

# Blood In The Water



Tami Veldura

**Table of Contents**

Love’s Landscapes.....3  
Blood in the Water – Information.....5  
Blood in the Water .....6  
Chapter I.....7  
Chapter II .....24  
Chapter III.....41  
Chapter IV.....49  
Chapter V .....60  
Chapter VI.....66  
Chapter VII .....75  
Chapter VIII.....83  
Chapter IX.....86  
Author Bio .....87

# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## BLOOD IN THE WATER

**By Tami Veldura**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Blood in the Water, Copyright © 2014 Tami Veldura

Cover Art by [Diego Candia](#)

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

# BLOOD IN THE WATER

By Tami Veldura

## Photo Description

Two pirates sit together in the lower deck of a ship enjoying each other. One of them, blond, is shirtless and smiling. He has a snake tattoo on his left shoulder. He leans forward to lick the nipple of his lover. The second pirate has black hair down to his chest. He straddles a leg of the blond and arches toward him. He appears more reserved. The blond restrains the black-haired pirate by one wrist.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Being a pirate is one of the most dangerous and exciting jobs ever. What people don't know is that what makes it even more thrilling is to intercept another pirate's mission, especially when you'll get to see the other pirate's bewildered expression. When will he notice that I always do it on purpose, but not because I hate him? They do say there's a thin line between love and hate...*

*I hope you'll be able to write our story and make it into one of the most exciting journeys ever, even if it means that many battles will have to be fought.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jane A*

## Story Info

**Genre:** historical fantasy, paranormal

**Tags:** : treasure hunt, slow burn/ust, sea battles, pirates, demons/spirits, spirit possession, tattoos, HFN

**Content Warnings:** extreme graphic violence

**Word Count:** 27,970

# **BLOOD IN THE WATER**

**By Tami Veldura**

## Chapter I

### *January*

Kyros sipped his slurry of a drink and held up his other hand to stop the spill of words. The ragged man across the table bit his tongue. Kyros grunted at him. "I don't need your life story. I need your sworn word, on your honor, that you will fight."

"You have it, sir."

"Who brought you in tonight?"

"Rodrigo and Hugo, sir."

Kyros stared for several heartbeats, but the man didn't try to slide away from his scrutiny. "I'll check with them, you realize?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Register your name with my quartermaster." Kyros leaned his head slightly to the left and watched his new recruit's expression tighten. "You'll be on three-quarters share for a period, make sure you don't cause any trouble." The man flashed a hard look at Kyros and with obvious discontent slid himself down the bench to sit across from Araceli.

They always reacted the same. Disbelief, anger, haughty self-importance, reluctant tolerance. Sometimes they made it past tolerance and worked well before the mast. Sometimes they didn't. Araceli didn't suffer fools. She calmly slid a knife against the edge of a whetstone, coloring the tavern chatter with the familiar slide of metal. It was more than a show, she'd already used the weapon twice in the few hours they sat here.

"Quartermaster." The new recruit spat on the bench. He lifted his chin. "Don't get too comfortable."

"Name, please." Araceli asked with no apparent interest.

"You can call me God, if you like."

Araceli continued to sharpen her knife and the utter lack of response deflated the recruit's ego a bit. He glanced at Kyros who didn't even offer a raised eyebrow of acknowledgement.

His bravado slid a bit more. "Antony Louis."

Araceli set the whetstone to one side of her ledger and the knife down on the other. She inked her quill and scratched his name onto the list. Kyros watched the recruit lean across the table and sniff at her. She hummed. "Captain says you get three-quarter share, understand?"

"Sure, darlin'."

Kyros saw Araceli's shoulders twitch a hair tighter. Antony couldn't handle a woman in charge, or perhaps he didn't like a negro telling him what to do. It was just a matter of time; he'd show his true colors. Araceli continued, "We sail after merchant vessels and will track down any legitimate treasure hoard. Any news you collect on that front you bring to me or the Captain—" Araceli paused at the blatant lust on Antony's face. "Repeat that so I know you're listening."

Antony reached forward to stroke a finger across Araceli's wrist on the ledger. "I'll listen to your voice all ni—"

Araceli swept his hand to the side, dropped the quill for her knife. She stabbed Antony's hand to the table. Her expression remained idly disinterested. Antony jerked to his feet with a shriek. He tried to punch her and missed. The whetstone skittered toward Kyros. Araceli pinned Antony's head to the table. His rapid breath ruffled the pages of her ledger. He whined, the fingers of his impaled hand white with stress. Blood seeped between the cracks of the table.

Araceli continued, the interruption not worth the effort, "Merchants and treasure hoards. You'll start in the rigging. Do you have any experience with line repairs?"

Antony's free hand scratched at the table, and his face took a more pasty shade. Araceli waited. "Yes."

A barmaid knocked into Kyros' arm with her hip, her hands full of drinks. She nodded at Araceli. "Keep scarring that table and you'll be paying for a new one."

"These benches have seen worse than a few knives."

"Your knives'll be the last. This ain't the Seal, we won't be seeing any brawls from you or yours in this place." She frowned at him and turned away to deliver her orders.

Kyros collected the whetstone. Araceli made a final note in her ledger and allowed Antony to lift his head from the table. She pressed the quill into his free hand and turned the book toward him. "Make your mark." Antony marked



a shaky cross of lines. Araceli yanked her knife out of the table and their new recruit's hand. He gladly put more space between them.

"You'll find the Hawk left of the bay," Araceli said, moving the knife in a flat gesture that Antony backed away from. "Move your things aboard. The coxswain will show you your hammock. We go with the tide in two days, understood?"

"Yes, Quartermaster." Antony cradled his hand and made his escape from the tavern.

Araceli measured her beer over the blood he left behind, filtering it through the wood and down to the stone floor. Kyros watched her wipe the knife. He handed her the whetstone. "What does that bring us up to?"

"Three score, even."

"Ought to be enough." Kyros sipped his drink. "Last minute concerns?"

"Going after this trade ship from Africa... that's another target Midnight Sun tracked down, isn't it?"

"So what if it is?"

She frowned at him, expressing multitudes of discontent. "You gamble with all of our lives. What happens when the Sun's Captain elevates you from annoyance to threat? I wouldn't take that ship with two hundred men."

"Have you bought into the stories, then? A cursed man that slaughters souls by the dozens?"

"No. If he were manic he wouldn't be able to run the kind of business he does." She closed the ledger and tapped her quill free of ink. "Their six-pounders match ours, and they have a pair of long nines out the front." She shook her head. "Frankly, she might match us for speed. It isn't wise to antagonize him."

"I'm not trying to get us all killed—"

"Then what are you doing?"

Kyros drained his mug and tapped it on the table, pensive. "I just need the distraction. And a spice ship is a good challenge for us. There's a lot of profit in it."

"Sure. So why are we taking on the Sun, too?"

Kyros wiped his hand down his face and pushed the mug away with one finger. "I need a treasure to chase."

“Don’t avoid my question.” Araceli sheathed her knife on the back of her forearm.

“I didn’t.” Kyros signaled the barmaid for another beer.

“You just refuse to accept that some things should be avoided, don’t you?”

“I don’t take ‘no’ for an answer, girl. It’s not in my nature.”

Araceli snorted at him, a deep sound in her broad lungs.

\*\*\*\*

## *January*

### *That Night*

Eric touched the shirt over his chest on the way up to tuck his hair back. He knew the shirt covered him. He’d put it on himself. It was not going to disappear. He tied several locks together at the back of his head, brass rings clinked on the strands. The Midnight Sun listed to port over a wave and moonlight blinked through the sails.

“Closing in to starboard, sir! Looks like an English boat.”

“Guns?”

A pause while the crow counted. Then, “Thirty, sir. And she rides low.”

“Tacking starboard! Full sail.” Eric swung the wheel before him, pulling the Sun to port, then turning to starboard on a direct approach. The boom of the mains’l drifted to port and the fabric stretched taut. “All hands. Ready the guns.”

“All hands!”

“All hands!”

The cry echoed over the ship, and men jumped to obey. Below him, Eric felt two score men load and roll out a full complement of cannon. The deck swarmed with men readied at sail and line. The Sun breached a wave, on the hunt. “Load the long nines, chain shot.”

“Load the nines with chain!”

“Ready!”

Two larger cannon out the fore rumbled into place, and Eric listened to the distance countdown. The crow called estimates every few seconds and as the numbers dropped, the tension on deck spiraled up.

“A hundred yards. Seventy. Fifty. Thirty—”

“Fire the nines.” Eric called to his men. And shortly: BOOM! Moonlight danced in the smoke. The Midnight Sun sailed right through it.

“Hit! The mains’l and rigging. She’s tacking port, Captain—they’re gonna fight.”

“Let them try.” Eric touched his course to keep the Sun as perpendicular to their target as he could, presenting a small target to their more numerous guns. Eventually, the tangent slid too far. Eric let the Sun angle behind their target instead. “Ho, the sails!”

Men dropped from on high, knots of rope in their hands to yank every sail up and out of the wind, using the fall of gravity for speed. The Sun slowed in the water, scraping behind the English ship without striking her. The seamen bristled at each other over the short distance. Wood groaned. Water sucked against the ships. Eric watched... “Starboard, fire centers.”

The middle four cannon exploded. Twenty-four pounds of iron burst into the back of the English ship, throwing wood in every direction. The crew cheered. Eric hauled his wheel around to port as fast as he could. “All sail! Full speed! Any man not on a rope or sail, get down on the sweeps.” Bodies scrambled. In seconds, Eric heard the deep pound of the coxswain’s drum and the dark rhythm of his voice. The Sun jumped forward through the water. She accelerated faster than wind, carving through the sea. The predictable splash of oars pulled them forward.

The crow announced, “English are tacking port, sir. Halfway. Two-thirds. They’re chasing, sir, forty yards. Fifty.”

With forty men pulling the boat by hand, the Sun couldn’t be caught. At a hundred yards, Eric called the turn, “Tacking starboard. Hands on deck. Prepare to board. Ready guns.”

“Ready!”

“Ho, the sail.” The zip of lines filtered through crashing waves. Starboard oars rattled as the men pulled them in. The Sun listed hard in the water, turning as close as her speed would allow. By the time they completed the about-face, their English target had reached them.

The boats slowed beside each other, men screaming across decks and between guns. Eric gripped the wheel. “Starboard, fire all!” Both ships rattled

with impact. Tangy gunpowder clouded the air. Men swung or jumped to the English vessel, screaming their fear or excitement equally.

A rail-mounted hand cannon fired on the Sun, bursting through rigging and bouncing off a metal grate on the deck. It flew through a man, taking parts of him with it. Eric jumped up onto a rail and followed his men to their prize. Blood already shone in the moonlight, painting the deck in abstract directions. Eric landed hard. He put a hand down for balance and inked his palm with blood. His chest stretched beneath the shirt. Eric swallowed hard; he forced himself to breathe.

An Englishman rushed him, sword up, screaming about something. Eric couldn't hear him over the rush of sound in his ears. Not everything came from battle around him. He thrust his blade up and blocked, jerked his elbow into the Englishman's face as he stood. Eric cut into neck and chest on the downstroke, then plunged his blade between ribs.

The Englishman drowned in his own blood. Eric pushed him back with his boot heel and swallowed again, keeping more than nausea at bay.

He considered the fight from his place aft of the wheel. Things didn't appear to be in his favor. He knew a thirty-gun ship was risky. He rubbed his chest on the right, running his palm over a ring in his nipple. He breathed hard. The moon set his odds in sharp relief.

He thrust himself into the fray, half-sliding down the stair rail to the main deck where he jabbed and sliced at every English coat he saw, more to annoy than kill. "Everyone back to the Sun!" He bellowed.

Men disengaged and fled, running for their lives back to the ship. Eric distracted Englishmen left and right, catching their attention so they wouldn't catch his crew. In a heartbeat, twenty swords surrounded him and twenty more formed another ring. He dropped his weapon.

"Kill him!"

"No, don't touch him!"

"He's cursed."

"The whole crew is cursed."

"That ship is what's cursed, kill him!" Someone jabbed him in the back. Eric hissed.

"No!"

“Everyone, shut up!” The captain, bound in bright British blue, muscled between his men. He tapped the flat edge of his sword against Eric’s cheek, a bloody stripe that made his chest tighten. “Deumont, I presume?”

“Who’s asking?” He put his hands down to his hips and fingered the edge of his shirt.

“No one you need to know.” The captain put his sword to the top of Eric’s chest, slicing the shirt.

“You don’t want to do that.”

“Poke a hole in you?”

“Your crew’s right. I’m cursed. The moon will bring it out.” He kicked his chin up to the light, and several men glanced up with him.

The Captain just smirked. “No such thing.” He yanked his sword down, cutting into the shirt and Eric both.

Blood flowed down his chest, between his fingers where he held the skin closed. His shirt fell open down the center and hung off one shoulder. Moonlight illuminated him. It focused on his ink tattoo: not a man, not a beast, but something between. His nipple ring pierced through one eye.

“See, gentlemen? Just a drawing—”

The spirit exploded from Eric’s chest, tearing flesh and blood with it. Eyeless, it closed a wide palm over the Captain’s head and crushed his skull without effort.

Men screamed.

They fled from the creature, warded themselves with crosses or stars, prayed to their gods when it was far beyond too late for salvation. Eric fell to his knees. Blood ran from a thousand holes where Ghalil tore free of him, wetting his trousers. He blinked at the bright puddle of blood where the captain lay and saw the creature lick its fingers.

Ghalil didn’t move so much as will itself forward, catching a screaming man and turning his head around the wrong way. Another, it stripped of his skin. A fourth, it crushed every large bone and left him shrieking on the deck. Methodical destruction. One by one. Patient. Ghalil made its way from man to man, running their heart’s blood across the deck in more creative ways than men with swords.

Eric pressed his hands to the line down his torso and tried not to think about the burn. He couldn't take a deep enough breath. Every instinct screamed at him to run, but the thought of moving made him light-headed. He bent down to rest his forehead on the deck, not strong enough to care about blood flowing like the sea.

He listened to Ghalil's progress across the ship. Heard each crunch of bone over the waves. Each scream. Eric's eyes closed without his permission. He fought to stay conscious and only won the battle half the time.

That had to be enough. Eric fumbled at his belt, picking through the hanging leather straps until he recognized a small pouch. He pulled the drawstring open, and between waves of black vision, he poured the contents into his palm. The last he had. The sharp scent of spice reached his nose and woke him up a bit.

Eric gritted his teeth. Then he slammed the handful of spice against the hole in his chest where Ghalil used to be. He screamed the incantation, spice burning through his veins, poisoning him but calling the spirit home. His eyes burned; his skin curled like a roast over fire. He hallucinated the ghost voice of his mother.

Ghalil slammed back into him, burning back into his skin in the same way it had torn itself out. Vengeful power rippled across Eric's body, knitting wounds together, filling him.

Eric vomited blood—not his own.

He stood. Blood-covered but whole. He stank of spice. Anything was better than blood. The deck lay like a slaughterhouse. His crew watched from the Midnight Sun, deadly silent. They had won the ship, but if anyone doubted the rumors surrounding their captain... Eric stumbled toward the stairs of their prize, his entire chest throbbing. He made his way down to the gun deck, the crew deck, the hold. Six men huddled in a corner. One screamed at the sight of him, but there was nowhere else to run.

“You—” Eric coughed and spat something more solid than he cared to consider.

“You can join me, or you can die.”

“Stay away from us.”

“You're cursed.”

“I won't go near that thing.”

Eric nodded. "Do you carry any cinnamon?"

"I'm not helping you."

"Stay away!"

Eric grunted and turned away. He struggled back up the stairs and found a plank bridging the ships. He crossed it. Men eased away from him like small fish from a shark. "Clear the hold. Mister Riviere... Boatswain, where are you?"

To his right. "Here, sir."

"Register everything in the ledger. See that any cinnamon comes directly to me."

A cabin boy resisted the hands that pushed him forward. When he found Eric looking down at him, he thrust both hands out and looked away. Eric accepted the bucket of seawater and upended it over his head. Cold. But the salt prickled his unblemished skin, and Eric relished being whole. He swished and spat. He traded bucket for shirt, and the cabin boy finally escaped his presence.

Eric covered himself and felt Ghalil settle down in his skin. Without the moonlight to get it excited, the spirit remained content with the blood it spilled. He rubbed his right pectoral as if it would help. It didn't. Eric felt his crew take a collective breath. More subdued than before, they filed back onto the English ship to clear the goods.

Claude Riviere nodded down at Eric from six foot nine. "Is it satisfied, Captain?"

"For tonight." Eric rubbed his chest again.

"Good. What do we do with survivors?"

"There are no survivors. Throw the bodies to the sea. Lash the two ships together and set Misters Bernard and Morel to the masts. We repair as we sail."

"Yes, sir." Claude rumbled. He barked at the crew to get moving.

Eric sighed on his way down to the gun deck. Men hauled cannon back from the edge of the ship, cleaned out their barrels and re-stacked the monkeys. He heard the clattering sound of broken wood swept out to sea. Eric closed himself in the aft cabin.

Everything felt muffled, here. More illusion than reality. Eric sat on his bed, breathing through a wave of nausea. Something bumped his elbow. Pressed and

rubbed. Eric lifted his arm for Orthos. The tabby bumped his head against Eric's chest and Ghalil squirmed to get away. Eric scratched Orthos under the chin until he purred like rolling thunder. Ghalil stopped protesting. The nausea subsided. Eric finally took a full breath of air.

This time when his eyes started to droop, it was from exhaustion, not blood loss.

\*\*\*\*

*February*

*A month later*

The Nomad Hawk stalled in the wind, her sails crossed against each other to stabilize the craft. Kyros dropped his spyglass and handed it to Araceli. He pointed. "There, on the edge of the inlet."

"I see them." She took her time assessing the distance and sucked her teeth.

"What?"

"Shallows of some kind between us, looks like they run back around... I'm not sure."

Kyros pointed at a man on deck. "Gregory, get up in the nest and tell me what you see."

"Sir!" Gregory scaled the mainmast, all long limbs and swinging. He pulled himself up to the top and set his hand against his brow to block the falling sun.

Araceli shook her head. "They shouldn't berth here. Something must have gone wrong."

"Let's hope it's not with the cargo."

"Looks like a reef, sir! Connects to the mainland there, or close enough, anyway."

Araceli snapped the spyglass smaller. "We'd best go around."

"After nightfall, then." Kyros nodded at her. "Bring us back behind the island until after sunset. No lanterns. We'll move once the sun isn't lighting us up from behind."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell everyone to get some rest. We won't need but a few for sneaking around. We attack in the early morning." Kyros left the helm in her capable



hands and took the steep stairs to the gun deck. He pushed the handle of his sword down to avoid knocking it against every step.

Antony sat to one side, working a fig into braided line. His right hand, bandaged from his encounter with the quartermaster, hindered his progress. Kyros jerked his chin in Antony's direction, curt greeting. "You'll get a chance to fight tonight, Louis. I'd like to see what you're made of."

"Captain."

Not a hearty "yes", but Kyros didn't think Antony was here for the fighting. More like ready to sneak off with the loot. Both Rodrigo and Hugo had vouched for him, but Kyros had a feeling that support might waver if he pressed hard enough.

"Javier." Kyros caught his coxswain by the shoulder on the way by. "Keep an extra eye on one of our new ones—Antony. He's fore on this deck doing some line repair."

"Sí, I don't trust any of them." A scar across Javier's nose wrinkled with his rolling r's.

"And good that you don't." Kyros slapped his shoulder and moved on. They only had an hour or so until full dark. He shut himself in his cabin.

Kyros sighed as he looked over the map spread on his table. The heading was clear, they had found the spice ship—and before the Midnight Sun, no less. As far as most of the crew knew, it was just another fight to win, but Kyros was after larger prey: an infatuation he failed to hide from Araceli.

He picked up a small, crimped, brass ring and sat heavily in his chair. Eric Deumont, pirate and treasure-seeker, captain of the Sun. Kyros knew what it felt like to be on the wrong side of Eric's sword (the edged one) but that just egged him on. What secrets did the cursed captain keep? Kyros turned the ring in his fingers, remembering the feel of black locks in his hand.

After a year of shadowing the man, Kyros only knew one thing for sure. Eric cleaved to a specific hunt that occupied his full attention. Even to the point of neglect for all other pleasures. Kyros didn't consider himself a treat, but to be dismissed out of hand? That wasn't an offense he intended to accept at face value.

Kyros needed to know what kind of prize could capture a cursed man's entire focus. And why.

Someone pounded on the door. Kyros jumped and slapped the ring down on his map with more haste than he intended. He pulled the door open to an expectant quartermaster and a silent gun deck.

“Skeleton crew for the move, Captain. Ready when you are.”

“Now is good,” Kyros said. He grabbed a jacket and yanked his door closed. “Any sign of movement?” He shouldered the abused leather and twitched one end free of his sword.

“None.”

“If you want to catch some sleep, you’re relieved.”

“Sir.” Araceli inclined her head, but the light in her dark eyes told him it wasn’t going to happen. Still, she knew to take a break when offered and headed below decks, regardless.

Kyros stomped up the stairs to shake the memory of Deumont from his skin and surveyed his ship from the wheel. Only nine or ten men worked, scattered around the deck and rigging. No lanterns, as he had ordered, but the darkness was her own kind of comfort.

Sail flapped with nowhere to go, and lines groaned against the ship. Only the wind greeted them when Kyros announced, low, “All sail.”

Men pulled lines in sequence and silence, aligning the canvas to the perfect angle. The sails bulged and pulled the Hawk forward steadily. Nothing greeted their movement but the slap of sleepy water. The inlet came into view, just a low smudge of dark with a sudden spike of masts at the end. Lanterns lit the ship top to rudder, a lighthouse beacon in the night. Kyros watched their distance grow, following the line of reef between them. He checked through his spyglass, but no movement on deck signaled they’d been spotted.

For hours the Hawk glided against the waves, farther and farther from the inlet until it dwindled to a dot, then around in a huge arc to dodge the reef. Kyros tracked their progress and that of the time. At the proper location, he called for crossed sails and a change of the skeleton crew. The Hawk had a clear approach, and with their target anchored so close to shore, she was a sitting duck.

Just before dawn, Kyros went below deck to rouse the crew himself. He started with his quartermaster, and she opened her eyes at his touch, awake and ready. Kyros shook his coxswain’s hammock. “All hands. Ready the guns. Man the oars.”

Javier wrangled his thirty-odd men down one more deck, and Kyros heard wood sliding against wood. Kyros watched the gun deck for a heartbeat, proud of his men for their practiced mastery of battle.

A hand on the hilt of his sword, Kyros jogged up the stairs and took the helm. Beside him, Araceli shifted her weight with the list of the boat and peered through the spyglass. "Still sitting there, sir. We're never going to get another shot like this."

"I agree." Kyros felt the drum of the coxswain echo through the ship. The splash of oars. "All sail," Kyros directed. "Full speed for ramming."

The Hawk accelerated slowly, but once moving nothing could stop her. At the front, a reinforced ram cut through the water and bore down on their target. The Spanish trade ship bobbed in the waves, unaware. Kyros twitched the wheel, adjusting for current drift on the approach. Below decks, Javier led his men in a rhythmic song. Each pull of the oars yanked the ship faster. By the time they breached the reef, the Hawk flew through the water.

Too late, the watch on the trade ship spotted them incoming. Kyros yelled as they approached, "Brace for impact!"

The Hawk shuddered through iron and wood, crashing with supreme force into the broadside of the trade ship. Spanish sailors fell through the scar the Hawk had torn, and the entire ship heaved up, against her anchor. Kyros held the wheel as his ship twisted in the water, momentum carrying the two against each other. The Hawk's port side slammed against the trade ship, throwing men, including Kyros, to the deck. He gasped.

Araceli bellowed, "PORT, FIRE ALL!"

A tight delay, where all Kyros could hear was the awesome splinter of wood. Then the Hawk jumped again, exploding from the left as each cannon fired asynchronously.

Kyros regained his feet. His men from the oars came flooding onto the deck, sword and mace in hand, ready for battle. There wasn't much of one to be had. The trade ship listed to starboard, taking on heavy water and shedding Spanish sailors in equal measure. Kyros swept his arm over his men. "All hands to the Spanish. Kill anyone you find, and recover that cargo before we lose the ship." Men swarmed to his command.

He continued to point. "Gregory, Antony. Grab two men each and tether lines fore and aft to hold it up. Jav—" Araceli yanked Kyros forward off his feet and thrust her sword into the gut of a Spaniard behind him.

Kyros rolled up and drew his sword to engage another yellow-coated man in the dark. They had climbed up the back of his ship. Kyros parried a thrust and lunged. His sword pierced the man's chest, sending him coughing to the deck. Kyros kicked his sword away and engaged the next.

Two, three, four men in a row. Kyros heard Araceli handling her own stream of offense with quick, brutal efficiency. Kyros kicked a man on the rail back down to the water. He and Araceli leaned over the back of the ship. A final man climbed a line from water level, hand over hand. Araceli pulled out her pistol, but Kyros put his hand on her fist. "Hold fire. I believe that's our Spanish captain."

She made an impatient face but lowered the weapon. The captain climbed to the deck under the point of two swords. He made a show of holding his hands up, away from the sword and pistol on his belt. "*Has destruido mi barco y llevado mis bienes. No tome mi pueblo también.*"

Kyros touched the point of his sword under the captain's chin, and he looked up to avoid it, wary. His eyes flicked from Kyros to Araceli and back. Kyros said, "Ask if he speaks Portuguese. I don't want to waste time finding Javier."

"*Você fala esta língua?*"

The captain squinted at Araceli, half-confused, then decided to nod and toggle one hand. Sort of.

"Good enough," Kyros said. "Tell him to abandon his ship and collect his men on shore. If anyone fights us, we'll kill them. When we're done, he can salvage what's left."

Araceli delivered the ultimatum rapidly, and the captain's progressive squint indicated he didn't quite follow. She scowled and repeated in shorter words. "*Deixa o barco. Leve os seu homens. Não volte.*"

"*Sí.*" He nodded. "*Sí.*" Kyros pulled his sword back an inch or two, and the Spanish captain backed himself into the rail of the Hawk. He glanced between Araceli and Kyros one last time, then turned and heaved himself over the edge.

Kyros turned back to the body of his ship and stepped over a sprawled Spaniard. The trade ship listed beside them, resisting the pull of a dozen lines holding it afloat. A gangplank dropped from the Hawk into the jagged hole of the trade vessel, a steady stream of men coming and going to empty her goods.

"Very good," Kyros said, to no one in particular. He wiped his sword on a Spaniard coat and used a bit of cloth from his own shirt to clean the blood from

the corners. Kyros slid it into the scabbard at his waist and left Araceli to delegate cleanup on deck. He trotted down the gangplank to the Spanish ship.

It looked worse on the inside than it did from the Hawk. Lanterns swung from exposed beams. Wood and metal were bent and broken in every direction. Twisted cannon lay some half a ship-length from their proper holds. Cannon balls collected in low corners like iron water. The Hawk's ram had cut in far enough to warp the stairs center of the ship. Kyros navigated men and debris on his way to the captain's cabin.

African trinkets and fetishes littered the place. All, bright reds and greens. Kyros picked through sheets of fabric and handfuls of carved things. A statue of a long-necked beast with stubbed horns towered in one corner, a deadly creature no doubt. Kyros had no intention of finding his fortunes in Africa. The place swarmed with monsters.

He dug through every cabinet, every drawer, every corner where something of more value might be hidden. He found something wrapped in plain linen. Kyros unrolled it over the table, but what he discovered didn't look like anything he knew. It appeared to be gold, but weighed much more than that. It was a complete ring about the size of his two fists together, tapered a bit at the bottom (or was that the top?) and with no smooth edges. Pieces of it lifted off the face and could spin in any direction, interlocking with each other.

Weird. And exactly the kind of treasure hunt Kyros could use as bait. He didn't recognize this piece, but the form reminded him of a jar he'd once stolen from the captain of the Sun. He rolled the item back up and wedged it into his belt. Another several minutes spent rummaging turned up nothing else interesting. He left.

Kyros stopped two of his men on their way down to the hold. "Are there empty barrels or bags down below?"

"A few, yes, sir."

"Bring them up here. Empty out the cabin." Kyros pointed behind him. "There are a thousand small fetishes and some nice-looking fabrics we can sell. Wrap it all up good, I don't want to see these things rolling around the deck."

"Yes, sir."

"There's also a tall, square-patterned statue of a beast in one corner. Be careful with that. It'll be worth more in one piece." Kyros took a step up the gangplank and reconsidered, a hand on the shoulder of his man. "On second thought, bring the statue to my cabin. I'll find a spot for it."

He let them go and relieved one of his men of their burden, a big bag packed with fabrics. Kyros hefted it over one shoulder and joined the line back to the Hawk.

That afternoon, with Javier watching over the salvage operation, Kyros sat down in his cabin with Bram. The bosun unfolded a pair of delicate spectacles and opened his ledger. "A decent collection, Captain. Salted meats, garlic, ginger, onion... something called an a-vo-ca-do? We have half a dozen things I've never seen listed in the Spaniard ledger. It'll take me some time to match them up." Bram glanced up over his glasses. "I don't have a good count of the little statues you found in the cabin, yet."

Kyros nodded, "I don't know if they're worth anything. If not, I'll let everyone pick out a favorite, but until then I don't want to see them in anyone's hands.

"Yes, sir. I've directed Tristan to craft new barrels, one for the trin—"

"Captain!" Araceli's voice shouted through the door. She yanked it open but didn't cross the threshold. "Sir, the Sun's been spotted on approach."

Kyros stood. "We'll finish later, Bram." He took the stairs two at a time, leaping to the helm and accepted the spyglass from Araceli. She pointed. He aimed the glass.

Sure enough, the dark hull and light sails of the Midnight Sun billowed in their direction. At speed.

"We should run."

"No." Kyros leaned over the rail to the deck and shouted, "Pull up the green for parlay."

Araceli grabbed his shoulder and hissed, "Are you mad? They're after this ship's goods."

"And I'm chasing a treasure on that one."

A single cannon fired in the distance. Kyros and Araceli ducked. The iron ball flew over the deck and tore right through the fore's'l. Kyros scowled and spied through the glass again. From the fore of his ship, Eric Deumont extended one middle finger.

Kyros muttered, "What's the flag signal for 'That was childish and unnecessary'?"

Araceli shook her head and stomped off the helm, her weight resounding each step through the deck.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter II

*February*

*Hours Later*

The dawn cracked between a crowd of ship masts. A gangplank slapped between their decks, and Eric marched across, pointing at the cocky Hawk captain with one square finger. “You son of a bitch—”

A woman’s wide black hand landed square on his covered chest, and Eric twitched back, scowling. Ghalil rolled under his skin. “Your sword and pistol,” she said, her palm now up to receive them. “Or back where you came.”

“Who the hell are you?”

One elegant eyebrow went up her tall forehead in an expression Eric read without help. No, it didn’t matter. He unclipped the frog for his sword and threw it back to Claude on deck. The pistol holster followed. He put his arms out. “Anything else?”

She stepped aside with an ironic arm out toward her captain. “Welcome aboard.”

Eric pointed again, but some of the bluster fell from his sails with the interruption. Still, he had a bone or two to pick. “You should have stayed in the drink when I threw you over in Nassau.”

“And miss seeing your face again? Tell me you didn’t put too much effort into that jar—”

“That was you?” Eric bristled and clenched his fist. He felt Ghalil churn in his chest and the discomfort fueled his rage. He paused, nose to nose with the captain, and thought he saw a smile flicker across his expression. Eric stood taller than him by inches, and tilting his head down brought his dreadlocks forward, around his face. He dropped his voice. “That jar was more than a payday, you motherfucker. I—”

“You didn’t want that jar. It was already cursed.”

“Cursed, how?”

“There was some kind of ghost locked up inside. I sold it to a witch in south Florida.”



In an instant, Eric's ferocity blew away. Eric felt his breath rush out, and even Ghalil's disturbing turn couldn't diminish the hope that blossomed in his chest. It was true, then. They could be caught. Captured. Eric brushed his left hand over his right pec. He could be free. He just needed all the pieces. Eric eased himself back half a step and said, "You need to tell me everything you know about that jar."

The captain smiled in a slow spread of lips and inclined his head toward the stairs. "Why don't we take this into the cabin."

Eric got the distinct feeling he was being set up for something, but if this man knew anything at all about that jar... well, he didn't have a choice, did he? "Lead on."

"Captain!" Claude, from the deck of the Sun.

Eric put up a hand to prevent him from storming the Hawk. "If he'd wanted to kill me, he wouldn't have run up the parlay. Stay on the Sun."

The Hawk's captain addressed the black woman as they walked past, "Quartermaster, start repairs on the fores'l and speak with the bosun about salvage of the trade ship. If we're done, cut it loose. Let the Spaniards have the rest."

"Yes, sir."

He led Eric down the steps. "Your quartermaster is a slave? A woman? How do your crew stay in line?"

He shot a look over his shoulder, something assessing. "She's a free woman and put in her position the same way yours was. By popular vote. My men respect her."

"You don't have to keep them in line?"

Now it was a full smile, sinister. He opened the door and gestured Eric in. "She does that all by herself." He shut the door behind him. "What is it you'd like to know?" The captain passed by closer than necessary and draped a stretch of unfolded linen back over an item on the table.

Eric propped up the wall beside the door and crossed his arms. "That jar. Do you know how the spirit got inside?"

"A spell of some kind, I imagine. I didn't try opening it, but the witch I consulted said it sealed from the inside."

"With what?"

“Magic. It was meant to last ten years, after that it would have weakened enough for the ghost to get out.”

“You’re sure it was a ghost? Not a spirit?” Ghalil twisted under his skin, and not for the first time, Eric wondered if it could hear him while confined.

The Hawk’s captain slid him another considering smile. “Why does it matter?”

“Just wondering.” He deflected, “Have you ever seen other jars like that one?”

The smile slid away, and for a heartbeat, the captain stared. Then he scoffed and kicked a trunk on his way toward Eric. “Naw, and I wasn’t interested in that one except that you were.” Shrug. “Sold it for a nice profit, though. Seems the ghost trade is a popular one.”

“I can’t imagine.”

“That so?” He paused a few inches away and leaned his hands on the wall beside Eric’s shoulders. His eyes shone bright amber, almost red in the center. “Then why is it you’re so interested in a jar for holding one?”

“It doesn’t concern you.” Eric felt a little silly holding his arms crossed between them when the Hawk captain seemed intent on hovering as close as he could.

“Everything you do concerns me.”

Eric narrowed his eyes. “Why did you run up the parlay?”

The captain leaned closer, their noses almost touched, and Eric witnessed a sense of pleasure flicker across his face. “You smell divine. What is that?”

Reality kicked Eric in the chest when Ghalil surged against him. Eric rubbed his pectoral and cleared his throat. “It’s called cinnamon. It’s the reason I’m here. The Spanish ship you took was carrying some. I need it.”

“Why?”

“It’s not your concern.”

“I’m making it my concern”—his eyes slid up, like one might consider a woman in a short skirt—“Eric.”

“It’s Deumont, to you.”

He grunted.

“Why did you run up the parlay?”

Disappointment twisted the Hawk captain's brows for a flash, then he shrugged again. “Need it beaten into you, do you?” Then he pressed their bodies together. Hips, chest, lips: a slow writhe.

Eric stiffened, his arms popped up to the captain's shoulders in shock, but he didn't push away. In fact, it felt... rather nice. Eric opened his mouth to accept the man's tongue and kiss. He dragged one hand up a strong neck to short blond hair. He groaned.

Heat flooded his skin in a way he had forgotten. Sex hadn't crossed Eric's mind in years, yet it ground against him, now, with demanding force, a hard plane of body against his, pressing him into the wall. Eric tore his lips away to gasp for air. A hot tongue licked his chin, his neck, and teeth bit into his shoulder. Hands across his chest. Fingers fiddled with the ring in his right nipple, through the shirt. Ghalil shifted. Eric slapped his hand away and grabbed it so it wouldn't return.

“What's the point of a nipple ring if it's not to play with?”

Far more than Eric cared to get into right now. He pulled on blond hair to put those swollen lips at the right angle for kissing. They rutted in quick, chaotic strokes until the captain tried to pull Eric's shirt up.

Eric tumbled them across the wall. He pinned the captain's hands with his own, lacing their fingers above their heads.

“Modesty does not become you.”

“There's more than modesty under this shirt.” And Eric wasn't about to tell all. He bit at the captain's lips and chin. Nipped his neck. He drove his hips up in long synchronous strokes, relishing the flash of fire in his gut. His captive arched and moaned.

“Eric. Oh, yeah. Just like that.”

Eric had to agree. The captain jerked against him, biting his own lip to stay silent, like the jangle of clips and metal on their belts didn't give everything away. Eric chased the cliff edge, regardless, squeezing their fingers together as his body curled close. He came with a fierceness that stunned him.

The bliss of a much-delayed climax cracked in a heartbeat as Eric realized the mess he'd just made. He let his head thump to the wall and sighed.

The captain laughed heartily. He unwound their fingers. “Yeah, not the brightest idea I've ever had. But still, we're making progress!” He ambushed

Eric with a peck on his lips and pushed off the wall. He threw the cabin door open, "Oi! Antony! Fetch the bosun. I want to know how much cinnamon we have on board."

Eric slid his shoulder to the wall and hit his back there to face the room. "What the hell is your name, anyway?"

Another bark of laughter. This guy was far too cheerful. "Kyros Vindex. Of the Grecian isles." He made an elaborate greeting gesture.

"Far from home."

"The boat's home enough." Someone jogged down the stairs. Kyros greeted him. "Ah, Bram. What have you got?"

The short man at the threshold pushed a pair of spectacles up his nose. "Cinnamon you said, sir? Three ounces." Eric closed his eyes and let his breath out, careful to avoid any outward sign of disappointment.

"Not much." Kyros grunted.

"It's very rare, sir."

Kyros leaned his head in toward Eric. "That going to work for you?"

"It will do." Two, maybe three times if he conserved. It would have to do. Ghalil shifted under his skin.

"Wrap it up, Bram, and meet us top-side."

"Yes, sir."

"So." Kyros turned on Eric and startled him away from the wall. Backed him into the desk at the center of the space until they were chest to chest. "Are you going to make me chase you around for another year?" Eric's fingers ran into linen on the table, and he pulled it off the thing Kyros had tried so casually to hide. "Or have I done enough to convince you we should coordinate shore leave?"

Eric split his attention between his fingers scrambling over a heavy piece of something and the intense question Kyros delivered. "We're taking a long way around to Nassau. If you're going in that direction..." Eric's finger tripped over a piece of the object that lifted and rotated. This had to be the fourth piece of the jar. Kyros had taken it from the Spanish ship. If he didn't know what it was, and their conversation indicated he didn't, then why was he here, attacking this particular ship?

“We can be,” Kyros said, with a smile crawling wider.

Eric nodded. He worked a pouch at the back of his belt open and stuffed the thing inside. “I’ll see you there, then.”

\*\*\*\*

*February*

*Minutes Later*

Kyros smiled and let Eric lead the way out of the cabin. He touched the table littered with linen and noticed the too-heavy puzzle thing had walked. Good. Kyros followed Eric across the gun deck and back up the steps. The largest pouch on the back of Eric’s belt swung like it was full.

Bram caught up as they breached the top deck, his spectacles folded on the front of his shirt. “Captain.”

Kyros accepted the small pouch and sniffed it. The visceral memory of Eric’s body pressed into his surprised him. This was the stuff. “Here.”

He tossed it to Eric. The Sun’s captain hefted it in his hand, then dropped it into a pouch on his belt, already rust-red with spice dust.

Kyros crossed his arms and kicked his chin toward the gangplank. “Don’t be a stranger, now.”

Eric watched him for a heartbeat, then turned away. Kyros didn’t watch him go, but it was a tough thing. Instead, he dove back below decks. He needed a change of pants and a drink. Araceli found him there pacing the length of his cabin.

“We’re just letting them go?”

Kyros looked up at her scowl. “I thought you didn’t want to engage?”

“No...” She crossed her meaty arms. “But I don’t like that you let him saunter around, either.”

Kyros laughed. “Collect all the leads for a meeting, we have a new heading. Also, send someone up to the nest to keep any eye on the Sun. I want to know when they’re clear of the reef and under way.” He tossed the last sip of rum down his throat and set the tankard back on his belt. The bottle he left on the table. By the time he’d tidied up the linen and shoved his scattered messes into a corner, the cabin had filled with men.

“Pass the rum around,” he said.

Bram reached for his tankard. "Good news, Captain?"

"Yes." He did a quick headcount. "Where's Theo?"

"Here." The big blacksmith squeezed through the door last. "Sorry, sir. I've got iron in the fire. Want to take advantage of being still."

"I won't keep you long." Kyros nodded. "Most of you know, the captain of the Midnight Sun just paid us a visit. He's onto something magical. Ghosts or spirits. Maug, what can you tell us?"

Maug rubbed his forehead and hummed. "Well, is it ghosts or is it spirits?"

"What's the difference?"

"Ghosts walk, talk, and reason. Spirits are a... like a single emotion given form."

"He asked me the same question. I'm guessing he's dealing with a spirit."

Maug shifted his weight and hooked both thumbs in his belt. "Well, you've never had an emotion like a spirit does. They only have one overwhelming thought, so I guess you could call them predictable. Pure love, pure hate, purely mischievous—just one thing."

"Can they be controlled?"

"Not like you can train a dog, no."

Kyros rubbed his hands together. "Okay. When I dug around in the captain's cabin on the Spanish ship, I found an item, maybe this big around." He held a circle shape with his hands. "Looked like gold, but too heavy. Definitely a puzzle piece of a larger item. Deumont took it."

His crew bristled and Kyros held up his hand. "Relax, I left it out on purpose." He nodded at Araceli. "We knew he was going after this trade ship, but we just happened to get here first. The piece he took looks a lot like the jar I stole from him some time ago, and I don't believe in coincidence. Deumont is seeking out a puzzle jar to capture a spirit."

Maug snorted. "What for?"

"I don't know yet, but that jar I sold set us up for months. Whatever he needs it for, the trade is hot, and we stand to make a nice profit from it. But even if we don't find Deumont's jar, I want to look into others." Agreeable nods from the crew. "Maug, between meals, can you sit down with Bram and dictate everything you can remember?"

Bram cleared his throat of rum. "I'll need a new book, Captain."

Kyros found his small library in a drawer. He touched a row of mismatched leather-bound books of scattered size. He pulled one out and flipped through the uneven pages. Full of the boatswain's passable handwriting. The next one was empty. "Last one I have. I'll get another next time we make land."

Bram passed it back to Theo. "Can I get a buckle and a clip on it?"

"Ya. No problem."

A hand pounded on the door but there wasn't room in the cabin for another body. "Sorry, sir! Midnight Sun is out of the bay."

Kyros clapped once for attention. "I propose a heading. We follow Deumont at distance. I suspect he's aiming for landfall at Nassau. Now that he has his jar piece, he'll need to reconnect with the rumors for his next step." He lifted his right hand. "All in favor?" Hands went up and he counted. Then lifted his left hand. "All opposed?" Only two hands in the air.

Kyros passed his looking glass through the crowd. "Get back up on the nest and keep the Sun's heading in sight. Report in to the quartermaster."

The voice from the back said, "Yes, sir!"

"You're all dismissed. Sam and Christoph, you two stay. I'll hear your thoughts."

\*\*\*\*

*April*

*Two months later*

A loud mix of high-scale extravagance and bottom-feeding degeneration: Nassau. Eric found it horrific and invaluable by turns. Where else could men rape each other of pride and money, and each come out of it claiming they got the better end of the deal? Eric avoided the well-traveled main road and let himself into an unassuming side yard.

An old dog sighed in his direction. Chickens clucked at him, pecking near his feet for corn or seed. Pigeons cooed from a coop at the end of the yard. One of them scratched for seed on top of the coop, a letter bound to its leg.

Eric took the letter and guided the pigeon into the coop with its fellows. He spied another message waiting for him on an interior shelf. Eric tipped his sword to the side and rested on a trunk placed against the wall. He unrolled the first message.

*Mister Deumont, I was surprised to receive your letter—blah, blah, introductions. Puzzle jars are something of a curious specialty—blah, blah, nothing Eric didn't already know. Ahha: However, it is with regret I return to you no knowledge of this specific jar piece you seek—*Eric tsked and tore the note to shreds for the chickens to scratch into their afternoon nests.

Drunk laughter scratched across the gateway and adobe wall of his hideaway. “The bloody Sun, can you believe it? Like any tosser would sign up for that gig?”

“It’s a death wish. Every one of ’em is tempting the fates.”

“But you know, they’re the best paid slobs in town, I’ll give you that.”

“I’d rather stick my hat with the hooligans on the Lola’s Embrace. Or even the Hawk!”

“HA! The Hawk? Bunch of superstitious louts.”

Eric pursed his lips and slid his second letter inside the breast of his jacket. Vindex was a spontaneous man, but Eric had seen too many things to think superstition played a part. He rubbed his chest. The voices drifted farther down the alley and turned, so he scaled the courtyard adobe wall and pulled himself up to the roof.

“—ing in the tavern tonight. Said there’s a line out the door for signing up.”

Eric overheard and followed the voice, mindful of his footing on the thatch. The two men below staggered against each other, half-arguing. One held a bottle of rum and watered the dirt more than his own palate.

“Don’t tell me you’re considering this?”

“Fuck—” Hic. “Why not? Maybe get to see more of the bloody planet than this rock. Hey!” A poke in the chest that nearly sent them both into the dirt. “You ottercomewith.”

“Sign up with the Embrace?”

“No, the fuckin’ Hawk—” A mutter of something Eric didn’t catch. He hopped to another thatched roof and slid himself down the back side.

The Hawk was in town signing men up to sail. Eric took a deep breath, surprised to find his heart racing for something other than the spirit in his skin. Vindex said he wanted to meet, but... well, Eric never put any faith in it. Yet, he was here. It was so strange to have someone outside of his crew expecting to



see him. Ghalil did a good job of isolating him either by rumor or slaughter, and Eric had focused so hard for so long on getting the spirit out that he let personal pleasures slip away unnoticed.

Eric arrested at the doorway to Gullwing Tavern, startled by his own ambition. He wanted to see Vindex. Touch him. Taste him. As reported, a line of men reached to the door, jostling and rousing each other. Cocking eyes and whistles at the black quartermaster.

He didn't know how to seduce a man, he didn't remember the steps of the dance for flirting. He was staring. Eric committed to a table inside the tavern and asked for a beer so he could pretend he wasn't watching the Hawk's captain go about his business. He remembered his second letter and pulled it out to read.

\*\*\*\*

*April*

*Minutes Before*

Kyros scowled at the fence seated across his table. "You came to me, so don't start thinking you have any bargaining power. You happen to be in a place of convenience for me, so stay convenient."

"Sir, I've sold to every merchant on this island, I don't think a review of the books is necessary to begin—"

Kyros leaned back and said, "You don't think it's necessary?" He looked at Araceli. "He doesn't think it's necessary."

Araceli sipped her beer. "I don't think he's worth your time, sir."

Kyros flicked his eyes across the man. "Are you wasting my time?"

"No, sir! I'm here—"

"Then listen. Because this is how it works," Kyros spoke over him. In that moment, Eric prowled through the tavern, eyes locked on Kyros and burning hot. Kyros completely lost his train of thought watching him declare ownership of a small, corner table.

Araceli cleared her throat.

Kyros did not want to look away. When he did, his scowl deepened, and the fence sat straighter. "You will turn over your ledger to my boatswain this evening, and he will review both it and your stores. If anything does not match

up, we will not do business. We will provide you a trial volume of goods which you will pay for in full. Once sold, you come to me or the quartermaster.” Kyros jerked his thumb at Araceli. “Then, my boatswain checks your ledger again.”

Kyros glanced up, covering his look with a lift of his empty mug to a barmaid. Eric wasn't paying him any attention. Instead, he was reading something intently. Kyros tried not to feel upstaged by the note. Eric's earlier stare had set a fire in his blood, and Kyros couldn't wait to stoke it higher.

“I don't run my business for you to correct, Captain.”

These interruptions to his daydreaming were pissing him off. “Look, you ignorant swine. If you want to act in this position, your business becomes my business. I'm not going to hand over my riches for some land flea to tear out the profit. You're starting to become inconvenient.”

The fence scowled. “I don't expect to search your ship, why should you invade my storehouse?”

Kyros growled, “Because that's how I run things. Now, you can present yourself at the docks for my boatswain, with books in hand or not, that is up to you, but get out of this building. We're done.” Kyros stared at him until he tsked and removed himself from the table. Then Kyros chugged his fresh beer just for something to focus his anger on.

When he set the mug down, Eric was gone. His half-empty drink still warming on the table. Kyros jerked to his feet. “Dammit, where'd he go?”

“Just left.” Araceli crossed her arms over her broad chest and gave him a turn of her lips. “In a hurry, too.”

The first of a line of men wanting to join his crew approached the table, beer already in hand.

Araceli flipped her ledger open to a new page. “I've got this.”

Kyros didn't insult her by double checking. He left a handful of coin on the table to cover their drinks and ran after Deumont. He jogged down the main street, weaving through merchants and shoppers. There was no sign of him outside the tavern, and Kyros' curiosity spiked alongside the heat in his veins. What could have been in that note to set him off?

He wasn't going to find out wandering the city like a drunk. Kyros detoured to a pile of crates and scrambled up to a store rooftop, then out on the limb of a

tree. It offered him a view down the hill all the way to the bay, and there: in a faded blue jacket, ran his pirate, down to the dock and back to the Sun.

Kyros swung down from his tree and landed on the thatched roof of the store. A baker, by the smell of it. His boots slipped on the waxy reeds. A cat hissed at him and jumped to the roof of the next merchant. Kyros followed, running on the peak where the thatch layered under a beam just wide enough for his steps. Not a conventional path, but he didn't need to deal with the crowds.

The road turned and his house-path with it. Kyros jumped to the dirt and sprinted across. He scrambled up an adobe wall and through a fluster of chickens, cutting into yards and wild wood to catch up. He half-slid down the final slope of rocky hillside and cut Deumont off just before the docks.

The man slid in the dirt to avoid him, his cords of dark hair flying about. "Come with me if you want but don't slow me down."

Was that even a choice? Kyros matched Eric's jog to the long dock and they stepped into a dinghy at the end, together. Eric counted out their first few strokes, but once they had rhythm, Kyros interrupted, "What's your big hurry?"

Eric fell silent, and Kyros let the splash of their oars count out the beats. It became clear Eric had no intention of sharing. Kyros felt himself bristle. "So you prowl into my day all hot and heavy, sex on two legs, and now I get the cold shoulder?" Kyros had no right in the world to be indignant, but he refused to let go of the feeling.

That message had to be about the jar Eric remained so focused on—nothing else had occupied the man's attention for as long as Kyros had been chasing him around.

But why?

They tied up at the Sun, and Kyros followed Eric up the ladder then down into the gun deck of the ship, only to be left at the threshold of the captain's cabin like a good dog. Eric kicked the door closed in his face. Kyros immediately pounded on it. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

But Eric didn't answer, and Kyros didn't know how to argue with silence. He growled and paced the width of the ship in front of the door, pausing to greet a silver tomcat that vocalized at him from the top of a gun.

Eventually the pacing stopped entertaining him and he sat against the door, arms crossed, stewing in his mix of attraction and irritation. He hit his head on

the door. He had it bad for a man who could turn enemy and royally fuck up his day. What the hell was he doing here?

\*\*\*\*\*

*April*

*Minutes Later*

Eric had to put a wall between them. That man set his skin on fire without touching it. Just the glower he gave while sliding down the rocks, the confident way he landed on the path before him—Eric wanted to tear off Kyros' jacket and press them both skin to skin, bite what he could reach and grab the rest close.

He couldn't look at him without seeing a perfect triangle from shoulders to waist. Couldn't talk to him without holding back a command to strip naked and bend over. The short ride here on the dinghy, just watching those arms pull the boat in perfect rhythm, gave him a hard-on so tight standing up caused tunnel vision.

Eric pressed his hands to the top of his table and forced himself to focus on the map. It took him longer than it should have to locate Havana. He thought he heard Vindex stomping back and forth just outside his door, and the idea of that deadly panther—coiled and waiting for him—shattered his concentration.

He rolled up the map and stored it in a tube for safekeeping. The letter he stashed in his trunk with the incomplete jar. One more piece. Ghalil rolled under his skin. Eric snapped the lid shut and locked it. The sooner this spirit took up residence in something other than his body, the better.

Eric yanked his door open. Vindex caught himself with admirable reaction time, hardly falling into the threshold at all. Then they were nose to nose, and the blond disregarded all the rules of personal space. Kyros grabbed his head and crushed their mouths together for gasping, desperate kisses. Eric closed the door and pushed him against it head to toe. He breathed in Kyros. He wanted to devour him. Then Kyros pulled his tunic up, out of his belt, and a thread of fear jolted him back. "The shirt stays on."

"I'm not coming in my pants again."

"Then take them off." Eric unthreaded his belt and dropped all twenty pounds of hardware and leather on the table with a clank. Kyros' personal collection hit the floor.

They crashed together, hard angles and sharp teeth. Kyros yanked at Eric's laces. Eric stripped Kyros of his jacket, holster, and shirt. Then Kyros got his hands in Eric's pants and squeezed. Eric had to lean on him or fall to his knees. Another hand on his cock—so foreign it made him shake. Eric bit at Kyros' neck and fucked his hand, groaning.

“That's right, big boy. Slam it. Show me how I'm going to take your ass.”

Eric yanked him off the wall and forced him face down, on to the table. He snarled in Kyros' ear, “Pants on the floor. It's your ass getting slammed.”

Kyros didn't complain. While he dealt with clothing, Eric found the grease. He slicked himself, then twisted a finger deep into Kyros. Two. He finger fucked that hole until Kyros pulled his own cheeks apart, and Eric could see his red erection pointed down against the edge of the table. He grabbed it, pushing in and pulling down in alternating strokes. Kyros begged him.

Eric replaced fingers with cock and groaned. Halfway in, Kyros came, his ass squeezing with each pulse. His voice, a confusion of “God, yes!” Eric fucked him while he shuddered. He dug his fingers into each hip, his thumbs pulling Kyros' cheeks wide. He watched the hole clench around him, and panted, “Your ass feels so good.” Climax struck like a shallow reef and he hissed, arching closer. “You're not leaving until I've fucked you raw.”

Beneath him, Kyros gasped for air. “Believe me, the feeling is mutual.”

\*\*\*\*

*April*

*An Hour Later*

Kyros rolled to one side and flung an arm over his eyes. The bed was a mess. They were a mess. His body buzzed from top to toes.

Eric threw an arm over Kyros' stomach. “Wake me up for dinner.”

Sleep. An attractive thought after a carnal indulgence like that. Kyros slid to the edge of the bed and fished underneath for the chamberpot. Relieved, he sighed. Behind him Eric snored. Out already? Kyros waved a hand over his nose. Snapped his fingers a few times. No response.

He ached to stay in the bed, both in heart and in body, but he had more than one reason for being here. Kyros investigated every corner of the cabin with methodical patience. He slid open each drawer, catalogued every cabinet, and

replaced everything where he found it. He wasn't interested in stripping Eric dry of his goods, just one treasure in particular.

It had to be in the chest. Kyros jangled the keys as he picked them up off the table, watching Eric for any sign of anger. The pirate remained resolutely asleep. Kyros unlocked the chest and investigated its contents. He lifted the puzzle jar and turned it in his hands. It wasn't large, maybe two fists tall but tapered down to one fist wide at the base. The circlet Kyros found on the Spanish ship fit, interlocked between two others. Four total, if Kyros had to guess. He couldn't make out the seams of each ring with confidence. It needed a seal on top.

Kyros fished out a rolled message from the trunk and spotted a rubbing in the middle of the letter. A sketch beside it. It was the top Eric sought to complete his jar. This had to be the letter he'd read at the tavern, the reason for his rush to get back here.

But the question remained: why did he need a jar for a spirit?

Kyros skimmed the letter, but it said nothing about trapping a spirit in the jar. Yet, it did give the location of the merchant who had the top.

With some regret, Kyros dressed and slid the jar into a leather pouch on his belt. He kept the letter inside. He repacked the trunk and locked it, tossing the keys to the table where, hopefully, they looked unmoved.

Eric snored.

Kyros didn't look back.

On the Hawk, Kyros closed his cabin door. He had to move the African beast statue to get to his maps. He unrolled one, well-traveled. His own course lines littered the spaces between islands, measured and timed from previous treks. Ocean current markers and seasonal notations littered the entire archipelago.

Kyros slid a rule across the map to line up Nassau and Havana. The Bahamas fell between them. Going north proved to be a shorter distance, but a strong current poured out of the gulf and pushed eastward. The faster route was likely to the south, then up the Cuban coast with the wind. Kyros marked his route, then calculated the times twice to make sure he'd done the math correctly.

Someone pounded on his door.

"Enter."

Araceli leaned in, her coat over one arm. "Everyone's aboard."

"Thank you. Any trouble with the new men?"

"Nothing abnormal."

Which meant a few of them got themselves cut but no one pressed the issue. "Alright. Take us out eastward and head south when we've cleared the island."

"You have a heading." She leaned on the doorjamb. "What did you find?"

Kyros waved her in and pushed the letter across his table. "It looks like the top to Deumont's jar."

"This isn't addressed to you." She gave him a bitter sneer. "You're asking for trouble, stealing his letters."

"Stole more than that, I have the jar."

"Dammit, Kyros. Do not make us his enemy." She slapped the letter down on the table. "We don't have anything to gain by this."

"There's a market for ghosts and spirits, which means there's a market for the jars that hold them." Kyros pulled the container from his pouch and set it on the map. "This isn't just something your local kiln throws on a wheel. It's like the clockwork inside my pocket watch. Even if it weren't used for something metaphysical, it would still be worth a small fortune to some plantation owner. And I know where the top is."

"When Deumont chases you down, I'm going to escort him right to you." She frowned and strode away from the table.

"East and south, Quartermaster."

"Yes, Captain." She slammed the door closed behind her.

Kyros turned the jar over in his hands, rotating the interlocked gears and arms around themselves. His reasoning felt hollow even to him, but he couldn't explain the truth and expect his crew to go along with it. Araceli was his oldest friend, and she knew how to call bullshit when she saw it.

And the truth was, Kyros was afraid one night was all he'd get with Eric if he had stayed. Maybe they would chat over dinner and rut like bunnies through the night, but it was obvious the Sun's captain wasn't the asexual stick-in-the-mud Kyros had expected. He was just so obsessed with his treasure hunt that everything else came second. So they would part ways in the morning, and unless Kyros tried to run him over with his ship, Eric wouldn't give him another thought.

Kyros selected a fabric from the haul of the Spanish ship and wrapped up the jar. He found space in a drawer. It was time for Deumont to do the chasing for a while.

\*\*\*\*



## Chapter III

*April*

*The Next Morning*

Eric stretched as he woke, pleased with both his performance and the depth of his short nap. He rolled up on one side and found his cabin empty. His belt and its riches remained on the table, but Vindex and his clothes were gone. Eric's buzz of happy pulled out like a low tide, gently leaving disappointment behind. Vindex proved persistent. Eric thought he would at least stick around for dinner.

He found pants and threaded his belt into place. Eric stepped out to the crew deck and frowned. The light was off. One of his men grunted from a hammock. "Mornin' Cap."

Morning? Eric's cheer snapped in half. He lunged into his cabin and threw open the rear hatch. Nassau's morning breeze spilled into his room. Early sunlight glanced off the bay surface. Eric let the hatch bang closed.

Fuck and run. Not even a good-bye. He should have guessed, but the slight still burned.

Eric grabbed a change of clothes and grumbled up the stairs. The few crewmen aboard gave him space. On deck, he swept the sky for any sign of his jailer. He didn't spot it. "Morel, you watched overnight?"

"Yes, sir."

"The moon?"

His crewman pointed one square finger out to sea. "Set early this morning. You're clear."

Eric nodded. Small miracles. He dropped his belt and pants. Eric threw a bucket over the side and pulled it back up full of seawater. He dumped it over his head and scrubbed Vindex' scent and the evidence of their tryst to the deck. He used the old pants to dry himself off, scrubbed the clothes in another bucket of water, and dressed.

He tossed his clothes on a line to dry and squeezed seawater from his dreadlocks. The chilly rinse woke him up. Put the whole thing in perspective. Vindex never said he was going to stay. Even with an invite, he already had what he wanted.

Eric panned his attention across the bay and didn't see the Hawk. Still, the disappointment wouldn't wash away so easily and Eric let himself down to the dingy trying to focus on other things.

He spent the morning reviewing sales with his fence at an out-of-the-way encampment on the edge of the jungle. Refined sugar and raw cane still outsold everything else—rum production on Nassau wasn't matched—but the heavier metal didn't move. Eric collected his share of the sales and arranged for someone to cart the metal back to the boat. Havana had a much more robust economy for shipbuilding. It would sell there.

Then to the harbormaster where he located a fast ship on its way to Havana, arriving before him, and wrote a letter to the merchant there. Yes, he was interested in the top of that jar and would he kindly hold it for Deumont's arrival?

He bought rabbit goulash at a tavern for lunch and caught himself watching the door for Vindex. Eric drained his beer and pushed it to the edge for the barmaid. This was getting out of hand—

“Captain Deumont?”

Eric grunted.

“Of the Midnight Sun?”

“Yes. Talk.”

A slim man worrying a flat cap in his hands sat across the table. He wore a merchant's vest and puffed trousers, playing at landowner. “Sir, I'm here on behalf of Philippe Lamar—you have met?”

Eric sucked a piece of meat from his teeth and wondered what else could go wrong. Lamar was a tick on a nameless plantation island in the South. “I've heard of him.”

“It's come to Philippe's attention that you're seeking pieces of a puzzle jar. He kindly requests you cease this project and turn your attentions elsewhere.”

Eric raised a thick eyebrow and took another spoonful of goulash. “Oh? Why?”

The messenger turned his flat cap along the edge. “It's not known to me, Captain, but I must insist. Philippe was quite clear you're not to continue.”

Eric sucked on a small leg bone and dropped it back into his bowl. “Philippe is an over-large beached whale, and his opinion means little to me. We did meet once, I stole something from him. Does he want it back?”

“No, Captain.”

“No, I imagine not.” Eric rubbed his chest and lost the appetite for his meal. “There’s no message to bring back to Mister Lamar, I’m afraid.” He left several coins on the table and stood.

“But, Captain. Will you stop?”

“No.” Eric walked out of the tavern. The messenger didn’t follow him.

Disturbed, Eric returned to the Sun in a pensive, sour mood. He locked his cabin door and grabbed the keys to his chest off the table. Ghalil twisted when he crouched beside it; only the ring through Eric’s nipple kept the spirit from swimming around to his back or down one leg. An uncomfortable tug.

Eric swept his hand over the wood. An innocent looking box that used to hold a vengeful creature hidden in the depths of Philippe Lamar’s plantation hideaway. More than once, Eric cursed the day he had ever set foot there.

He jammed the key into the lock and popped the lid. Even Ghalil stilled under Eric’s shock.

His chest was empty. The jar: gone. The letter from Havana with it. Small wonder Vindex didn’t stay for dinner. With his hands full of Lamar’s bidding, it was too risky to form any attachments.

Eric felt his skin cool with the force of his anger. He pressed his lips into a thin line. He latched the chest and strode out to the crew deck. Two sailors and his quartermaster fell silent before the oppression of his still gaze. “Mister Muller, recall all hands to the mast immediately.”

Sven stood straighter in acknowledgement. “Problem, sir?”

“I’ve been robbed.” He turned to the stairs, hand spasming around the handle of his sword. “I’ve been betrayed.”

\*\*\*\*

*April*

*Two Weeks Later*

Kyros stepped onto the long dock in Havana and smiled. He had a week before Eric showed up on his heels demanding retribution, and the thought of a healthy fight followed by a healthy fuck had him tightening in all the right places. Maybe he could even tear that damn shirt off and get to know him from head to toe.

But that meant he had a few days to kill. Kyros spent the afternoon with Araceli, visiting their local fence to offload all the Spanish goods. The fabrics would sell well over time. The thousand-plus trinkets were even better. Small and exotic, he could sell them in bulk for a hefty profit. The statue, he didn't want to try and move. Kyros settled for keeping it in the cabin until they passed through another town.

In the evening, she left him to his own devices. Kyros checked the letter he'd stolen from Eric and browsed around the merchants. He picked up a book to replace the blank one in his library. The merchant shook his hand over the transaction, a marked difference from the debauchery of Nassau. He shoved the binding into a pouch on his belt and unfolded Eric's letter. "Do you know where I can find a merchant by the name of Martin?"

"Weber or Lang?" The man asked, chewing on a thumb of tobacco.

"I'm not sure. I'm after a jar, do either sell containers?"

"Lang does." He pointed. "Down there, left at the red banner, right at the one that used to be white, has a black serpent symbol on it. Third or fourth one down. You can't miss it, big blue drapes."

"Thank you." The directions proved accurate. Merchant stalls evolved from temporary structures to wooden ones as he went along. Then wooden to stone further down the street as it wandered closer to the heart of the city. Martin Lang occupied a wooden one-room building overflowing with pottery and the like.

"Good day, sir! I have a new shipment direct from Africa. Best glazes you've ever seen."

"No doubt." Kyros smiled. "But I'm here for something rather specific." He handed Eric's note to the man. "You're Martin?" He walked farther into the building, squeezing around stacks of pottery. He picked up a pitcher and turned it over in his hands.

"Yes, Mister Deumont but..." The man pursed his lips. "Well, I'm afraid I've changed my mind about the part in question. I don't intend to sell it."

"I'm sorry, Martin. I don't think that's going to work out. See, I've come all the way out here from Nassau. Think I could at least take a look at it?"

Martin folded the letter and tried to hand it back, but Kyros ignored him, pressing deeper into the shop. He opened lids and poked his nose around a nested row of bowls.

“I’m not going to part with it.”

Kyros hummed. “I can make it worth your time. Let me see it.”

Martin wavered

“It might not even be the piece I need.” Kyros shrugged.

That seemed to be enough. Martin left the letter on a plate and worked his way into the back of the store. He returned with a box and held it out for Kyros to open. “I’m not giving it to you, even if it is the one you’re looking for.”

“Why is that, I wonder?” Kyros flipped the box’s latch and opened the top.

A beast roared out of the box, two dozen horns around his head and red-red eyes, bigger than the box. Bigger than the room. Kyros stumbled back, knocking pottery and plates to the ground. The beast crushed what he stepped on and roared again, “GHALIL!”

Kyros backed into billowing blue drapes. He tore them away and collapsed into the street.

The beast spun in the store and a long spiked tail obliterated the bowls. Fragments of clay spun about like confetti. “You promised me Ghalil!” It roared at the merchant. “Where is it?”

Martin cowered and pointed at Kyros. The beast roared and bit Martin’s hand off. “Where is Ghalil?” Martin just screamed.

Kyros watched in stunned disbelief. People peered into the building. Some shrieked and ran, others couldn’t turn away from the wreck. The beast swung at Martin, slicing him in three, then slicing again. It destroyed the entire booth, wrecking like a bull and screaming for something named Ghalil. Wood splintered under the force of its tail, and when the stall collapsed inward, it threw a beam into the street.

Kyros rolled to the side. Something caught the drapes. The beast stepped on them and arched over him, sharp teeth and red eyes dripping fire. “Ghalil,” it snarled. Kyros fought an arm free and pointed, he didn’t know where, he didn’t give a damn as long as it wasn’t here.

The beast hacked, a sound in its throat like something got caught. Then it vomited tacky fire onto Kyros’ chest and stomped away. Kyros screamed, rolling in the dust and tearing himself free of molten cotton. His arms and hands burned. His chest burned. His metal buckles melted into his hip. He stumbled away from the heat and immediately crashed into unconsciousness.

*May*

*One Week Later*

Eric directed the *Midnight Sun* imperiously into Havana's main bay, steaming at the thought of Kyros beating him here. He didn't see the *Hawk* on approach or in the bay proper and it cooled his temper a bit. He pushed his crew hard to cut time on this trip, maybe the effort paid off. He was tired, the men were tired. He didn't have time to indulge it.

Eric led the first boat to shore and relied on his sketchy memory of the merchants. He needed the jar guy—he couldn't remember the name on the letter. Confused inquiries with a potter and tanner had him jogging circles around the main street until he realized a stretch of the road showed signs of recent fire damage. He ducked into the closest merchant stall, a baker, and pointed down the way. "What happened here?"

"Ohh," The man said, shaking his head. "Saw the whole thing. A demon came out of that shop and tore it to the ground. Set fire to the whole row and then ran down to the docks."

Eric put a hand on his chest and rubbed it. "A demon?"

"Oh, yes. Seven foot. Eight, maybe. Horns all around. Tail like a lizard and teeth like a cat. It spat fire like... liquid fire."

"What stall did it destroy?" Eric asked with a sinking gut.

"Martin's, three buildings down. Tore him to shreds and broke every pot in the place. People are scavenging but there isn't much to rescue."

It couldn't be a coincidence. Kyros had already been here. Though what he thought he was doing with spirits and demons, Eric couldn't begin to guess. He thanked the baker and jogged to the epicenter of the fire scars. The street itself was clear of litter, but the former building hunched wood over clay, a mess on top of a wreck. People crawled over the leftovers, hauling wood away for other purposes.

A big black woman grunted as she toppled a beam too large for most men to shift. Eric pointed at her. "Oi! You!" He scrambled up a cascading hill of fired clay, suddenly hot with anger now that he had somewhere to point it. "Woman! Quartermaster. You're *Vindex'* quartermaster, aren't you?" He stooped and picked up a shard of pottery. "Answer me!" He chucked it at her when she sneered.

She dodged the piece and put her foot on a fallen beam. She shoved it forward into Eric's knee. He crashed to the pile, hands first and cursed. Eric rolled to one side. The quartermaster sat on his stomach, stepped on one of his hands, and held a knife up to his throat. He wheezed, "Fuck, woman, you are not light."

"I knew you'd come after us."

"Tell me where Vindex is."

"Why?"

"TELL ME WHERE THAT SON OF A BITCH IS HIDIN—" He choked off the words when the knife dug in.

The quartermaster leaned closer, voice calm. "I asked why?"

Eric gasped for air. "He stole what's mine. I want it back."

"Is that all?"

"I haven't decided yet."

She pulled the knife away and wiped it on Eric's heaving chest. "He's on the Hawk. Trying not to die."

Eric just lay there puzzling out what that meant. The quartermaster stood, and he gasped several full breaths. She walked away down the pile. Eric had to scramble to catch up. "What happened?"

She made a vague gesture at the fallen merchant stall. "Someone intended this for you."

"Kyros was here," he said. She led him to a pile of black on the ground, harder than rock with exploded spikes out of the top.

She leaned her boot heel on one of the spikes and heaved. The spike tip snapped into the dirt. "People are saying a demon vomited fire on top of him."

"He survived this?" Eric turned the shard of stone over in his hands, sharper than any knife he owned.

"You could call it that. He made it about two feet away." She pointed. "Collapsed on his face. He's been unconscious since then."

Eric rubbed his chest, and for once Ghalil had nothing to do with it. There was a tightness there he couldn't explain. He needed to see Kyros, and he wasn't sure yelling at him was even on the table anymore. "Take me to him?" he asked. "Please?"

She gave him a once-over. Then nodded. "Don't make me have to kill you."

Araceli, she said her name was, and she didn't let him row the boat. As they jumped across the bay, Eric realized that might be a good thing. Her broad arms heaved with a force he wasn't sure he could match. And she maintained that speed all the way out of the bay, around to the Northwest, and down the coast to a much smaller cove where the Hawk bobbed out of sight. The ship sat with her sails furled, anchored close on shore.

They climbed to the top deck, and Eric felt the stares like points of heat. Without Araceli leading the way he wouldn't have made it to the stairs.

Two decks down, the quartermaster stopped him at the door. "If you start any shit, I will put a knife through your eye." The quiet desperation in her voice made Eric's stomach flip. She opened the door.

A man at the table sat up, pushing glasses up his nose. The boatswain? If he said anything, Eric missed it. Kyros lay unmoving on the bed, body red and bloated, skin missing more than it was there, blisters from head to toe. Black. Chunks of roasted flesh. Eric knelt at the bedside and covered his mouth. His fingers shook. "He's dead."

"Not yet," Araceli snapped at him. She urged the other man out and closed the door, leaving Eric alone.

\*\*\*\*\*



## Chapter IV

*May*

*Two Weeks Later*

The groaning wouldn't stop. Kyros struggled to breathe, to move, to speak. He felt heavy, and too hot. Everything twitched like it was too tight. And the groaning kept going on and on.

Someone brushed his hair back and whispered in his ear. Kyros opened his eyes and realized the moans came from his own chest. His mouth snapped, dry. Why was breathing so difficult?

“Easy, easy, don't move. That isn't a good idea, I promise.”

He recognized that voice but couldn't place it. The head petting stopped. He missed it. Something dripped on his lips. He licked at it. Beer. What on earth happened?

He tried to speak and just managed a croak. Then exhaustion swept over him and he only knew black.

The next time Kyros woke he screamed in pain, which only caused more. Everything burned. His hip seared, as if Theo had jabbed him with still-molten metal. He blacked out.

Kyros woke to words in his ear, whispers about nothing and a hand stroking his forehead. It was the only place that didn't hurt. He managed a grunt. Beer appeared and Kyros thought he remembered doing this already. The liquid cooled things, though, and he lapped at it until he was too tired to swallow anymore. He slept.

He didn't know how long he wavered between the two states. Everything was pain. Sometimes there was sleep. Usually he dreamed about pain.

His arm itched. Kyros reached with his other hand to fix that. As soon as he made contact, fire spiked through his body. He hissed and didn't try again. Eric appeared over him. “I told you not to move. It's still not a good idea.”

“What—” He didn't have any spit to work with. Eric held his head up and nursed a mug of grog between his lips. That helped. He tried again, “What are you doing here?”

Eric crossed his arms. "You took something of mine, which I found by the way, thanks."

"I mean... why am I here... with you?" What did he mean, anyway?

"You tried to get your fool self melted."

Kyros didn't know how to process that. His blank expression must have conveyed such, because Eric sat down on a chair beside the bed and sighed. "People are saying a demon vomited liquid fire right onto your chest. By the looks of things, I'd say your leather fetish saved your life. You've got a permanent belt loop though." Eric touched something on his hip that was attached to him but not in any way flesh. He didn't feel the contact so much as the pressure which... he just couldn't explain.

He lifted his hand and started when it came into vision, red and swollen. Too red. Peeling. "I don't understand?"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"The jar..." Kyros turned his head to look at the bottom drawer across the room and the motion pulled things that weren't supposed to be tight. "I spoke with a man about the top to your jar. He said he didn't want to sell it."

"Why?"

"Dunno. Said he changed his mind. I asked to see it." Kyros looked up at Eric and squinted, trying to remember. "I was going to steal it from him if I needed to."

"How did you plan to steal it?"

"I asked to see it. I had to press him about it." Kyros put his hands up in a shape over his stomach. "He brought out a box. Said I could see it. I opened it..." Roar. Horns. Red eyes. Claws. Fangs. Kyros remembered fear. Stumbling back and away. Not fast enough. Too stupid to run. "Who is Ghalil?" Eric jerked against the bed and Kyros saw him rub his chest. "Someone you know?"

"Where did you hear that name?"

He wanted to sit up. He tested his stomach and it didn't try to eviscerate him. He managed to scoot back a bit and sit against the headboard. He could see Eric properly now, and the man looked ragged. "How long have you been here?"

"Ghalil." Eric insisted. "Where did you hear the name Ghalil?"

Oh, right, he was telling a story. “I opened the box and this... monster came out. Huge. Horns. Like... I don’t know. It demanded to know where Ghalil was. It tore Martin into pieces when he couldn’t produce. Almost tore me apart. Spat... slag from a forge or something, straight on my chest—blue drapes.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I tangled up in blue drapes. I think that’s why I didn’t just... melt on contact. I got out of there. I ran... I... I don’t know where I ran to?”

Eric shook his head. “You fell over where you stood. You should be dead.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Three weeks. I arrived a few days after your... accident.”

Kyros pressed his lips together. “It wasn’t an accident. They thought I was you. Who is Ghalil?”

Eric stood. He lit a lantern in the far corner of the room, and Kyros tensed. Visceral memory screamed through his body. His heart raced. He clenched his teeth. Eric closed and locked the window. He barred the door.

He took off his shirt.

A black tattoo crossed his chest and ribs. The flickering light of the lantern made it look alive, moving across his skin. Eric stepped closer. It *was* moving, writhing in place, held to one spot by a nipple ring that also pierced the socket of its eye. Kyros whispered, “What is that?”

Eric passed a hand between them. “Kyros, meet Ghalil. Ghalil, Kyros.”

“What?” Kyros glanced up at Eric’s face but had to look at the not-a-tattoo again.

“It’s a spirit, bound to my body. The full moon lets it tear out, which is exactly as painful as that sounds. It slaughters everyone in sight. It might come back on its own. I use cinnamon to call it back in if it doesn’t.”

“That’s why you need the jar.”

“I’ve been trapped with this thing for six years. I need it out.”

The door shook, someone trying to enter. Then they pounded on it. Araceli shouted, “Eric, you quit whatever it is you’re doing and open this door!”

“What if I’m taking a shit?” He yelled back, yanking his shirt back on.

“I’ve seen worse! Open up.”

He slid the bar up and let her in. “He’s awake,” he said without malice.

Araceli came straight to the bed, her hands full of something charred. “How are you feeling?”

“Chewed up and spit out,” Kyros admitted. “I’m surprised you let him on board.”

“I told you I would escort him here.” She held the charred thing up to Eric. “Found that today in the wreckage. No sign of the top, but if he did sell it, it should be listed.”

“This whole thing is a damn goose chase,” he said, flipping through the back of the ledger. “Even if it is listed, there’s no way to know—” Eric pressed his lips together, and Kyros saw his fingers clench.

“What is it?”

“Phillipe Lamar.”

Araceli looked at Kyros. He shrugged, then regretted it with a wince.

“Do you know him?” Eric asked, staring hard.

“No, should I?”

“Don’t feed me any shit, Vindex. Do you know him?” He snapped the book closed with one hand.

Kyros scowled. “No. I don’t.”

Eric stared for another heartbeat then let his breath out. He handed the book back to Araceli. “On one of the last pages you’ll find an entry for the sale of several pieces to a Phillippe Lamar, and the purchase of one box, about this big.” He held his hands up in the same shape Kyros used to describe the demon box.

“This guy wants you dead,” Kyros said. “Or your...” He gestured with one hand, “...guest.”

Eric wiped his hand down his face. “I got word of a treasure cache on a plantation island. Lamar’s island. Good source of info. Good proof. Great results. We broke in. Stole everything. Including a chest carved with a rune on the top that I thought would sell.”

“The one in your cabin?” Kyros asked.

Eric nodded. "I opened that chest and freed Ghalil. I don't know how long it stayed locked in there, but it preferred to take a host"—Eric gestured at himself—"than wander free and risk being locked away again. We fled."

Eric took a seat. "When we were in Nassau, a man claiming Phillipe sent him found me at one of the taverns. Insisted that I stop collecting pieces to the puzzle jar. Later, when I realized you had taken the jar I assumed you were working for him, too."

"Thanks," Kyros said indignantly.

Eric just gave him a flat-eyed look. "Phillipe, or someone claiming to be him, is listed in that book as purchasing the jar top and selling the box to the vendor. He intended it to kill me, and when you walked in with my name and my letter..." Eric lifted an eyebrow at Kyros.

"Hey, tell me you'd rather be in this bed. We can switch."

Eric's haughty expression dropped. "No," he said. "And I'm sorry. I just wanted..." Eric slid a glance at Araceli who tactfully peered at the ledger instead. "I'm glad you're going to be okay," Eric said. "I need to pay Lamar a visit. Maybe after I've taken care of this I'll drop in on you again. Make sure you're healing up okay."

A pause breathed between them.

"That's it?" Kyros asked. "You're just leaving?"

"Yes." Eric turned and walked away.

Kyros blinked at the door. "Follow him," he said to Araceli. "Get this ship unmoored and in the wind. If he is going after some revenge trip on a plantation, we're going to back him up."

"Okay." Araceli closed the ledger and set it on the table.

Kyros blinked again. "Really? No argument?"

"This Lamar guy. He tried to kill you. Well, he tried to kill Deumont but he got you instead. Point is, no one messes with what's mine. This deserves some retribution, and the guys need a place to point their fingers and blame. Lamar sounds like as good a target as any."

"Oh... well, okay, then." Kyros nodded at the door. "Hop-to."

She smiled. "I'll send food over."

"Can... can you blow out the lantern?"

She looked at him funny but did as he asked. Darkness slashed through the room. With the window still closed, only light from the deck spilled into his doorway. But the fire was out and that unknotted his gut.

He'd never had an issue with flames before. Then, he'd never been burned to a crisp, either.

\*\*\*\*

*June*

*Two Weeks Later*

Eric crouched in a tangle of ferns, fingers twitching to draw his sword. He heard Araceli shift in the tree branches above him. "See anything?"

"Guys are patrolling in pairs. Swords for sure. Maybe pistols too. There's a lookout tower near the warehouse—man up there has a rifle."

"Slaves?"

"None that I can see, everyone must have bunked up for the night." She swung down from the branch and landed, crouched, beside Eric. A move more subtle than he thought she could manage.

Eric said, "The warehouse is where we'll make our profit. The estate is probably where he's keeping the jar top."

"Divide and conquer?"

"That's what I'm thinking. I'll take Lamar."

"Why do you get to kill the guy?"

He glanced at her. "Why, you want to kill him?"

"I'd like to poke a few holes, at least."

He grunted. "Your guys know how to pillage and burn?"

She slid a sarcastic look at him. "This isn't our first plantation."

"Some of mine are new at this, I have a high turnover rate." He didn't miss the glance she flicked at his shirt. "So who's your lead man?"

"Javier," she said. "Can your men follow a stranger?"

"They don't have a choice."

The two of them scrambled back to the overgrown jungle where a group of ten pirates waited in utter silence.

“There are six patrols of guards, two each, and one man on a watchtower with a rifle.” Araceli drew a crude map in the dirt. “The warehouse is to the right of the estate.”

“That’s where you all will focus,” Eric said. “Javier, you’ll lead the group. Take everything worth taking and hoof it back to the boats. Leave one for the quartermaster and me.”

Javier gave Araceli a long look. He didn’t like taking orders from Eric. “This your plan?”

“Strip the warehouse clean,” she confirmed. “We’ll take care of Lamar.”

Eric saw Claude’s lip curl up and he shook his head at his man. This wasn’t a time for arguments or democratic votes. “We’ll see you back at the ship.”

Javier pressed his hands together and grunted. “*Escucha*, we pair off. You two, you together, you...” Javier took control of the group and his gestures demanded their attention.

Eric and Araceli slid back into the jungle. He pointed down the hill. “A guard at the back door.”

“None on the second-floor balcony.”

“Don’t tell me you’re climbing up?” Eric slid a suspicious glance at her.

“Why not? He might be in an office or library. Second floor.”

“But... you’re...” he swallowed his words at the look she sliced his way.

“Fat?” She asked, with no discernible intonation. It sent a shiver down his spine in the way yelling couldn’t. “You think I could get this big sitting around on a boat eating pancakes?”

Eric refocused on the back door guard and didn’t reply.

“Just hope I never have cause to sit on you again, Deumont. I’ll break your matchstick ribs.”

He cleared his throat. “So, ah... you’ll take the balcony, then?”

“That’s right.”

“Good.” And a heartbeat later, he heard her move deeper into the jungle for a better approach. Like a leopard, big and deadly.

Eric shook himself of the feeling Araceli watched him. The guard at the estate shifted his weight. In the light of the setting moon, Eric saw him yawn.

The jungle gave him cover for yards. Eric crawled around trees and slid low under ferns. He untangled his sword from a vine. Circling leftward gave him the closest approach without leaving jungle cover. Eric maneuvered to his feet, a crouched position only yards away. He paused there and drew his blade. The next time he saw the guard shift his weight, Eric lunged.

The guard got half a shout out. Then Eric plunged his sword into the man's chest and smothered his cries with one hand. He tackled the man, dragging him down to the ground just as he saw Araceli slide out of the jungle, jump up for the balcony railing, and pull herself bodily over the edge.

The man below his hands died. Eric jerked his sword free and dragged the body back to the ferns. It wouldn't fool a search, but it might delay the alarm. He yanked the door handle. Locked. Eric aimed a kick right next to the doorknob. The lock and jam splintered. He kicked again. The door slammed open. The house appeared to be empty.

Then he heard a scuffle upstairs. Eric sprinted for the stairway at the front of the house, sliding around the corner on a rug. He stormed the second floor only to find Araceli browsing the library shelves. In the center of the room, the Havana messenger with the flat cap lay hogtied and gagged.

Eric wiped the blood off his sword on a silk settee beside the door. He slid it home and crouched next to the messenger. The man huffed through his nose and continued to struggle but Araceli's bindings didn't budge. Eric put a finger to his lips until the man lay on the floor heaving, but still. Hopefully, he wouldn't scream. Eric pulled the gag down with one finger. The messenger took a big breath. Eric slapped his hand down and they struggled again, wiggling on the floor while the messenger shot loathing intent through his eyes.

Eventually he had to breathe again, and that's when Eric pulled the gag down his chin. "Where's Lamar?"

"Not here," the man gasped. "And you better leave before the guards swarm this place."

"We've taken care of them." The messenger blanched and Eric smiled. "So what are you doing here?" Araceli pulled a drawer from the desk and upended it onto the study carpet. She pushed papers around with the toe of her boot.

"I live here!" the messenger squeaked.

"With Lamar? Is he teaching you to submit to the spirits?" Eric leaned forward. "Are you liking it?"



“He’s my father!”

Araceli dumped another drawer of paperwork and trinkets to the floor.

“Well, that’s boring,” Eric said. “I like my theory better.” He pulled his cotton shirt free of his belt. “Have you ever seen a spirit in person?”

“Wait. Stop.” The man’s struggles renewed.

Araceli threw the curtain over the window and emptied another drawer.

Eric pulled his shirt up. “I took a chest from your father once. A chest with a spirit in it. Are you sure you don’t want to see it?”

“Stop! He’s in Saint Lucia!”

Eric paused. “Where’s the top for the puzzle jar?”

“He took it with him?” Lamar Junior’s eyes widened.

Araceli tsked from the desk side of the room, “Saint Lucia is a two month trip if you sail straight. You want to answer that question again?”

“He has it, I swear.”

“Why?” Eric shoved up to his feet.

“I don’t know!”

Araceli sighed. Eric just drew his sword and pointed the tip at Junior’s crotch. “Stop wasting my time.”

“Shit! He’s doing something with spirits, okay? I don’t understand it. He’s not letting me help with any of the good stuff. All I do is study the damn books!”

“Which books?”

“This one.” Araceli held up a leather doorstop of a reference book one handed. It bristled with bookmarks and notes.

“Please don’t take that.”

Araceli rolled her eyes and tucked it under her arm. “We’re done here.”

Eric sheathed his sword and led the way out. Araceli closed the study door behind them.

Junior screamed through the door, “Wait! ... Wait, you can’t leave me tied up like this! ... Come back here, you fuckers!”

*June*

*Hours Later*

“We’re not going after Lamar—you can barely move.”

“It’ll take two months to get there. I’ll be fine. Give me sewing repairs to do, or something.” Kyros knew his glower’s effect fell flat. It was hard to be in charge from flat on his back with new skin and scars making him pink.

Eric’s snort from the table didn’t help, either.

Araceli folded her arms and Kyros winced. There wasn’t much could budge the woman when she stood her ground. “You have a belt buckle fused to your hip and—”

“What are we doing, then? Sitting around?”

“You’re sitting around.” Eric closed the huge tome in front of him. “I need to off-load this sugar.”

“So that’s it, then? You’re just leaving?”

“Like you just left Nassau,” Eric agreed. He grunted and rose from the table to open the bottom drawer against the wall.

Even without a malicious look, Kyros winced hard. He couldn’t demand anything of this man. He was going to anyway.

“Vindex,” Eric said, bent over the empty drawer. “Where’s my jar?”

Araceli shot Kyros a hard look and huffed. If he got her any more riled up he was going to regret it.

“You’ll find it in Saint Lucia.”

Eric slammed the drawer shut so hard it warped in the space and jammed at an angle. He turned on Kyros with hot fury, pointing. “I’m going to tear this ship down to ribs looking for it—”

Kyros had to use both hands for his fingers to cooperate but he showed Eric his middle finger, then laughed when the pirate stormed toward the door. “It’s not on the boat, Deumont!”

Araceli’s eyes widened. “You sent it ahead?”

“I’m not a complete invalid—”

“Good Lord.” She spun out of the room. “Deumont!” He heard her echoing boots stomp across the crew deck. Kyros closed his eyes and tried not to laugh—that still hurt.

A half hour later Araceli growled back into the room. "He's headed for Saint Lucia. We're still not going."

Kyros grunted and kept his eyes closed. All the excitement had him tired already. She left him alone.

A week after the plantation visit, Kyros sat up in his bed to take stock of himself. The demon fire had struck his chest and arms, with some additional splatters down his stomach, and the notable splash on his left hip where the buckle now resided as a part of him. His chest and arms were so much swirl of scar, awkward and tight in every direction. But he was alive.

His palms shined pinkish with new skin, sensitive to touch, so it took him a while to work open the hidden compartment in the wall beside his bed.

Araceli knocked once and entered mid-sentence, "—elling him the cost isn't worth it, but he insists." Bram followed her in with a log book open in his hands. "Do we have anything else that will work?"

"He's the blacksmith, Quartermaster. If he says he needs it, he probably does. I don't know the first thing about smithing."

"Kyros, have... you..." She trailed off.

Kyros turned Eric's puzzle jar over and over in his hands. The space in the wall was just large enough to hold it, and for a week, he heard it rocking against the wood, reminding him.

"Bram, leave us."

The bosun didn't question her order. He snapped his book closed and shut the door behind him.

Araceli stood beside his bed. "Kyros, look at me."

He looked up.

She backhanded him. Her knuckles caught his teeth and nose. The force of her entire body snapped his head to the side. Kyros felt his teeth clip the inside of his cheek and the edge of his tongue. Blood. He saw spots.

At least she wore no rings.

Kyros held the jar up for her to take. "Set course, south by southeast," he said. He pointed to the charts on the table that she'd refused to look at for a week. "Bring us to Saint Lucia."

She left, taking the jar with her. Kyros tried to sleep.

## Chapter V

*August*

*Two months later*

Eric leaned his ass against the aft railing, beside a flickering lantern. He watched Sven and the crew work like an oiled machine, singing rhythm to a new shanty song someone had picked up in the tavern. In another week they'd land in Saint Lucia. Then he could put an end to this.

The crow called down from above, and Eric rubbed his chest to calm Ghalil. "White sails on the horizon! Forward port!"

Sven half-turned to hand Eric a spyglass. He accepted it, scanning the barely discernible line of ocean and sky in the night. White sails. Riding low. Ghalil wouldn't stay calmed. Too bad Vindex wasn't here to gang up on the vessel. Fifty guns at least.

Then Eric remembered he was in this mess because of Vindex, and he snapped the spyglass closed to hand it back.

"Bring us in line behind them, Sven. Full sail."

"Aye, sir." Sven called the tack and turned his wheel. The Midnight Sun cut through the waves on her new heading.

Eric found his men below decks. He shook Otto's heavy shoulder. "Coxswain, get your men up." Otto grunted. "We've found a big merchant vessel, heavy. I need everyone on deck, guns loaded."

"Yes, sir." Otto pulled himself out of the hammock and shook himself awake. He barked, "Wake up!" and suddenly the crew deck swarmed with activity. Eric left him to it.

On the top deck, Eric spotted the merchant without the spyglass. They closed in, silent in the night but for an occasional creak of line on wood and the slap of water. The deck rumbled. Eric heard gun doors snap open on either side.

Ghalil twisted on his chest. Eric swung his head around and found the moon just rising behind low marine clouds. He tugged the shirt tighter under his belt. He'd had good luck with the spirit for a while now. He didn't want to ruin that record.

The crow called five hundred yards when a lantern lit up the aft deck of their target. Then a second light. A third. The crow shouted, "They've spotted us, sir!"

"Keep your heading," Eric told Sven, then he yelled across the deck, "Load the long nines with chain!"

Men echoed the order to the gun deck and the response relayed back, guns ready.

"Turning to port, three hundred yards," the crow reported.

Eric touched Sven's shoulder and took the wheel. He turned the Sun on a shallow port angle, not quite committing to the tack. Then he saw the port anchor drop and realized, too late, that the merchant wasn't turning to run, they turned to fight. The anchor hit seafloor and pivoted the heavy vessel. Suddenly the Sun was there, too close to disengage.

"Fire forward guns!" Eric spun his wheel away to starboard just as the two cannon fired. "Starboard tack," he called out, heart tight, "ready port guns!"

The merchant fired first, all twenty-five port cannon on two decks lighting up the night. The Sun shuddered and slowed, nose digging into water rather than slicing through. Eric shared a tight glance with Sven. A fifty gun ship prepared to run, they could take, but a ship willing to stand was another matter.

"All men to the oars. Give us speed!" He had to take advantage of their anchor. Men scrambled below decks. Ghalil rolled under Eric's skin, and he smacked his own chest to keep the spirit in line. Then he heard a telltale clatter of chain. The merchant pulled up their anchor, six men around a spoked wheel in the deck running it back up.

Eric considered using the oars to run instead of fight. Then, two concussive blasts rocked the merchant. Eric ducked on instinct but nothing hit the Sun. Oars finally stroked the water but they didn't move far.

Then, two thirty-six-inch iron balls dropped from the sky and ended the fight. They fell through Eric's rigging and sails. One punched a hole beside the mainmast, offsetting the structure enough for the Sun to list port side. The second clipped his aft rail, tore through the captain's cabin, and disabled the rudder.

Merchant soldiers hooked the Sun, and Eric just stood at the wheel, watching. No rudder, no mainsail, extensive damage to port side—he'd never

lost a fight so completely or so fast. He wondered if Vindex would pick up the puzzle jar in Saint Lucia and try to finish it himself.

Soldiers swarmed the boat, and Eric felt the whole thing in slow motion. He didn't fight when two men grabbed his arms and marched him across his own wrecked deck. They tangled with Orthos, smart enough to abandon ship with the crew. There was a brief argument about what to do with Eric, then the big merchant captain pointed to his own mainmast, and Eric hung his head. They strung him up facing aft so he could watch the merchant captain sail. Arms stretched out, feet tied down, heavy line wrapped, again and again, around his chest.

The Captain tilted Eric's head up by a finger under his chin. His hat sat tight on his broad head. Eric saw his own crew filed past behind him, down into the hold at the bottom of the larger vessel. "The feared Captain Deumont, if I'm not mistaken?"

Eric pulled his head away from the man's hand, but his eyes landed on the Sun, listing heavy, now, in the waves. His ship was sinking. "What were those last two shots?"

"Ah, did you like that? They're called smashers, we just installed them this season. Heaviest thing we've ever tried. A real bitch to load up, but they tend to cut down on the retaliation."

"Yeah..." Three tons of iron per shot would do that.

The Captain patted his cheek. "Don't worry. We'll bring you to land in one piece. You can learn all about them in the meantime."

\*\*\*\*

*August*

*One Week Later*

Kyros leaned on the rail of his ship and looked over Saint Lucia's bay. He needed the support more than he wanted to admit. Scar tissue curled across his chest and arms, distorting what had once been tanned, weather-beaten skin into tough, still-pink, ripples. Proof he'd come through something horrific and survived. He was still weak, walking laps around the deck could wind him in an hour. Kyros tried to remind himself how much worse it could have been—infection, gangrene, he was lucky.

Kyros didn't see the Sun. He couldn't imagine they'd beaten Eric here, behind by a week, but he saw no sign of the ship in any of Saint Lucia's coves,

and he didn't want to waste time scouting the nearby islands. If Eric had been here already, they needed to pick up his trail and catch up.

Araceli stepped next to him. "I still think you should stay aboard."

"I need to get off the boat. Even if we don't find anything." Kyros rolled his shoulders. "So let's go."

Araceli skimmed down a rope and landed on the dingy below. Kyros took the slower ladder built into the hull of the ship. She insisted on rowing. Kyros didn't argue with her. People started staring the second he stepped onto the pier. Knots of them whispered. A few pointed. Some couldn't let him go by without trying to touch him. The pier only stretched thirty yards and by the time they made land Kyros was ready to turn around and hide on the ship.

His quartermaster put a broad hand on his shoulder and pushed him up the main street. "Come on. Let's check out this craftsman first. I'll take care of the resupply, later, while you wait in a tavern."

"I'm not going to drool at a bar while my woman goes shopping—"

"Tell me that again when we're done with this guy and you can barely stand up." She handed him a folded and refolded piece of paper. "Now, where are we headed?"

Kyros flipped the map right side up and oriented himself with a bakery shop. "That way." He pointed. His paper described a metalworker in the hills of Saint Lucia who Lamar intended to commission puzzle jars from.

A quarter mile wasn't supposed to wind him but Kyros grossly underestimated the toll rolling hills could take. By the time they located the building, Kyros felt his legs shake with fatigue. Araceli pounded on the door and Kyros tried to make himself stand straight.

A young man answered the door, no more than mid-twenties, rubbing his dirty hands on a rag. "Hullo."

Kyros checked the map. "We're looking for Master Gerard?"

"Yes."

Kyros and Araceli traded a look, and she lifted an eyebrow. "You're his apprentice?"

The young man tossed his rag to the side somewhere beyond the doorway. "No, ma'am, I'm him. What can I do for you?"

Araceli made a face at the honorific but didn't correct him. "Have you had any dealings with a Frenchman by the name of Phillippe Lamar, recently?"

His friendly face became less inviting. "So what if I have?"

Kyros leaned his shoulder on the wall and tried to make it look casual. "What about Eric Deumont?"

"Not that I recall, what is it that you want?"

Kyros traded another look with Araceli. "You haven't spoken with Eric? Captain of the Midnight Sun?"

Master Gerard crossed his arms. "I'm not answering any more questions until you tell me what it is you want."

Araceli produced the puzzle jar from a pouch around her waist and held it up. The craftsman uncrossed his arms and reached for it.

"Oh my god, is this the jar?" He turned it over in his hands, spinning interlocking pieces and making the device click. "It is. Lamar gave me drawings for this. He asked me to make one. And here you are with it..." He looked up. "What do you want for this?"

"Not for sale," Kyros said. "But if you can make a top for it, we'll commission you."

"Of course I can." He frowned at them. "What kind of question is that?"

Araceli plucked the jar from his grip. "Don't get cocky."

"I'm gonna need that if you want a matching top."

Kyros levered himself up off the wall. "I thought you had drawings."

Gerard turned into his shop and called over his shoulder, "Come look." He spread several papers out over a drafting desk by the wall and weighted the ends so they stayed flat. "These are okay but there's a lot of information missing. I told Lamar I might be able to put something together in a few months but without all these dimensions..." he pointed out several spots, "...I'll be guessing until I get it right." Gerard gestured to the jar in Araceli's hands. "If I had the jar, itself, I could copy more precise drawings. It'll cut my production time by two-thirds."

"How long for you to make a top?"

He shrugged, "Two weeks?"



Kyros leaned his hip on the desk and addressed Araceli, "I think we beat Deumont here. No way he'd let these sit around."

"Agreed."

"Okay," Kyros said. "We give you the jar for drawings and a top, and you keep your mouth shut if Lamar comes by. If he never knows, you can charge him through the nose for all the work we're saving you."

Gerard accepted the jar and set it on the drafting desk. "You cover my materials for your top."

"Deal." They shook hands.

"What's your problem with Lamar?"

Kyros put a hand on his chest to draw attention to the twisted, pink scarring. "He tried to kill me over the jar. We're not fond of each other."

Gerard winced.

Araceli suggested, "Best keep that out of sight."

They left Gerard a little wide-eyed at the mess they'd handed over to him. Kyros used Araceli's shoulder for support during the last leg of their trip back into town. She steered them both toward a tavern and Kyros didn't complain. "What if he turns around and sells the jar to Lamar?"

Kyros shook his head, "Did you see the way he lit up when you showed it to him? He's a craftsman. He wants to make them himself."

"He could still sell it."

Kyros slid to a bench and put his head down, just breathing for a while. "I don't think he will," he said. "If he's not in it for making things, he's in it for profit and scamming Lamar out of his money is much more profitable."

Araceli hummed. "I'm going to check in with the dockmaster."

Kyros waved her away. "Tell the guys they have shore leave for at least two weeks. Keep an eye and ear out for Lamar. He may still be in the area."

"Got it. Anything else?"

"Yeah..." Kyros pulled several coins from a pouch. "Get me a shirt, would you? I'm tired of the staring."

## Chapter VI

*August*

*Days Later*

A week tied to the mast. Sun, wind, salt exposure. Eric didn't try to lift his head anymore. Someone fed him a gruel-like paste every few hours. He pissed where he stood. Jeers, rotten food in his hair and face, spit, vomit—he was a target for anything. Every now and then someone threw a bucket of seawater over his head.

His sword and knives were long gone. His belt still hung slack around his waist, held up more by the lines around the mainmast than tied. His shirt sported several new holes but still clung to his torso.

Kyros filled his fever-dreams with laughter. He remembered the night they'd spent together, relived it over and over because even the man's stubborn betrayal was better than this. It made waking up to hell so much worse.

Eric screamed at the first touch of a whip against his skin. The sound broke. His voice went out after four days and only occasionally worked. The bullwhip brought it back with every strike. Leather bit his chest, wrapped in his shirt, shredded the fabric and exposed him to the wind of high noon.

Ghalil ripped itself free, tearing through muscle and skin, leaving a demon-shaped hole in Eric's chest. He passed out to the sound of a man being skinned alive.

When he came to, everything was different. He lay horizontally, for one, and Orthos lay on his chest (whole, unscarred, tattooed) purring away. He entertained the idea that it was all a wretched dream. Kyros hadn't sent the puzzle jar to a craftsman beyond his reach. A merchant ship hadn't owned him in twenty minutes or less.

But the beams overhead crossed in the wrong pattern, the smell of the cabin wasn't his own, and the ship rocked... differently.

Someone opened the door. "Stephano," Eric croaked. "Oh, thank god."

"You've been asleep for two days, Captain. I scrubbed you up best I could." The blacksmith took a stool beside the bed. "What do you remember?"

"How long was I tied to the mast?"

“Almost a week.”

“I remember the whipping.” He saw Stephano nod and closed his eyes, trying to remember. “My shirt tore. Ghalil got out and... screaming... I don't remember anything after that. How did I get here? Where is here?”

“You're in the captain's cabin of the merchant vessel. Her name's Trovita. When the creature got out it caused chaos. Several people ran down to us, locked up in the brig. They wanted to know how to stop it. We convinced them to lock themselves in with us, that it couldn't pass iron bars. When they did, we killed them and waited it out.”

“It didn't come down?”

“It was satisfied by the time it cleared the second gun deck. We were never in any danger. When we started hearing word it was gone again, we let ourselves out and took over the ship. I washed you off and brought you in here.”

Eric struggled to sit up. Orthos complained about the move but settled in, again, on Eric's lap. “How many of us survived?”

“A majority. Sven is directing us toward Saint Lucia. Otto keeps us in line. We lost Claude.”

Eric pinched his nose. “Who has been voted to replace him?”

“We haven't, yet. Rutger's taken on the role for now, until we have a chance to figure it out.”

“Okay.” Eric took a deep breath. “Okay,” he said again. “Get me up.”

The blacksmith kicked his stool back to the table and gave Eric a hand to his feet. “I'll let the others know you're up.”

“I need something to eat. Real food.”

“I'll look into it.” Stephano let himself out.

Eric rolled his head around, stretched, and otherwise checked himself out. Other than the sorry state of his pants, Ghalil's return left him in remarkably good health. He gave Orthos a pat on the head, found ill-fitting clothing in one of the drawers, and let himself out into the sunlight.

He checked on every single one of his crew. Ninety-six men in total. He shook their hands, checked their spirits, and was surprised to find morale higher than a hijacking and mutiny warranted. Rutger provided a hearty meal that Eric devoured.

His check-in with Sven at the helm assured him the crew was not in bad shape. "What do you remember?"

"Enough to know we're lucky."

"We lost the Sun." Sven never did pull his punches.

Eric looked at open ocean off the port railing and remembered the black wood of his ship sinking there. "I know." He shook his head. "How does Trovita sail?"

"A little heavy on the port rear from the hole we punched in her. Otherwise smooth."

"I think I'll keep her."

"Fifty gun plus the carronade, you'll need a bigger crew."

The crew shouted, "LAND! Land to forward port!"

Men abandoned their posts for the port side of the ship. She tilted in the water. Sven scanned the horizon with a spyglass that didn't belong to him. "Finally." He handed the device to Eric who waved it off.

"I heard you're taking us in to Saint Lucia."

"That's right. Figure this won't be over until you get that thing out of your chest."

Eric squeezed Sven's shoulder, unable to articulate the relief he felt. He owed the crew and the damn demon in his skin his life.

\*\*\*\*

*August*

*Hours Later*

"The reinforcement is looking good," Bram said, pushing his glasses up. "I still recommend plating along the ribs we have exposed. It's a good opportunity."

Kyros grunted. "Should we plate inside or outside?" He stirred his goulash.

"If we're attacked, the damage is the same. I'd do it inside. Gives us some surprising resilience."

Kyros nodded to Araceli and she made a note in her book. "I'll speak with the dockmaster this after—"

“Captain!” A runner slammed the tavern door open, breathless. “Captain, Deumont just made land at the pier.”

Kyros dropped his spoon and ran out the door, shoving a barmaid to the side in his haste. He hurdled a low wall and cut through someone's side yard. The ship in the bay was not the Sun. He ran down to the dock anyway, searching the faces streaming off the big merchant vessel.

He gasped for air where he was, not quite ready for such a rush on his lungs. “Deumont!” People turned to look at him. “Where's Eric Deumont?”

Someone pointed back to the ship. A familiar knot of dark hair looked in his direction.

“Oh, thank god.” Kyros pushed himself against the tide of sailors. He ran up the gangplank. Eric shoved someone aside with one hand. Kyros crashed into him, all biting, crushed lips and out of breath. “Where the fuck have you been?”

Eric squeezed the life out of him, lifting him up off his feet with no effort at all. They kissed again, and Kyros felt himself drowning. He sank his hands into tangles of dreadlocks, balanced on a desperate edge.

“I need you,” Eric snarled between their teeth, equally raw.

They moved, half-running, down into the ship. Kyros squeezed Eric's hand, unwilling to let him go now that he'd come back. The second gun deck was wrong. The cabin was wrong. Hell, the whole ship was wrong. But the way Eric pinned him to the wall and devoured him, the way their hands pulled clothing into piles and dropped leather to the side felt right.

They didn't make another step toward the bed. Eric pushed him to the wood floor, slicked himself, and staked his claim. Kyros clawed and scratched him closer, faster, harder. He bit what he could reach and cursed what he couldn't. He didn't know how to express the blinding relief flooding his veins with adrenaline.

They came with groans; first Eric, then Kyros, too fast to catch up with themselves, and even that release didn't bring them close enough together. They devoured each other's kisses and gasped shared air for several minutes.

When Kyros finally felt his heart calm down and Eric lay on top of him, still kissing the skin under his lips, he formed a full sentence. “We have a top to the jar.”

“You found it?” Eric pushed up off his chest. “You found Lamar?”

“No, we missed him by several days, but the craftsman he came here to meet was quite helpful. He has drawings of it, he can make as many as you’re willing to pay for.”

“You had him make a top?”

“Yeah. It’s back on the Hawk.”

Eric smiled, an open-mouthed, full-of-teeth grin. “Ha,” he said, then laughed and laughed until tears fell down his cheeks. “Oh, my god,” he dropped his head to Kyros’ chest and sighed. “Oh my god, it’s almost over.”

Kyros wiped the tears away. “Come on, the bed’s right there.”

Eric pulled him up by the hand with a yank. Kyros hissed, “Easy, I don’t stretch much anymore.” He rubbed the swirl of discolored scars across his chest.

“Sorry.” Eric followed the veiny edges of the scar where the color had darkened most. “Have you been to a barber-surgeon?”

“No. I’m fine.” Kyros lifted his left arm until the scarring arrested it. “I’ve lost some range here, but that’s all.”

Eric touched the buckle protruding from Kyros’ hip. “And this?”

“Best we can figure, it’s fused to my bone. It doesn’t bother me.”

Eric looped his finger through the iron and used it to pull Kyros close. They both snorted, then kissed again. Kyros tugged them toward the bed so he had something soft to fall back on.

Late that night, Eric told him about the ill-fated battle with Trovita. The sinking of the Sun pained him more than he expected. It wasn’t his ship... but Eric was its captain, and he felt the loss acutely. Eric described being held to the mast, the whipping that released Ghalil, the days he spent unconscious.

By comparison, their casual traverse to Saint Lucia was downright dull.

Eric kissed Kyros’ forehead and breathed another deep breath. “I want to take care of this tonight. The moon’s out, ship is empty.”

“Right now?”

“We can’t do it soon enough.”

\*\*\*\*\*

*August*

*Minutes Later*

Eric tugged his belt tight over his hips, checking the contents of each pouch and sling. He missed the familiar weight of his sword. Tomorrow he planned to pick up a new one.

He heard Kyros' voice on the dock. And someone else. Araceli? Eric pushed a hatch open in the cabin to listen.

“—tting you do this alone.”

“Yes, you are. You've been right there for every step of this. Hell, you captained the damn Hawk yourself for months, following me around on this obsession.”

“You need me here.”

“No. I need you to make sure the men on the Hawk have a captain to follow.”

“...what are you saying?”

A pause, a single pair of steps walked closer to the ship. Then Kyros said, clear as day, “You weren't there, Araceli, you didn't see that demon... There was no handling it. If this one is anything like it... Go back to the Hawk, girl. And if you see this ship in flames, don't come looking.”

“I'm not just leaving you to—”

“YES, YOU ARE.”

Eric let the hatch snap shut and ran the length of the boat for the stairs. By the time he reached the top deck, though, Araceli was gone and Kyros stood at the aft rail, looking out to sea. He turned when Eric came up behind him and rubbed his chest in a gesture Eric recognized, himself. “Let's get this done.” He held the jar in his hands. The top fit. The only hint it wasn't an original piece was its bright, new color.

Eric shook his head. “You hold onto that. I won't be much help when it comes out.”

“How do we do this?”

“Carefully.” Eric gestured for Kyros to stand at the starboard side of the helm. He backed up to the port side and heard water slap the edge of the boat. “I'm going to take off my shirt. It'll pop out. Make sure that jar is open.” He

fingered his shirt and felt his gut turn over. He wasn't in danger, there was no reason to release the thing. This was such a bad idea.

He grit his teeth. Kyros widened his stance and held the open jar at the ready. Eric's heart thumped. Or maybe Ghalil did.

Eric whipped his shirt over his head. The moon reflected on his skin so everything glowed silver. Ghalil rent itself free, tearing skin and muscle, bleeding him dry like it knew this was its last chance to work destruction.

It stood on the deck and Eric thought maybe the sparse offering of just one man surprised it. Eric collapsed to his knees. Blood ran down his chest and hips, dripped in lines to the deck. He thought he saw the wood warp beneath him but when he put his hand down to steady himself it snapped back into place.

He heard Kyros yell. An angry, aggressive thing. He looked up and saw Ghalil surge first to one side, then the other. Kyros kept the jar between them, teeth bared and eyes wide. Ghalil lunged. The spirit's clawed hand slipped into the jar and then it seemed like it couldn't pull back out. Kyros surged forward, pressing the jar close.

For the first time in his life, Eric heard Ghalil scream, a sound like nails scratching bone. The spirit slipped into the jar, and Kyros slammed the lid on top.

Eric fell forward, gasping for air and at a complete loss to stop the bleeding. He felt a hand on his shoulder, pushing him to the side. Onto his back. Kyros stood over him, hysterical and high on adrenaline. Eric reached up to touch his face. He was free of the monster. At last.

He turned his head down to see the jar. It sat innocuously on the deck, moonlight shining off the new cap. A new jail for the beast. He heard Kyros screaming at him like a distant crash of waves but there were more important things to handle first. Like this almost empty pouch of red dust.

Eric pulled his last small handful of cinnamon from the leather pocket on his belt. Bloodstained. He saw dust run through his fingers and thought it would be fitting to throw this final handful out to sea. An end to an era of terror. Just as he considered trying to get up again, the jar clicked.

He rolled his head back in that direction and felt himself go cold inside. Pieces of the jar lifted off the surface and rotated by themselves. They clicked and clacked like the gearing in a pocket watch. They spun into an interlocking knot. All at once the pieces snapped back to the surface of the jar.



Ghalil exploded from the top with an infuriated roar. Red and violent, it swiped at Kyros. Eric screamed. He shoved Kyros to the side and took four claws to the neck and face, himself. He slammed his final fistful of cinnamon to his chest and gasped the incantation. Ghalil slurped back into his chest like a rose vine, all sharp thorns and crooked angles. Eric felt his flesh knot back together, his blood flush full again, his body heal to perfection.

He felt Ghalil rail against the cage of his ribs. He vomited blood.

Eric wept.

Kyros held onto this edge of panic. "Oh, my god. Oh, my holy fucking shit. Eric. Eric, please look at me? Eric? DEUMONT!" Kyros shook him and wouldn't go away.

He needed to go away. Eric opened his eyes and saw a finger stripe of blood on Kyros' cheek. A stripe he'd put there. "Go away," he croaked.

"Like hell. We got it in the jar. It went in. Did you see that? We just need to figure out how to keep it there."

Eric ripped himself away from Kyros and rolled onto his hands and knees. He felt Ghalil beat against his chest and knew he had to leave. There was nothing that could hold a monster like this. He swiped his hand and grabbed the jar. Kyros scrambled to get the top. They still fit together.

Kyros knelt beside him. "We can make this work. I know a witch we can talk to."

And all of a sudden the answer was obvious. Eric pressed the jar into Kyros' hands. "Go," he said. "Talk to your witch."

"You can come with me."

"No!" Eric winced, his desperation too raw. He clenched his fists. He needed a reason to keep Kyros away, something obvious. He saw red dust on his hand and rubbed his fingers together. "I need more cinnamon." He latched onto that explanation, praying the man would buy it. "There's an African trade merchant sailing by in three months. I'm going to take it."

"The man-o'-war?" Kyros pushed his shoulder but Eric refused to look up.

"Trovita has the firepower to mow one down. Them and the escorts. I need the cinnamon if we're going to try this again."

Kyros turned the jar in his hand. "Okay... okay, I'll talk to the witch, and you have a chat with the merchant captain. We'll get together and try again in a few months."

Eric nodded. He sat back on his heels. Kyros bent and kissed him, bloodstained and all. Eric closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to watch him walk away.

No witch in the seas would deal with Ghalil, he'd already tried that. And if a puzzle jar couldn't hold him, nothing could. Eric stood on his feet and fetched a bucket of seawater from the bay. He dumped it over his head and shook with cold. Nothing could hold Ghalil but his own ribcage. So he would track down the trade caravan and send that cage to the bottom of the sea.

He needed a crew.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter VII

*September*

*One Month Later*

Kyros turned the jar over and over in his hands. He didn't understand how the creature had gotten out. But then, he didn't understand much about spirits and ghosts. They traveled a realm humanity wasn't supposed to touch. And Eric made himself a bridge between those two.

He slid the jar into a pouch and stood. Araceli licked her fingers, polishing a fruit they found during the hike. They continued their trek upward. On the top of a mountain half-eaten by the sea, on an island unmarked on any map Kyros had ever seen, in a corner of the ocean no one bothered to visit... lived two unaging witch twins with dark skin and white eyes. Kyros led the way up a used trail with a stick in one hand to help with the climb.

Their ascent led them out of the jungle, and he spotted a sturdy shack at the peak. Crows circled the building. A few soared down to check them out and call back to the group.

Kyros picked up the pace. Ever since leaving Eric to his new ship, a sense of foreboding settled around Kyros' shoulders. He didn't like the idea of separating again. Hell, he was almost willing to hand direction of the Hawk over to Araceli and take up the mast under Eric just so they wouldn't have to sail different paths.

But Eric was right. If they were going to do this again, he needed the spice if something went wrong. Divide and conquer. Still, Kyros didn't want to delay any more than necessary.

He grunted as he crested the last pile of rocks to the top of the cliffs. A crone of a woman eased the cabin door open and invited them in.

She stooped lower than Kyros' chest. Her head was bald of hair but painted or tattooed with feathers. Her clothing fluttered with feathers as well, black and grey from the flock of birds that called this mountaintop home. She walked without a cane.

Another woman sat inside the cabin, her fingernails, pointed like bird claws, tap-tap-tapped on the arm of her chair. She rivaled her sister in age, but neither seemed gray with it. Their dark skin almost shone in the sparse candlelight.

The first woman snuffed a candle between two fingers as she walked by and gestured for Kyros to sit on the tree stump there. He didn't ask if she knew he now feared fire. He didn't want to know if the answer was yes.

Araceli was not offered a seat. She stood beside Kyros in silence.

The woman who guided them in sat at a long wooden table littered with small white bones, little dice, and a scattered collection of pictorial cards. He didn't need his fortune told. He didn't want to know the future. Kyros pulled the jar out of his pouch and birds screamed outside. The flock took wing in a noise like wind.

Kyros didn't know how to read omens but even he knew this couldn't be good. He set the jar on the table. Both witches leaned toward it, murmuring. They didn't touch it. Araceli shifted beside him. Kyros felt the same—a pressure in the air, like static or an incoming storm.

Then the witches leaned away and it was gone. The twin with pointed nails spoke in raspy sentences, “A horror has been inside this jar. Why do you bring it here?”

“We trapped a spirit of violence inside. It broke out.”

“What spirit?”

“Ghalil—”

Birds screamed again and thunder crashed against the mountain. Araceli ducked. Kyros just stood from his tree stump and growled, “Enough theatrics, both of you!”

“Ooh, the little chick is impatient!” They cackled like the crows and their feathers fluttered. “We enjoy our theatrics; we don't get many visitors.” But the bird flock settled down.

Kyros twitched his lip, irritated but needing their expertise. “Ghalil—” he spoke over the thunder crack and their laughter, “was locked inside for a moment. We want to know how to keep it there.”

The twin with the painted feathers on her head just hummed a negative. “Why are you playing with such a strong spirit?”

“It is using a friend of mine. It lives in his chest—we need it out.”

“It comes out for the moon.” Fingernails tapped her chin.

“We want it out so it will never come back. Can we trap it in the jar?”

“Of course you can.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“Sailing to intercept a man-o'-war caravan from Africa.”

Painted feathers spread several cards over her table, and Kyros looked away from the pictures. “You don't want to know his fate?”

“No.”

“He means this much to you?”

“Yes.” He heard the clatter of bones across wood and kept his head turned away.

“You've done many things for him. Suffered for him. What else would you do, little chick?”

“Anything.” Kyros closed his eyes and knew it was true.

“And what would you give up to save him from this fate?”

“Everything.”

Thunder crashed and Araceli grabbed his arm. They both jumped when the twins appeared inches in front of them, black skin glowing as if it had been oiled.

“Wait,” Kyros said, holding his hand out. “Wait, that was hasty. I misspoke.”

The twin with painted feathers handed him the jar. “It is done, little chick. No going back.” She pointed to the jar. “When Ghalil is inside, align the pins in this manner. It will lock, but not forever.”

“How long?”

“A year, maybe two. Then it will break free and kill you both.”

He gripped the jar and memorized the interlocking rings. A year or two. They could figure this out by then. They had to.

The twin with long nails took Araceli's hand and placed something small into her palm. “Find the beast with this. Hold it to the sky during the day and it will show you the path.”

Then the crows screamed again, and Kyros felt a bolt of fear in his chest. He'd made a deal with the witch twins and it would cost him greatly. They needed to find Eric before he had to pay that debt. He pushed Araceli toward

the door. "Run," he said. "We are cursed." And when the twins didn't laugh at his words, he knew they were true.

\*\*\*\*

*November*

*Two months later...*

"This is foolhardy, even for you, Captain." Sven tacked Trovita toward the trailing escort of the man-o'-war's caravan.

"I've noted your concern," Eric said. He knew his purpose out here. Surviving the encounter was not on his list today. Sven would take Trovita. The men would follow him. Eric didn't bother to consider the details after this fight. "Load all guns," he shouted to the deck, "and prep the smashers!"

Ghalil shifted and Eric smirked. Here was the beast's last opportunity to enjoy itself. Could it feel the end coming?

The crow called distances. They descended with speed faster than the Midnight Sun could reach, even with full oars in the water. Trovita didn't slice through the waves, she crushed them under her bow.

The rear escort tacked to face them broadside. Spotted. "Tack to starboard, Sven."

"Tacking starboard," Sven replied.

"Ready port guns."

The call came back, "Ready!"

Eric watched a sailor posted to the foredeck. Trovita was longer than the Midnight Sun by half a length. It made estimating their angles of attack a learning curve Eric didn't have time for. His sailor raised a hand. Eric shouted, "Port, fire all!"

The escort ship fired six cannon. Trovita fired twenty-five. The shot passed each other in the air, a few of the balls striking and falling, inert, into the sea. Two impacts shuddered Trovita's port side. The escort ship crumbled, fell in on itself, and the powder magazine ignited. It listed aft and the nose fell into the sea.

With seventy guns on three decks plus several specialty cannon fore and aft, the man-o'-war was the largest ship Eric ever had the pleasure of encountering on open sea. The escorts were smaller—twelve or twenty-four cannon each.

Faster in the water, but not as sturdy. Two carronade armed the Trovita, though. How many other ships could claim a sixty-eight pound cannon ball in their armory?

The man-o'-war and three remaining escorts turned to engage.

Eric prepared himself. "Load the guns."

\*\*\*\*

*November*

*An Hour Later*

Kyros measured their time and marked his map with a shake of his head. They were off his expected course, way off, and there was nothing around but open ocean. He made a note of the current time, then met Araceli back at the helm.

"It's still working?"

She held up the sunstone and light refracted to a line straight off their bow. "How far off are we?"

"Days." Kyros shook his head. "I don't like the feeling of this."

"Do you not trust it?"

"I trust it better than my own measurements. Never doubt a witch, especially not the twins."

Araceli shrugged her shoulders as if ridding herself of a bug. "They creeped me out. All the birds, the claws on that one..."

Kyros couldn't get the worry out of his head that he had traded something he couldn't live without. *What would you give up to save him from this fate?* He didn't even know what fate he was saving Eric from—he never looked at the cards or the bones the witch threw.

But if he sacrificed their future together for survival now... Kyros wasn't sure that was a trade he was willing to make.

He watched Araceli hold the stone up and correct their course. The trade was made, their future already set. He had to find a way to accept the path. He didn't trust the twins to plot a future he wanted.

The crow yelled, "Sails on the horizon! Cannon fire!"

Kyros didn't even ask for the spyglass. He screamed at his men, "All hands to the oars, full sail. Monkeys ready the cannon."

Javier organized the sailors with his drum and rhythmic chant. The Hawk jumped forward and Kyros' heart with it. He gripped the rail and watched the horizon. "Araceli, if anything happens to me, you take this boat and make something of it."

"Nothing is happening to you, boy. You've sailed halfway across the Atlantic for this man, and I'm still right beside you."

He looked down, then back at her. "I wouldn't be here if not for you."

"I know." She settled on one hip. "Unless you still think a dingy and one oar counts as a fleet."

Kyros smiled and shook his head. "I'm serious, though—"

"You're not going to die, stop being so melodramatic."

What else could count for giving up everything in exchange for saving Eric from his fate? "Alright, but still. If we make it through this, you deserve your own craft. I want you to have the Hawk."

"You planning on picking one up while we're here?" She spread a hand out over the water.

The crow's distance calls dropped under a thousand yards, and Kyros just laughed. "Quartermaster, keep us on target for the closest escort." He yelled at the crew, "Ramming speed!"

The distance shrank before them. The Nomad Hawk flew like her namesake, a dive across the surface of the water. The escort tried to turn, but she was already hobbled by several cannon holes in her aft starboard side.

"Brace for impact!"

The Hawk plowed into the escort ship, crumpling the smaller vessel like paper. Wood splintered in every direction. The new reinforcement on the Hawk's hull deflected most of the impact. They crushed the escort below them and kept going. It rolled into two pieces and sank.

"Hard to port!" Kyros called the tack. "All hands to the guns." He waved his hand over the crew. "Douse all but main." The Hawk stalled in the water, her back end swung out and they drifted around. Kyros saw the man-o'-war and Eric's new vessel lashed together. Men swung from ship to ship, doing battle by hand. The final escort ship sailed into the Hawk's line of fire.

"Guns ready!"



“Starboard, fire all!”

The cannon burst, rocking the Hawk in the water. Their target fired back, but only a few shots hit the air and all fell short. The escort stalled in the water.

“White flag!” The crow shouted, “White flag, they surrender.”

Only the escort backed down, the larger man-o'-war continued to swarm with conflict. Then Kyros spotted Ghalil on the target ship's top deck. It grabbed a man by the arm and eviscerated him. It took the time to shake the insides out.

“Get us next to the escort.” Kyros said, checking his belt pouch for the jar. “It'll be faster to run.”

The escort bobbed in the sea beside the man-o'-war. The Hawk slid up beside, and Kyros used a line to swing from one to the next. Men on the escort didn't try to engage. Between the Hawk and whatever horror terrorized the man-o'-war, they were done.

Kyros climbed rigging until he found a loose line. “Dammit, Kyros.” He heard Araceli below him and kept moving anyway. He let the sea dip him closer to rigging on the man-o'-war and leapt. Waves rocked each boat. For a second, he saw the entire slaughter on the man-o'-war deck.

Then he caught rigging and half-slid down to the blood-painted wood. Eric knelt by the mainmast, bloody and fading fast. A repeat of the vision Kyros faced back in Saint Lucia. He ripped the jar from his pouch and screamed at Ghalil.

\*\*\*\*\*

*November*

*Seconds Before*

Eric coughed, on his knees for the last time. The sight of his chest torn open so familiar to him that he could admire the design of blood splatter decorating his pants. His fingers felt cold, and he didn't seek out the pouch of cinnamon at his waist. It was empty.

He closed his eyes and hallucinated the sound of Vindex' screaming rage. Eric wondered if any single sound could more accurately represent his life for the past six years. He squeezed tears down his cheeks and decided he wanted to die watching Ghalil realize its host would not survive this time. He needed to see the demon know this was its last hurrah.

Eric opened his eyes, ready to heave to his feet one last time. Kyros stood before him, facing off against Ghalil with jar in hand.

Again.

“Don’t...” Eric didn’t have the strength, or perhaps the will, to finish. He turned his head. Something punched through his back; a single point of blunt pain. A knife. Eric slid down to perch on his ankles and one hip. He turned and saw the Spaniard behind him fall under Araceli’s precise blades.

Everything happened too fast. He couldn’t track. Araceli put a hand on his shoulder and said something. Her lips moved faster than her voice and it got jumbled up in his head. Why were they here? He was supposed to drown today—they couldn’t be here for this.

He didn’t want them to see... how was he supposed to explain it? It was just inconvenient.

Ghalil appeared to Eric’s left. Araceli lunged away from it. The spirit didn’t slide into him, though. For the first time, Eric watched it watch him and saw his own nipple ring hooked on the creature’s empty eye socket. It had the form of a man with no skin, no eyes, no ears. It had fingers like bone with claws of black. It didn’t seem to breathe.

“Leave him alone!” Kyros advanced with the jar, and Ghalil willed itself away an equal distance, wary of the device. It circled the three of them.

Then it pointed to Kyros. Eric struggled to his feet, blood-light and cold. Ghalil would not take a new host.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter VIII

*November*

*Seconds Later*

Kyros held the jar out in front of him but had no confidence in his ability to catch the demon. Already it had moved past him twice with speed like a blur of red, and he had no way to keep track of it.

And now it saw how Eric suffered and turned its attention on Kyros. He didn't know how to catch a spirit, how to use one, what it wanted or why. He couldn't begin to guess at its thoughts, but Eric fought to his feet beside him just as the thing blurred again, too fast to see.

It dodged the jar. Kyros felt the demon's clawed hand pass through his own chest, then Araceli tackled him from the side and took the brunt of its attack.

The deck quieted. Eric collapsed, again, to his knees and held his hands against the open holes in his chest, gasping. Kyros scrambled back to his feet, slipping in blood. Ghalil disappeared.

Araceli lay motionless on the deck. Wait, not motionless. A ghost of Ghalil pressed against the skin of her face, deforming her dark skin into a featureless skull. Then it was gone.

"Oh, my god. Araceli." Kyros hit the deck on hands and knees. He put the jar down, top open, and put his hand against her cheek. "Araceli, wake up. Girl, come on, wake up!" He wiggled her chin and thumped her chest.

Ghalil came back, deforming her face again into its own plain countenance. Kyros shrieked at it, wordless rage.

Something bright burned in one of Araceli's pouches. Kyros shook Araceli and it bounced free. The sunstone flashed on the deck, and Ghalil seemed to separate from Araceli in an attempt to get away from the light.

Kyros grabbed the sunstone and held it close to his oldest friend. "Get out of her! GET OUT!" He pressed the stone to Araceli's cheek, and it horrified him to see her skin burn on contact. A ghost of Araceli also divided from her body. The spirit screamed and tried to get away.

Someone slammed the jar down on both apparitions. Eric, coughing blood and half unconscious, trapped both Ghalil and Araceli's spirit. Kyros shook as he heard her scream and scream and scream.

“No. No, get her out.”

Eric dragged the jar toward him, fumbled with the top.

Kyros lunged over Araceli's body and tried to grab the jar. “Get her out, Deumont. Don't lock her in. Not with that thing.”

They clawed for ownership until the interlocking pieces of the jar began to turn by themselves. Eric thrust the jar into Kyros' hands. “Close it, man. End this.”

“No, Araceli—”

“Saved your damn life from a fate that was mine!”

*And what would you give up to save him from this fate?*

*Everything.*

“No.” Kyros barely saw the interlocking pieces through his sudden tears. “I'm so sorry, girl. I'm sorry. I'll figure this out, I swear.” He pressed the top into place and twisted the line of pieces into place to lock the jar. He felt the device shudder and he hugged it close while he wept. He remembered the exact pitch of her screams.

\*\*\*\*

*November*

*Seconds Later*

Eric closed his eyes for a single brief moment. It was over. The spirit was finally locked away in a place other than himself. He rolled from his knees to his side on the deck and coughed. He had been ready to die just moments ago, but Kyros wasn't supposed to be here. Araceli wasn't supposed to be in that jar with a monster. They weren't supposed to come to his rescue like that.

Eric sighed. Then hard hands grabbed his shoulder and arm, supported his hip.

“Whoa, there, Captain. You're not in good shape. Don't be going to sleep just yet.”

He grunted. Sven took the small knife out of his back and made him roll down onto a net of rope. “Kyros...” But they were hauling him away already, tearing off the last of his tunic and putting pressure on the holes in his body.

Eric had not felt pain like this for so long. Ghalil always healed him up after every slaughter. Then he realized he hadn't vomited someone else's blood, either, and the pain became easier to manage.

He rolled his head back in the netting and saw Kyros curled on the deck with the jar. Then they hauled him over the plank to his own ship and the pirate was out of sight.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter IX

*December*

*Several Weeks Later*

Kyros arched under Eric's hands as the Hawk rolled through black seas. The motion just added to their fervor, driving them closer into each other. Kyros reached his peak and clenched, knotting his fingers in the netting overhead. Eric followed him down into the depths.

They surfaced for breath, both gasping. Sweaty. Eric lay on the bed and Kyros curled up next to him. He played with a dreadlock.

The ship heaved, and they both braced against a corner post of the bed. Something rattled on a shelf.

Kyros stilled. Except for a shaft of moonlight cutting into the room, it soaked in inky black. No fire to light the space. The ray fell across a puzzle jar on one of the shelves, wrapped in cloth and weighted down with chains of iron. It shook, testing the restraints.

Eric startled him with a thumb against his cheek, stroking. Kyros squeezed his eyes shut. He heard Araceli scream and kissed Eric to drown it out.

He found the sunstone in Eric's hair. Yet another trinket from his adventures. One year. Maybe two. Kyros watched Orthos hop up the shelves and pick his way between the heavy chain. He curled around the jar and began to purr. The shaking settled.

They needed to find an expert dealing in spirits. A man who could trap one without grabbing Araceli as collateral. He refused to leave her tortured in that chamber. He refused to take "no" for an answer.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Tami Veldura is a writer, reader, lover and artist. She currently resides in San Marcos, CA. She writes science fiction, fantasy, steampunk, and GLBTQ fiction.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Goodreads](#)