

SAILS OF BLACK
AND BLOOD

THE REVENGE OF
CAPTAIN VESSIA

LESLIE ALLEN

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CONTENT WARNINGS

This book includes individual scenes that are graphic and may be harmful to some readers. Please proceed with caution.

Death
Violence
Needles
Deadnaming and purposeful misgendering
Public hanging
Sexual content
Starvation
Descriptions of underfed people
Emotional abuse
Parental abuse
Drowning
Forced Confinement
Grief and depression around loss of loved ones
Firearm use
Recreational alcohol, smoking, and drug use
Dark spaces
Blood, gore, and decapitation of various limbs
Descriptive scenes of biting and blood drinking, including in sexual scenarios
Poverty
Stabbing
Fire, burns, and burning buildings
Food restriction in the form of a vampire drinking rationed blood

PREFACE

To get right to the heart of it, this is not a lighthearted book. This is a book of blood and violence and living in an intolerant society, and the realities of fighting against it. This book is drawn from my own experience and traumas of being a trans woman, yet inspired by pirate history; and asking questions of how a vampire would act within that history.

Despite the dark themes of this book, I hope you find the experiences of which I've drawn, the history I've studied, and the themes of hope despite everything, enthralling.

For your convenience, there is a glossary of naval terms in the aft-end of the book.



Jardoms of Norlandia

Icewind Vale

Seven Peaks

Republie

Trondhelle

Alfyce

Vesumbopu

Daxla

Thaxaxa

Scourcree Island

The Three Nations of the Great Divide

A chart of the pre-vlauc Island Nations of the area
Commissioned by his Majesty, King Darold the VII
Orced. The year of our Lord above, 653

Kingdom of Kitaxia

MERCANTILE PRINCEDOM OF VARCNA

Varcna City

Warcna Cove

Polcou

Viranols

Drax

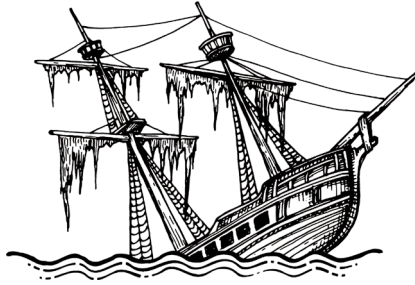
Souris

*I had to dig you out of the grave, despite an entire
society piling dirt on you.*

But finally, I can give you this gift.

To the girl who needed this book a lifetime ago.

CHAPTER ONE



“Captain Claire Vessia. For the crimes of murder in the highest degree, piracy, high crimes against his majesty the king, and assaulting a naval vessel, you are hereby sentenced to death. You will proceed hence in one week’s time to the gallows, where you will hang by the neck until dead. Do you have anything to say before his majesty’s court and god above?”

I looked up from the chains shackling my wrists.

Despite wishing that he’d look at me and see the fear and misery I was feeling, to give me any passing consideration past thinking I was a nail that needed hammering, the judge’s wrinkled gaze didn’t shift from those damn papers on his desk.

Dread gnawed in the pit of my stomach as I opened my mouth to speak, to plead, to do anything, but the shock of his words announcing my sentence cut into my limbs, making them feel heavier than cannonballs.

They were going to hang me.

Imagining a rope around my neck, the jeering crowds, and a pitiless executioner robbed me of breath, a tightness in my lungs making me gasp for air, unable to speak.

The judge adjusted his powdered wig, finally glancing up from his papers to peer over his jewelled spectacles in my direction. There was no pity I could see in his eyes. “No? Nothing to say?”

I thought my trial would be where I'd be vindicated, that they'd all see it was just a misunderstanding, and that I was innocent.

Anything but *condemn* me.

Think Claire. Think. There has to be a way out of this.

I racked my brain for anything I could say that would spare me the gallows. The drive to run was burning in my bones, a useless feeling, as all four of my limbs were chained to the pulpit. Heavy footsteps of guardsmen getting closer from their positions echoed from behind me in the silent courtroom.

No one here would save me. The only people here were me, the judge, the two guards who'd brought me in from the cells below, and my public defender. They didn't even let my mother—or worse yet—*my husband* in to see this.

The only person whose job it was to defend me had done an all-round shit job at it.

My lawyer stood off to my side, yawning. His indifference to my sentence would've made me feel nauseous if I wasn't so scared.

"No. I have nothing to say."

It took a few seconds to realize it was me who spoke. How could I possibly sound so calm at a time like this?

They were going to *hang* me.

The judge nodded, his eyes again on his papers. "Very well. Take her away." He swished his hand dismissively as if I were a spec of dust.

The same part of my shocked mind that drove me to deny my last right to speak must've also been driving my limbs as the guards appeared at my side, unlocking me from the pulpit, chaining my limbs instead to each other. They pulled at my bindings, and I couldn't find it in myself to resist them with any more than with a half-hearted tug. Whether that was due to the miscarriage of justice happening to me or the badly bandaged gash along my stomach was anyone's guess.

I limped after them, wincing through my teeth, and noticed that the sound of misplaced justice sounded a lot like the clinking of chains.

I didn't deserve to die, I wasn't even a pirate!

Well. I was *barely* a pirate.

I didn't get a vote when my captain and his officers decided they

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were going to raise the black. I didn't get a say otherwise when the ship's officers voted in favour. I didn't get to voice my concerns when we jumped merchantmen with our piddly 2-pounder cannon. I was just a midshipman; *I didn't get a choice.*

How the hells we even got that lucky to take four ships before we were caught was past me.

It had been idiotic, stupid, ill-thought-out, and several other words that I thought were smart sounding and disapproving. Or at least that's what I *thought* I remembered saying when I'd explained it all to my lawyer.

If I'd actually been captain... I'd have done it differently. I'd have done it right.

Despite it all, the Kingdom of Kitaxia suffered no threats to its maritime trade. The navy was sent after us.

Barely two months of flying the black, and the navy had us scuppered.

In the resulting shipwreck, all but four of us drowned, and it was a close thing for me as well.

When they pulled the survivors from the water, we were no better than half-drowned rats, and the naval officers decided the others weren't worth keeping alive.

They were shot and tossed back into the sea.

When it was my turn to taste lead, they couldn't bring themselves to shoot a poor defenceless *woman*. Trust a Kitaxian to be sexist about executions, so help me Gods.

They clapped me in irons and dragged me back to Haxla, the capital of Kitaxia. On our way there some bright naval officer on board thought they'd get a promotion if they told the authorities that *I* was the captain of the pirate vessel. The last survivor, the terror from the sea, mastermind of it all.

And so the stage was set.

The navy had sunk the pirate vessel, captured its captain, and glory, glory to the king and all that bullshit.

I would hang because some Kitaxian navy officer wanted a promotion.

I had been looking forward to my trial, getting to prove my innocence, curse out the captain's name, and then get on the first ship out of Haxla. The judge however, seemed disinclined to believe anything my public defender had to say. From how the lawyer had listened to me, I doubted he believed me either.

Now here I was, being marched back down to the dungeons with only a few days left in this miserable existence.

I held back burning tears as they dragged me into a cell I'd now long since been acquainted with, the memory of the transition from the courthouse to the dungeons lost to panicked reflection.

The shackles around my feet were undone, along with the one around my left wrist, but my right was chained to the wall. I offered no resistance to them, even if I was more present minded to fight them, I doubt I had the physical strength to manage much.

The fire was gone out of me now, if it was ever there to begin with.

The guards nodded at their work and left me in the cell, clanging the barred door closed behind them. After a few stomps of their boots against the hard stone floor, they disappeared into the darkness beyond the bars of the cell, leaving me alone in the black void of the dungeon once more.

Only the barest hint of moonlight shining through a crack in the wall illuminated the damp stone walls, the sound of dripping moisture, and iron-forged bars that separated me from hundreds of empty cells.

In Kitaxia, you were never a prisoner for long. The gallows waited for no one.

Once I was sure they were gone, I let out a shaky breath, feeling a clutched knot of sobs rising in my chest, an ache beneath my breast.

I was going to die.

The panic seeped into my core, and I clawed at my breast, wishing I could reach in and scoop it out of me. Despite tears and angry scratches finding no purchase in my chilled skin, I crawled over to what passed for my bed, a smattering of straw in a corner. I tried to scramble together some warmth and comfort.

I concentrated on where the steel manacle cut into my cold

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calloused skin. Cold and pain meant I was alive. And if I was still alive, just maybe, I could find a way out of the gallows.

How many days did the judge say? Seven days?

Actually, it was six now. It was sunset when they led me out of the courthouse.

I cursed every swear I knew, banging my fist onto the merciless stone floor from where I lay, while broken sobs choked out of my throat. I contemplated my last days in teary horror. Sitting in this damp cell, starving, near frozen to death, all before they dragged what would probably look more corpse than woman to the gallows.

They hadn't exactly been feeding me, after all. I'd had nothing but spoonfuls of water, breadcrumbs, the smallest amount I'd need to keep breathing. The medical wrappings around my abdomen, an ugly wound I got during the shipwreck, was almost certainly infected. I didn't dare look at the blackened skin attempting to heal around blood and salt-soaked shrapnel underneath. My breathing had been raspy for days, and I didn't even want to begin imagining the levels of sanitation in this bleak cell.

Every day over the past three weeks was a surprise to wake up to. I fully expected to just... not wake up one morning.

I wondered what I'd die from first? The gallows? Starvation? Infection? Or would some random guard take pity on me and do me in himself? The possibilities seemed endless. The monotony of how I questioned my end made my panic slowly die in my gut with my sobs beginning to silence as I took a shuddered breath. Pushing myself onto my back with a wince, I tried my best to find a comfortable position laying my forearm on my brow.

A cold and merciless realization settled into the void the panic had left, letting calm wash over me, despite the tears sliding down my face into my matted hair.

I'll have to die with my head held high. That's the only way I win.

I thought... I could manage that. If they were going to kill me, at least I could die well with my chin in the air. Maybe I could flip them off with my last breaths?

I started to morbidly chuckle at the idea when an unfamiliar sound

echoed through the silent dungeon. Not the usual thunderous boots of the guards, or the cart bringing meals or taking out a dead cellmate, but a sure and quiet *click-clack* along the cobblestone.

Strange.

I rolled over on the straw, looking through the bars of my cell towards the hallway, to see a flickering of orange firelight bouncing off the stone walls, growing in intensity as it got closer.

Their smell wafted down the hall, reaching me long before I saw them. A near strangling smell in comparison to the filth surrounding me, something rosy and floral. Quiet and sure steps carried them around the corner and I could finally see her through the bars, making her way towards me along the damp hallway with an expression that reminded me more of a hunting hawk in flight than a person.

The moment I saw her, I almost wanted to mug her. Her outfit screamed wealth and power. She wore a heavy well-made cloak on her head and shoulders to keep off the damp and cold; I couldn't help but stare jealousy. It protected a dress that was probably the most expensive thing I'd ever seen, hugging her figure tightly around the waist in that cinching fashion highborn women used to make their curves all the more pronounced.

If I wasn't dying, I would've swooned.

Her hair colour was difficult to tell, both from the light and the cloak's hood. If I'd have to guess, auburn or brown, but for all I could've known in the lack of light, it might've been red. It was tied back in her hood's shadow in some fancy braid, but a few strands dangled to frame her face.

I'd been too busy longing for either the warmth of her body or the comfort of her cloak to save me from freezing to death to notice she was looking directly at me. Her blood red lips were fixed in a practised neutrality, but she allowed the faintest of smiles to escape them.

There was something about her ice-blue eyes, locked on me as they were, they devoured the torch's light; looking in them lit some instinctual fear that settled deep into my bones, a lighthouse warning me of dangerous shoals ahead.

She stopped a few paces outside of my cell, her eyes raking me up

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and down, taking an awkwardly tense moment to stare at me through the bars, maybe looking for a sign of weakness.

I sat up from the straw, crossing my legs and clasping my hands, leaning forward onto my thighs. I didn't want to admit that I was gathering strength to stand, that even just sitting up was asking a lot of my body. But the more she stared, the worse I felt. My limbs shivered, my stomach wound ached something fierce, and Gods, the things I would do for a *bite* of bread.

And here was this noble looking woman who was looking at me like a dessert.

Whatever she saw in me, I began to think that she must've liked it, as her mouth loosened ever so slightly into a tiny smirk.

"You? You're the pirate captain?" she said in some ridiculous accent I had never heard before. Heck, maybe all nobles sounded like that, it wasn't like I would know.

I gave her my best sly grin, hoping that it masked how awful I felt. "That's what they tell me."

Her smile grew.

"You're not what I expected." She replied, tapping a finger against her bottom lip. "Or maybe exactly what I expected." She added quietly, her head tipping slightly to the side in contemplation.

I shrugged a shoulder dismissively, finally dragging myself to my feet with a wince, the clinking of my chains echoing throughout the cell. Now I could look her in the eye.

I would have towered over her, if I could manage to stand straighter; she was a good head shorter than me. The unnatural fear I felt at her gaze didn't lessen with my height over her.

Squinting my eyes at her through the cell bars, I tried to examine why this minuscule woman held such an aura of dread. She was dainty, *tiny* even, yet her gaze left me feeling like I was looking into the eyes of the goddess of death herself; leaving me with nothing but a feeling that I should either be reverent, or terrified.

I elected to be neither.

I scratched at my forearms to avoid grasping at my bandages. "I'm not sure what to make of that, Miss. Nor am I sure I should

care.” My voice was as raspy as I felt, and I cursed internally at my dry throat.

She laughed at my answer, which confused me. I didn’t think I was being that funny.

“Oh, I like you captain,” she murmured with a smile.

Her bemusement, the odd feeling of threat I got from her, the farce of a trial, on top of my starvation and pain... I wouldn’t exactly say I was at my diplomatic best. Seeing her standing there with a pretty smile with obvious excess made me furious.

Here I was dying, and here she was to lord it over me and laugh at the condemned girl.

I took a deep breath, exaggerating the rise and fall of my shoulders before I let her have it. “I can’t eat or drink your appreciation of my character, Miss. So maybe you can get to the damn point of why a highborn lady such as yourself is here in the first place, gawking at the half-dead woman in the cell.”

The smirk disappeared from her face and her eyes hardened; I felt my stomach drop in fear. Those impossible eyes drilled into my skull, the light of the torch flickering in them. She was silent another full minute, considering me. I crossed my arms as much as I could around the chain attached to my wrist, in hopes I was striking some image of stubbornness.

Not that I wanted to think about my image. My dark hair was still salt-caked from the sea. My tattered blood-stained shirt and pants were the only things left of my clothes, still the very same I had been pulled from the wreck in. They hadn’t even left me my boots and coat, the bastards. I had barely any feeling left in my bare feet, and I made a point of standing on the straw to separate my skin from the cold cobblestone.

The things I’d do for her cloak. Maybe a drink too...

“You said you couldn’t eat my ‘appreciation of your character’. Food and drink. That’s all you want?” She asked out of nowhere, shattering the silence between us with a voice like a silk-covered cannon-shot. I’d found myself believing for a moment that she’d turned into a statue, maybe some hunger-stricken dream, but now

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found myself blinking back surprise at her words that seemed to read my mind.

“Unless you got a ship out of here in that fancy dress of yours, I’d be content with not starving to death for starters. Although a warm cloak sounds...” I waved a hand towards her dress, but she only raised a single eyebrow as she slowly shook her head.

I wasn’t getting the cloak.

“Food and drink. No more. In return, I ask for one thing.” She leaned in towards the bars, grasping one of them to speak through the gap in between, like she only had a few moments to ask whatever she wanted of me. “Just a tiny, little, thing.” Her voice sank to a needy whisper as my suspicion grew. Nothing in Kitaxia was ever given out of the kindness of their hearts. Gifts were given with malice here.

“Don’t know what I have to give that you people haven’t already taken,” I muttered, staring into her icy eyes with a hardened look of my own, yet her smile sharpened. It looked... unnatural. Her teeth were unblemished pearls of white, yet her smile looked... hollow.

“Blood,” she whispered.

I raised my own eyebrow. I must have misheard, or maybe my hearing was going from my injuries. “Pardon?”

Instead of answering, she pulled out a thin glass vial from some hidden pocket in her dress.

“Just a small vial of blood,” she said, her smile turning mischievous.

Oh good. So, I didn’t mishear. All she wanted was my *blood*.

I tried to imagine why a Kitaxian highborn would want such a thing. Why specifically *my* blood? There was a horde of oppressed poor just outside the lower city she could’ve taken advantage of. I knew, because I’d lived there myself a decade ago. I couldn’t think of any reason other than ‘something she can’t get from elsewhere for gods knew what’.

But if I was being honest with myself, if I was going to die, dying with a full belly for a few drops of blood didn’t sound like too bad a deal.

I began to consider her offer seriously, my mouth watering at the

mere thought of eating. It'd been almost two months since I'd been scooped out of the sea, and just as long since had a proper meal, and all my thoughts turned to my favourite foods as I licked my lips in anticipation. It seemed my decision was already made.

I shrugged my shoulders in defeat, my chain clinking against the stone floor. "Done." As if I could've said anything else; I knew who had the power here. She'd have gotten it from me one way or another, at least this way I was getting something out of it.

I hoped.

"You'll forgive me if we don't shake on it, I'm uh, a little tied up at the moment." I raised my wrist twisting the manacle back and forth in her vision. She chuckled as she unlocked the door with a key she pulled from some hidden pocket.

"I won't hold it against you Captain," she said, her tone suddenly sounding like a new lover being sweet to me.

As soon as she was through the door, she pulled out a needle of some fashion, clasped the vial to the end of it and stood just out of reach with an isolated glare.

"Now captain. You wouldn't dare take advantage of a lady's honour and try anything would you?"

I could've sworn her eyes glowed as she said those words; as soon as she said them, my head felt like it was filled with soaked sponges. I was woozy, vision fading at the edges; it felt like I was drifting off to sleep, swaying on my feet.

"No. Of course not my lady..." someone whispered in a slurred voice. *My voice.* Wait. Had I just said that?

"Good. Now hold still, this will only pinch a bit."

Her voice sounded like sweetened honey. Music to my ears. I couldn't bear to move a muscle even if the noose was around my neck right now.

A spit of pain at my inner elbow followed a breath later; I tried to raise my gaze to look at her. My head was so heavy, and her grip was surprisingly strong on my wrist. Didn't I *want* her to do this?

"That's it. Now hold pressure there for a few minutes." She said quietly as she took my other hand in hers, shifting it to the puncture

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she had made, her breathing laboured more than mine.

She stepped away. My vision focused and my thoughts cleared, but felt like I'd been drugged. I tried to shake my head free of this slurry-filled feeling. "What... What did you do to me?"

She stepped out of my cell, already locking the door behind her. She stopped for a half second to give me a parting glance, before her eyes shifted back to the vial of my blood in her hand a breath later.

"Nothing untoward, I promise captain. Your food and beverage will be here for you upon the morrow. Provided this is to my... *satisfaction*... I may have another bargain for you tomorrow evening. Till then, goodnight."

I almost wanted to shout after her to explain what exactly she'd done to me, but she'd turned away, taking the light with her to leave me to wither alone in the darkness once more.

The sound of her steps disappeared as soon as she turned the corner, the light of her torch winking out in a sudden dash of darkness.

Was she real?

Had I dreamed her into existence? I didn't even know her name.

CHAPTER TWO

“The Crown announces the confession and appointed execution of Captain Claire Vessia, for crimes of high seas piracy. Public hanging shall occur on the 14th day of Hitika, at morning’s zenith. To be presided over by Brother Cantun, Church of the King Undying.”

— *Poster on a church noticeboard in the Upper city of Haxla*

My eyes fluttered open and I stretched as much as I could on my straw, trying to wiggle soreness out of the multitude of cramped muscles making themselves known. Sleeping in my cell was a hellish enterprise, but at least it passed the time.

Dawn light filtered through the tiny crack of a window, illuminating a few droplets of blood in the centre of my cell, and to my surprise, evidence that the lady had made good on our deal. Some dry bread, salted jerky, and a flagon of ale sat innocently on folded cloth by the door like a gift from the Gods.

The moment I recognized it, my stomach gurgled in a sharp stab of pain and I all but launched myself at it. I probably should’ve made it last. Who knew when I’d get more food?

But I was dead in six days. What was there to save for?

The bread was dry and tough to chew through, the ale was watered down, and the jerky was more salt than jerky. It all sat in my stomach like I’d swallowed a stone, but it was the first real food I’d had in weeks. After not a crumb of bread had escaped me, jerky devoured whole, and the flagon licked clean of every droplet... I was the most content since the day I was thrown into this cell. For me, it might as well have been a feast for a king.

My wrist was scratched bloody from the manacle, I was starting to lose feeling around the wound in my ribs, I was covered in month

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old filth, I didn't even want to imagine what the rest of me looked like, but for the first time in what felt like ages I had something to be happy about. I had a full stomach.

I leaned against the wall on my straw, my hands pillowing my head, legs stretched out and a foot tapping as I hummed one of the shanties I knew, and thought that maybe, just maybe, dying might be easy.

An hour later, like clockwork, one of the guards showed up for their morning rounds. He quickly saw the flagon from my ale, placed without a care back on the floor where it'd miraculously appeared this morning.

And I immediately cursed myself for not hiding it.

"What the fuck?" He snapped. "Where did you get that, pirate bitch?"

Whatever arrangement I'd made with that highborn lady, she *apparently* hadn't informed the guards. It seemed the Gods had other plans about my happiness this morning.

"Don't know what you're talking about, shit for brains." I replied.

Turning my gaze away from him to the wall, not knowing quite what was driving me to push my luck. Maybe the judge's sentence robbed me of a self-preservation instinct.

The guard sputtered, having obviously heard me. Why couldn't I just keep my mouth shut? I was in for it now.

"What did you say?" he demanded, a surprised fury in his voice.

"I said 'I don't know what you're talking about, shit for brains'" I replied once more, in an exasperated tone.

He opened the door to my cell with a roar, crossing the space towards where I sat against the wall. His gloves reached down to dig into my hair, a cry escaping me as I was pulled to my feet to face him. He stared at me from inches away, his face spitting fury.

"What are you trying to pull? How'd you get out?" He demanded. I stayed silent as his shouts burst spittle onto my face, my hand clutching at my bandaged side, wishing I was just a bit stronger.

The door was open, it was *right there*, and he was alone. Gods, the *keys* were even on his belt.

I tried to reach with my free hand...

"Fine. I'll have to beat it out of you then." He let me go, and

my grasp missed. He'd stepped away just enough, letting me drop to my knees.

He reached down to grab the offending flagon off of the floor. He raised it in the air, and I tensed myself for what was to come, trying to raise my hands to protect myself.

I caught the wooden mug in the face, instantly dazed. He shouted some demand that I didn't even hear through the ringing in my ears, as I tried to blink away the stars exploding in my vision. I'd been punched in the face a few times in my life, but none of those times felt like this. My half-dead body didn't know what to do with this level of physical abuse.

I didn't even notice the second hit. On the third, the mug broke as it clawed across my face, clattering to the floor at the same time I did.

I could barely register anything beyond the stars in my vision, the stinging of my face, and the fading of my consciousness, but I held on. Bloodied wetness trailed down my cheek onto the floor beneath me, my breathing coming in quick pained gasps.

I groaned, reaching for my face with my eyes clamped shut, a moment before his boot connected with my ribs, tearing my hastily made stitches, briefly lifting me off the floor with its force. I let out a loud screech as any breath still in my lungs rapidly exhaled out, leaving me gasping and reaching out for anything to clamp onto to anchor my body.

“What the fuck is going on here? Jenkins?”

A new voice shouted into the din of my gasping breaths.

My hands were wrapped around my stomach feebly, trying to will my pain away. The guard above me twisted his head towards the bars of the cell, spotting another man with greying hair staring in mute horror at us.

The asshole that had been familiarizing his boot with my stomach stopped dead and I writhed away from him as much as I could. “She had a flagon in here, she'd gotten loose somehow, so I was going to—”

“Kill her? Over somebody giving her food and ale?” The older guard suggested, disappointment bleeding into his voice.

“Well—” The first one sputtered.

“Well nothing Jenkins! Get the fuck out of there. *Someone* gave

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her that flagon. If it wasn't you, and it wasn't me, and you know it wasn't Roberts, he sleeps through his shifts. So who was it? Who. Was. It?" The older guard repeated his question through his teeth, emphasizing each word, nearly seething.

I thought I noticed Jenkins posture stiffen through my hazy vision. "O-oh." Jenkins muttered. The older guard shook his head as Jenkins stepped away, leaving me to grasp at my face and stomach, curling into a ball of twisted misery on the stone floor, thankful for its coolness for once.

"Exactly. I fucking told you. Once they're on death row, don't fucking touch them. Better yet, don't even go near them."

Jenkins closed the cell door, mumbling in worry as he did it. "Right. Sorry," he muttered, leaving me to barely register that the apology wasn't to me, but to the older guard.

"Come on then. Leave her," the older one ordered, as both trotted away without giving me a second thought.

My heart was beating hard, and if I wasn't hurting before, I sure as hell was now.

I sucked in air to my abused lungs, thankful the attack was over, but wishing I could fold into myself even more than I already was, breathing through my clenched jaw. Between the trauma of my ribs and the dizziness of my head, I tried to count what little blessing I had.

It could've been worse. *Far worse*. Pain meant I was still alive. For the moment.

The lady who had taken my blood, despite having not told the guards about the food, apparently had enough of a reputation to frighten them into not killing me then and there. That in and of itself was terrifying, but I wasn't exactly in a place to do anything about it, let alone use it to my advantage. Right now, I was focused on breathing.

But... I did have something else now. Something I could use. I reached out to grasp it, lying there ever so innocently in the middle of my cell, like it was divinely placed by the Gods themselves.

A piece of broken handle from the flagon that could be made into... *something*. A weapon? A lock pick? At the very least... maybe it might save me from the noose.



The rest of the day passed quietly as I nursed my wounds and tended to my newfound tool. I wasn't brave enough to remove my bandages, so instead tore off a pant leg and wrapped it as tightly as I could manage around my midriff to staunch the additional seepage. It still hurt like hell, blood soaking the fabric slowly, but there wasn't anything else to be done.

I sat and tried to breathe through my pain, stubbornly clinging to life as the sun set and darkness once more overtook my cell.

And eventually, in the blackest hour of the night, the lady returned. Much like she'd left, appearing around the corner of the hallway as if manifesting from the darkness itself.

A torch in her hand illuminated a different dress, similar in style, a different shade of some dark colour, and again, that dark thick fur cloak that I couldn't stop wishing I could wrap around me. It felt like years since I'd touched anything soft, and I longed to stroke my fingers through that fur and hold it close.

She stood once again before my cell, in nearly the exact same spot and pose she had the previous night.

I tried to hide my improvised weapon in my shackle as much as I could, but her sharp eyes had spotted it right away.

"Really captain?" she tutted. "What do you mean to do, stake me? How laughable." She gave her head the smallest of disapproving shakes, tapping a slender finger against her bottom lip. "How perceptive and resourceful you seem to be."

I stood, but it was slow going, trying to hide the pain of how much effort it took to meet her eyes, where an undeniable hunger shone. Her gaze was different tonight. Now she looked me over less like I was dessert and more like I was the main course.

I didn't want to answer her. I couldn't. My hand wandered to the blood-soaked wrappings around my midsection. It felt like the Veiled Lady, the patron Goddess of death itself, was standing over

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my shoulder even now. I had no patience for whatever game this noblewoman wanted to play.

What had happened this morning was something that I wouldn't forget, and I couldn't deny the reality of my situation. Everything would be over soon.

They're going to hang me.

And yet this lady, somehow without even being in the room, was the reason that guard had stopped. She had power, influence, hells maybe even the ear of the king.

"Your face. You've been wounded," she observed, not seeming to notice the silence I was treating her with, eyes locked with severe focus on the dried blood on the side of my face. The longer I drew this out, I figured the better my chances were of getting to ask her what I wanted.

"One of the guards?" she asked, puzzling through a thought, as if she didn't know. Her expression switched from curiosity, to anger, contemplation and then to... *hunger*, in a span of seconds.

Only after another minute of silence, did she wrench her eyes from the dried blood on my face, wandering almost leisurely all over me hungrily and noticed I wasn't answering her. "You seem to be... a bit more... antagonistic towards me, captain. Was the food and drink not satisfactory?"

A breath passed as she looked me up and down curiously. It was now or never.

"What, do you want?" I crossed my arms over my manacle, doing my best to look and sound determined.

Her eyes suddenly latched onto my face, silently judging.

What did she see? A broken woman doomed to die? A pirate captain who murdered her countrymen? Just some poor girl down on her luck? Whatever she saw in my face, it made her smile.

"Do you know, you can tell so much about a person from their blood?" she asked quietly, seemingly out of nowhere.

I barely smothered the urge to roll my eyes in time.

Somehow it wasn't surprising that she decided to say something batshit weird instead of answering my very basic question. She

did want my blood after all. I rolled my eyes, wishing I could just lie down and sleep through this monologue. Maybe I'd die from it instead of the gallows.

"You're brave, but not foolish. Uneducated, but smart. Unlearned, but observant. Your blood hails from Norlondia, but you were raised here in Kitaxia. And all those years at sea... You're as independent as they come. All that, I learned from your blood."

Her eyes closed as she ranted, her words seemed to be caught up for a moment in the *idea* of me. I didn't know what to say as she rambled on... but how in the hells did she know any of that?

There was no way to prove any of what she said. Was I brave, or smart? Observant? Independent, sure. I had to be to survive the Haxla slums in my youth and during my career at sea. According to her I was from Norlondia? That was news to me, not that my adoptive mothers would take issue with it. I was orphaned, and didn't know who my birth parents were.

But maybe there was something here I could push to get what I wanted.

"I take it that my little vial was satisfactory?" I asked, hoping that whatever fantasy she'd cooked up about me in her mind, it was enough to make her want more.

I bit my lip, praying to the Gods that my gamble was correct.

She smiled as she tipped her head slightly in admission. "I admit it was. Very satisfactory, in fact. I would very much like another. Name your price. Another round of food and drink, perhaps?"

I dug my nails into the palms of my hands. Finally, the question I was hoping she'd ask.

I felt my stomach lurch, as I gazed into those devouring eyes. The torchlight flickering across her proud face.

She was expecting me to beg for food and drink, and I would not.

I was done begging.

Feeling the remnants of the guard's assault, my battered body, and I knew that the only thing that was awaiting me after my last few horrid days in this cell, was death.

I wouldn't accept that.

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“I want my freedom. Or you give me a quick and painless death right here, right now.”

Her gaze narrowed, whether in disappointment or excitement I couldn't say. I glared back with every bit of fury I could muster. If she was looking for any weakness, any give, she wasn't going to find it.

“That is my price.” I nearly spat at her feet.

She regarded me for another long awkward minute. She seemed a fan of these long silences, letting me stew in whatever she was thinking. The drip of far-off moisture and my own haggard breathing were the only audible noises in the dungeon.

Despite the quiet, she was silent and still as a statue. Again. Strangely enough, she almost looked like she *wasn't* breathing. No rise and fall of her shoulders, no sound in the cells save the subtle rattling of my chains.

I didn't budge despite the growing fear and anxiety building in my gut. I wouldn't deny that a meal a day sounded nice, Gods above and below knew I needed it. But it was nothing but a stopgap, for I only had a few more nights in this life. If she wanted my blood, it was a finite resource. She'd have to pay something I thought it was worth. And if she wasn't willing to give me either of those things...

She could take it from my corpse after the hangman was done and *choke* on it.

“Alright,” she said quietly through that odd smile of hers, her voice slow-moving lava flowing into the silence between us. “Here's my final offer, since your price is so steep.”

I expected her to walk away, to deny my price outright, and just order the guards to pin me down while she got her blood regardless. Not *bargain*.

I nodded, looking at her with suspicion, motioning with my chained hand for her to continue.

“Three vials. Every night till you go off to your execution. If by then, through some miracle of god you're still alive, I'll free you from the noose's consequences.”

It felt like the floor had dropped out from me then and there. I tried not to let my expression shift into complete shock as my world tilted

around her offer. There was a very obvious trick happening here. Some form of trap, her wording so stupidly specific. How could it *not* be?

The noose's only consequence was death. And freedom from that... That meant life.

And life meant possible, eventual, *freedom*. It had to. All for, what, eighteen little vials of blood? I thought I could handle that... Maybe. Just maybe... She was offering me a chance. The smallest chance. If I lived through her blood tax, I'd be *free*.

I couldn't say no. Even if the odds were not in my favour, I sent a silent prayer to the Goddess of Fortune.

I breathed in through my teeth, and felt my choice settle into my gut with full conviction.

"Done," I replied.

Her white, pristine, hollow looking smile widened to be as bright as the morning sun.

"I'll ask that you prove your sincerity, captain. Toss your little stake away and I will consider our bargain struck," she muttered with haughty prose, pointing a long delicate finger towards my shackle, where I'd hidden my improvised weapon.

I pulled my day's long effort out of the space between my shackle and my skin, holding it tightly. Honestly, I didn't know what I planned to do with it. Hold her captive? Assault a guard? My chances were slim at either but I had spent my entire day sharpening the little handle on my cuff to a dangerous point, and dammit I wanted to use it.

She wasn't moving, her eyes not wavering from the stick in my hand. For a moment, I could've sworn there was a smidgen of fear in her. But the reality of the situation loomed over me. I let out a deeply held breath as I tried to let the stress flow out of my body.

I tossed my little stake through the bars towards her feet, where she kicked it out of reach with finality. She looked up at me, flashing that damn unnatural smile.

"Good choice captain," she whispered.

She collected her due much like she had the previous night. Said a few words that left me half-awake and pliable somehow, and got her wretched tithe before I could free myself of it.

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But unlike the previous night, I very quickly realized the consequences of the deal I had struck. One vial was a trifle. Three vials was probably fine to someone in good health. But to me? I'd been starved for days despite my 'feast' this morning, and was injured to boot. I immediately started feeling woozy after she had finished her collection.

"It wasn't part of our deal, but food and drink will be here for you once again each morning. You'll need it to replenish your fluids. Goodnight, captain."

Before I could even reply to her with how dizzy I felt after my bleeding, just like before, she disappeared into the darkness, leaving me to doze into a dreamless sleep on my straw.



I awoke the next morning to more stale bread and ale awaiting me in exactly the same spot as the previous morning.

The guards didn't show up for the usual morning rounds. Or their afternoon ones. It seemed by either the deal I'd struck or through fear of the lady, whoever she was, I was to be left on my own for now.

The days very quickly started to pass by in brief flickers of time that I could barely commit to memory. When I wasn't eating and drinking, I was sleeping, or getting blood taken from me.

My body was rebelling at the loss of its most precious fluid over my last days, leaving me near mad from it. With only so many nights to go, I could barely stay conscious. My heart felt like the loudest thing in existence, its slow beat the only thing I could concentrate on as I laid pathetically in my cell. She only had a few words for me after each collection.

On the second night before my execution, I was somehow lucid enough to ask her name.

"Oh, I'm no one of import, I like to imagine. A noble wife of Kitaxia. Nothing more." She stated as she put a stopper on her final vial of the evening, and left it at that.

She would never answer to anything other than ‘my Lady’, if she responded at all. Most nights, she wouldn’t even bother to speak, just taking her cursed tribute and then leaving me to the darkness once again.



I couldn’t even rise from my straw to eat, only barely managing to choke down the ale, before finally, the night before my appointed hanging, she came to me one final time.

Hands on hips, looking for a moment like a disappointed mother, she regarded me with an amused smile as I stubbornly refused to die. “Still alive. I’m actually impressed, captain. You cling to life with such... *ferocity*,” she said, almost with amazed inevitability that I still breathed. “This has been a very profitable arrangement. Providing you are still breathing after this final tax, you shall have your appointed reward.”

I barely stayed conscious enough to even amount a token resistance to her needle once again. The pain was too great, my entire body feeling either feeling numb, or inflamed with searing ache. As the blood drained from my body, she sighed happily.

“Annnnd... there. Done. You’ve paid your dues in full.”

I chuckled darkly from where I laid in a heap on the floor, trying to lift my manacle towards her, my hands barely able to lift the steel from the straw of my bedding, let alone get up on my feet to make my escape. I hoped she’d be able to carry me. I was in no shape to walk. Even now, my vision blurred, her face looking more like a smudge on a canvas than a person.

I reached for her, my dark deliverance. “Now... get me out of here...”

She laughed in reply, making no rush to move. She instead slotted her torch into one of the slots in the wall, and lowered herself to my bedside. I felt her hands grip my shoulders, and I must’ve been weaker and lighter than I thought, because with no noticeable effort, she dragged me to sit against the wall, my limbs useless dead weight on the floor.

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What was happening?

“Oh, captain. That wasn’t the agreement,” she whispered, her hand gripped my chin, pulling my face up with ease. Her smile grew ever more vicious as she tipped a vial of something into my mouth.

The liquid had a coppery metallic taste, but morphed into something delicious, a sick twist to the most tasteful wine I had ever had. I gulped it down instantly without a second thought, desperate for some tincture to alleviate my pain.

“*Now... Sleep...*” Her honeyed words seeped into my ear as she leaned down towards my neck, her mouth opening wide, her breath somehow cold on my skin.

I could not resist her order, and blissful rest claimed me.

CHAPTER THREE

“The transition of human to Vampyri is not a pleasant one. My subject’s bodies seem to burn through every spare resource they have in a vain attempt to fight off the virus. Muscle tissue, organ health, every bit of liquid in the body... Everything is thrown at the virus in an attempt to fight it off. What results in nine times out of ten, the body is simply overwhelmed, the soul passing on to the Veiled Lady. But the ones whose will is unbowed... Well, living isn’t the right word. ‘Surviving’ through the transition is a much more appropriate descriptor.”

— *From the journals of Valerie Du Bois, Scholar lord of Draculesti*

The morning of my execution, I awoke in more pain than I had ever felt in my life. From the moment I opened my eyes, my screams bounced off stone walls and rattled the bars of my cell, echoing throughout the empty dungeon.

That fucking bitch.

The guards, the same from before, the grizzled one and the other who beat me half to death, stood outside my cell as I twisted in my bonds. I felt uncontrollable, wild. My skin felt burned, blood boiling inside me. I could just barely understand, let alone register their conversation through the burning red haze of my vision, the aches across every inch of my skin, every muscle writhing inside me.

“Drove this one crazy. Surprised she lived through Lady Ameritia,” the old veteran said.

Lady Ameritia.

Impossible. There was no way it could be her.

The fucking Crown Princess of Kitaxia herself. Heir to the throne. Bleeding me like some medical patient this entire time?

Her name felt like it was being engraved on the back of my skull,

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the visage of her face and her vile blue eyes a brand burning into my mind's eye.

“She kills most of them. Slow-like,” he continued, ignorant of the horror on the other guard's face. “The rest are usually half dead by the time they reach the gallows. First time I've seen anything like this.”

I cared not for what they had to say, their judgements, or these pitiful looks from fools of men. All I could focus on was Ameritia bleeding me like a pig, and these men were in my way.

I threw myself against the bars of my cell, reaching as far as I could towards them, clawing through the bars separating us, fury and pain propelling me into wild and unnatural contractions as I growled at them, my throat raw.

Lady Ameritia. Realising that I wasn't the first sucker to fall for her ploy only made my uncontrollable and pained rage feel brighter, more furious, more *violent*. She poisoned me with that tincture, just to make me live long enough to see the noose.

While my focus was on the guards, I didn't even realize that another guard had snuck into my cell and had unbound me from the wall. It was the bindings I felt suddenly clamping around my ankles that alerted me to their presence. Twisting towards the unexpected assailant with a wild roar only resulted in tripping on the chain's short length, and slamming into the cell floor.

Pain and panic made me try to crawl away, but guards poured into my cell and swarmed me. In moments, I was being dragged out of my cell, bound fast by every limb, manacles clasped around my body as I squirmed. Now held fast by chain, all I knew was fury and pain. Fury at Ameritia, her vials, her lies, the guards, my captain, Kitaxia.

All of them.

“Fucking hells Jenkins. You should've gagged her!” the old one bellowed beside me over my screams, dragging me forward by pulling on my bonds. Jenkins on my other side twisted away as I tried to kick him, but he held my bindings fast.

“Fuck that, have you seen her teeth? I swear she sharpened them,” Jenkins replied to his superior, giving me the inspiration to chomp at him. A sick laugh escaped my throat as he visibly recoiled, and

no attempt at gagging me was made. Not that I could form coherent words, there was too much pain oozing through every muscle. I was confused that I wasn't dead, no one should be able to experience this much pain and live.

It felt like I was being raked through hot coals. Everything *burned*.

Chains pulled at every joint as the guards dragged me through the darkness. They brought me step by agonizing step out of the dungeon and into the upper levels.

Where once in the light of day, and the pain ratcheted up to new heights.

My blood boiled still, searing pain skittering all over my skin. Both from inside my body and now strangely, from the *light* of the morning as well. My skin felt like it was sizzling as sunlight reached my skin. And Gods, had it always been so bright? It was overwhelming. Blinding. The sun on my open skin hurt so badly I thought I was going to vomit.

But the sun, painful as it was, illuminated something far more disturbing. A crowd had gathered for my hanging, more people in one spot than I had ever seen crowding Haxla's main square. They cheered as I was towed through them to the gallows, each seemingly throwing something foul in my direction. A piece of rotten fruit, a used dishrag, but most commonly with their poor aim, rocks that dinged off the guard's armor more than they hit me.

The townsfolk had begun a chant as I was dragged up the worn steps of the gallows and towards the rope, ominously hanging like a waiting promise. My eyes locked onto it, terror piercing the pain enough that I tossed and turned in my bonds, tugging left and right away from the sight of my doom, trying to find any way out.

But struggle was pointless, the end inevitable, the chains too thick, and my body too weak. The rope was lowered over my head almost comically slowly, no matter the tossing of my head. The executioner was even kind enough to draw my hair through the loop as he fastened the thick rope around my neck. A priest mounted the wooden stairs to join us on the wooden platform above the crowd.

I tried to wiggle my neck free of the rope, the chains around my

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waist and wrists denying me the ability to reach up and free myself, just as the priest began to speak to the jeering crowd.

“We gather here today—” the priest began, and *finally* I was able to get stuttered words out through the pain.

“Get. It. Over. With,” I demanded, writhing in my bonds. I wanted to run, to fight, to do *anything* but submit to my doom. But this was all I could do. This last spit of defiance.

I would not go to the afterlife with the blessing of their god.

This, I thought through my grinding teeth, my seething pain, would have to be my small victory. My last laugh.

The priest gave me a single parting glance, before nodding at the executioner behind me, his silent pity speaking volumes among the crowd of jeers.

But that second of pity wasn't enough to prepare, to shout one final curse towards this hellish country before the floor dropped underneath me.

The shock of the rope breaking my fall against my neck was almost welcome, even though it felt like it should've broken my neck. It was an inevitability. But still, I would not let myself go quietly.

I choked, kicked, and fought at my bonds... But between the rope and gravity, there was nothing I could do. I almost wanted to laugh, if I hadn't been choking. That even now, here at the end, the burn of the rope against my neck was nothing compared to the burn of every muscle in my body.

But I needed *air*, and the rope's crush against my windpipe left me choking for breath that wouldn't come.

The crowd's shouts began to fade, the light began to dim.

Slowly, *slowly*, ever too slowly, death came for me.

And it was nothing like I expected.

The fire tearing through my body quieted and gave way to cold. My heartbeat, drumming with panic and pain, slowed. The air in my lungs grew cool and stale.

I swung from the gallows, all my momentum gone as my body stilled, blackness taking my vision. My muscles finally gave in and relaxed one final time.

No avenging angels came from the Kitaxian god to grant me their eternal punishment or reward. Nor was I claimed by the Veiled Lady to be taken to the waters below the world. Nothing claimed my soul that morning.

A stillness becalmed my awareness, a moment in the void of nothingness. For the first time in weeks, I felt no pain, no suffering, no sharp bite of *anything* plaguing my body. I floated in an empty expanse of black, with no thoughts, no dreams, no *nothing*.

Forever frozen in a silent swing, back and forth, back and forth, in a world of darkness.



Bit by bit... The sound of waves grew in my ears.

I opened my eyes and heard the sounds of the ocean, the busywork of a ship, and feeling the most intense hunger I had ever suffered. All the fire and pain I'd felt just moments before was now hyper-focused in my throat and jaw.

But the noose—

I reached up to grasp at my throat to remove the noose... and found it missing. A quick grasping around my body revealed my chains were gone as well. I took a moment to breathe in thanks, but my hunger was hard to think past. It burned in my throat, my mind, my gut, and most intensely... In my teeth. My entire jaw *ached* with it, a tightness in my body that felt like a hot poker was being shoved in my gums.

It took active effort, but I shifted my focus to the sensations and sounds around me. Or to be more specific, the tight cloth blanket I was stuck in.

The *sailcloth* tightly sewn around my body.

Oh Gods... *A burial at sea.*

For the briefest of seconds, I supposed I should've been thankful. Better than putting my corpse in an iron gibbet. If I got out now— "I don't know why her highness wanted a filthy murderin'

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pirate to have a burial at sea,” a voice walking towards me muttered.

“But I suppose we’re far enough out. Ready?”

Oh. *Shit*. No no no no—

“Heave ho then. Hup!”

Despite my clawing outwards against the stubborn fabric, it was too late. They hadn’t noticed my movement.

I felt the board I had been set on slide sideways as I fell several feet from the deck, the whoosh of air sweeping past rapidly before the unmistakable smack of water met my body.

Fuck.

I sucked in a quick breath as I immediately began sinking, water soaking through the cloth in an instant.

I pushed outwards, trying to find some hole to push out of, tearing at it as best as I could, but sailcloth was tough to begin with. It had to be to avoid tearing in bad winds, and underwater? It might as well have been made of steel.

I could feel myself sinking deeper, the blackness of the sea overwhelming my vision more and more by the second. With a lack of anything sharp on my person, I opened my mouth and bit into the cloth and was surprised as my teeth tore through it easily.

I pushed my hands into the hole I had made, tearing it wider, and shot through the salty water into the wake of whatever ship I had been thrown from.

Breaking the surface to breathe in the open air. And found myself... not short of breath at all. That was strange. I was under near abouts twenty feet... My lungs should’ve been burning.

Pushing the thought away to address the fact that my only escape from the waves was rapidly sailing away, I turned to look at the ship.

“HEY!!!” I yelled, waving wildly from where I bobbed in the waves. The aft lookout spotted me, pointing. Shouts ran up around the deck, making me let out a sigh of relief. It might be back into a cell, but at least I wouldn’t drown. I began swimming towards the ship, expecting a line to be thrown.

But instead of throwing a line, there was a glint of steel lining up in the moonlight over the aft railing.

Muskets.

I dove beneath the waves just as splashes of shot exploded into the water around me. I stayed below as long as I dared, hoping they'd thought that I had drowned after all.

As I stayed longer under the waves, I found once again that my lungs didn't burn with the need for fresh air, and momentarily curious, I let myself ask the question.

Just how long can I hold my breath?

I stayed below the waves, letting them wash above me as the hull of the massive ship sailed away. Two minutes. Then three. Five. *Ten.* With gnawing worry in my gut, I rose to the surface once more.

I didn't gasp for breath as I broke the surface.

In fact, after a moment of concentrating on my lungs, it was obvious *I* wasn't breathing at all.

I racked through my memory, remembering my hanging... and the night before. The vial of liquid Ameritia had fed me before I passed out. What did she *do* to me? Some potion to... kill me temporarily? A deep sleep like death?

I bobbed in the waves, trying to push those worries aside to deal with the unbearable hunger, struggling to keep it smothered in my consciousness so I could *think*. Gods, it felt like there was an iron clamp on my head and a hot coal in my stomach.

The topmast of the ship that had carried me out here was the only part of it still poking over the horizon, and I couldn't catch it for the life of me. No one could swim that fast.

My only escape was long gone.

I'd somehow cheated death, despite being hanged, but now... I was adrift on the open sea.

And that was a death sentence.

I cast my eyes about the horizon, but there was nothing but more waves, nothing to do but float and pray I didn't starve or freeze, since *apparently* I wouldn't drown.

Without anything to distract me, I finally gave in and let myself feel the hunger in its entirety. Its intensity nearly made me gasp with how much it *hurt*. My whole body, every muscle and bone, ached

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with the need to eat... *something*. It was worst in my throat and teeth, a sharp need I felt in every fibre of my being, undeniable as I floated in the waves.

How could I be so hungry? How long had it been since I ate?

How was I *alive*?

I didn't have an answer for any of my questions, and over the next few hours nothing came to me to explain further. How had I survived the gallows? Why wasn't I breathing? What was this inhuman hunger? Nothing made sense.

Eventually, the water began to rough up, and I looked up from my thoughts to the horizon knowing what would be there.

Dark clouds so thick you could mistake them for mountains.

A storm.

There wasn't much I could do about it. There was no shelter to swim for.

Before long, rain pattered my skin as the tips of waves crested with spray.

All the while the hunger grew harder to ignore, a burning need in the pit of my stomach. With nothing to hold onto, I loosened my limbs out into a starfish pose, and just focused on floating. Whether I liked it or not, the storm would take me where it wanted.

Hopefully somewhere where there was land.

I don't know how long I floated there in the rain. There was still no land to be seen. I became bored, surprised at my lack of exhaustion. I wasn't physically tired from keeping myself afloat for so long. Mentally however, I was exhausted. Pushing the awareness of my maddening hunger down into the bowels of my subconscious was testing my patience.

But when day finally broke, something changed.

The dawning sun, despite its beauty and expected welcome, its rays of light bursting in between the storm-clouds in dramatic fashion, overwhelmed my senses. The pain of the gallows returned in force, a sizzling on my skin, a searing of flesh that felt and almost *looked* like my skin was steaming in the sun.

It wasn't insurmountable without gritting my teeth, but Gods,

it was dreadfully unpleasant. My skin felt hot, like I'd had my face pressed to a fire, the flames licking my skin for hours squeezed into a passing second. Worse still, it somehow amplified that hunger, making it all the harder to ignore.

I dove under the waves and felt some immediate relief. Thinking it was done and dealt with, I resurfaced only for it to return, making it abundantly clear that the light really was the source of that pain and discomfort.

Without anywhere to hide, I did the unthinkable. I let myself sink.

I hovered just below the surface, closed my eyes, and somehow felt myself drifting to sleep, cradled in the ocean's embrace.

Only for nightmares of the dungeon, Ameritia, and the noose to jolt me awake.

Blinked back into consciousness with alarm at what felt like a moment later, hands clamped onto my shirt, dragging me from the ocean.

I startled, reaching over my head to dislodge whatever had me, but the grip was firm, pulling me out of the waves.

"Thank the Gods above and below! You're alive!" A man's voice exclaimed, and I looked over my shoulder at the most welcome sight I could've possibly seen.

A fisherman, in an oilskin greatcoat with a thick brown beard, pulling me into his little fishing scow.

I clamped onto his arms, and helped him heave me onto the boat. I never wanted to kiss a man so desperately in my life.

Not that I'd ever kiss a man again.

I floundered into the tiny deck, the fisherman's hand on my back, as he knelt down beside me. "Are you alright? Miss? Miss? Speak to me please."

It was impossible. That I should be picked up by some kind hearted soul in the middle of Gods knew where, looking at me with concern and worry. Plucked out of a doomed fate floating on the ocean's forever more.

I couldn't help but throw my soaking arms around his neck in a sob.

"Thank you." I managed to get out, tears burning in my eyes.

His broad shoulders were shaking with laughter, his heart was

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hammering in his chest, and I could almost feel his blood pulsing beneath me—

How can I hear his heart?

He patted my back, ending his laugh on an awkward note as he felt me tense in his arms. “You gave me the fright of a lifetime miss. Pulling you up out of my nets like a prize catch.”

The feeling of *need* at hearing his heart, a little dull rhythmic beat that couldn’t be anything else. It settled in my gut, stirring a rumble of hunger that left me feeling anxious and irritable.

I tried to relax my body, remembered to *breathe*, and sucked in a ragged sigh of relief, only for the smell of him to hit me.

Salt and sea, warmth, blood, and sweat. He smelled... *delicious*. My mouth watered as I finally let him go to sit down on the deck of his small boat, my arms hanging loosely on my knees as I breathed through my teeth. I tried to make sense of the wild fire aching in every muscle, the sharp agonizing pain in my teeth and throat, the hunger making this man have a gravity I couldn’t resist.

I forced myself to turn away from him to examine his boat, which was barely big enough for three people when empty, but a good half of it was filled with what looked to be a sizable catch. It forced me to nearly snuggle up beside him. But all in all, the little scow looked to be well made.

The fisherman however... Once my eyes were back on him, I couldn’t look at anything else.

“Harold,” the fisherman said, introducing himself a moment before pulling off his coat to put it around my shoulders. I pulled it tightly against me, desperate for its comforting embrace. It was the softest thing I’d touched in *months*, and it was still flush with his warmth. Despite the fact it was raining, and it looked to be the only coat he had, it nearly brought me to tears.

“I don’t have any more water, but we’re just an hour from shore. I’ll take you to my wife, and we’ll get a roaring fire going and warm you up.” His eyes were kind and brown, like his beard, his hair tucked underneath a weathered cap. I couldn’t stop my gaze wandering to his throat. The pulsing in his neck was... *distracting*.

He caught me staring as he began to set the boat in motion once again, letting loose the single sail. “What happened Miss? Can you say?”

I nodded, pulling his coat tighter. “There was... a shipwreck. I’ve been swimming for hours.” The lie came easy, and was believable enough.

He nodded in understanding, turning the tiller with expert precision. “You’re lucky the storm didn’t shift this way then. Don’t worry, we’ll get you warmed up soon. You must be freezing.”

I pushed the hunger down *again* to mentally check my body and found... I wasn’t actually cold. The jacket wrapped around my shoulders was warmer than me, and its heat was fading fast.

I didn’t feel... much of anything... No feeling of warmth in my core, no breath to hold in my hands to breathe warm moisture into my freezing fingers. I felt nothing.

Besides hunger.

I knew that I *should* be freezing. The ocean was the *ocean*. People died of hypothermia in minutes, yet I had been in there for hours! I put a hand to my wrist and felt... nothing. Neutrality. Soft skin under my fingers and nothing more.

Not even a heartbeat.

Was I... *dead*?

That single thought stirred the quiet song of recollected memory as we picked up speed to sail over the waves.

“I met a traveller from the eastern continent once,” Mother June had once whispered quietly into my ear. *“Do you know, my darling, where that is? It’s past the eastern shores of Kitaxia, across the Vibari sea.”* She had been trying to get me to sleep for the hundredth time that night. I had been maybe six, or seven. It was so hard to sleep on an empty stomach in those early days.

“The land he called home was called ‘Draculesti’. Such a strange name. You should’ve heard his accent. He told me a story of an undead monster his people knew. Their kind had ruled their country for centuries.”

I had asked her what ‘undead’ meant with my blanket huddled around me as I had snuggled into Mum. The ghost of that same

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feeling hitting me again as I pulled Harold's coat tighter around me.

"It means, not quite alive, not quite dead. Something in between."

I remembered that had alarmed me. How could you die, but not be dead? I had seen plenty of my friends die in Haxla's gutters by then. Far too many. I knew death, even at that young age. I liked the idea of them not being dead, no matter the circumstances for how.

"How do they do it? Become undead, and not die?" I'd asked, and she wordlessly poked the fire outside our ramshackle tent for a quiet moment before she had answered. I remembered that unsettled me, that quiet pause, like she couldn't believe what she was about to say.

"The traveller said they drank blood. They had pointed teeth to do just that."

I needed to see my face. *Now.*

"Do you have a mirror?" I looked up at Harold with hope and terror from where I sat on the deck, my shoulder rubbing up against his.

He nodded with a smile, pointing at his pack laying against the deck on the other side of me. There were only so many pockets, and I found a small silver pocket watch where a mirror was set into its inside cover.

It clicked open satisfyingly, and was undoubtedly a beautiful piece, and I couldn't help but marvel at it for a moment before...

Before I saw my face in that tiny mirror, and my stomach dropped in terror as raindrops dripped onto the mirror's well polished surface.

I wanted to blame the rock of the boat for how much the watch shook in my hand, but I knew better.

The sea had washed the grime and filth of the dungeon away. But... the woman that looked back at me I hardly recognized. My skin was deathly pale, making me look like a shadowed corpse of my old self. No longer was my skin suntanned from years of working on sailing ships. My dark, raven coloured hair, that had looked plain and thin before, now had a thickness to it that I couldn't deny, despite it being soaked.

Any scar I had from my internment was gone. In fact, most of the identifying marks on my face were gone, for there wasn't a freckle in sight. I could no longer feel the wounds I got from the wreck in my

ribs either, or really, any injury at all.

But most noticeably striking... were my eyes.

Oh Gods, my eyes.

The sun of the morning broke through the rain-clouds for all but a second, and I saw the same danger I remembered seeing in the eyes of Ameritia, however now with a crueller difference. Their colour.

"What did they call those undead creatures who drank blood?" I had asked Mother June as I was finally falling asleep in my memory.

"Vampyri," she had replied with quiet hesitance.

My eyes were not the green I had seen in the mirror my whole life. These eyes were blood red. As the rain pitter-pattered against the coat wrapped around my shoulders, my saviour sat quietly beside me, probably in wonder at this strange woman he pulled from the sea.

I knew what I needed to do, the last piece of the puzzle to show me, without a doubt, what I had become.

I opened my mouth.

In a mix of muted horror and morbid curiosity, I instinctively flexed the muscles in my jaw that had been aching ever since I was tossed into the sea.

There, just there, extending down into view over my canines, were lengthy fangs, prominent and perfectly shaped as if I was born with them.

I looked up from the mirror into the concerned face of Harold. I could no longer push the hunger away from the forefront of my mind. It was all-consuming. There was nothing in my thoughts but my growing horror of what I was, what my body needed, and what I couldn't stop myself from doing.

"I'm so, so sorry," I said, throwing the coat off my shoulders to the deck.

Harold's face twisted from concern to fear as I crawled over him. He let go of the tiller to push me away, only to find I was immovable as stone. I grabbed his beard, wrenching his face to the side, and he cried out in pain.

The sight of his pulsing neck was all I needed to know what to do. I let the hunger override any feeling of control.

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I bit down into his neck, my fangs digging into his throat viciously as blood spilled into my mouth.

I wanted to gag at what I was doing, until the taste hit my senses. It wasn't of copper and iron, but of... *everything*.

Unimaginable flavours, life and memory... I groaned into his neck with relief. It was *delicious*.

I drowned in the sensation, swallowing every drop I could in a pleasurable haze. The feeling of absolute satisfaction, my body overriding every thought with perfect clarity that yes, *this*, is what I needed.

And I needed *more*.

And really, there was so much you could know about a person from their blood.

Harold was a hard worker. He loved his wife. He loved the sea and the home they had built together. I tasted it. Devoured it.

And I could *see* it, as if it were happening in front of me in my mind's eye.

I could see they were trying for a child, that he loved that fact so, so much.

I reeled back into the present moment in shock, my mind suddenly cleared from the taste of Harold's memories and feelings as his heart beat one final time.

No. No no no no no.

I tried to put a stop to my murderous instincts as the blood flow slowed from his neck, pressing my hands against his throat to stop the bleeding, while mentally pushing against the hunger still burning brightly in the pit of my stomach, simmering in my throat.

I cried, grief and guilt tearing at my insides, painting me as deeply as Harold's blood all over my hands, my chest, *everywhere*. "No, Harold! No!"

But my eyes kept wandering not to his deadened eyes staring out over the sea one final time, but to the rivulets of blood seeping from in between my fingers.

I was still hungry.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Oaths to the Gods are never to be made lightly. But if you’re going to pick a Goddess to swear to, don’t be an idiot and make an oath to the Sea. The Sea never forgets what you promised her.”

— *Captain of the Queen of Sardis, Tarrick Yondu*

Guilt tore at my unbeating heart, Harold’s pocket watch swinging in between my knees. Rage burned in the back of my throat at Ameritia for turning me into... *this*.

Harold’s boat lay on the sandy shore not too far from where I sat. I’d pulled Harold’s body onto the sandy bar, and had dug him a shallow grave.

He would be yet one more sailor lost to sea, his wife forever wondering what had happened to him, like so many widows before. My rescuer. And I’d killed him.

Vampyri.

Monster.

Oh, what wretched bargains you keep, Princess of Kitaxia.

The hunger had lessened now. It was much easier to settle it in the back of my mind. My jaw no longer ached with searing pain, more like a dull throb, and I had a horrifying feeling that if I had just a *bit* more blood, I could probably settle my feeling of desperate hunger to be negligible.

But for how long?

What other cursed new rules governed my existence?

I breathed in deep, and let it out with the next crash of waves.

Between feelings of anger, guilt, fury, betrayal, and brokenness... I didn’t know what to do.

Behind me there was a deep mountainous jungle. Before me was the sea. I had no idea where I was, or *what* I was.

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Did I deserve any of what had happened to me? Dragged across the sea to be executed for crimes I didn't have a choice in committing, tricked into becoming some monster of undeath by the future queen of the ruling superpower of the region, and *then* thrown into the fucking sea?

I snorted. Of course not.

But nonetheless, it'd happened. I was what I was.

A monster.

I traced my finger across the blood still dripping from my mouth, licking it dry. Even the salt of the sea could not dilute its delicious taste.

Well. I'm not going to just sit here and die.

I didn't even know if I *could*.

But if I couldn't die... What was the point of living? What could I live *for*?

I stood from the sand, giving one last glance at the mound of dirt that was Harold's grave, before looking out to the sea.

One more soul laid to waste at Kitaxia's feet. At *Ameritia's* feet. I knew that I shared some of the blame for Harold's death. My hands were still literally covered in his blood. I tossed the pocket watch onto the sand covering his grave.

Kitaxia. They're the root cause.

Them and *Ameritia*.

And suddenly, all that rage and fear, became pointed at one goal, and I knew what I was going to do.

"I swear, to the Gods above and below, that I will not rest until I burn it all to the ground." I clenched my fist, holding it out towards the ocean. "I will ruin you, and take every single little thing I can from you, *Ameritia*. I will repay your kindness with the death you've stolen from me a thousand times over."

Far, far away, almost out of sight, lightning arched across the sky and over the water, a flash of brilliance against the distant storm still raging. The thunder barely a whisper of noise by the time it reached my ears.

"I promise you. I will have my revenge. Against you, your country, your navy, *everyone* who let this tragedy happen. Not just my

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death, not just Harolds, but all the lives lost your genocidal country is responsible for. Mark my words well, for you will know the name Claire Vessia.”

They had made me a monster. I would show them just what a monster really looked like.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Leslie Allen is a librarian, sailor, astronomer, and has travelled the world. Yet she somehow found herself back home in small town Nova Scotia.

She is often simultaneously plotting her next tattoo while sipping white hot chocolate and plotting the downfall of her characters. She devours stories in every medium she can find, but her favourites are movies and video games, and being eternally frustrated that they never go far enough.

Sails of Black and Blood: The Revenge of Captain Vessia is her first book.

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