

DAUGHTER
of the
PIRATE
KING

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*For Alisa,
my sister, friend, and first reader*



“LET US NOT, DEAR FRIENDS,
FORGET OUR DEAR FRIENDS THE CUTTLEFISH.”

—CAPTAIN JACK SPARROW
Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End



Chapter 1

I HATE HAVING TO dress like a man.

The cotton shirt is too loose, the breeches too big, the boots too uncomfortable. My hair is bound on the top of my head, secured in a bun underneath a small sailor's hat. My sword is strapped tightly to the left side of my waist, a pistol undrawn on my right.

The clothing is awkward as it hangs loose in all the wrong places. And the smell! You'd think men did nothing but roll around in dead fish guts while smearing their own excrement on their sleeves. But perhaps I shouldn't complain so.

Such precautions are necessary when one's being invaded by pirates.

We're outnumbered. Outgunned. Seven of my men lie dead on their backs. Two more jumped overboard as soon as they saw the black flag of the *Night Farer* on the horizon.

Deserters. They're the most cowardly filth. They deserve whatever fate comes to them. Whether they tire and drown or get claimed by the sea life.

Steel twangs through the air. The ship rocks from the blasts of cannons. We cannot hold out much longer.

"Two more down, Captain," Mandsy, my temporary first mate, says from where she peeks through the trapdoor.

"I should be up there, shoving steel between ribs," I say, "not hiding like some helpless whelp."

"A little patience," she reminds me. "If we're to survive this, you need to stay put."

"Survive?" I ask, offended.

"Let me rephrase. If we're to *succeed*, you really shouldn't be seen performing impressive feats with the sword."

"But maybe if I just killed a few of them . . ." I say more to myself.

"You know we can't risk that," she says. Then she adds abruptly, "More men have boarded the ship. I think they're headed this way."

Finally. "Give the order to surrender."

"Aye, Captain." She ascends the rest of the steps leading to the deck.

"And don't get yourself killed!" I hiss after her.

She nods before traveling through the trapdoor.

Don't get killed, I say again in my head. Mandsy is one of only three I trust on this ship. She's a good gal, very bright, optimistic—and a good voice of reason, which I desperately needed during our voyage. She volunteered to come, along with two other girls from my real crew. I shouldn't have allowed them to join me, but I needed their help keeping these worthless men in line. Life these last few weeks would have been so much easier if I could have had *my* crew on this venture.

“Lay down your arms!”

I can barely make out her cry through the sounds of fighting. But then things calm down. Cutlasses clatter to the wooden deck almost instantly. The men currently under my command had to be expecting the order. Praying for it, even. If I did not order the surrender, perhaps they would have given up on their own. By no means does this crew consist of the bravest bunch.

I climb the stairs, lying in wait just belowdecks, staying out of sight. I'm to play the part of the harmless cabin boy. If these men were to discover who I truly am . . .

“Check belowdecks. Make sure no one's hiding.” It's one of the pirates. I can't see him from where I hide, but if he's giving orders, he's either the first mate or the captain.

I tense, even though I know exactly what comes next.

The trapdoor lifts, and a hideous face comes into view, complete with a foul, scraggly beard, yellow teeth, and a broken

nose. Meaty arms grasp me roughly, hoisting me off the ladder and tossing me onto the deck.

It's a miracle that my hat stays on.

"Line them up!"

I stand as my weapons are removed by the ugly pirate. Then his foot jams into my back as he forces me to my knees, along with the rest of my men. I look down the line and relax as I see Mandsy. Sorinda and Zimah are unharmed as well. Good. My girls are safe. To hell with the rest of the crew.

I take a moment to observe the pirate barking out orders. He's a young man, perhaps not even twenty years of age. Unusual, that. Young men are not usually the ones giving orders, especially among crews such as this one. His eyes are alight with the victory of the battle. His stance is sure, his face confident. He's probably a head taller than I, were I standing, with dark brown hair the color of a seal's coat. His face is pleasant enough to look at, but that means nothing to me when I know he belongs to this crew. He notices Mandsy in the lineup. Her hat has fallen off, revealing her long brown hair and pretty face. He winks at her.

All in all, I'd say he's a cocky bastard.

My crew and I wait in silence for whatever the pirates have in store for us. Smoke billows around us from the cannon blasts. Debris is scattered around the ship. The smell of gunpowder leaches into the air, scratching at the back of my throat.

Footsteps sound as a man walks across the gangplank that connects the two ships. His head points down, revealing nothing more than a black hat with a white plume rising from the side.

“Captain,” the same pirate shouting orders from before says, “all the men on the ship are before you.”

“Good, Riden. But let’s hope they’re not *all* men.”

A few pirates snicker. Some of my men glance nervously in my direction.

Fools! They’re giving me away too easily.

“I’ve spotted three lasses so far, but none of them have red hair.”

The captain nods. “Listen up!” he shouts, raising his head so we can see him for the first time.

He’s not much older than his cocky first mate. I slowly take in the faces of the pirate crew. Many can’t even grow hair on their chins. It’s an incredibly young pirate crew. I’d heard that the *Night Farer* was no longer under the command of the pirate lord Jeskor—that he was succeeded by a young captain, but I hadn’t expected the entire crew to be so young.

“You have all heard the stories of Jeskor the Headbreaker,” the young pirate captain continues. “I am his son, Draxen. And you will find that my reputation will grow to be far worse.”

I can’t help myself. I laugh. Does he think he can make a reputation for himself by *telling* everyone how fearsome he is?

“Kearan,” the captain says, nodding to the man behind me.

Kearan rams the bottom of his sword onto the top of my head. It's not hard enough to knock me out, but it is enough to hurt like hell.

That's enough of that, I think. Mandsy's words of caution are so far from my mind now. I'm done kneeling on the floor like some servant. Bracing my hands against the wooden deck, I extend my legs backward, hooking my feet behind the heels of the ugly pirate standing there. With one yank forward, Kearan topples backward. I stand quickly, turn around, and take my sword and pistol from him before he can regain his feet.

I point the pistol at Draxen's face. "Get off the ship and take your men with you."

Behind me, I hear scuffling as Kearan finds his feet. I jerk my elbow backward, connecting with his enormous gut. There's a large splat as he collapses to the ground once again.

It's quiet. Everyone can hear the click of my pistol cocking back. "Leave now."

The captain tries to peer under my hat. I could duck under his gaze, but that would mean taking my eyes off him.

All at once a shot fires, wrenching the pistol from my hand. It lands on the deck before skittering out of sight.

I look to the right to see the first mate—Riden—placing his pistol back into his holster. A resulting arrogant smile stretches across his face. Though I would like to slash the look from him with my sword, I can admit it was an impressive shot.

But that doesn't stop me from getting angry. I draw my sword and step toward the first mate. "You could have taken my hand."

"Only if I'd wanted to."

All too quickly two men grab me from behind, one holding each arm.

"I think you talk far too much for a mere cabin boy whose voice hasn't yet dropped," the captain says. "Remove the hat."

One of my captors yanks the hat from my head, and my hair falls into place, reaching halfway down my back.

"Princess Alosa," Draxen says. "There you are. You're a bit younger than I expected."

He's one to talk. I may be three years shy of twenty, but I'd bet my sword arm I could best him in any challenge of wits or skill.

"I was worried we'd have to tear apart the ship before we found you," he continues. "You will be coming with us now."

"I think you'll learn quickly, Captain, that I don't like being told what to do."

Draxen snorts, rests his hands on his belt, and turns back toward the *Night Farer*. His first mate, however, never takes his eyes off me, as though he anticipates a violent reaction.

Well, of course I'm going to react violently, but why should he expect it already?

I slam my heel into the foot of the pirate holding me on the

right. He grunts and releases me to reach down. Then I jab the side of my freed hand into the other pirate's throat. He makes a choking sound before placing his hands at his neck.

Draxen turns to see what the commotion is. Meanwhile, Riden levels another pistol at me, even whilst a smile still rests upon his face. Single-shot pistols take time to reload with gunpowder and an iron ball, which is why most men carry at least two on them.

"I have terms, Captain," I say.

"Terms?" he says in disbelief.

"We will negotiate the terms of my surrender. First I will have your word that my crew will be freed and unharmed."

Draxen removes his right hand from his belt and reaches down for one of his pistols. As soon as he has it, he points it at the first of my men in line and fires. The pirate behind him jumps out of the way as the body of my crewman falls backward.

"Do not test me," Draxen commands. "You will get on my ship. Now."

He is certainly eager to prove his reputation. But if he thinks he can intimidate me, he is wrong.

Again I pick up my sword. Then I rake it across the throat of the pirate recovering from the strike to the neck I gave him.

Riden's eyes widen while the captain's narrow. Draxen pulls out another gun from his waist and fires at the second man in line. He goes down like the first.

I ram my sword into the closest pirate next to me. He cries

out before dropping first to his knees, then to the deck. The boots I wear are now sticky with blood. I've left a few red footprints on the wood beneath me.

"Stop!" Riden shouts. He steps closer, pointing his gun at my chest. It is of no surprise to me that his smile is now gone.

"If you wanted me dead, you would have already killed me," I say. "Since you want me alive, you *will* comply with my terms." In a matter of seconds, I disarm Kearan, the pirate who grabbed me from before. I force him to his knees. One hand yanks his head back by the hair; the other holds my sword steady against his neck. He doesn't make a sound as I hold his life in my hands. Impressive, considering he has seen me kill two of his shipmates. He knows I will feel no guilt at his death.

Draxen stands before a third member of my crew, holding a new pistol.

This one's Mandsy.

I don't let the fear show on my face. He has to think me indifferent. This *will* work.

"For one who asked for the safety of her crew, you sure are being callous when I kill them off one by one," Draxen says.

"But for every man I lose, you shall lose one as well. If you intend to kill them all after I'm on board, then it doesn't really matter if I lose a few while bargaining for the safety of the rest. You intend to take me captive, Captain. If you wish me to board your ship willingly, then you would be wise to listen to my

offer. Or shall we see just how many of your men I can kill as you try to force me over?"

Riden approaches his captain and whispers something to him. Draxen tightens his hold on his weapon. I feel my heart beating rapidly. *Not Mandsy. Not Mandsy. She's one of mine. I can't let her die.*

"State your terms, *princess*." He practically spits out my title. "And be quick about it."

"The crew is to be unharmed and released. I will come aboard your ship without resisting. Also, you will bring my accessories over."

"Your accessories?"

"Yes, my wardrobe and personal belongings."

He turns to Riden. "She wants her clothes," he says incredulously.

"I am a princess, and I will be treated as such."

The captain looks about ready to shoot me, but Riden speaks up. "What do we care, Captain, if she wants to get herself all fixed up for us every day? I for one won't complain."

Soft laughter resonates from his crew.

"Very well," Draxen says at last. "Will that be all, *Your Highness*?"

"Yes."

"Then get your pampered arse over to the ship. You men"—he points to a couple of brutes in the back—"get her belongings to the ship. As for the princess's crew, get the lot of you to the

rowboats. I will be sinking this ship. It's a two-and-a-half-day sail to the nearest port if you row quickly. And I suggest you do before you die of thirst. Once you reach the shore, you will take my note of ransom to the pirate king and inform him that I have his daughter."

Men from both sides hurry about to carry out orders. The captain steps forward and holds out his hand for the sword. Reluctantly, I give it up. Kearan, the pirate I'd been threatening, rises to his feet and scurries as far from me as possible. I don't get a chance to smile at his reaction, because Draxen lands a blow on my left cheek.

My whole body lurches from the force of it. The inside of my mouth bleeds from where my teeth struck skin. I spit blood onto the deck.

"Let's get one thing straight, Alosa. You are my prisoner. While it appears you've learned a thing or two from growing up as the daughter of the pirate king, the fact remains that you will be the only woman on a ship full of cutthroats, thieves, and blackhearts who haven't made port in a good long while. Do you know what that means?"

I spit again, trying to get the taste of blood out of my mouth. "It means your men haven't been to a whorehouse recently."

Draxen smiles. "If you ever try to make me lose face in front of my men like that again, I may just leave your cell unlocked at night so anyone can wander in, and I will fall asleep, listening to your screams."

“You’re daft if you think you will *ever* hear me scream. And you’d better pray you never fall asleep while my cell is unlocked.”

He gives me an evil smile. I note that he has a gold tooth. His hat sits atop black hair that peeks under in little curls. His face is dark from the sun. And his coat is a little too big for him, as if it belonged to someone before him. Stole it off his father’s corpse, perhaps?

“Riden!” Draxen shouts. “Take the girl over. Put her in the brig. Then get to work on her.”

Get to work on her?

“Gladly,” Riden says as he approaches. He grasps my arm tightly, almost hard enough for it to hurt. It’s a sharp contrast to his light expression. It makes me wonder if the two men I killed were his friends. He tows me toward the other ship. As I walk, I watch my men and women drift away on the rowboats. They row at a steady pace so as not to tire themselves too quickly. Mandsy, Sorinda, and Zimah will make sure they swap positions regularly so each man can get a turn to rest. They’re bright girls.

The men, however, are throwaways. My father handpicked each of them. Some of them owe him money. Some of them got caught stealing from the treasury. Some didn’t follow orders like they were supposed to. And some have no other fault except for being an annoyance. Whatever the case, my father gathered them all together in one crew, and I brought no more than three girls from my ship to help me keep them in line.

After all, Father suspected that most of the men would be killed once Draxen took me. Lucky for them, I was able to save most of their miserable lives. I hope Father won't be too upset.

But that doesn't matter right now. The point is that I'm now aboard the *Night Farer*.

Of course, I couldn't make my capture look too easy. I had a part to play. Draxen and his crew can't suspect me.

They can't know I was sent on a mission to rob their ship.