

A black and white illustration of a man in a pirate captain's uniform, including a bicorne hat and a long coat, standing on a ship's rigging and holding onto a rope. He has a sword at his waist. Behind him, a mermaid with long, flowing hair and a seashell bikini top looks on. The background features stylized, swirling waves.

KATHERINE WEBBER

A TWIN CROWNS NOVEL

CAPTAIN
F
FATES





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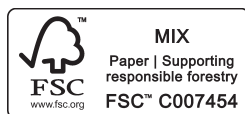
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*For Kevin, who makes me believe in true love and for
our daughters, Evie and Mira, who light up my world*



Map to come

Map to come



*Go past the horizon, across the sea
And there you'll find your destiny*





CHAPTER 1

Marino



Captain Marino Pegasi could not remember the last time he had spent so much time on land.

He was at his fourth ball in as many weeks and had been introduced to countless ‘eligible young ladies’, who had all started to look the same after a while.

It was not that Marino didn’t love to dance. He enjoyed a party as much as anyone, maybe even more than most, but where some might become seasick after weeks bobbing above the waves, he found himself becoming waltz-sick after weeks bobbing around the dance floor.

The constant spinning round and round and round, the faces changing but the conversation ever the same. He stayed courteous, bowing to each partner at the end of the dance, even as he heard the whispers from the nobles and royals of Eana, wondering who, if anyone, Captain Marino Pegasi would dance with a second time.

He knew he made a striking figure in the ballroom, standing taller than almost all the guests in his perfectly tailored burgundy frock coat and fitted black trousers, with an embroidered waistcoat over his starched ruffled collar and rakishly tied cravat. And of course, he wore his earrings,

three simple gold studs on one earlobe, and two small pearls on the other. At these events, Marino had his tightly coiled black curls tied into a knot at the nape of his neck, but a few always managed to spring free, brushing against his cheekbones as he danced.

And dance he did, with partner after partner. Until the evening came to an end, and he could collapse in a luxurious bed in his guest room at Anadawn Palace, wishing that he was in his own bed on his ship instead.

But he knew that would be rude not only to Queen Rose and King Shen, who were graciously hosting him at Anadawn until his next voyage, but also to his sister, Celeste, who expected to see him at breakfast where they could regale each other with tales of the evening before.

Marino feared he was becoming more proud by the day, increasingly unimpressed with the ladies paraded in front of him.

He would never admit as much to his sister or to Rose, who was almost a sister to him. He knew they were trying to help him. And he had learned long ago that when they teamed up they were a force to be reckoned with. They were certain that this time spent on land, away from his ship, was the perfect opportunity for him to find his match, someone to keep his bunk warm. Someone to care for him, they claimed. So, he kept smiling and laughing and made sure they only ever saw the charming Marino they knew and loved.

How could he tell them that for him love was complicated? Marino had his sights set on a life of adventure, and that meant he was always going to be at sea, looking to the horizon. He was far too much of a gentleman to make any

false promises of settling down to the ladies presented to him.

In his heart, Marino dreamed of a romance greater than any he could find in a ballroom. It wasn't that he didn't want love, the opposite of it, he wanted the kind of love that inspired grand gestures and epic adventures. The kind of love those closest to him had found.

It felt like everyone around Marino was starry-eyed and love-drunk. Everyone but him.

Queen Rose and King Shen had wed several months ago, but Rose was still the blushing bride. She could not stop looking at Shen. And when he looked back at her, well, the heat in his gaze was enough to raise the temperature of the entire room. It made Marino feel oddly . . . lonely, in a way he never felt when he was on his own in the middle of the sea.

And nothing had surprised Marino as much as Celeste finding, and keeping, love herself. Celeste had always sworn off true commitment, saying there were too many fish in the sea for her to ever choose only one, and yet here she was, canoodling with Princess Anika of Gevra. Celeste shunned propriety and only danced with Anika at the balls, and the two were a liability on the dance floor – twirling and prancing around with no regard to what song was playing, only dancing to the tune in both of their hearts.

At least Rose's sister, Queen Wren, and her beau, Tor, were away, spending the summer in Ortha, where Wren had been raised. As much as Marino liked both Wren and Tor, he was relieved not to be *entirely* surrounded by loved-up couples.



Finally, it was the last ball of the summer.

It was nearly autumn, but the night air was still warm and inviting enough for the ball to be held outside in the grand Anadawn courtyard. Queen Rose had enchanted the candles to float in the air and garlands of flowers were strung overhead. The musicians played the favourite songs of the season, songs Marino had heard so often, he knew he would never forget them even if he tried.

His back was straight as he twirled Lady Sophie, a petite blonde noblewoman visiting from the northern coastal town of Norbrook. Next to them, Celeste and Anika twirled and laughed, and Marino wished he could dance with someone with as much abandon. Celeste caught his eye and nodded her head towards Lady Sophie, eyes wide with a silent question. Marino shook his head slightly. No, Lady Sophie was not destined to be the great love of his life. Celeste rolled her eyes in response and then focused her attention back to Anika.

‘Are you enjoying the evening, Captain?’ Lady Sophie asked, and Marino felt a quick pang of guilt for not trying harder to get to know her. It was so easy to keep things at surface level, to smile and charm and never truly let his guard down. Perhaps he should at least make a small effort. It was the last ball, after all.

He rewarded her with a warm smile. ‘I am,’ he said. He saw how she blushed in response to his smile, which he had to admit was pleasing, even if he had no romantic interest in her. He knew that dancing at a ball, being seen as the catch of the season, was no true hardship. He simply missed the sea, and that wasn’t Lady Sophie’s fault. ‘It is a beautiful night. Queen Rose is, as ever, an exceptional host.’

‘This is my first Anadawn ball,’ Lady Sophie said, sounding a bit breathless with excitement about it all. ‘I’ve never seen magic before, not until tonight. It’s spectacular.’

The land of Eana was ruled by witches gifted with a unique magic. For all of Marino’s childhood, witches had been banished and abhorred, and they had only come back into their rightful power when the twin witch queens, Rose and Wren, had been reunited just before their eighteenth birthday.

Rose had been raised in the palace, with no knowledge of her true heritage nor the existence of her twin. Meanwhile Wren had spent her whole life living with a hidden sect of witches far on the western coast of Eana, preparing for the moment when she would take Rose’s place and usher in the reign of the witches. Back to their rightful place, ruling the land that had been created by, and named for, Eana the first witch. And while things had not gone exactly to plan for either twin, the result had been something even better – two queens working together for the good of their people. And with the return of the witches to power, and the strengthening of the land itself, many Eanans had discovered their own latent magic. Including Marino.

Marino hadn’t known he was a witch until Rose and Wren welcomed magic back into the kingdom. He had been surprised, and then pleased, to know he had the gift. It had once been believed that witches were only able to access one of five distinct strands of magic. Enchanters could do small magic and minor spells of enchantment or manipulation. Healers were gifted with the ability to cure those who were ill or injured. Tempests could control the weather, calling down storms or shifting the wind. Warrior

witches had tremendous strength and agility and were unparalleled on the battlefield. Seers could glimpse the future, usually by reading the movements of flocks of beautiful starcrest birds that were unique to Eana.

When Marino had first discovered his witch heritage, he realised he was a natural tempest. It was a joy to sail on the sea and practise his gift – catching a strand of wind in his hands and then sending it to fill his sails so his ship practically flew over the waves.

Now, since Rose and Wren had freed all five strands of magic, Marino could access *all* his gifts. Every witch still had a dominant power, but with practice, they could master all five strands. Marino's power was growing stronger all the time.

Hearing Lady Sophie's awe made Marino feel a twinge of guilt for being so immune to it all. 'There is nothing quite like an Anadawn ball,' he said, and he meant it. Then he turned his attention back to Lady Sophie. 'And what do you like to do in Norbrook?' She was a beautiful dancer, but he felt no draw towards her, nothing made her stand out from any of the many others he had danced with all summer, but he should give her a chance.

Lady Sophie held her head high. 'I am quite an accomplished pianist. And I paint as well.' She sounded unbearably smug, and Marino had a sneaking suspicion that she was exaggerating her talents.

He nodded, trying to muster more interest. 'What do you like to paint?'

'Horses, mostly. We have quite the impressive equine collection, you know. And the occasional self-portrait, of course.' She fluttered her lashes coyly, as if even she was

immune to her own charms.

Marino cleared his throat. 'And do you like the sea?' Perhaps she painted seascapes. 'I've not been to Norbrook, but I've sailed past it before. The coast is quite dramatic.'

She scrunched her nose up. 'The sea! Goodness no. The salty air ruins my hair, not to mention my jewellery!' Her laugh was high and sharp. 'And the smell of fish! No, it is not for me. I prefer to stay in town. Or go riding.'

'But!' she went on, clearly seeing Marino's disappointment and seemingly remembering what he did. 'I do love to watch the sun set from my father's house. The light is very pretty when it dances across the waves.'

'So it is,' said Marino, with a deep sigh. Saying she liked sunsets did not endear her to him, not because he disagreed, but because he had yet to meet someone who didn't enjoy a sunset. It was akin to saying that she enjoyed breathing.

They finished the dance in silence, and Marino bowed politely before turning away and striding to the edge of the dance floor.

'Marino!' Rose swept towards him with a warm smile. 'Come, let us dance.' Rose looked radiant. She was wearing a flowing pale green gown embroidered with golden thread and her long chestnut hair was loose and hung to her waist. On her head was a delicate gold crown inlaid with emeralds, and matching jewels winked on her wrist and fingers. She beamed at Marino, green eyes sparkling, and Marino couldn't help but smile back at her.

'How did you find Lady Sophie?'

'A very fine dancer,' said Marino diplomatically.

'And? Do you want me to invite her to tea tomorrow? I've not spent much time with her, but I am happy to get to

know her better if you enjoyed her company.’ Rose’s eyes were wide and hopeful.

Marino raised his brows. ‘I do not think she is the one for me. But I appreciate the effort.’

Rose sighed. ‘Marino! It is the last ball of the season. And none of the ladies in Eana have caught your eye. No noblewoman *or* any of the witches! How will we ever find you a love match?’

‘Rose, with Wren away, surely you have more important things to do, like running a kingdom? Playing matchmaker for me should be at the very bottom of your to-do list.’

Rose wound her arm through his and guided them towards the drinks table, the very place he had been heading before she caught him on the dance floor. ‘Marino, finding you a love match is not on my to-do list. It gives me much joy!’

‘At least one of us is enjoying it.’

Rose rolled her eyes. ‘Oh, Marino! You are impossible. But you know I am not one to back away from a challenge.’

‘I know that all too well,’ said Marino, with an affectionate grin. ‘We grew up together, remember?’

‘Rose, my love, my forever queen, are you badgering poor Marino again?’ Shen had appeared next to them, looking debonair as always in his red and gold royal regalia. Through his marriage to Rose he was now a rightful king of Eana, but he still ruled his own land, the desert-based Sunkissed Kingdom.

The Sunkissed Kingdom had been lost in the sands long ago, hidden from the rest of Eana, but Shen and Rose had rediscovered it. When they did, they found not only an entire kingdom, but Shen’s history and heritage, as well as his right to the throne. Now the pair of them ruled both

lands together, allowing the Sunkissed Kingdom and Eana to prosper alongside each other.

Rose pouted. ‘Shen! I’m not badgering him. I’m helping him!’

Shen raised his brows. ‘Marino?’

Marino cleared his throat. ‘Ah, well, she did take me to the drinks table when I sorely needed a drink. So, yes, she has been helping.’

Rose preened. ‘See?’ Then she swatted Marino on the arm. ‘Marino! I am helping more than that!’

Shen laughed as he handed Marino a glass of wine. ‘I’m sure you are missing your ship. And the freedom that comes with it. Perhaps I can join you on a voyage one day.’

‘You will do no such thing,’ said Rose. ‘Leave me to run both of our kingdoms while you go off gallivanting with Marino? I think not!’

Marino clinked his glass to Shen’s. ‘Ah, as we both know, the king answers to no one but his queen.’

‘Too true,’ Rose said smugly. But then she leaned up to press a kiss to Shen’s cheek. ‘I suppose if you really wanted to join Marino on a voyage you could. But wouldn’t it be more fun if I came along too? And Celeste and Anika! Why don’t we plan it for when Wren and Tor are back?’ She turned to Marino. ‘You know, I’ve never been to the southern continent. And I’ve always wanted to go to Demarre. Is it nice in the autumn?’ She clapped her hands together with glee. ‘Oh! It could be an official royal visit. What a wonderful idea, Shen!’

Shen shook his head in bewilderment. ‘Ah, yes. That was my *exact* idea.’ But he was smiling at Rose, taking delight in her clear joy.

‘Marino, what do you think? You’ve been missing your ship all summer, and this way you can be back at sea and we can all still be together!’ Rose beamed at him.

Marino took a small step back, suddenly dizzy from more than the wine. He felt overwhelmed by all of Rose’s plans. It was one thing for her and Celeste to decide what he was doing while he was in the palace, and an entirely other thing to imagine them all on his ship for weeks on end. ‘Autumn is a wonderful time to visit Demarre.’

‘Oh, there will be so much to plan!’ said Rose, sounding delighted by the prospect. ‘And Marino, who knows? Perhaps you’ll find someone to your liking in Demarre.’

‘Perhaps,’ he said with a smile. ‘Perhaps. Now, if you’ll both excuse me, I think I must retire for the evening. It has been, as ever, a delight.’

‘Won’t you stay for the fireworks?’ asked Rose. ‘Please? This is the last ball of the season, after all.’

Marino didn’t want to disappoint Rose, so he slung an arm around her and Shen and grinned at them both. ‘I wouldn’t miss it for anything.’



After what Marino had to admit was a truly spectacular fireworks display, he said his goodnights and slipped back into the castle and up to his guest room. The windows were open, and he was grateful for the evening breeze. He went over to the window and gazed out at Wishbone Bay, thinking he could spy his own ship, the *Siren’s Secret*. The summer Marino turned fifteen he’d joined a crew and set sail, and he knew he was meant for a life at the sea. By the time he was seventeen, he had the *Siren’s Secret*. And now, at twenty-one,

he had his own crew. They spent their days sailing to far-off lands and bringing back goods to trade and sell in Eana. Now that Rose and Wren were the queens of Eana, he had been given the title of Royal Captain of Eanan Sea Merchants. So, he was captain of his crew, of his ship, but apparently not of his own destiny.

For Marino, being on land this long felt more punishment than reward. He found the palace air stifling; he missed the sea winds. Most of all he missed seeing nothing between him and the horizon and feeling like adventure could be anywhere.

Well, it sounded like he would be joined on his next adventure by the whole palace.