



# CHAPTER 3



MY NEW RAPIER FEELS incredible against my side, the knuckle guard shimmering in the sunlight as I walk. I adjust my belt slightly so the sun doesn't catch it. Last thing I need is my enemies to see me coming.

A boy who must still be in his younger teen years rows me out to my ship. He doesn't say a word the whole trip, which I love. I tip him generously when we arrive, and he returns to shore, waiting to row out the next person. Eventually, I know Alosa means to have docks extending out from the island so ships can anchor closer. But for now, we do what we must.

When Alosa gifted me the brigantine and asked what I wanted to call her, I told her *Vengeance* more as a joke than anything else, referring to a conversation from a while back.

"The three of you make quite a set," Alosa said while Mandsy, Niridia, and I all sat around a campfire on Queen's Keep, resting after a hard day's work helping with construction and organizing our men and women.

"Because we're pretty?" Mandsy asked.

"Nah," Niridia said. "It's because we're her favorite people."

I said nothing.

“You’re both correct,” Alosa said, joining us around the fire. She grabbed a stick and poked at the flames, which were just as bright as her hair. More seriously, she added, “You’re my inner circle, you know that, right? You’re what I need to keep everything we’ve built. This pirate empire will continue to succeed only because I have you three to rely on.”

“Aww, thanks, Captain,” Mandsy said.

“You’re going to make me blush,” Niridia said.

True to form, I said nothing.

“I mean it,” Alosa said. “Now, don’t ever let anything bad happen to you.”

Niridia gestured to her arm, which was still in a sling. “I could argue that this was your fault.”

Alosa winced, and I wanted to smack Niridia for the comment.

“It’s a joke, Alosa,” Niridia amended. “The pirate king is gone. We can put everything he did behind us.”

But Niridia was still suffering from the two gunshot wounds she’d received during our race against the king to reach the siren treasure. Her injuries were hard to forget when her bandages were in plain sight, for all to see.

Alosa stared at the flames. “We’re going to make this empire better than he ever could.”

“Because you’re in charge,” Mandsy said. “And you’re better than he was.”

“No, it’ll be because it’s built on the backs of hardworking, good women. Pirates who hold honor and strength above all else.”

“And gold,” Niridia whispered.

Alosa shook her head. “With you three setting an example for the rest, I know everything will work out. You are the best parts of me.”

“I don’t ever remember hearing you be so sappy, Captain,” Mandsy said.

“I mean it. You are the best parts of me. Mandsy, you are my mercy.”  
As a healer and pirate, Mandsy deals help and death efficiently.  
*Mercy* is the perfect word for her.

“Niridia,” Alosa continued, “you are my justice.”

Niridia is more fair and levelheaded than anyone else I know. I thought Alosa’s words an apt description. Then she turned her gaze on me.

“And you, Sorinda. You are my vengeance.”

A hush fell over our group.

“Never forget this,” Alosa said. “Never forget how precious you three are to me.”

As I stare at the side of the brigantine while climbing the rope ladder, I realize that Alosa took my suggestion for ship name to heart. In bold black letters, someone has painted *Vengeance* on the side of my ship. I suppose I’m stuck with it now, not that it’s a bad name.

I set one foot on the deck, take a look around at all the unfamiliar faces loading food, supplies, and personal effects, and feel a jolt of uneasiness.

I know how to sail. I know the jobs of every sailor on a ship. I know what needs to happen for things to run smoothly and efficiently. I’ve just never been the one in charge before. Alosa said I’d earned it, but it wasn’t exactly something I ever wanted: captaining my own ship. Yet I’ve accepted this responsibility, and I intend to see it through to the very end.

Then I will resume duties as assassin and never captain a crew again.

In the meantime . . .

I start for the girl barking out orders to the pirates shuffling about.

“Get those barrels stored below quickly. In the back of the hold, please. We won’t need them right away. And, you there! You’re not on vacation. You can have one trunk of personal effects and one alone.”

“Dimella?” I ask when I reach her.

“You must be Captain Sorinda. Nice to meet you.”

She’s a tiny thing at barely five feet, but her voice is so loud, you’d think she was twice that height. With strawberry-blond curls pulled into a band at the nape of her neck and deep brown eyes, she looks positively youthful.

“Before you can ask, I’m twenty-one years old. I can assure you I’m more than capable of serving as your second on this voyage, Captain.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

“That’d be a first for me. Everyone takes one look at me and assumes I’m sixteen. Not my fault my da was a wee man. Oi, you there!”

She points to a man wearing an enormous hat. I have to do a double take once I recognize him.

“Enwen?” I ask.

“Miss Sorinda!” he says excitedly. “Wait, that’s not right anymore. Captain! I was excited to hear you were in charge of this voyage!”

Warily, I ask, “Why?”

“Because Kearan is also aboard. Didn’t you know?”

I don’t know what he means by that, but I’m already certain I don’t like it.

“What’s with the hat?” Dimella asks him.

Yes, indeed. Enwen wears the biggest sailor’s hat I’ve ever seen. You could catch gallons of rainwater with it, and the plume looks as though it came from something much larger than an ostrich.

“It’s my newest good-luck charm,” Enwen exclaims. “When people are distracted by this hat, they’re not watching my hands.” He wiggles his fingers.

“There’ll be no thieving on my vessel,” I warn him.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Captain! This is for if we happen to stop anywhere along the way. I never know when I might need my lucky hat.”

“Toss it over or store it below,” Dimella says. “I can’t see half the ship when you’re in front of me, and that has nothing to do with my size.”

“Aye-aye, Miss Dimella.”

Enwen pulls the hat from his head and clutches it to his chest. He’s a tall man even without it, with midnight-black hair, small eyes, defined cheekbones, and impossibly long lashes. Enwen’s body type borders on scrawny. Probably a good thing. With all the superstitions he carries around with him, the man can appear massive.

I start to follow him belowdecks to get settled before remembering I don’t sleep with the rest of the crew. No, this is my ship. My quarters are at the stern. The captain’s quarters. The door is unlocked, so I let myself in.

It’s more space than any single person on a ship has a right to own, though I’m sure Alosa would think it too small. Brigantines are thin and easy to maneuver, valued for their speed. The captain’s quarters are much smaller than they might be on other vessels.

I empty out my bag, putting four sets of identical clothing in cubbies of the closet. Cotton shirts and pants in varying shades of gray and black. My spare boots I place on the floor, tucking my coin purse within the toe of the left boot for safekeeping.

I notice that Alosa has already placed other sets of clothing in here for me. Fur-lined pants and boots. Long-sleeved shirts, wool scarves and hats, a coat thick enough for me to get lost in.

There’s no telling how far north we’ll have to go, but the farther we sail, the colder the weather will get. As usual, Alosa has thought of everything.

I haven’t any items in the way of personal belongings save all the weapons I carry on me. I learned at a young age not to give value to such things. They can be ripped away faster than you can blink.

I store my second rapier, brass knuckles, knives, and other sharp

instruments throughout the room, placing them in drawers, nooks behind navigating instruments, and wherever else I can make them fit. That done, I turn to the bed.

I can't remember the last time I slept in an actual bed. Usually, it's a hammock belowdecks for the likes of me, and I've certainly never slept in a bed big enough to fit two people.

Atop the woolen blankets, I find the key to my room, a fine-looking jacket, and a note. I pocket the key before picking up the parchment.

You're a captain now, so you need to look the part. Happy belated birthday! See you when I get back.

With love,  
Mandy

I flip the paper over, finding another scrawl of writing in a different penmanship.

You should know I had to stop her from picking out something in yellow. Since you hate attention and birthdays, I won't bother to wish you a happy one. You should also note that I refrained from giving you a gift. Who's your favorite?  
It's me!

—Niridia