



CHAPTER TEN

Secret Passageways and Cake

‘After you,’ Frances said, gesturing.

Aleja lowered her lantern to peer inside the hole. There was a wooden pole that ran down into gloom as thick as night, with short, stubby bits of wood nailed to it on each side. It didn’t look particularly sturdy. Passing the lantern to Frances, Aleja sat on the edge of the hole, dangled her legs beneath her, then began climbing down the ramshackle pole. ‘What’s down here?’ she asked, peering into the hazy shadows as Frances reached the bottom with the lantern.

Below sea level, it was dark and echoing. They were standing in the equivalent of the ship’s cellar. Crates and tools were stacked up against the walls and a

brig was secured in one corner, its bars thick and rusted. Frances grinned. ‘This is where we lock our mutineers. There’re bones in there if you look closer.’ Aleja didn’t.

Eerily silent, the shadows in the bottom of the brig clotted together and rose up, forming the bloodied figure of a murdered sailor, his chest punctured with throwing knives. Aleja shrieked and even Frances looked a little spooked. ‘Stupid shadows,’ Frances muttered under her breath, making shooing motions at it with her hand until it collapsed again. Aleja shuddered, feeling its blank grey eyes on them still.

‘See that?’ Frances pointed at something small on the wall.

Aleja traced the shallow lines. ‘It’s an owl.’

‘Griete devised this whole system,’ Frances explained. ‘There were always secret passages running throughout the ship, but she found a way to better conceal the entrances. Push it,’ she told Aleja enthusiastically. ‘The secret passages are where the magic likes to hide.’

The *Ship of Shadows* seemed to run on magic and, eager to see more of it, Aleja pushed the little painted owl. Another rumble shook the wood under her hand, as if the ship was shaking its skin off, and then a portion of the bulkhead rolled open for them. Frances grinned, they both stepped through, and the bulkhead closed behind them once more.

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‘So how long have you been on this ship?’ Aleja asked as they wandered through the hidden warren. It was dim and slightly musty, and Aleja soaked it all in. She was desperate to memorize everything so she could relive it in the future, like rereading a favourite book. Only this time it would be the most precious story of all – her very own adventure.

‘Years now,’ Frances said, leading the way. ‘We’ve been all over the world several times.’

Aleja, listening intently, almost walked into the side of the passageway when it abruptly curved and hooked back round. ‘Oh, yeah,’ Frances continued, ‘we’ve battled kraken and ridden camels in the desert – some of the beasts in those sands make kraken look like baby bunnies – and trekked through jungles. Once, I nearly got swallowed up by a snake in the Amazonian rainforest!’

‘What happened?’ Aleja asked, slowing to stare at Frances. She was enthralled at the mention of kraken and beasts – she’d been right to believe the sailors’ rumours.

Frances grinned. ‘I tried to strangle it with a vine but the thing got twisted round so I ended up jumping on its back and riding it through the rainforest instead.’

Aleja opened her mouth to say something when a deep rushing sound began to ripple through the passageway.

‘What’s happening?’ Aleja asked, looking round, half expecting some beast to be racing through the narrow passage towards them. Instead there was gurgling and a luminous waterfall appeared, bubbling out of the wall and swirling around their feet. It sparkled bright blue with phosphorescence. Aleja leaped back, sure that water was rushing through a crack in the hull, but the puddle at the base of the passageway was kept small as if by –

‘Magic,’ Frances said, laughing at the expression on Aleja’s face upon seeing the glowing waterfall. ‘I told you it liked to hide down here. Something about secret passageways really captures the imagination,’ she mused to herself. ‘You never know what you’re going to find!’

An entire wall of shadows descended from the passageway and became a group of rabbits that bounced through the waterfall with excited squeaks, turning their dark shadow-selves phosphorescent blue. The shining shadow-bunnies lit up the rest of the passage as they darted ahead, rousing other shadows that were slumbering in the ink-black corners.

When Aleja and Frances ran through the waterfall – Aleja feeling she must be dreaming – it turned their hair the same shade of glittering blue. Glowing brighter than the lantern and laughing at each other’s hair, they slid into several hollows where other magical waterfalls had sprung up, attracting more mischievous shadows. After

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a steep climb, they emerged into the galley from a trapdoor hidden in the bottom of one of the cupboards.

‘What are we doing in here?’ Aleja asked, looking around the galley. It was large and burrowed back towards the stern. A gigantic table was bolted to the floor with wooden benches and the odd chair arranged round it. Along one bulkhead was the huge stove, with iron doors on the ovens and a chimney that funnelled all the smoke outside. Shelves and cupboards had brackets to stop the plates falling to the floor.

Frances turned to Aleja, her delighted face highlighted by her bright blue hair. ‘I thought you might be hungry,’ she said. ‘I know I am,’ she added, rummaging around in another cupboard.

Aleja looked at her with amusement.

‘What?’

‘I thought you were going to show me some more magic,’ Aleja admitted, her stomach still fluttering from the bewitching display in the passage.

Frances spread her arms wide. ‘What could be more magical than food?’ She stepped aside to reveal a cupboard crammed with cake, biscuits and more treats than Aleja had ever seen in one place. ‘Ermtgen – our cook – keeps the best stuff in here,’ Frances said, reaching in to grab a large tin.

The lid popped off with a sharp clang. Inside was an entire round of yellow cake with a thick, creamy top.

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‘Ooh,’ Aleja said, her mouth beginning to water. ‘Is there a knife or a plate or –’

‘Nah.’ Frances scooped a handful of cake out, passed it to Aleja, then reached back in for another handful. ‘We’ll just snag this bit and put the rest back.’ She shoved her cake in her mouth with a little sigh. ‘S’good.’

Aleja bit into her own piece. Soft and fluffy with a hint of vanilla, it was cake the way cake was meant to be: creamy and sweet. She wished she could save a slice for Miguel, but she was on an adventure and adventurers didn’t stop to think about their brothers. She’d tell him about it when she got back home, she decided. In the meantime there was cake and a magic ship and more questions than she could fit in her mouth to ask.

Frances dug out two more handfuls of cake before she replaced the tin and showed Aleja back to her cabin, the two of them licking their fingers on the way. Frances asked a heap of questions of her own about Aleja and her life in the tavern and her brothers, which she seemed rather fascinated by. Aleja couldn’t understand why. To her, nothing was more interesting than the *Ship of Shadows* and its pirate crew, and she couldn’t stop wondering what the next day would bring.