

CHAPTER ONE

CSILLA

Port Barlow

Late Summer

I will not die today.

Csilla's unspoken words crowded her mind. She never dwelled on death—there was no reason to in the life she lived. Death came, it took, and it did not give back. She hadn't given much thought to how she would die, but she assumed it would be bloody and brilliant. *Not like this.*

As she walked through the crowd with her wrists tied tightly behind her, her fingers ached for the leather hilt of her sword. If she could, she'd fight until every Incendian soldier lay dead or until her last breath wheezed through her bloodied lips.

Around her, the weathered courtyard overflowed with unruly harbor-folk who'd normally be selling wares or watching the soldiers' demonstrations. On this day, however, they'd be witnessing her execution.

The soldiers marched before her, parting the path like a sword through the sea. To onlookers, she was a stain on their garments they couldn't scrub out, a plague they couldn't be rid of. Every time their eyes ran over the scars along her skin, the piercings that lined her ears, and her one blind eye, their anger flickered with fear and their shouted insults grew louder.

Csilla ignored them. The distant crash of waves and the briny scent of the sea was enough to calm the frenzied beating of her heart—for now. It was impossible to truly be calm when a storm was on the horizon.

Time was running out. The noose loomed across the courtyard.

If the Incendian Navy thought to humiliate her in her last moments, they would fail. She held her chin high and stepped with grace. No one would see her falter. No one would see her break. She'd show them only a girl who was proud of her pirate heritage, who preferred to die and be seen than to waste away, hidden in a cell.

"Filthy pirate!" a woman's voice yelled, her words slicing above the crowd's jeers like a sharpened blade.

Csilla glanced to her right, her good eye coming to rest on a woman whose worn face snarled at her. The woman wove through the crowd, following as the soldiers pushed Csilla forward. Then the woman stopped, slipped off her shoe, and hurled it, the shoe smacking hard against Csilla's cheek. She ignored the searing pain as well as the taunts and laughter that rose from the crowd.

Rage burned through Csilla like wildfire. They could rot in Limbo for all she cared. She stopped walking, pulled against the rope binding her to the soldier, and cut her sight to the woman. When their eyes met, the woman shriveled back, averting her gaze to the ground. It wasn't the first time Csilla had received

this reaction, which was why she usually wore a scarf to cover her white eye, but today she embraced her difference. Today, she was glad the soldiers wouldn't let her wear it.

"*Sobel liitena shobenasku*," Csilla said, repeating the same words that had cursed her half blind. "*Sobel miitesa jaharren eto*."

The woman's face went as white as merchant sails, her eyes growing wide and frantic as she realized Csilla's incantation was a curse. There was no magic in Csilla's veins to fulfill the venomous words, but the woman didn't know that. A glimmer of satisfying warmth spread through Csilla even as the soldiers dragged her forward, their fingers digging into the muscle of her arms and adding more bruises to her body.

"Witch!" the woman screamed. "Pirate witch! You'll waste away in Limbo!" The Harbor of Souls. Once a lost soul docked there in the afterlife, it never left again. It could very well be where Csilla's soul was heading today.

"See you there." Csilla locked gazes with the woman, her lip twisting into a smirk.

The sky was a blanket of clouds but the heat of the sunspur season still hung in the air. Sweat from the dense humid air gathered at the nape of Csilla's neck and traced down her spine like a river snake gliding over water. She wore only the filthy rags that the fort had *graciously* provided after they'd ripped her from the bed of her betrayer and stolen all her gear and armor. Though she hated the way the fabric scratched her skin, there was a twisted satisfaction in knowing that the soldiers, clad in their military trousers and multiple frilly layers, had to withstand the humidity. Sweat dripped down their temples, soaked their collars, stained their underarms.

One soldier shoved her forward into step again. The crowd

parted and Csilla's face went cold when the gallows came into view. She swallowed, her insides on the edge of heaving the small piece of bread she'd eaten yesterday. The noose swayed back and forth, a pendulum ticking down her last moments, and all previous confidence drained from her like blood from a fresh wound. The raised wooden scaffold with the dangling noose was a vision that reignited her darkest nightmares, her deepest unspoken fears. She shivered as she imagined her flailing body, her fingers clawing at her neck . . . her eyes, which would remain open long after her soul departed.

A soldier nudged her forward again until she was at the foot of the wooden stairs.

The world tilted—she blinked, but even in her good eye her vision didn't clear. A scream suffocated in her throat, her stomach turned to rock. She tried her best to remember her grandmother's training on the deck of the *Scarlet Maiden*: *Live fearlessly. Face every threat with a wicked smile and a sharp blade.* Yet as her gaze trailed up the scaffold, she struggled to lift her foot. Fear was an anchor that held her firm against the tide.

A drop of warm rain fell, splattering onto her cheek as she took the first step up and toward her death. By the time the soldiers corralled her directly in front of the noose, the clouds had opened up and showers poured down, cool against her skin.

Observers below pulled their hoods over their heads but Csilla embraced the rain. As the executioner looped the noose around her neck, she tilted her face back, letting the rain wash away the dirt and grime that had collected on her skin during her days in the cell.

The rope binding her wrists cut into her skin, but it didn't stop her from testing the strength of the soldier's knot. She wriggled

her arms, attempting to free herself until a sharp blade pointed into her back, making her freeze.

“As issued by the king of Incendia,” a soldier announced. His eyes trailed over the scroll as if he was reading the words, but the ink dripped in dark droplets from the edge of the rain-soaked parchment. He must’ve hanged so many pirates he knew the words by heart. His voice boomed across the open courtyard. “Any persons associated with piracy will be charged without trial.”

Csilla scanned the upper level of the fort, searching for Rhoda or other Scarlet Maidens. She’d hoped her sister and her crew would come for her, like Csilla would do for them, but their absence proved that not everyone supported the youngest captain on the Sister Seas. Her crew had given up; and worse, they’d left her to die in this forsaken kingdom. Her gaze darted left and right, down by the stairs, by the doors, around the stage, anywhere, everywhere. Hoping she was wrong. Wishing she’d catch a glimpse of her sister’s tightly woven braids or her friends’ devious smiles.

But they truly hadn’t come. It was a stab to the chest that left her knees trembling and filled her with a deep and cruel loneliness.

Then, her eyes fell upon someone in the crowd below, unhooded, rain dripping from his light hair with a smile that she knew too well split across his lips. The sight of him set her stomach on fire—an anger nearly strong enough to cover the ache in her chest.

In another time, in a place she’d buried deep within her memories, she would’ve been relieved to find his familiar sea-green eyes in this crowd, and perhaps, she would’ve allowed herself to get lost in them as he saved her from this unjust death.

But in this moment, in this turn of events, he wasn’t there to rescue her. In fact, he was the reason she was facing death.

Flynn Gunnison—*her betrayer*.

It may as well have been him tying the noose around her neck. And after how he'd betrayed her trust, their friendship, and the possibility of what could've been between them, he had the gall to look her straight in the eyes. She lifted her chin. She would never let him see how much he'd shattered her.

She partly blamed herself for being so foolish, for letting the warm flame of his touch pull her into bed with him a week before. Maybe it was his charm. Maybe it was the rum. Whatever it was, the cost was her life.

Csilla's stomach twisted. She tore her gaze away from her betrayer as the soldier spoke once again.

"Csilla Abado of Macaya," he announced. "Captain of the *Scarlet Maiden*, conspirer against the Crown, pirate by choice, and pirate by blood, has been sentenced to hang by the neck until death."

The soldier rolled his drenched scroll back up even though it tore at the edges, then retreated down the stairs. No one cheered. No one clapped. The pattering of rain continued, seeping through Csilla's clothes, dripping off the tip of her nose. The fall through the gallows would break her neck, and if by some chance that didn't kill her, she'd choke to death soon after. This didn't stop her fingers from digging desperately at her neck for a grip around the rope.

Csilla closed her eyes once more, sending her last prayer to the Sea Sisters. She asked Anaphine to guide her soul with grace through Limbo and into the After. She prayed to Talona for strength for herself in her last moments, and even though they'd abandoned her, she prayed for her crew and for Rhoda, who had to go on without her. Finally, she pleaded for Iodeia to avenge her

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and smite Port Barlow with vicious waves taller than any tower they could build, taller than the Obsidian Palace in their capital city.

Maybe Csilla's dying wish would stop Incendia from encroaching any farther on the island kingdom of Cerulia. If the Incendian king had his way, the pirate fleet of Cerulia would be buried at the bottom of the sea, along with everything they stood for. Except for the gold. The greedy king would keep every coin for himself.

The footsteps of the executioner echoed behind her, thick heavy slaps against the creaking platform. Her chest fell in heavy pants and she counted every last breath. Her hands clenched into fists, her fingernails cutting crescents in her palms as she held on to every last second.

Then the lever clicked, and the wood below her dropped.

Everything stilled for a moment, a breath taken before the leap.

Csilla's heart fell first, then her legs followed. The blur of the crowd and their angry screams made her wish that the force *would* break her neck. A quick death. This hungry mob didn't deserve to watch her struggle for air.

It was just a blink of time, but in that moment, memories wisped through her mind, blowing past her like leaves in the wind. The flowered jungle treetops of Macaya. Her grandmother's sharp and commanding bark on the deck of the *Scarlet Maiden*, still able to be heard over the sea's crashing waves. The sparkle in her mother's deep-brown eyes even as she lay in her bed, frail and dying. And Rhoda's softness with her, which she never gave to anyone else.

All of it there, a beautiful painting, then a faint whirl cut through the air above her and instead of jolting to a violent stop,

she kept falling, the rope never tightening around her neck. She hit the ground hard, her legs crumbling beneath her weight, her head knocking into stone.

A thick tang clouded the air around her, making her throat itch. Maybe she'd died and the fall had broken her neck. Was this what death smelled like?

She opened her eyes but the cloud wouldn't clear from her vision. She blinked several more times before realizing it wasn't her eyesight—it was smoke. That was what she was choking on. Somehow, by some miracle, she'd escaped death this time.

Her left ankle throbbed unmercifully as she tried and failed sit up with her hands still bound. Biting her lips shut to keep from groaning, she rolled onto her knees, careful of her ankle as she gazed out from under the gallows.

The crowd before her was a frenzied mob. Women screamed, tripping over their muddy skirts, clawing at each other to escape the possible danger first. Most of the men attempted to run for the fort gates, too, their eyes wide as they searched the area for threats. Soldiers swarmed in from their positions throughout the inside of the fort, their swords at the ready. They tried to reach Csilla but the panicked crowd's momentum pushed them back.

Csilla glanced at the end of the noose that still hung around her neck. The rope laid limp on the stone, severed and frayed. The smoke around her thinned, and her gaze trailed up the wall to see a small dagger wedged between two stones. There was only one person who could throw a dagger with enough accuracy to cut a rope. The same person who used to practice throwing her daggers at Csilla's dolls when they were children.

Her sister.

The weight that'd been suffocating Csilla was gone and she

could breathe easy again. She should've known Rhoda would be too dramatic to take out the guards as they escorted Csilla to the fort, or to break her out of her cell the night she got arrested. It was just like her sister to wait and make a scene out of saving her so that she could be applauded for the show later. Rhoda might've been brash and selfish at times, but they were family and all each other had left. Csilla should've never doubted her, but Rhoda could have at least saved her *before* she was dropped through the gallows.

"Csilla," a harsh whisper sounded from behind her as a blade cut her wrists free. "Get your lazy ass up. We've got a grand escape to make."

Csilla pulled the noose from her neck then whipped around to glare at her elder sister, wincing as she forced her body to stand, her ankle buckling beneath her. "We won't be going anywhere fast. My ankle's shot to hell."

"Don't be such a baby." Rhoda trudged toward her, eyes widening as she glanced to the side. Then she reached behind her back, withdrew a dagger from her leather belt, and threw it in Csilla's direction. The blade whizzed by her ear, followed by a thud and gurgle from over her shoulder. Rhoda had taken out a soldier, but Csilla still wasn't happy with her.

"You couldn't warn me?" Csilla asked as her sister yanked her dagger out of the guard's chest, wiping his blood off it with the crimson scarf that dangled from her belt. Csilla finally managed to stand alone without her sister's help and placed most of her weight on her right foot, allowing only the tip of her left boot to touch the ground.

"Are you finished griping, little cub?" Rhoda asked back, adjusting her daggers, then reaching for her cloak's tie and unrav-

eling the knot. She pulled the scarlet cloak from her shoulders and draped the fabric around Csilla, lifting the hood over her soaking hair. Rhoda pulled another hood from her blouse and covered her own two braids before wrapping an arm around Csilla's waist and moving them both forward.

"Thank you, Rhoda," Csilla said as her sister helped her limp to the edge of the gallows' shadow.

"You didn't really think I would leave you to hang, did you?" Rhoda asked, the taunting sneer gone from her tone. She leaned forward, turning her head left, then right. "You're my sister. I'll always be there to rescue you when you get yourself into trouble." Csilla took notice of how she didn't address her as Captain; she likely never would.

Csilla braced herself as they left the cover of the platform and pushed into the chaotic crowd toward their escape. Soldiers still fought to get through the swarm of people while others searched for the one who had cut the rope. Smoke continued to clear, and the soldiers took the opening to shoot straight for the gallows, where Csilla and Rhoda had been a moment before.

"She's escaped!" a soldier yelled from behind them. "The pirate has escaped!"

Rhoda picked up her pace, practically dragging Csilla along. Csilla put as much weight as possible on her left foot, trying to ignore the sharp pain that shot up her leg with each step. *I will not die today*, she repeated over and over in her head. *Rhoda will not die today. I will not die until Flynn Gunnison has paid for what he's done.*

"Where are the others?" Csilla whispered to her sister.

"The twins are here," Rhoda whispered back. "They have more smokers ready if we need them. The rest are with Nara and the ship."

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Csilla nodded, gripping Rhoda's waist tighter as she bit back her cry. Her ankle twisted again beneath her. The world spun, her vision spotting. She needed water. She needed food. She couldn't remember when she'd last had a good meal. But she didn't dare give up hope or Rhoda would use her instead of her old dolls for target practice. Just a bit farther and they'd be home free. If they could just get through the open doors and to their ship, then she could rest her ankle as long as she needed to.

"Find her!" someone yelled. "Find her allies! Do not let them leave this fort alive!"

Soldiers swarmed through the crowd, a few brushing past her in the chaos. Csilla always preached to her crew to remain calm in the worst of situations, to raise their chins against the biting wind, to grit their teeth and breathe deep when they wanted to scream and give up. Her girls never surrendered, never raised a white flag.

But there she was, their captain—her ankle throbbing, her spirit broken, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes like a weak little doe.

A soldier combed through the rushing men and women and stopped directly in front of Csilla and her sister. His brow turned down and his curious eyes flicked between the two of them, their faces shrouded in shadow.

"Remove the hoods," he ordered, stepping even closer when they tried to shuffle past. When they didn't comply, he pointed his sword at Csilla. "I said, remove the hoods."

Rhoda sighed, then a hiss filled the air. Thick, white smoke rose in plumes from multiple spots in the crowd, unleashing more screams and yells among the harbor-folk. Smoke engulfed them almost immediately, shielding them from sight. Rhoda used the

opportunity to hoist Csilla's arm over her shoulder, taking some relief off her ankle. Another body pushed in at Csilla's right, lifting her other arm. The scent of the mint leaves that Serafina liked to chew calmed Csilla's heart a beat.

Soldiers yelled orders but their confusion made them incapable of doing anything. They were birds flying blind. Smoke billowed up into the sky and out of the gates of the fort, masking their group as they continued forward through the sea of people. Soldiers yelled from behind, their curses fading the farther Csilla and her crew trekked down the hill to the harbor.

Cutting from the crowd, Rhoda and Serafina guided Csilla down a side path. Serafina's twin, Rosalina, darted in front of them, her dark ringlets bouncing as she led the way. She placed her hand idly at her back, ready to unsheathe her hidden blades if need be. If it came down to it, by Maiden's honor she would protect Csilla before her own blood.

A small farmhouse stood in a field off the path, surrounded by tall grass and little white flowers. Csilla thought someone stood in the open doorway, long dark hair blowing with her skirts as she watched the Maidens run like the wind toward the sea. She knew the watching stranger didn't matter in the scheme of things, but something in the back of her mind made her glance over her shoulder at the girl before they rounded the hill.

The sea finally came into view, followed by another glorious sight—the *Scarlet Maiden* with her crimson sails flapping, ready for departure. Csilla had never been so delighted to see her ship, even when she had set foot on it for the first time as captain. The deck had been her home since she was a little girl, more a home to her than anywhere else in the world. She needed the scent of

the wood, the wind blowing against her cheeks, and the sun on her skin out in the open water.

Hidden by a short peak of land, the ship was unable to be seen from the busy harbor and its nosy inhabitants. Csilla and her girls neared the edge of the cliff, the *Scarlet Maiden* waiting below in the water.

Csilla peered down at the waves crashing against the jagged rock. Freedom was within reach, but first a high drop off a sharp and terribly intimidating cliff. “You just *had* to make this escape as dramatic as possible, didn’t you?” she asked Rhoda as she cocked her brow. She remembered the time Rhoda blew up a military ship at a trading harbor just because she could.

“Oh, shut up about it,” Rhoda grumbled. “We jumped higher cliffs than this in Macaya when we were kids. Now, do you need me to throw you over, or are you going to be a big girl and get your ass in the water?”

Csilla shot her own daggers at her sister with her eyes and moved back to make room for a grand swan dive. The sound of someone clapping stopped her as she bent at the knees.

“Well done,” a familiar voice rang out behind. She would recognize that smooth honey tone anywhere. It was the same one that had coaxed her into bed, along with the soft eyes and even softer lips.

Csilla spun around to glare at the captain of the *Anaphine* and the one she’d almost let shatter her. She’d never developed a liking for killing, despite how many had died by her sword, but she would enjoy ripping Flynn apart piece by piece.

How could she have let him lure her to this in the first place? She’d been so gullible, so naïve; she’d never make the same mistake again.

“You son of a—” she started.

“Ah, ah, ah.” Flynn cut her off. He smiled and wagged his finger at her. “Our mothers have nothing to do with this, so please leave mine out of it. I could rattle off nonsense about your mother, but I’ll bite my tongue for your sake.”

There were shouts in the distance, coming closer every second. If she could somehow drag him with her to the *Scarlet Maiden*, she would, but she’d be lucky enough to get to the ship herself with her brokenness.

“I’ll kill you, Flynn Gunnison.” The words tasted delicious on Csilla’s tongue. “When you least expect it, I will be there, waiting in the shadows. *And I will end you.*”

Flynn chuckled, as if knowing she wouldn’t follow through on her threat. “You can hate me all you want, but I count on seeing you again very soon.” Her stomach twisted at the reminder of a time when she would’ve been excited for that moment, but now she only felt the thrill of avenging his betrayal.

Without another glance at him, she turned around and flung herself from the cliff. Her hood fell away and the wind cut through her hair, billowing her cloak behind her, and when she hit the water, it engulfed her like a blanket. She came up for air, glancing back at the cliff as her crewmates made their own leaps.

Flynn stood at the edge, waving good-bye. For now.

CHAPTER TWO

KANE

Baltessa

Early Redwind

The crack of Kane Blackwater's knuckles against his opponent's nose was like the starting pistol before a race—the echo of it brought the gathered crowd to life. Surrounding men exploded into a cacophony of curses and guttural yells as they elbowed each other aside for a clear view down into the fight pit. He'd once been up there, years ago, hungry for violence.

In the basement of Grisby's tavern, it was easy to get swept away in the vicarious thrill of watching two people clash—fist to face, knee to gut. Even Csilla and Rhoda Abado had jumped into the pit for a bit of fun, but Kane was most often the one doing the beating, putting on a show, filling his leather pouch with gold pieces each time he visited the island capital of Baltessa. Tonight, his pockets would be brimming with Cerulian gold.

Blood trickled from his opponent's nose, rolling over his

upper lip. Kane pitied the man—Silas, he believed—because there were only more blows to come. Giving the crowd what they paid Grisby to see would be as simple as shooting fish in a barrel. Kane’s knuckles might be busted and bloody by the end, but at least with the gold he would finally be able to pay off his debt to Dominic Rove, captain of the *Bonedog*. Making deals with him was like bargaining with a snake, and Kane had made one rotten deal too many. Things he’d like to keep buried in the bottom of the Silver Sea.

From above, men roared and stomped their feet in approval, rattling the wooden boards that walled the fighting pit, the ruckus causing dust to unsettle and cloud the air. Kane’s eyes watered, and he rubbed his face with the back of his hand, smearing dirt across his cheek. The movement stung a little, his skin still tight from the sun after his voyage here.

“Get him, Silas!” someone yelled. “Don’t just stand there!”

Silas bared his teeth and lunged forward, swinging his fist toward Kane’s face. The man was all rage and no prudence. Kane stepped aside, smirking as the man blew past him like a rushing boar. Raspy jeers and laughter rumbled from above. Silas growled as he turned back to face Kane. Another swing, another miss. Kane countered and jabbed, grazing Silas’s cheekbone and knocking his chin.

The man stumbled back and Kane saw an opening. With a wide sweep of his arms, he used the strike his father had used on him during their brutal training sessions, catching Silas in the ribs with a blow that cracked them and caved in his side. Kane hooked his punch wide again and put his weight into it. His fist connected with Silas’s jaw. Blood spewed from his mouth and his body jerked to the side like a broken piece of wood.

Cheers erupted again.

But Kane wasn't quite finished yet.

He took two steps back and the crowd hushed. He surged forward with a roundhouse kick so spot on that Silas didn't stand a chance. The thud of the man's face hitting the floor echoed in the musty basement.

One breath.

Two breaths.

Shit. Had he ended the fight too soon?

He clenched his fists and rolled his neck to ease some of his tension. He could care less if the surrounding men enjoyed his brutality or not—he just needed the damned gold. Someone started clapping and his tight muscles eased.

One breath.

Two breaths.

The basement erupted into an ear-splitting roar of approval—the loudest Kane had received yet from his fights.

Thank the goddesses.

Grisby's payout would be hefty tonight. It would be enough to stop Dominic Rove's Bonedogs from breathing down his neck for repayment on his last . . . loan. The hated captain always collected his debts. If Kane was any other man, Rove would've been murdered in a dark alley by now. Kane's surname had saved him too many times to count, for the Blackwater name was renowned through the history of captains. As the captain of the *Iron Jewel*, Kane was favored by the ruler of the Cerulian Islands—the King of Bones.

Kane lifted his bloody fist, acknowledging the men who praised him. He imagined the crowds cheering for him, just like this, if he was ever the one on the throne, if he was the one wear-

ing the Bone Crown. It was a pretty thing, crafted from the bones of an ancient enemy and dipped in liquid gold, known throughout the world, no matter which elemental deity you prayed to.

With a vision of the crown on his head, he quickly got swept away in dreams that would never come true. If he was the King of Bones, he'd cast Dominic Rove out of the kingdom and revoke his title as one of the five fleet captains. The sorry sea whelp didn't deserve his place behind the gold-crested wheel of the *Bonedog*. He bought his way with deals made in the dark, his crew's hands filthy with blood while his own remained clean.

But there was little chance of Kane ever becoming king. With the Cerulian king alive and Kane bearing no royal blood, striking against Rove was just a figment of a desire that would never be fulfilled. Relishing in this moment, pretending the applause was for his dream, was the closest he would ever get.

Then he heard it.

It was faint at first, like the hum of a crewmate drowned out by the flap of sails at sea. But as voices quieted, the sound became clear. The deep toll of a bell rang in the distance. The tune was different than the ones he'd become familiar with—yet somehow, he knew the song in his bones.

"The king!" someone shouted, startling Kane. "It's the king!"

His face went cold. The king. The bell. No wonder he hadn't recognized the toll. He hadn't heard the Blood Bell since he was a child.

Kane rushed to the rope ladder that dangled from the top of the pit, leaving Silas groaning on the ground. He would need his nose reset, and he might not be able to get out of bed for a few days, but he'd be fine. It wasn't Kane's fault the imbecile didn't realize just who he was up against. Most sane men wouldn't enter

the pit with the captain of the *Iron Jewel*, but some saw his youth and thought they could get one up on him. They were always mistaken.

Once out, he motioned to a drunken Grisby in the corner—he'd be back for his payout—and followed the current of men as they moved up the stairs and into the tavern. Kane tried to listen in on flurried conversations, but keeping up was near impossible.

“Was it murder?” one man asked his friend. “It's so sudden.”

“Who will take his place?” asked another.

“No heir? But what about the last Storm? Did they ever find her?”

Loud voices merged into one indecipherable hum. Kane rushed out the doors and into the city.

It was like stepping into a memory.

He had stood in this same district as a boy of nine. Still as a statue. Welded to his father's side even though he wasn't wanted there. Kane remembered glancing up at him from between the strands of his black hair. They'd stopped in the middle of the market, which was odd. Nothing could stop his father from finding a good deal in Baltessa. He was like a hound sniffing out gems among the piles of rubble. But the clang of the Blood Bell ended his hunt so abruptly that Kane had been scared for a brief moment.

“Captain?” a small Kane had asked as he'd tugged at his father's hand, trying to pull him from his frozen state. “Father, what is it?”

Kane didn't receive an answer from him. He never received much from his father besides brutal training and two meals a day from the age of six. Kane had learned to quit asking for anything a long time ago. He didn't dare repeat the question; instead he followed quietly behind his limping father.

Now, Kane didn't follow anyone—he set the course. As he made his way through the streets he couldn't help but notice how the spirits of Baltessa were the same as that day over ten years earlier. Sad faces blurred into a sea of despair for a king they'd never personally known yet who was their best protection against the encroaching Incendian kingdom.

As he walked, Kane's hand warmed, remembering the way his father's callused hand had gripped his like he was holding on for dear life. When Kane had glanced up all those years ago, his father was watching him, his eyes shining with despair and regret—too many things for a boy like to him to understand at the time. His father didn't have to say it aloud. He had been thinking about the death of the woman they both loved most in the world.

Kane always thought of her when he encountered death—even now as the Blood Bell announced the death of the pirate king.

The bell still clanged in its perch above the city's copper spires and stone streets. Darkened windows lit up like beacons in the night. Curtains swept to the side and shutters opened as people mirrored Kane, their eyes searching for the tallest tower. Between the tolls rang a new sound—a chorus of crying. It echoed through the air, snaking between the spires. A song of mourning.

Kane should have felt an inkling of despair for his king, but the truth of the whispers circulating through the narrow alleys and clustered streets left him feeling something he hadn't felt in many, many moons. Hope.

The king had no child—no heir.

There was no son to take his place, no Rathborne to continue the bloodline. The king could've still conceived children, he'd still had time. His death was so sudden that Kane wondered what the

cause had been—a blade in the night? There was little time to wonder, and if there was a traitor in their midst, he'd sniff them out as soon as a larger, more impending problem was dealt with.

The Bone Crown now belonged to no one. There had to be a king to rule the islands—to keep the people safe against Incendia, who would see their ways burned to ashes. The flame-worshipping kingdom would turn the islands into ports for their navy. They'd collect every gold piece for themselves and enslave the free islands to perform the daunting tasks of building their marvelous cities and palaces, just as they'd done when they'd left their western kingdom and crossed the Frozen Gap, taking the eastern land. Now they wanted to expand once more.

If Kane was king, he'd never let the Incendian Navy close enough to even glimpse one of the islands.

While the rest of the Baltessans hung their heads in despair, Kane held his chin high as he strode through the market. It should've been empty since all of the stalls were closed up for the night, but there were more people swarming the area than Kane had seen before. His mind wandered to the other four captains, including his old friends Csilla Abado and Flynn Gunnison. They'd all be wondering the same thing as him when they heard the news: Who would their next ruler be?

More citizens poured into the streets, but Kane took a sharp right and darted back to the inn where he and his crew were staying. There was too much to get in order—and too little time to do it all, especially for what would be coming next after the king's funeral. His hand twitched for the familiar feel of his father's compass in his hand, the one he'd left on the nightstand in the room he'd rented. If he could just hold it for a moment, rub the weathered scrapes along the side with his thumb, he'd be able to

think clearly and piece his plan together, like his father would have done.

When he stepped into the room, everything seemed in place. In the fireplace was the faint ember of a fire he'd forgotten to put out, casting the room in an orange glow. The doors to the balcony were still open, curtains curling in the night wind like waves in the light of the moon.

"Kane?" a soft feminine voice asked.

Shit. He'd forgotten he'd left Clarissa in his bed before running off to Grisby's for gold and blood. He thought she would've been gone by now—or at least, he wished.

"Where'd you run off to?" she asked. He glanced over at her then, still in his bed. Her amber hair fell over her shoulders as she sat up, covering herself with the sheets. "When I woke up, you weren't here. And the Blood Bell. Did you hear the Blood Bell? I was worried you—"

Kane fisted her pile of clothes from the rickety chair next to the wall and tossed them at Clarissa. "Out," he said, aware of how cold he sounded and not caring in the least.

"Out?" she asked, her face melting into a pout. Her hazy emerald eyes shimmered with crocodile tears. "Out? Is that how you're going to treat me? Like I'm one of Grisby's whores?"

Kane could've thrown his head back and laughed. This trick worked on traders and new recruits, but not on Kane. "You knew what this was. You knew there were no strings attached." He sighed, ready to be alone so he could get his mind right. "Don't feign ignorance with me."

Clarissa straightened in the bed, her gaze down at the sheets. "I just thought that . . ." Kane knew the game she was playing—she was an innocent girl being treated unfairly by a beast such

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as him, but she was beastly too; her claws were just hidden. “I thought that maybe you and I would . . .”

“What?” Kane asked, taking a step closer to the bed. “You thought that I would pronounce my love for you? That I would whisk you away on my ship?”

Clarissa tore her gaze away from him, her cheeks flaming. Kane knew the blood rushing to her skin was not from embarrassment but from hidden anger. “We’ve been doing this for years, Kane.” Her voice quieted to almost a whisper. “I know it started out as just a fun roll in the sheets every time you docked but you can’t blame me for falling for you.”

“Oh.” Kane watched her carefully. “So now you’ve suddenly fallen in love with the captain of the *Iron Jewel*.”

Clarissa nodded, her lips curling into a pathetic frown. Kane might’ve believed her if it wasn’t for the feline glint in her eyes. He neared the edge of the bed, noticing her breath hitch with his movement. Settling one knee on the mattress, he leaned forward, and laid one hand on either side of Clarissa’s face. She arched her back as he bent toward her, so close that her quick breaths were on his face.

“Oh, Clarissa,” he whispered, tracing the tip of his nose down her cheek. She shuddered beneath him. “How convenient of you to declare your feelings for me after you hear the Blood Bell.”

Clarissa went still beneath him, but his voice remained low and seductive.

“Did you truly think that I wouldn’t connect the dots?” he asked, pulling back to watch her green eyes widen as she realized she’d been caught. “We all know that the Blood Bell signifies the death of the pirate king. We all know that our king has no son.” He lowered his head, whispering the next part in her ear. “Tell

me, Clarissa. What happens when there is no heir?"

Clarissa tilted her head to the side, exposing her neck as Kane blew across her skin, making her shiver. "The Trials," she answered with a rasp. She cleared her throat. "The Trials begin."

"Do you think that I will win the Trials?" A light kiss on her collarbone.

"Yes," she said, breathless.

"Will I make a great King of Bones?" His fingers traced softly down her jaw.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Do you want to be my queen?" He leaned farther into her, brushing his lips against hers.

"Oh Goddess, yes," she moaned.

"Do you really think I am that stupid?"

"Yes! Oh yes! Yes—" She stopped, clearly realizing that Kane's question was not the one she'd assumed he was going to ask.

Clarissa put her hands on Kane's chest and shoved him away. Her sharp fingernails dug into his skin, but he didn't flinch—he'd felt much worse.

"You're a cod, Kane Blackwater," she hissed, snatching her dress from where Kane had thrown it. She slipped out of the bed as she pulled the fabric over her curvy frame, huffing and puffing the entire time.

"You're right," Kane answered, grabbing her wrist before she could run out of the room. "I am a cod, a scoundrel, all the terrible words you're thinking in your head right now. So get out of my room and go find yourself a love who sets your heart on fire and stop wasting your time on ashes like me. Don't wait for me, because I won't be waiting for you."

Clarissa raised her chin defiantly at him, but Kane knew she

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understood. They were both raised to take what they wanted and offer no apologies. It was one of the first things his father had beat into him.

As she trudged to the door, the strap of her dress hanging off her shoulder, she stopped and stared Kane straight in the eyes. “I wish I’d never met you,” she said through her teeth. The blow should have hurt, but it didn’t. Nothing really hurt anymore.

“You should be thanking me,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest as he eyed his father’s open compass on the nightstand. Good. Right where he left it. “I’ve taught you one of the most valuable lessons in this life.”

“And what is that?” She pursed her lips, waiting for his answer. “Never trust a pirate.”