I started to move, then stopped to kiss him. "Thank you. For trusting me."

He squinted down at me. "If you were a Saxon spy, this would be the perfect moment to turn on me."

I cocked an eyebrow. "You're right. It would."

I turned on my heel and all but ran down to the hold. An empty deck would arouse as much suspicion as anything.

It took longer than I would've liked to convey the plan to Reed and have him bring the other sailors forward to be released. There was some grumbling when I told the rest they were to stay in the hold, but Reed silenced it with a look before bringing the others out.

When he moved to follow, I stopped him with a hand. "You can't come, Reed. What if they recognize you?"

He looked betrayed. "There's almost no chance anyone on that ship has ever even seen me before. I'll keep my head down, but I can read them better than you. You can't leave me locked down here when you're in that kind of danger."

I turned the key in the lock. "It's too great a risk to all of us."

He was angry, but there was nothing I could do about it.

"Give me the name of a Saxon noble's daughter. One who may not have been well-known in society."

His chin jutted stubbornly like he might withhold the information, but he sighed and said, "Lady Fern. Her father was notoriously reclusive, preferring to stay at their country house."

I nodded my thanks and sprinted back up the stairs. Talon stood on the lower deck, assigning a post to each of my crew members who emerged with a barked command. When I came out, his eyes scanned everyone I'd brought up.

"Where's Reed?" he asked.



Guilt washed over me.

*No more secrets. No more lies.*

But Reed's secrets weren't mine to tell. I trusted Talon to keep me safe, but what if his best chance of keeping me safe meant turning Reed over?

Keeping it from him was my only good option, but I hated lying to him.

"I left him to make sure the rest of the crew doesn't get wild ideas and give us away."

Sigrid emerged from behind me holding a bundle of cloth and pulled me around the corner. "Put this on," she said, rapidly unrolling a green gown made of rich velvet cut in the Saxon style. "And get it together. Your feelings for my brother are irrelevant right now unless you're going to do something useful...like take out that ship with sex magic."

I snorted as I pulled my clothes off and stepped into the gown. "My powers might distract them a bit, but it wouldn't be enough to stop them from warning the fleet and sending them after us."

She quickly pulled my hair up and pinned it in the back, then pinned an elaborate lace hairpiece in place that shielded my eyes, covering my scar. "You don't seriously think that's the extent of your magic, do you? Inflicting some horny frustration on people? Making some people want to fuck it out?" She turned me to look her in the eye. "They're more scared of you than they are of me. I assure you, your magic at its full potential could flatten an empire with lust."

She started to lace the back of the dress with quick tugs, limiting my ability to breathe.

I gasped at one of her merciless tugs. "And I assure you, I couldn't have felt...*things* any more intensely. It's not possible."

I could hear the smirk in her voice. "Maybe that's true. But you're scared of it, holding it back, binding it up with shame. You have no idea what you're capable of."

With a shove at my back, she sent me back out to where Talon stood. His eyes swept over the swell of my bosom, and I held up a hand to cover myself. “You can’t start that again. My song.”

*My song.* Was it really more powerful than what I’d felt so far?

Talon said he’d been ready to crawl to me. I’d been ready to claw my own skin off with need. Flattening empires with lust might have sounded amusing to Sigrid, but the prospect made me shiver with fear. I couldn’t control something like that, and there would be no hiding it from anyone afterwards.

Talon rubbed his hands down my arms, looking concerned, but the corner of his mouth tugged up. “I look forward to ravishing the Saxon noble’s daughter later. For such prudish people, they certainly like to put tits on display.”

I gave him a quick kiss, careful not to arouse my song in case it rippled out as far as the other ship, and headed for the main deck, hoping to cut the figure of a curious lady instead of an agitated pirate captain.

When the other ship was close enough for them to use a speaking horn, I felt every eye on their ship drawn to me. Saxon women weren’t allowed to be sailors, and a red-haired young woman would be a rare sight for them.

I tilted my chin up imperiously.

Through the speaking horn, a man in an officer’s uniform called, “This is Lord Quinn, captain of His Majesty’s navy. Identify yourself.”

I nodded to my ship’s mate, Baxter. He was a Saxon who’d fled when they’d caught him praying to the old gods. I was unaccustomed to letting someone else speak for me, but the Saxons preferred their women silent.

“I’m Baxter, Lord Fern’s steward, escorting his daughter to their summer home on the islands.”

I tried to keep my breathing steady, aware of the way my bosom heaved with each breath.

There was a pause, and then Captain Quinn lifted the horn again. “Quite the ship to take a lady to the summer isles.”

Baxter smiled. “As you can see, she’s quite the lady. Far too enticing a prize for the pirates in these waters.”

I didn’t have to look back at Talon to know he had a devilish smile on his face.

“Have you had trouble with the pirate scum?” Lord Quinn asked, pointing to our mast.

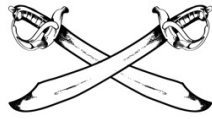
“No, milord. A storm, but we’ll make it to port.”

He seemed to be buying it, but surely it couldn’t be this easy.

“I’d like to meet the lady. Send over a launch.”



# TALON



“**A**bsolutely not.”

She seriously wanted me to let her take a launch over to an enemy ship with only an escort and her wits to protect her.

“It’s still our best chance. Splitting our crews while one of us runs and the others try to evade them isn’t a scenario either of us wants. Can you feel anything from their ship that might tell us whether they suspect anything?”

I shook my head. “It’s too far.”

She bounced on the balls of her feet, knowing a delay would only raise their suspicions. “You have to let me try. You can get to me in minutes if I’m in danger.”

“Minutes could be too long!”

She gave me a tight smile, refusing to back down. “Give me a little credit. I beat you after all...” Doubt crept into her expression. “Is it because you don’t trust me? You’ll still hold most of my crew. It’s not like I’d—”

“I trust you,” I said definitively, realizing I had to let her go. I surveyed the sailor waiting for the launch. He looked like a strong fighter, but I’d already sent Dutton to the hold to retrieve Reed. She might have left him down there to keep the remaining crew from giving us away, but they wouldn’t do anything stupid if they could see it was their captain’s life on the line.

I couldn't go myself or send Sigrid, but Reed was protective enough of her that it pissed my berserker off. He'd confronted Sigrid and me at the same time, armed with nothing but a pair of knives, to try to rescue her. He was the only one I was certain would sacrifice himself for her, which made him the only acceptable option.

Sigrid suddenly looked at Astrid and cocked her head with interest, and I didn't need to turn to see Reed was now on deck. I'd felt Astrid's desire to protect him flare the second she spotted him.

But if her fear was intense enough to catch Sigrid's interest, what did that mean?

Why would she be afraid for him specifically?

"If you're going, you take Reed," I said, releasing the shackles on his wrists. He bristled with aggression that made my berserker want to mark our territory, and I stepped closer to Astrid. Reed knew exactly what I'd done with his captain the night before, and he didn't like it one bit.

Astrid's feelings flared the way they did when she was in a blind panic and not thinking clearly—a need to keep something hidden. A need to deceive me. Amid the noise of everything she was feeling, it was too muddy to pin down exactly what she was hiding.

She couldn't even look at me as she said, "He's useless in a fight. A liability."

Reed's jaw tensed, and he stared her down but didn't dispute it.

I'd been in more fights than I could remember, had been a warrior since I could hold an axe. I could read an opponent, and that man was far from useless in a fight. Why would she lie about it?

Her deception twisted around me like thorny vines.

She desperately wanted to leave him on the ship. If he could hold his own in a fight, why was she so focused on protecting him?

Sigrid swung a blade at Reed's throat without warning, and he dropped instinctively, managing to twist away from the knife in her other hand a hairsbreadth before she vivisected him with a downward stroke.

He was unquestionably a fighter.

Reed faced her, seething. "You'll need to be faster than that, Princess."

Sigrid snarled, "Call me that again, and I'll cut out your tongue."

His eyes flashed. "You rather enjoyed my—"

Sigrid moved like a viper to hold a knife against his stomach. "Finish that sentence, and I'll gut you right here in front of your pretty captain."

"Enough," I snapped, ready to smack their heads together. I was far more worried about Astrid's reaction.

*She lied to me.*

*Why?*

"The launch is ready, Captain!" one of the men from her crew called.

Astrid tried to walk away, and I blocked her path. "If he can fight, why would you want to leave him here?"

She looked back at him, and they exchanged a meaningful glance, but I didn't know what it meant.

"He's a wanted Saxon criminal," she said. "There's a bounty on his head, and they might recognize him." She was still trying to deceive me, but it was closer to the truth than saying he couldn't fight.

Reed stepped closer, looking frustrated. "If they recognize me, she can leave me and let them claim the bounty on my head. It would give them a prize to take back to the fleet, and you all would get a chance to escape."

There was no deceit in his desires.

She glared viciously at Reed.

“Take him,” I told Astrid.

She narrowed her eyes. “You said we’d face this together. That doesn’t mean barking orders at me.”

I put a hand on her lower back and pulled her closer, leaning down so I could murmur into her ear, “And you promised not to lie to me again. Don’t fucking cross me on this, Astrid.”

The look she gave me might as well have been a dagger to the chest.

She didn’t know how close I was to snapping at the very idea of putting her in this kind of danger. She could handle herself. I was trying not to be overbearing, but her lying to me in this moment was ripping open too many doubts.

At this point I had to trust her. If she betrayed me, I wasn’t sure I’d survive it.

What was she hiding? She wouldn’t put the rest of her crew at risk, but now she knew I wouldn’t harm them. Was there any chance she would use this to try to run? Was she planning to sacrifice herself to save us?

My instincts screamed to pull her back, but then we’d have no choice but to board the Saxon ship or sink it. We weren’t close enough to board, so it would be a drawn-out, bloody fight we didn’t have time for with the rest of the fleet lurking. Sink it, and we had no chance of outrunning the rest of the fleet. The only reasonable answer was to let her go, but I didn’t feel reasonable.

She started to walk away, but I tugged her back, pulling her into my arms and kissing her hard. There wasn’t time to tell her she was the heart beating in my chest, my reason for being. So I kissed her, making myself let go the instant I felt her song even though it felt like tearing something essential from myself.

My berserker was all but snarling, making me want to take the boat across myself and rip the smarmy Saxon fuck to pieces.

She put a hand on my forearm like she knew.



“I’ve got this,” she said, raising her chin.

I cupped her face. “I know you do. Just...come back to me.”

She rose on tiptoe and kissed me one more time quickly, then ran for the boat.

As they climbed down to the launch and started to cross the distance between the ships, I clung to the threads of her desire, feeling for any shift that might indicate she was in danger.

Sigrid suddenly cursed and gripped my arm so hard, I winced. “He’s the fucking heir to the Saxon throne.”

“Who is?” What the fuck was she talking about? I squinted at the other ship, trying to find the man she meant.

“Reed. He’s the Saxon prince.”

The deck beneath my feet felt unsteady, and it had nothing to do with the sea.

Sigrid snarled, “That devious motherfucker. I’ve known something wasn’t right about him. I’ve been harvesting his fears, waiting for him to slip, and he finally gave it away.”

I reeled so hard, I had to brace myself on a beam. We’d been holding the Saxon prince hostage without even knowing it.

“That’s why she didn’t want to take him. What the fuck is the Saxon prince doing playing pirate?”

I wanted to pull Astrid back, but it was too late.

Sigrid watched them closely out of the gap in the gunport. “Won’t know until we ask him.”

I replayed every time I’d seen them together, how close they were, how passionately they protected each other.

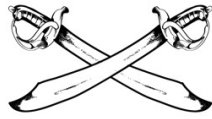
It made me question everything.

Going all the way back to our wedding and the feeling I hadn’t been able to shake that there was someone else.

Had she belonged to the Saxon prince all this time?



# ASTRID



**H** e knows I lied.  
*Fuck!*

*Don't think about Talon.*

*Focus.*

He'd made me take Reed.

*Fuck.* If someone recognized him, Reed would expect me to leave him.

“Why didn't you just tell him who I am?” Reed said in my ear as we got ready to climb down to the launch.

“You know why,” I whispered back.

He waited until we were in the boat to say, “I think it's because you know you can't trust him.”

“I trust him when it comes to my safety. I can't trust him not to sacrifice you if he thinks it'll save me, and that's not a call I'm willing to put in his hands.”

He picked up an oar. “Incidentally, it's the same call I'll make if it comes to it.”

I wanted to yell at him, but it was more important I look like an esteemed lady of the court, whatever the fuck that meant. “You won't. If you tell them who you are, I'll tell them what I am, and we'll both be taken in chains.”

Reed pulled on the oars, looking behind me, but he said, “That's stupid and you know it. They won't kill me. But

they'll take your head back to my father.”

I huffed. “It'll be tough to convince him I was really a siren if all they bring is my head. Someone tried that on Atlantis once and left without the bounty. They'd take me back to the capital first, and that leaves plenty of time for us to escape.”

“So is that your plan here? Let them take us?”

“I told you my plan,” I said, watching the other ship loom closer and closer. Saxon soldiers peered down at us.

Reed scoffed. “You told me what you told him. What's the real plan? We get the crew free, take the Saxon ship, and run, leaving them as bait?”

“A few days ago, that would've been my answer,” I admitted, hating that it had even crossed my mind.

“But?”

“But I care about him, Reed. I trust him. There isn't time to tell you everything now, but what happened before was a misunderstanding.”

He made a disbelieving noise and shook his head, rowing harder. “You can't be this naive. We talked about seducing him to escape, but you're the one who's been seduced.”

If my spine got any more rigid, it was going to snap, but I resisted kicking him in the shin. Barely. “Don't you dare belittle me,” I said through clenched teeth.

He glanced up at me, looking sad. “You can't think clearly when it comes to him.”

“Yeah? Are we gonna talk about you and Sigrid?”

He tilted his head like it was a low blow. “A means to an end. Nothing more.”

I snorted. “Think what you will about it. We all have a better chance of escaping that fleet if we don't let them divide us. We have to get to Atlantis and warn them.”

Our boat thudded lightly against their hull, and they tossed a ladder down to us.

Suddenly, nothing mattered but surviving this ruse. If they discovered our treachery, we'd be ludicrously outnumbered, and I wasn't even armed. Talon had tossed Reed an extra knife to surreptitiously tuck in his boot for me, but that wasn't going to do much against fully armed, properly trained Saxon soldiers.

Fighting wasn't an option.

We had to fool them.

Reed offered me a hand to stand, leaving me momentarily confused, but it was a good reminder of what being a lady meant to the Saxons.

I met his eyes and was hit with a pang of worry. I'd gotten him into this mess, and I had to get him out of it safely.

He gave me a tiny wink of reassurance. "Climb it like you haven't done it before," he said under his breath.

I awkwardly ascended the rope ladder, not having to fake most of it because my skirts and sleeves kept getting in the way.

A gloved hand reached out to help me climb over the bulwark, and I suddenly found myself unarmed and surrounded by enemies.

Lord Quinn gave me a charming smile and bowed. "Lady Fern. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

I did my best to curtsy demurely, hoping to do as little talking as possible since my accent was far from that of a proper Saxon lady. That had seemed easy when I'd been standing on the deck of *The Vengeance*, but now I felt immense pressure to say something.

Reed stepped onto the deck behind me and bowed to the captain, keeping his eyes cast down. "My lord," he said in the crisp accent I'd teased him about but suddenly envied.

The captain waved a dismissive hand. "Your escort can wait over there."

I forced myself not to make eye contact with Reed as he moved in the other direction.

*There goes my knife.*

I fought the urge to turn my face down, keeping my chin up and trusting the veil Sigrid had affixed would cover my scar. Lord Quinn offered me his arm and led me on a stroll around his main deck.

I tried to tuck my fingers into my palm because they were anything but the soft, well-maintained hands of a lady.

He smiled as he helped me over a coil of rope. “Lady Fern, I had no idea you were so lovely. How have I missed you at court?”

The top half of my face was covered, and the gown covered me from wrist to ankle, so he’d all but told me he liked my tits. I feigned embarrassment and said very softly, “We spend most of our time in the country, my lord. I’m unused to being in the company of such distinguished men. I find myself quite overcome.”

*Do people really talk like this?*

The delight in his expression spoke volumes about his opinion of himself. Perhaps this was going to be easier than I thought.

It gave me the confidence to be daring. Barely louder than a whisper, I said, “Where are all those boats going, my lord?”

“To rid the world of the pirate scourge,” he said haughtily, stroking a finger down my hand like talking about killing my friends was foreplay.

“The pirates of Atlantis?” I asked breathlessly, leaning towards him a little.

“No, my dear. They’ll get their turn, but it’s harder to reach, you know. We’ll meet the other fleet and converge on Ocracoke later today.”

*Gods help us.*

Warning Thorin wasn’t as critical because he already knew an attack was imminent, but he’d need aid. *The other fleet.* With that many warships, we might be trying to evacuate the island rather than defend it.

We had to reach Atlantis.

Something he'd said didn't make sense. "Later today, my lord? Isn't Ocracoke far from here?" I asked, cringing a little at the breathy girlish voice I was using to conceal my common accent.

He tapped his nose and leaned inappropriately close. "The other fleet has weather mages."

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

I reacted so violently, I had to pretend I tripped and allow him to steady me with a hand under my elbow. Weather mages were terrifyingly powerful beings who were normally ensconced in the mountains of Daneland. I'd never heard of them leaving before and wondered how the fuck the Saxon king had managed to convince them to aid his cause.

The captain moved on, telling me about his estates or something equally ridiculous while my mind spun. It was all I could do not to run back to the launch or to signal Talon to attack. I managed to bite my tongue until we'd made a full lap of the ship, and then I caught Reed's eye.

He bowed in front of the captain and said, "We really must be underway, my lord. It seems you too have pressing matters." He looked out the direction of the Saxons, reminding the captain of what he was supposed to be doing, and Lord Quinn stiffened.

"May I call on you, Lady Fern? When we return?"

I curtsied and whispered, "Please do."

I all but flung myself down the ladder and had to dig my nails into my palms to stop myself from picking up oars to get us there faster.

"I told you no one would recognize me," Reed muttered as he sat at the oars in front of me.

As though that even mattered now.

I whispered, "The fleet they're meeting has weather mages. They'll be at Ocracoke today."

Reed cursed.

“Do you still have your piece of eight?” I asked.

“Yeah, what’s your plan?” he said, rowing harder.

“We get to Atlantis and get spells that’ll take us back there. We can’t evacuate the whole island in one go, but you and I could make our way back and forth, getting as many people out as we can.”

He looked grim. “From what I’ve heard of Thorin, he’s unlikely to abandon the island.”

“We’ll make him see reason. If we move everyone to Atlantis, we escape to fight another day.”

We reached *The Vengeance*, and I scrambled up the ladder, making sure I looked like I was struggling enough not to arouse suspicion.

As soon as my boots hit the deck, I ran for the stairs to reach Talon, but he was nowhere to be found. I passed Harald and said, “Can you get us underway? My men will follow your orders until it’s safe for yours to get back in the rigging. If we don’t get to Atlantis to catch a spell to Ocracoke today, there may not be an Ocracoke left to save.”

It wasn’t really my place to make the call, but he understood the gravity of the situation, calling orders as we waited for the other ship to get underway.

I climbed down to the gun deck and still didn’t see Talon, but I did find Sigrid leaning against the wall.

Something was wrong.

The look she gave me could’ve frozen the sun. “He’s in his cabin.”

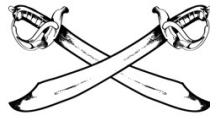
Reed climbed down behind me, and Sigrid’s expression went feral. She unsheathed the sword from her back and pointed it at him, chucking the shackles onto the deck at his feet. “Why don’t you go talk to Talon while I take Prince Bastian below?”

*He knows.*





# TALON



I shattered something against the wall. A chair, maybe?

The situation was too much for my berserker, and I'd walked away as soon as they'd made it to our ship safely. I couldn't get answers from Reed if I killed him.

I'd had to stand and watch as that Saxon piece of shit touched her, walking her around on his arm. Had to watch and wonder if something was going to give them away, if someone was going to recognize Reed...if she was going to betray me.

It was too easy to rewrite the whole story. She'd been in love with the Saxon prince all this time. She was fierce and loyal, willing to sacrifice herself to a Viking brute to save the man she loved, who couldn't so much as defend her.

There was nothing I wouldn't have done to keep her from harm.

I couldn't hate her for protecting him even if it meant she'd betrayed me.

Maybe she'd never been mine to begin with.

If it was true, I loved her even more for her bravery.

I blindly picked up something else to throw but froze when Astrid opened the door. Her eyes were huge and worried.

Gods above, I loved this woman enough to break me.

She put her hands up like I might hurt her. "I'm sorry I lied to you."

I took a step back, needing to know the truth before losing myself to holding her. “Tell me it hasn’t all been a fucking lie. That you haven’t been his since before we got married.”

Her lips parted with shock, and she ran to me. “Talon, no. I didn’t even meet him until I’d been in Atlantis for a year.”

I pulled her against my chest, not daring to trust it. Some part of me had always known I didn’t deserve her. “The things I feel from you both. The way you protect each other...”

She took my face in her hands. “He’s my best friend but nothing more. You wanted to know the story of my scars? Ask Reed. He was there when I got them and there to stitch them for me in the years before we had a surgeon on our crew. We’ve escaped death together, dealt death together, and we both know what it is to be hunted for things we didn’t ask to be.”

Ferocity glowed in her eyes. “But I love you, Talon Thorvald. Only you. Always you. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you he’s the Saxon heir, but I was worried that if it came to it, you’d sacrifice him to save me, and I couldn’t live with that.”

“You love me?” I repeated, heart racing.

She breathed a laugh. “Is that the only part you heard?”

“It’s the only thing that matters,” I said, leaning down to kiss her, backing her towards the bed.

I needed to be inside her, but she said, “Wait, Talon—I have to tell you what I learned!”

Harald pounded on the cabin door even though he must’ve been able to feel Astrid’s call. I grunted in frustration, knowing it must be important, and threw the door open.

“Sails!” Harald looked frantic.

“We know the Saxon fleet is there.”

His eyes were round with shock. “Aye, Captain. But you need to see this.”

I tried to swallow my irritation as we followed him out into the sunlight. I saw Sigrid’s expression before my eyes had

adjusted to the light...and it was chilling.

Nothing rattled her like that.

On the eastern horizon, I could make out a fleet twice the size of the Saxons' flying my father's colors...and sailing in consort with the Saxons. More sails than I could count. It looked like our father's entire formidable fleet.

Astrid gripped my hand, staring out at certain death.

Sigrid whistled at my side. "If that isn't a sight to make you shit your britches, I don't know what is."

"Our father allied with the new Saxon king? There has to be some other explanation."

Sigrid's smile was vicious. "I heard our father took a new wife. If he's got a new heir, perhaps he's decided to remove the old ones from succession and make friends with the new neighbor in the process."

We didn't have time to outrun them back to Ocracoke. Our only hope was to make it to open water and get to Atlantis. On Atlantis there would be a witch powerful enough to give us a spell back to Ocracoke.

Fear slid down my spine like ice before I could master it.

What aid could we offer against a force like that?

I let the thought occupy my mind for a moment, then considered what tactical options we had. If we could get ahead of them, they'd lose the advantage of surprise, which opened the possibilities.

If we could rely on Atlantis for supplies, we could use the cannons from the fort on Ocracoke to stop the invaders from landing. There might be time to lay traps and lure them to shore at strategic points. If we could hold them off long enough, it would buy time to recruit more crews or mercenaries from Atlantis.

"That's one of the things I love about you," Sigrid said, and I looked over my shoulder to make sure she was talking to me. She didn't usually use words like *love* even if she demonstrated it regularly. "Everyone else's fear chokes me.

Some people can push it out of their minds, but I still feel it, lying in wait for a moment of weakness. You accept yours, let it in, and make it part of the solution. It's...soothing."

I nodded, understanding immediately what she meant. Astrid's desires had the same effect on me.

Sigrid looked between us. "We hold the Saxon crown prince hostage. How badly do you think he wants his heir back?"

Astrid released my hand and rounded on Sigrid. "Don't you fucking dare even think about using him as a bargaining chip."

"Against that?" Sigrid nodded out to the horizon. "Everyone is a bargaining chip."

Suddenly, magic crackled, and it was like someone was drawing all the air around us and pulling it to the east.

"Weather mages!" Astrid breathed. "He said the other fleet had weather mages."

"They'll be at Ocracoke in hours with the wind they're summoning," Sigrid murmured.

We'd seen the weather mages do their work from the mountaintops in Daneland, but it'd been nothing like this. This would have a cost.

As soon as the magic passed us, it was like something snapped, and there was a warped, eerie silence and seconds of complete stillness. "Brace yourselves!" I shouted, realizing what was about to happen.

What they'd displaced had to return, and it roared towards us, an unnatural gale that hit the sails hard enough to lift the ship from the water. The jury-rigged main mast snapped under the force of it and crashed towards the deck. Astrid was clear, but I dove to push two of my men out of the way in time. Once we were on the deck, there was no way to do anything but wait for it to pass, unable to hear or see anything under the wild force of it.

When the wind finally subsided, I rolled to my feet before picking people up and giving orders to get the wounded help. Astrid was unscathed over by the forecastle, but many others hadn't fared as well.

She called, "I'm going to check on my crew!" as she sprinted for the stairs.

I checked people for injuries, relieved to find most were just banged up. Sigrid got to her feet, cursing our father into oblivion, but she seemed to only have a few minor scratches.

Harald clung to a shroud, looking out at the horizon. "Open water, Captain! We're out of the Doldrums."

We could make the leap to Atlantis!

Whatever was happening with her crew, we'd be better able to help them once we got there. Astrid needed to shift us immediately.

I ran for the hold, but before I could get off the main deck, Astrid appeared at the doorway with shackles on her wrists, face pale and eyes wide. She walked stiffly, and the reason for it became apparent when Avery emerged from behind her, holding a knife to her spine.

He dragged her back to the wall of the forecastle and moved the knife to her throat. She winced as it drew blood, and my entire existence shrunk to that knife.

I couldn't think past the thundering roar of my berserker screaming at me to lunge across the deck and destroy the threat, but it was too far.

To my right, Sigrid groaned and doubled over, holding her head. She staggered up, glaring at me. "Lock it down, Brother. I can't help you if you keep that shit up. Your fear is fucking killing me."

Avery laughed. "We've finally found the thing that'll break the swaggering asshole. Gonna take this bitch to Atlantis and claim my reward."

I sucked in a deep breath, trying to silence my berserker and regain control of reason.

“You can’t kill her,” I said, finally thinking clearly. “She can’t take you to Atlantis to claim your prize if she’s dead.”

A pistol cocked next to my ear.

Avery spread his free hand and smiled. “I did think of that. Which is why I needed to distract you enough for my crewmate to point a pistol at your head.”

I locked eyes with Astrid, willing her not to do anything stupid.

Her core desire was to protect me. She burned with such an intense need to remove the gun from my temple, I was surprised the man hadn’t burst into flames.

“Astrid, don’t. He won’t shoot me.”

Avery pointed a pistol and shot Dutton in the gut.

Astrid’s pain made my knees buckle, and the sound that tore from my throat was an animal snarl. “Now you have to shoot me because I’m going to tear you to pieces with my bare fucking hands if you don’t.”

Dutton sagged to the deck, and Sigrid ran to staunch the wound, which made Avery shout and pull a second pistol to point at Sigrid.

Astrid wrapped her hand around Avery’s forearm and started to shift to Atlantis before he could pull the trigger, taking the man who held the gun to my temple with them.

A roar tore from my throat.

There was no way to get to her. It would take time for them to put her on trial and execute her, but if I’d known where to get another piece of eight, I wouldn’t have hunted her down in the first place.

If Remel executed her, I’d lead my father’s fleet to Atlantis myself and crush them.

*Fuck!*

I’d sworn to her I’d never let it happen, and now I was powerless to stop it.

They wouldn't execute her, surely. It was barbaric, and she was well-known on the island. But so was Remel's paranoid fear of sirens.

Our crewmates had rushed to help with Dutton, but we needed a witch for a gut wound like that and we'd only find one on Atlantis.

"Talon!"

I turned to Sigrid, feeling more beast than man.

"You haven't heard a fucking thing I said, have you?"

I grunted, shaking my head.

"We can't get to Astrid, but we might make it in time to do something for Thorin, even if it's picking up survivors."

I roared again. I wasn't thinking clearly, but it wasn't just Astrid. We couldn't get to Thorin before the advancing armada now.

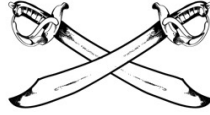
I had no choice but to say the words that meant I was abandoning my wife.

"Get this mast back up. Then set a course for Ocracoke."





# ASTRID



I'd made the leap to Atlantis dozens of times, and it never got easier, but this time I landed on the docks and sprawled to my knees, shaking. I looked up and found the familiar sight of the town.

Eclectic buildings sprawled along the busy street with people from every realm bustling about their business. The annual ship race would've been a few days ago, so it was busier than usual. For most it was a stop along the way, but for me it was the only real home I'd ever known.

I tried to stand, and Avery shoved me back down. Had I shifted us quickly enough? Did either of them pull the trigger?

I didn't hear a gunshot, but I'd never made the leap when I was anticipating one before.

Avery tucked his pistol away.

"Did you shoot?" I asked, voice quavering.

"Shut the fuck up." Avery grabbed the chain of the shackles and yanked me to my feet so hard, they cut into the flesh of my wrists.

I was unarmed and in chains with one of the men holding each of my upper arms. Making a scene by trying to escape might only put me in more danger. If I could just hold on a little while longer, Reed would use the other piece of eight to make the leap with *The Vengeance*, and Talon would be here.

Dread coiled in my stomach.

*And then what?*

Would they attack Atlantis to get me free?

“Help!” I cried, out of options as they dragged me forward. Many heads turned in our direction, and people muttered as they saw I was in chains. Some of them would recognize me, but I didn’t see any friends I could trust.

Avery thumped me in the stomach. “Gag her. Won’t have her spinning tales, trying to rob us of our bounty.” He held me in a headlock as the other man stuffed a filthy rag in my mouth and bound it in place with a rope around my head.

They yanked me forward until a tall woman I didn’t recognize blocked our path. “The sex auction was two days ago, and all participants had to be willing. Release this woman at once.”

Avery spat on the ground. “Ain’t no woman. She’s a siren.”

The lady’s face turned ashen, and she backed away like it was a contagious affliction. “Wait here,” she said, scurrying away, likely to find the guards at the entrance to the docks.

Why wasn’t Talon here yet? It was making me worried they’d both fired their pistols before I’d shifted them, but surely I would’ve heard it. Even then, Reed would still come for me, so why hadn’t they made the leap yet?

Two guards clad in black approached, looking wary.

Avery yanked on my chain just for the sake of it. “She’s a siren. We’re here to claim the bounty.”

The taller guard who was a woman with light skin and blue hair who I thought I’d seen before looked at me skeptically. “That’s Captain Ash. She’s not a siren.”

The man on my right said, “Aye, she is. Bewitched our whole ship, she did. You weren’t there to feel it, but she’s a siren all right.”

The guards exchanged an uncertain look, then the blue-haired guard said, “Take her to the monarch for questioning.”

As they loaded me into a wagon and Avery climbed up behind me, I spared one last longing look at the harbor, wishing I could make them take the leap by sheer force of will.



“WE’LL HAVE to put her on trial.” The tiara on Remel’s inhuman, angular brow glistened in the sunlight as they said it, and I found myself irrationally focused on the gems, as though something pretty could soften what they’d just said.

Avery huffed impatiently. “How long does that take? We both felt her song. She’s a siren.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why are you in such a hurry, Avery? Worried someone might come for you?”

It had to have been at least an hour, and Talon still wasn’t there. Had something happened?

If they hadn’t been shot, they could’ve been attacked by the Saxons. I should’ve been worried about myself, but the fear churning in my stomach was for everyone on *The Vengeance*. For Talon not to come for me had to mean something bad had happened.

“It’ll take as long as required to obtain an aphrodisiac and secure her in the stocks in case you speak truth. The stocks are the only thing on the island that can neutralize her power.” Remel said it like they were discussing building repairs, not my public humiliation.

*That* drew my focus back to the conversation, and horror clanged through me. “You’re suggesting dosing me with an aphrodisiac in the middle of the town square? And then what? What happens if you learn I’m a siren?”

Remel wouldn’t meet my eyes.

*They execute you. Like you always knew would happen if you couldn’t control yourself.*

“Don’t bother sending for the aphrodisiac. I admit I’m a siren.”

A half-orc guard on the other side of the room sucked in a gasp.

If I faced execution, the least I could do was forgo being dehumanized by such a trial. I’d face my fate with a clear head and as much of my dignity as I could maintain.

Remel had been cautiously neutral with me, but now they stepped back just like the woman on the docks had. “Guards, take her to the stocks. Quickly!”

The guards approached with the kind of caution I’d expect if they were trying to disarm Talon, not pick me up from where I knelt in shackles.

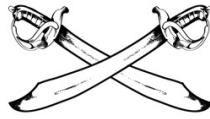
It was so ridiculous, I laughed. Did they think I was going to start masturbating and overwhelm them with my powers? What were they even afraid of?

The truth of their desires was so frightening, they were willing to have me killed for it.

Just as they were about to pull me from the room, I glared daggers at Avery. “He’ll come for you. Even if he’s too late for me, you’re a fucking dead man.”



# TALON



**I**t had been at least three hours since Astrid had left. Three hours of the aching agony of feeling her fear and being unable to get to her. For the first hour or so, I'd been a mindless animal, ready to tear the ship to pieces with my bare hands because my berserker didn't understand why we couldn't help her.

I'd come to my cabin holding the clothes she'd taken off before putting the gown on, trying to quell the mindless rage in me without hurting anyone. We were going to need a plan when we got to Ocracoke with little knowledge about the new Saxon king.

Sigrid sat outside the door, ready to stop me from hurting someone if need be. She hadn't told me that, but it was what I would've done for her.

When I called her name, she sprung to her feet and came to check on me.

"Where's Reed?" I asked, realizing I hadn't seen him since they got back from the other ship.

"I put him in the hold," she said. "Why?"

I'd been so lost to my anger, I'd forgotten I promised Astrid I'd release her crew as soon as we got free of the Saxons.

"Release all the prisoners, and bring Reed to me. Let's find out if he knows anything useful about his father."

She hesitated like she might question me, then thought better of it.

Within minutes, she returned with Reed, who was still in chains.

“I said to release the prisoners,” I said.

She shrugged. “I didn’t realize we were counting royal hostages.” She wasn’t gentle about unlocking his wrists, narrowing her eyes at him. “Did you know...*Prince* Bastian? That there’s an alliance between the two kingdoms?”

He raised his chin defiantly. “Did you, *Princess*?”

She laughed. “No, motherfucker. I left after my second marriage ended...poorly. For my husband. Chose not to wait around to be married off again. I haven’t spoken to my father in years.”

His jaw clenched. “Neither. Have. I. If you’d pull your head out of your ass, you’d see we’re more alike than you want to admit. If I’m a traitor purely for being part of that bloodline, so are you.”

“We’re nothing alike.”

Reed sighed in irritation and looked around the cabin. “Where’s Astrid?”

There was a tense pause where Sigrid waited to see if I wanted to explain, but I couldn’t get the words out.

“She’s on Atlantis,” Sigrid said without emotion. “Avery manipulated her into taking the leap with him, intending to claim the bounty on her head.”

Reed shot up from his chair. “Then why the fuck are we just sitting here?”

“We aren’t,” I said. “We’re underway to Ocracoke to see if we can at least help Thorin.”

He reached for his boot, digging in the seam where the laces were, only to produce a piece of eight. Heart pounding in my chest, I reached for it so quickly, I knocked the chair I’d



been sitting on to the ground, but Reed took the leap even faster.

The world warped, and I closed my eyes. As soon as I opened them, all three of us ran up to the main deck to find the sparkling calm water of the harbor.

*Atlantis.*

We were in Atlantis.



“TALON, YOU CAN’T START A WAR.”

Almost the very same words that had led to my marriage to Astrid.

When I didn’t respond, Sigrid gripped my arm. “You *cannot* take the entire crew into town armed and looking for a fight. They’ll see it as an invasion. We need to save Astrid, but our brother is in just as much trouble. We can’t help either of them if we’re entrenched in a battle.”

I couldn’t feel Astrid anymore. We were in Atlantis, and I couldn’t feel her through our bond.

*Oh gods, have they already killed her?*

The berserker within me raged to crush the town and destroy everyone in it.

The man within me couldn’t think past the idea of her being gone.

Sigrid grabbed my chin and turned me to look at her. “You can’t be expected to reason when your berserker is like this, so you’re going to fucking listen to me. I’ll go and get us a spell to reach Ocracoke and one to heal Dutton. You go and get Astrid, then meet me back at the ship. Everyone else stays here so we’re ready to leave as soon as we can.” I started searching the docks for her again, but Sigrid dragged my face back to her. “Look at me, Talon. Don’t kill anyone you don’t

absolutely have to kill. When you get her out of here, we still need them as an ally to save Ocracoke.”

I shook her off. “I won’t kill anyone I don’t need to kill. But don’t wait for us. Get a spell and get to Ocracoke now. We’ll get our own and meet you there.”

Reed said to Sigrid, “I’m going with you.”

Sigrid got in his face. “We don’t have time for this!”

Reed calmly stood to his full height, making him a little taller than her. “Then don’t argue.”

Sigrid started to do just that, but I said, “Take him. The locals trust him. You’ll get the spells faster.”

She rolled her eyes but scrambled down to the docks, and I followed close behind.

We made it three steps before one of the monarch’s people, clad in black, blocked our path. “Do you have any sirens on your ship? Sirens are outlawed, and I apprehended one earlier today—”

Sigrid punched him in the face so hard, he dropped to the ground.

*Apprehended her?* Had he put his hands on my wife?

I gripped the collar of his shirt and lifted him to a sitting position. “Where is she?”

He wiped his bloody lip. “They took her to the court.”

The court was in the fort, where Remel made all new visitors to Atlantis report. And where the dungeons were. Maybe the magical cells belowground blocked the bond between us. Remel couldn’t have executed her that quickly.

I spared one last look for Sigrid and ran, sprinting up the path that led to the fort. Two more guards tried to block my path off the docks, but I evaded them, leaving them for Sigrid and Reed to deal with.

*Don’t kill anyone you don’t need to kill.*

I kept repeating it, knowing it would do no good if they'd so much as upset Astrid. What the fuck did he mean about apprehending her?

When I rounded the bend of the last stretch, I spotted two people coming towards me from the fort.

*Avery.*

The scum-sucking traitor was so busy looking into a heavy sack he was carrying, he didn't see me until I was almost upon him. The heavy sack could only be coin from the way he was looking at it, laughing along with the man who'd held a pistol to my head.

They'd traded my wife for gold.

They looked up and saw me, then they ran for their lives. My berserker howled, all too happy to give chase.

I caught Avery's accomplice first, and with one swing of my axe, I cut his throat without breaking stride. Avery tried to run for the forest, but I reached him in a few seconds and slashed my axe across the tendons in his heels. He instantly fell to the ground before rolling into a heap that left his face bloody.

"Where is she?" I demanded, raising my axe.

He knew he was about to die. He'd been a pirate long enough that he recognized this was the moment, and he met it with a sneer. "You're too late."

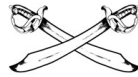
It was like my hands didn't belong to me anymore, a feeling I'd only experienced one other time, when my berserker had fully claimed me after she ran from me on our wedding night.

I dropped my axe to the ground and wrapped my hands around Avery's neck, ignoring his gurgling screams as I tore flesh and bone, ripping sinews apart until his head came off and his body collapsed to the ground twitching.

My berserker didn't fully release its hold on me, but I didn't try to fight it.

Instead, I picked up my axe, the sack of gold, and his head, a gift for Astrid when I freed her. I had to believe I could still free her.

Avery had always been a lying piece of shit. She was still alive.



THE GATES of the fort were barred when I reached them, and a sentry wearing black shouted down, “State your name.”

“Talon Thorvald,” I called, barely recognizing the rough sound of my voice.

“They’re expecting you,” she said, opening the gate.

The gold path was for visitors, but I wasn’t some new visitor to be put to the test, so I strode straight for the monarch’s throne room. I paused outside the doors, listening, hoping to catch mention of Astrid. They were open enough that I could see Remel and Eloise inside. Eloise was the witch who owned the brothel on the island, and I usually gave her wide berth because she was an endless source of chaos. Was her being here related to Astrid in some way?

“Did you know the whole time she was living here?” The softness of Remel’s voice did nothing to diminish the anger in their tone.

“Of course I did,” Eloise said with glee.

“Why would you withhold that information?” Remel said, voice even softer but laced with fury.

“And miss the chance she’d bespell the island and I’d finally get the orgy I deserve? My only regret is that her self-control didn’t slip.”

Remel set something down far too gently on the table in front of them. “Our laws require me to execute you with her now.”

She giggled maniacally. “I’d like to see you try.”

My berserker thundered at the word *execute*, and I kicked the doors open, no longer able to wait.

“Where is she?”

“Talon,” Remel said, blinking with surprise. “We got a message from Thorin weeks ago saying to expect you. We feared you’d had a run in with the Saxon fleet and—”

“*What the fuck* have you done with my wife?”

They took a step back, noticing the head I was carrying by its hair. “Your...wife?”

Eloise clapped. “Ooooh, I told you punishing her was a bad idea...”

“*Punishing* her? What”—I sucked in a breath, fighting not to rip anyone else’s head off before I got answers—“did you do?”

“The siren is your wife?” Their eyes were wide with terror, and I growled, knowing their fear meant they’d done something to her.

“She’s unharmed!” They put up their hands defensively.

“Where is she?” Everyone who’d wronged her could be dealt with later.

“In the stocks. In the center of town.” They said it quickly, like it might lessen the impact.

My vision turned red, and my control slipped. “You...locked...” I sucked in a breath. “You put her on display in the square like a fucking animal?”

They took another step back, looking over their shoulder for the guards. They could bring an army, and it wouldn’t stop me from claiming retribution.

*Don’t kill anyone. Don’t kill anyone.*

“Talon, please listen. The stocks are spelled to block her magic. It was the only way we could make sure everyone was safe from her while we made a decision.”

I had to speak through gritted teeth. “By locking her in the stocks, you already made a decision, and it was the wrong one. I’ll deal with you later.”

I turned to leave, and Eloise called, “Wait!”

Remel spluttered, but I silenced them with a look.

Eloise said, “Got a plan to get home? It seems your brother could use the backup.”

Every second I wasted talking to her was an extra second Astrid was in the stocks, but she was right. We’d need to get off Atlantis quickly, and spells weren’t the easiest thing to come by immediately.

“Do you have a spell?”

She held out a bottle, but when I reached to take it, she pulled it back. “There’s a cost.”

I snarled, but she stood her ground. If I stole the spell from her, it wouldn’t work. It had to be willingly given.

I held up the sack of coins in the hand that still clutched Avery’s head. The sack was soaked in blood, but she knew the volume of gold it contained.

She grinned and shook her head. “Once you’ve freed her, you don’t punish anyone on Atlantis. And I get to bottle some of her magic.”

“Will that harm her?” Making a deal with this witch was dangerous.

“Of course not.” She laughed, tossing me the bottle. “Now go dick her down good. Ooh! Better yet. Cunnilingus. That’ll get me some good magic.”

Remel dared to speak. “Absolutely not. She cannot be allowed to—”

Eloise stepped in front of them. “Go get your girl. Bring her back for the summer festival!”

I pocketed the bottle and shook off her words, then ran out to the courtyard. Once I was back outside, I focused my mind on the town square, on the feel of her and nothing else, and I

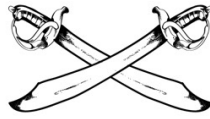
found it, the faintest glimmer of the magic that bound us. They'd stifled it with whatever spell the stocks contained, but they hadn't extinguished it.

*I'm coming for you.*





# ASTRID



**T**hey were going to put me in the stocks.

There wasn't a single day I'd walked past the square and not thought of this outcome. I'd been able to see them when I worked at The Siren's Call. They'd stood empty as though waiting for me.

These stocks had haunted me from the moment I'd set foot on Atlantis.

I'd known this would be my fate if I allowed myself to feel pleasure...

And yet as Brynn unlocked and opened them before forcefully pulling each of my wrists into place, I was numb with disbelief.

In that moment I came to understand that some part of me had always trusted it wouldn't come to this. The people of Atlantis knew me. It was a place of many travelers, but the locals were like family.

Remel *knew me*, and yet they'd let fear win.

"Climb up," Brynn commanded, her voice devoid of emotion.

They'd brought out the contraption that went with the stocks, a wooden bench of sorts that I'd kneel on in order to reach the height of the hole for my head.

Still in shock, I obeyed Brynn's command, straddling the bench until my knees met the wood and then bending forward,

letting her push my head down over the scooped opening. She dropped the top piece of wood into place before securing the holes around my hands and head so I couldn't escape.

With dawning horror, I realized what the bench was for.

*It'll be tough to convince him I was really a siren if all they bring is my head.*

Historically, when they'd put a siren on trial, they'd strip her bare for all to see and lock her in the stocks where her magic couldn't escape, but they could feel its power if they touched the wood.

Then they'd put her on trial, proving whether she was a siren by force. In this position, you could give an accused siren an aphrodisiac and fuck her, forcing her to reveal her song. As far as I knew, no one had made such a spectacle of it for a long time, but the unnecessary cruelty of it terrorized me.

My stomach started to heave with panic, but I couldn't move, couldn't get out.

Hundreds of years ago, they'd done this to my foremothers, executing them for their song. They'd locked me in the fucking stocks where they'd stripped countless sirens of their dignity, shamed them for their magic, and ended their lives.

Rage like I'd never known poured through me, tendrils of it licking through my bones until the panic subsided, replaced by something with teeth and claws.

Brynn snapped the lock into place, and I pulled my head up as far as I could to make her meet my eyes. "Why don't you strip me naked while you're at it? Isn't that what you're supposed to do with sirens?"

She sighed and shook her head. "They aren't putting you on trial. Don't make a scene and make it worse for yourself."

"*Worse* for..." A hysterical laugh escaped me. "I should be polite about letting them put me to death, you mean? Make sure I don't make anyone *uncomfortable*?"

She nodded to the other guard in black, and they walked away.

They'd...*locked me in the stocks.*

I refused to hang my head, refused to make it easier for the people walking past.

Every last one of them could look me in the face and live with how barbaric this was. This shame didn't belong to me. It was their burden to bear.

A woman with rich brown skin and a cloud of beautiful curls around her head emerged at the front of the crowd on her way into The Siren's Call. I waited for the sneer, for the look of revulsion to mar her lovely features, but she only looked at me with surprise and confusion. When everyone else would've glanced away in shame, she held my gaze. This woman saw me. She saw me as a person and not a monster, and it gave me a tiny light to cling to.

Not everyone was bad.

For what could've been minutes or hours, people mostly avoided meeting my eyes, but some of them heckled me.

I marked their faces.

Then I saw a someone with short dark hair across the square and recognized Golda as she turned. She was the kind of woman who looked like she could split a tree trunk with her bare hands, but her muscles weren't overly defined; she was just butch in the best possible way.

Hope flickered inside me at the sight of a familiar face. I almost called to her but stopped, not wanting to see the loathing on her face when she realized what I was. She'd created an inclusive space for all beings with her erotic theatre...but today showed sirens were truly the exception.

She was carrying two bags, clearly in a hurry, and at first her eyes skated past where I was. Then she looked again and dropped what she was carrying, letting the contents scatter into the dirt.

“What. The. *Fuck?*” she said so loud, people’s attention diverted to her for a second.

Bags forgotten, she ran to me.

“A guy came into The Pleasure Chest saying they’d apprehended a siren, but I thought he was just a drunken moron. Is this a sick joke?”

Would she turn on me next? She’d been the first person to show me kindness on the island. She’d taken me in when I was vulnerable and alone, but she hadn’t known what I was then.

I lifted my chin defiantly. “I’m a siren.”

She lowered her eyes, taking deep breaths. Then she started to walk away.

Before despair could sink in, I watched her pick up a folding wooden chair and thump it on the ground until pieces of it flew off. With a broken piece of wood in her hand, she marched back over and tried to pry the stocks open.

The second she touched them, she grunted in pain and dropped the wood.

“They’re spelled,” she said with frustration, trying again, despite knowing what would happen this time.

She yelled as the stocks started to buzz, obviously hurting her, but she kept trying anyway until her hand gave out and she dropped the wood once more.

They hadn’t left a guard because there was no way to get the stocks open.

“What the *fuck?*” The deep boom of Zayne’s voice was like a shot of strength that held me back from the brink of despair. The crowd scattered as he ran to us. He was an imposing figure with his huge muscles and a scar that almost matched mine cutting across his face.

He’d trained me with the sword, had stripped me down to my worst and built me back up stronger.

He dug in one of his pockets and started trying to pick the lock. Just like Golda, he yelled with pain but continued

anyway, gritting his teeth as he kept trying to get the lock open.

They were helping me despite knowing what I was. It was deeply reassuring, but as I watched the fearful faces of the people milling around the square, I realized it could make this worse.

“You can’t help me,” I said urgently. “Trying to help a siren escape could mean they execute you too.”

Golda bent down so I could see her face. “You seriously think I’d rather live with myself after leaving you like this than risk execution?”

She wiped a tear from my cheek. “Don’t start that, honey, or I’ll start too.”

Zayne’s face appeared in front of me. “I’ll send someone to get Eloise, and in the meantime, we’ll stand between you and anyone who’d do you harm.”

“Thank you,” I said, holding back tears. I was enough of a spectacle as it was. The people choosing to look instead of objecting to this didn’t get to see my tears.

I lifted my head again, feeling grounded now that I knew my friends would stand by me. It might not change the outcome, but it made all the difference to me.

Zayne took up a post on one side of the square, and Golda took the other, keeping people back as much as they could.

No one had been there for my mother. At least I wasn’t alone.

I stared defiantly into the faces of anyone who dared to look my way until Golda and Zayne suddenly rushed to one of the street corners to block the way, holding weapons out.

Were they coming to execute me?

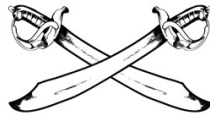
I couldn’t see who stood on the other side of them at first, but they finally shifted, and I caught a glimpse of a Viking warrior.

*My Viking warrior.*

He'd come for me.



# TALON



**D**on't kill anyone.

*Don't kill anyone.*

I was almost fully berserker, barely aware of anything except the faint hold I had on my bond with Astrid. I tried to lock down my feelings, knowing the moment I saw her in the stocks, I'd crush anyone in my path.

Just as I reached the square, looking frantically for a glimpse of her, two people charged to block me. My every ruthlessly trained instinct screamed that I should annihilate them, but some sliver of reason still remained.

A formidable-looking dark-haired woman in a tank top and a heavily muscled man with darker brown skin stood there brandishing weapons.

“Not today, motherfucker,” the woman said.

I roared as I grappled with my berserker, but they still didn't back down.

I knew this man.

Zayne.

This was the weaponsmith who'd trained her. A friend? Was he protecting her?

I wanted to tear him to pieces simply for standing between me and her.



“Who are you?” I got out through gritted teeth, looking at the woman.

“Golda.”

A friend. The erotic theatre owner.

*I shouldn't leave her corpse in the street.* My mate liked this woman.

“I'm her husband,” I managed to say, willing them to move before I did something Astrid wouldn't forgive.

Instead, Zayne raised a hammer to a fighting stance. “Is that supposed to convince us to let you pass? Because from where I'm standing, she could do better.”

Golda bristled with aggression. “Do you know what could've happened to her when she first came here? What if I hadn't been the one to find her, you piece of shit?”

I growled, but Zayne muscled his way between us. “Did you turn her over to Remel? Because if I find out you turned her over—”

I held up Avery's head, dripping and grotesque. “This is the man.”

Golda muttered, “Ripped his fucking head clean off.”

Zayne said, “He's growing on me.”

“If we let you through, are you going to get our girl out of here?”

They had entirely too much faith in my control if they were still asking questions. “I'm getting her out either way. If you stand aside, I won't have to explain to her why I injured her friends.”

“Talon!” Astrid's voice was both a salve to my worried soul and a trigger for my berserker.

Her friends made the wise decision to move aside.

Anger like I'd never known consumed me at the sight of her in the stocks. Had I not been focused on getting her out, Atlantis would've been reduced to rubble.

*Talon, you can't start a war.*

But I wasn't Talon, not in that moment. I was mostly a berserker clinging to the remnants of Talon's reason.

I swept the hair from her eyes. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, biting her lip like she was fighting back tears.

I smashed at the lock with my axe, feeling a bone-rattling jolt of pain each time I made contact, but it eventually shattered and fell to the ground. I'd thought that was the worst of it, but the lock had been the superficial way the stocks were secured. A spell was the real mechanism.

When I tried to lift the top of the wood from Astrid, screaming agony ripped through me until my fingers released it of their own accord. I tried two more times with the same results.

Magic couldn't be overcome with brute strength, but we had a magic stronger than whatever they'd built this with.

I bent down, gently stroking her cheeks, hating the worry in her expression.

"If I become fully berserker, I think I can get it open. No witch's spell can hold back the strength of the gods."

Hope flared in her brilliant blue eyes. "Can you do that?"

I dropped my head, feeling ashamed. "I'll want to claim you. If I loosen my control any more, I'll take you right here in this horrifying contraption because my berserker can't handle how close we came to losing you."

Her expression shifted, and she was the warrior queen I'd caught a glimpse of that first night in the tavern. "Take me. Let them watch. Let them all fucking see the pleasure they're so afraid of."

She caught my thumb in her mouth, sucking it and grazing her teeth along the tip. "Make me come, Talon."

The magic of her song flared within the holes of the stocks, making the wood glow. My siren liked the idea of doing this in front of others. She'd fed me fantasies of being

onstage, but this was different. They'd tried to make a spectacle of her humiliation, and instead, we could turn the spectacle back on them, letting her reclaim her power.

That was all it took to break past my reservations. She should've been in my arms, not in this object of hell. The only way to get her out was to surrender myself to the instincts I ran from, give myself completely to the berserker I tried to always control, and trust that she'd pull me back from it.

I tried to start slow, to make it good for her without letting anyone see too much, which was easier with her long gown on. I knelt at her side and slid a hand up her calf under the skirt, coasting over her soft inner thigh until I reached Valhalla.

Her whimper when I stroked her clit was my undoing. I didn't give a fuck where we were or who was watching. They'd all know she was mine.

"Stop teasing and show them." Her voice was husky, dripping with the desire I could feel pulsing from her.

I got behind her on the bench before hiking her skirt up to get my hand under it, then I stroked her, rolling my fingers through her slick folds until she gasped.

After that, I was all but lost to my berserker instincts, consumed by the need to make her come. I wasn't even an animal. I existed only for her gasps and moans, for the way she tightened around the fingers I thrust inside her, for the feel of her plump limbs around my fingers when I let her taste herself on them.

When she came, I roared with frustration because the stocks suppressed her song. They seemed to be feeding her siren magic back into her so it kept building for her without release. I wanted to feel my mate's satisfaction, to revel in her power. I needed her to feel relief from the lust that burned through her.

She whimpered at the force of what she must've been feeling. "Fuck me, Talon. Please fuck me!"

Around the square, more and more guards were beginning to assemble, likely waiting for a number great enough that they could challenge me. The crowd behind them was thick with people watching.

I strained to focus when all I wanted to do was take her. “Astrid, I have a spell to get us back to Ocracoke, but we can’t use it in the middle of a crowd. We’re going to have to fight our way out of here, but we still need to be able to evacuate Ocracoke to Atlantis if it comes to it. We have to try not to start a war.”

She raised her head, panting and looking around the square. “It’s too many people.”

I closed my eyes, trying to hold on to reason. “Between the pent-up lust and the threat to you, I don’t know if I can stay in control.” I pressed the spell into her hand. “If I start mindlessly slaughtering people, you take this and fucking run.

She thrashed her head. “I’m not leaving you. You won’t hurt me.”

Some of the guards were armed with weapons I’d never seen before. There was no guarantee a place like Atlantis that existed out of time and space hadn’t come across a weapon that could neutralize even a berserker too quickly for me to get Astrid to safety. If I told Astrid that, she wouldn’t leave me. “There’s a spell for each of us,” I lied. “I’ll follow you there.”

“Fuck. That.” She laughed, a half-mad ragged laugh that made people in the crowd take a step back. “Talon Thorvald, you’re a terrible liar. Stick to what you’re good at...get me the fuck out of these stocks. Then put your tongue to better use. It’s my turn to protect you.”

Another contingent of guards arrived and started pushing the crowd back, but it was too many people.

“How?”

“With my song.”

I was torn between reaching for my axe and the bone-deep need to satisfy my mate’s desperate desires. “It won’t be powerful enough.”

She laughed again. “I’m ready to find out what I’m capable of. Fuck me.”

It was our best shot. I thrust into my mate from behind, groaning at the swollen, soaked heat of her surrounding my cock. She arched her back but couldn’t move. She was fully at my mercy as I sunk deeper until our bodies were joined.

I held her shoulders, trying to make sure I wasn’t pushing them into the stocks as I rocked my hips forward. Her song was trapped inside the spelled wood, building and building as we coaxed her pleasure higher.

“You’re still holding back,” she said though gritted teeth. “I want *all* of you.”

“I can’t, Astrid. I might hurt you.”

“You won’t. Let go!” she commanded, and my berserker responded to her call.

I let go, becoming the warrior of the gods that lived within me. I could feel her desires even more acutely, even though I couldn’t feel her song.

She wanted my hands on her breasts, and I was only dimly aware of fabric tearing as I shredded the top of her gown to obey her silent command.

“Yes!” She moaned. “*More...*”

I fucked her with wild abandon, and in the dim haze of lust, heard her shout, “Now, Talon! Open it now!”

The top portion of the stocks shredded under my hands just as she shattered around my cock, clenching around me and screaming my name.

Astrid *exploded* with all the trapped power. It rocked out from her like a tidal wave, sweeping over the island in all directions.

Through a fog of incendiary lust, I saw the guards drop their weapons. Everyone stood stunned by the mind-shattering magnitude of it for a split second, then the square devolved into chaos, clothes coming off and bodies melding together.

A guard tried to approach, but when they saw how few were still interested in fighting, they turned and ran.

It didn't stop when the initial wave passed.

Astrid threw herself into my arms and kissed me, radiating power like I'd never felt before.

I didn't remember who I was or what was happening.

My cock ached, but I couldn't come until my mate came again. I lifted her up onto the stocks, letting her sit on the portion that remained.

"More," she begged in an otherworldly voice.

The last whisper of reason reminded me that we needed to leave quickly.

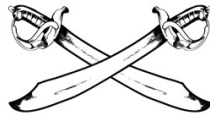
My berserker didn't give a fuck. If my mate wanted more, she'd have more.

She threw her head back as my hands pushed her skirts up, and my thumbs spread her beautiful glistening pussy open.

She wove her fingers into my hair, and smiled at me wantonly. "I thought I told you to put your tongue to better use."



# ASTRID



I'd lost count of how many times we'd both been obliterated by pleasure, and my sense of reality was warped. My ears were ringing so much I couldn't tell whether I was still giving off my song or if it was merely a phantom in my mind.

Talon was sitting on the bench behind the stocks in the middle of the square, and I was straddling his lap, breasts exposed in my torn dress and my skirts rucked up around my hips. His pants and boots were still on, but his cock was inside of me, thrusting in and out slowly.

My song got louder, building again for another wave of bliss.

"Why is the sun still up?" I asked Talon between kisses that tasted like me. "Is it tomorrow?"

"It's still today," he said with a lazy grin.

"Talon Thorvald doesn't grin," I said, sounding like a drunken fool and not caring.

He nipped my bottom lip with his teeth. "He does when he's seen Valhalla."

"I'll show you Valhalla." I rocked my hips up and down, rolling them in a grinding motion that made him hit just the right spot inside of me each time.

"I was warned about sirens, but no one warned me how they'd milk me dry." He panted and grabbed my hips with his



huge hands, trying to slow me down. “What if you want more? I might not be able to get hard again.”

I shook my head and kept going faster. “All I want is for you to feel as good as I do.”

I let my song reach a crescendo as he pushed me over the edge again, and he toppled over with me.

He wrapped his arms around my back and pulled me close as he groaned my name, shuddering and bucking his hips.

For a long moment, we just held each other and nothing else mattered.

My song slowly subsided, replaced with a wave of contentment that would impact everyone on the island, regardless of whether they’d felt my song.

“We have to go,” I said, looking around at the absolute debauchery that had obviously taken place in the streets. Clothes were everywhere, people lay in clusters or in pairs up against the walls of the buildings.

There was no shame here.

We’d chased it away with love.

Talon lifted me onto my feet and grabbed the spell bottle that we’d forgotten in the haze of my song. He also picked up a sack and a human head.

Avery’s head.

Talon held them up. “The bounty on your head and the head of the man who tried to claim it. Should we mount it in the square as a warning?”

I looked around again. “We leave them with peace, not warnings. There’s a far greater enemy we need to face together.”

Talon kissed me deeply. “Ever the level-headed one. You knew what you were getting marrying a berserker.”

I laughed. “I had no idea what I was getting marrying a berserker. But I think I’ve got him under control.”

He pulled me in for another kiss, but I took his hand and tugged him towards the docks, just barely managing to tuck my tits into the torn top of my dress. In the contented aftermath of my song it was difficult to remember that most of the people we loved were still in danger.

As we approached the docks, we both searched all of the ships, but *The Vengeance* was nowhere to be seen.

“They managed to get a spell,” Talon said.

I breathed a sigh of relief, hoping they’d reached Thorin in time to help.

I steeled myself to ask, “Dutton? Is he okay?”

Talon squeezed my hand. “He was still alive when we made the leap. If they got a spell to leave, Sigrid will have gotten a healing spell for him too. I’m hopeful.”

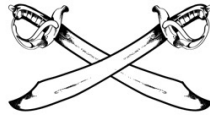
“Where will it take us?” I asked, nodding to the small vial in his hand.

“It came from Eloise, so my guess would be that we’ll arrive somewhere that will aid our cause, but be maximally chaotic. Whatever we face, whatever the outcome, we face it together. No more running.”

I took a deep breath and looked into the eyes of the only man I’d ever loved, the man I was going to build a life with. “Let’s go fight for Ocracoke.”

# EPILOGUE

## TALON



**T**he spell Eloise had given us was so violent that for a moment I thought we'd been betrayed. It felt like I came apart into tiny pieces that were scattered far into the sky, but then they were flung back together with a crack.

Through it all, I gripped Astrid's hand, anchoring her to me. If we were going to be lost in the cosmos, we were at least going to be lost together.

Suddenly my boots were on firm ground again, and I felt the wind sweep through my hair before we'd fully rematerialized.

"You're late. As usual."

I didn't have to open my eyes to recognize that frigid voice.

I blinked and saw my father standing in front of us on the deck of a Viking warship that was anchored just off the coast of Ocracoke. All around us on the sea, sails stretched to the horizon, flying a mix of Saxon and Viking colors.

They'd come to annihilate Ocracoke.

"Take us back," I said to Astrid urgently. We couldn't help them from here.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," my father said.

Astrid's eyes flared as she looked to my left, and she didn't shift us.

I turned to find Thorin and Sigrid on their knees. A Saxon soldier stood behind each of them with a pistol pointing at their heads.

The people I loved most were in mortal danger, but there was a way out. If Astrid focused, she could make the leap with all of us.

My father flicked a coin up into the air and caught it with a smirk.

Not a coin. A piece of eight.

“Do it,” he said. “Give me an excuse to wipe Atlantis out at the same time.”

If he already had the piece of eight, it might still be worth the risk. I couldn't see a better way of getting us all out alive. Atlantis stood a better chance of defending themselves with three berserkers and a warrior making the leap to raise the defense than they did being caught off guard by this fleet.

Thorin's voice in my mind said, *They have Layla and Reed. They'll torture them if we try anything. If he wanted to kill us, he could've done it already. He's after something else.*

I squeezed Astrid's hand and gave a tiny shake of my head.

My father's desires were unreadable, blocked by his formidable magic. He was the king of Daneland, which gave him access to a well of power we couldn't match. His berserker was vicious, but I'd fight him if it came to it. We'd always known that one day we'd have to challenge him. We couldn't run forever.

“Get to the fucking point, old man,” Sigrid said, rolling her shoulders like she was ready for a fight.

My father smiled like he'd been anticipating this moment. “You're going to do your duty. You'll wed the match I've chosen for you and produce an heir.”

My berserker snarled and snapped its jaws at the very suggestion, and Thorin's growl was an animal sound that made the guard behind him flinch.

Sigrid was already shaking her head, eyes wild with terror that was completely out of character. I'd never seen her like this.

Thorin snarled, "Leave Sigrid out of it. I'll be your heir."

My father glared. "You? You aren't worthy of the throne. You humiliated yourself mooning after a whore and stealing from the House of Pleasures. The nobles would never follow you." He turned back to Sigrid. "She's the strongest of my line. The only one I'll accept."

Sigrid cocked her head at him. "How do you see that ending? Because I see it ending the same way it did last time you pulled this shit, but this time I'm going to claim your throne and decorate it with your fucking skin before I sit on it."

My father laughed. "As delightful as that sounds, you won't be coming home to Daneland with me."

A man I hadn't initially noticed stood from a chair across the deck and walked towards us slowly. His resemblance to Reed was uncanny. Same lanky height, same green eyes and chiseled jaw, but with silver in his hair.

The new Saxon king.

I shuddered at the coldness in his eyes. His desires were cruel and power-hungry. This wasn't a man to trifle with.

"You said she'd be obedient." His voice dripped with disdain.

My father narrowed his eyes at Sigrid, past pretending he was amused by this. "Oh, she will be."

Sigrid shook her head. "You want an obedient heir? Make a new one. I'm *never* going to obey you again."

The Saxon king spread his hands. "Your father and I share a common problem. Multiple common problems really. Coffers depleted by endless war between our kingdoms. We each have an heir who won't do their duty. And pirates harassing our ships. Common problems make unlikely allies.

We're going to form an alliance between our kingdoms and end the pirate problem at the same time."

Astrid sucked in a breath, realizing where they were going with this. I pulled her closer, hoping she didn't draw my father's focus. He didn't seem to know she was a siren yet, and if he found out, we were going to have to take our chances running to Atlantis.

My father's voice turned menacing as he glared down at Sigrid. "You'll marry the Saxon prince or I'll crush your little island and everyone on it."

Sigrid snarled. "Force me to do it and I'll kill him like I killed the others."

The Saxon king threw his head back and laughed. "A Viking princess murders the heir to the Saxon throne? What a martyr he'd be."

The look Sigrid shot him should've incinerated him where he stood. "That's what you want, isn't it? Why not just have him killed?"

Astrid bristled next to me. I didn't think Sigrid would actually kill Reed, but if she was backed into a corner and forced to marry again, there was no telling.

The Saxon king got in Sigrid's face. "I want my son to stop playing pirate and do his duty. Having him killed makes him useless to me. But he's useful as a martyr if you'd like to do me that favor."

If Sigrid killed him, it would start another war and give the king a reason to levy taxes to fund it. If she didn't, they'd get the allegiance they sought.

Sigrid looked at us, and her shoulders dropped. "If I marry him, you'll leave Ocracoke, Atlantis, and all of their people alone?"

I didn't care how decent Reed was, I didn't want my sister to marry him to save us.

Astrid tugged on my hand and I looked into her eyes. She'd been forced to marry me, and it was the best thing that

had ever happened to either of us. But neither of us had lived through Sigrid's pain.

My father said, "As long as you're obedient and the pirates stop harassing trade in our waters, we'll leave them to their quaint existence. But I mean *obedient*. You'll take your place as princess of both kingdoms and you'll produce an heir."

Sigrid smiled coldly. "Planning to oversee that process again?"

My father's jaw clenched. "That won't be necessary. I'm taking her as collateral."

He nodded, and two soldiers dragged Layla forward. She was gagged, and her face was streaked with tears.

Thorin roared and jumped to his feet, ignoring the pistol that was pointed at his head.

So my father pointed a sword at Layla's heart.

Thorin froze, half berserk already, but still able to see reason.

"Don't worry," my father said. "She'll be safe in the House of Pleasures, where she belongs."

Thorin radiated violence, but he held perfectly still.

"I'll do it," Sigrid said, raising her chin to look at our father.

The Saxon king held out a silver wrist cuff. "You'll wear this and only I'll be able to take it off. It will neutralize your berserker."

Sigrid blanched, but recovered quickly and held out her arm. As the Saxon king got close enough to put it around her wrist, she purred, "It's cute that you think my berserker is the part of me you need to fear."

His eyes flashed as he snapped the cuff closed. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to breaking you. Then we'll take that cuff off and your berserker will obey me too."

Sigrid turned back to my father. "Get your ships the fuck away from my home."



My father cocked his head. “Your home is the Saxon palace now.”

He snapped his fingers, and suddenly Thorin, Astrid, and I were sprawled in the square on Ocracoke. People were panic-stricken, but my crew was in the process of regaining order.

The ships along the coast began to move, sailing for the horizon with unnatural speed given to them by the weather mages.

Thorin screamed with rage, and I knew all too well what he was feeling.

“We’ll get Layla back,” I said, trying to calm his berserker. “The old bastard overplayed his hand.”

Thorin put his hands on his head, breathing deeply. “And Sigrid? Forced to marry a Saxon fuck...”

Astrid stood in front of him fearlessly, holding his face in her hands. “That Saxon fuck is my quartermaster and one of the best men I know. I’m more worried about Reed.”

Thorin nodded, visibly struggling to regain control of himself. “You two need to rule in my stead here. Make sure we’re ready if they try anything else. I’m going after Layla.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said without hesitation. “Astrid can handle Ocracoke.”

Thorin considered me, looking calmer. He’d cast off his deranged fear to assess the problem with a clear head. “The more of us who go, the more likely we are to be noticed, which will only put her in danger. I’ll go alone. As soon as I’ve got her out, we can bring hell down upon the Saxons.”

I smiled despite the gravity of the situation. “The Saxon king has just let Sigrid into the palace, thinking he can control her. She’s not the girl who was forced to marry before. I’m sorry we won’t get to see the chaos she wreaks. They don’t even like it when women speak at the dinner table.” I put my arm around my brother. “She’s going to fucking destroy them.”



THANK you so much for reading! Eager to read Sigrid's story? You can preorder [To Wed a Warrior Queen](#) now! Thorin and Layla's book will be coming after that! Want to spend more time with Astrid and Talon? Be sure to [sign up for Jenny's newsletter](#) to get a spicy bonus epilogue!

Ready to spend more time in Atlantis? Next up is [To Win a Witch's Heart](#), in which a pirate captain saves a powerful witch...but he might know more about her misfortune than he's saying...

Keep reading to check out the first chapter!



“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.

Read [To Win a Witch’s Heart](#) now!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenny Nordbak is an author, retired dominatrix, and former archaeologist. When she isn't writing romance novels, she cohosts the Bonkers Romance podcast and delights in narrating the steamiest of audiobooks. When she isn't doing any of those things, she can generally be found in the outdoors somewhere with her two adorably feral children and her handsome Viking husband.

To keep up on new releases and sales news, be sure to sign up for her [newsletter](#)!