

CHAPTER II

The Sea of Monsters



The *Rainbow Serpent* had put out to the Scyllic Sea. Cramped into a tiny cage of rusted iron, drenched by caustic sea water, his fingers trembling, his stomach rumbling and cramping. With a soft *clank*, the lock on his cage opened but slipped through his gaunt hands and fell to the floor. The banging of rusted iron on sodden wood echoed through the ship's hold. He snatched the heavy metal lock through the bars of his cage with his bound hands and fumbled to reattach it whence it had just fallen. Heavy steps in the darkness outside his cage; faint lantern light creeping into his world; a soft *click* as he fiddled the lock to a close. Just in time as a meaty hand lifted the thick cloth covering his prison and revealed a fat face illuminated by flickering lantern light.

"Whatcha doin' all this noise for? Haven't ya been told to be dead silent? Ya was so well behaved. A man's tired and trying to get some rest over here. Don't force me to shut ya up, boy. *Hush.*"

The light burned in his eyes and the man's stench burned in his nose, but he kept his composure and played the part of the dumb prisoner.

"Y...yes, Sir. I just banged me hand. Believed there were some thing. Mayhaps a rat. Promise to make no sound no more, Sir."

The fat man got some sick pleasure from getting called *Sir*, his eyes twinkled every time he was addressed as such. Every single time he uttered it, the word crept across his tongue like bitter poison. He felt no

respect for the fat man, nothing but distilled hatred; for him and his entire goddamned crew. Especially for the fucking Alchemist, whose face burned whenever he closed his eyes, ready to be cut and choked.

"Well then, we have an agreement. Ya be quiet and perhaps y'earn yourself some chicken once more. And ya best be quiet when the Queen eventually speaks to ya, eh. She's not as lenient as I. She'll might have yer tongue if ya make the wrong noise."

"Aye, Sir. You need not worry 'bout me, Sir. The Queen need not worry the same. There's no need for her to hurry herself for me. I am just content with sitting in this cage and swatting them rats."

"Yes, yes, ya've said that already. Don't mistake me for one who doesn't know how to use 'em ears. Well, I did bring them words to our Queen but she didn't like hearing 'em, though. I think. Yer an odd fellow, ya know that? Sitting content in yer cage. Swatting rats, as you say. We normally don't let 'em passengers wait so long to meet the Queen. Normally they beg and plea and wanna see her as soon as they arrive, and we let 'em rot a bit. Ya've rotted enough though, boy. She's finally ready to meet ya, so be quiet and behave when she graces ya with her presence. She wants to see the man fallen in love with 'em cage of his."

"Aye, Sir."

"Hehe. 'Haps I'll leave ya some chicken again later. Now *hush*."

Oh, the thought had to torture the Queen of the *Rainbow Serpent*; someone not dying to meet her and a prisoner at that. She had to be intrigued at least a little bit by this strange stranger—or be fuming at the mouth ready to crush this little, disrespectful maggot. He had bet his freedom—his life—for it to not be the latter. He had bet his life on the assumption, that he had not blundered into the workings of a madwoman, this all seemed way too deliberate and sophisticated; the way he the crew talked about their Queen, the way they followed her, defended her honour, served her. She not only demanded to be obeyed, but demanded to be loved. A command seemingly as easily obeyed by her crew as a command to breath. Everyone,

on and under deck, he had observed from the confines of his cage, seemed to have fallen for her at least a tiny bit. Hell, she was a captain of a ship and they called her *Queen*. Everyone on this godforsaken ship—except for him. He had bet on swimming against the tide to give him a way out of this imprisonment...hopefully not into an early, watery grave. But the game the Queen was playing seemed so obvious to him from within these rusty iron bars. A game he was ready to participate in, but not as the pawn he had been designated to be. With the measly wager of his life. *Win, or die.*

Soothing darkness embraced him again as the thick cloth fell over his cage and the fat man stomped back to his post; the memory of bright lantern light still burning a little in his eyes. Stale and filthy seawater stood to his ankles and drenched him to the bone. Every wave crashing against the encrusted hull rattled his rusty cage, rattled his bones in his gaunt limbs. This dirty, tiny cell offered more discomfort than actual living space. No one could inflict such torture upon it and hope to emerge from the whole ordeal unscathed. He would have his vengeance for this. On the crew. On the Queen. And on the goddamn fucking Alchemist. That's what he got for trying to be a good person. Days and night of *this*. Days and nights inside a damp cage, starved and bruised. *Good guys finish last*. What a fucking joke. *Good guys finish their meals in thirty seconds, for they have nothing to swallow but dried bread and cockroaches*. The face of the woman on the pier circled his mind. *Laurelle*. How she had ever managed to sow doubt in his heart was beyond him. Some vile witchcraft most likely. Vile witchcraft to sow doubt within his head. *Sow hope within his heart*. No! What a bunch of meandering horseshit. This brain-dead *hope* was the only reason he was subject to this agony. He would not let it get the better of him again. He would have his vengeance; on the crew, the Queen, the Alchemist, and the goddamn woman on the pier.

His stomach rumbled again. He felt like giving up, surrendering his dignity for a decent meal, but that way lay only subjugation and captivity. To regain his freedom he had to endure this; endure this, to earn his honey.

This time he would take what was rightfully his and not surrender to false promises of *hope*. The last honey he had bought with suffering was still due, withheld from him. But no, not this time, this time he would dine as much from the Queen's sweet honey as his heart desired—bring her down with her goddamn pirate ship.

He pulled out the chicken bone from his shaggy beard and clutched the thin bone in his scraggy fist. The word *Sir* still burned on his tongue. All this humiliation for this tiny thing. *His way out*. Out of this cell. And into the Queen's mind. Or to his death. No, not to his death. He was beyond doubt now. He was beyond *hope*. He had wagered too much on this. Only cold anticipation. With his bony fingers, he picked the lock on his cell again and this time—this time—he caught it before it hit the floor.

He was ready now, ready for the most important performance of his life.



Dozens and dozens of meticulous statues guarded the hallway. A sour smile crept across Laurelle's face as she remembered hiding from their gazes as a child as if these pieces of marble and quartz could tell on her being disobedient to her father. She tiptoed down the corridor; for days on end, she had been placed under house arrest for being near the Old Man the night it burned down. As if she could be locked away like the dogs they kept in the manor's kennels. Every day the servant called her Lady Laurelle and every day she felt less like a lady and more like a prisoner. Her eyes wandered from the petrified parade to the wine bottle in her hand. Refilled a dozen times with wines double and triple the merit of its original contents, and yet she craved nothing more than to taste its original cheapness, for its memories dwarfed all her father's fine reds in bitter-sweetness. Her heart dropped to her stomach that night and had not yet found its way back. But as she heard every other day through the manor walls: a rising tide lifts all ships. She took another swig. The wine bubbled in her stomach. It was only a matter of time. She burped.

The voices grew louder and clearer towards the other end of the hallways. Laurelle pressed against the wall and peeked through the milky windows into the lavish backyard gardens to see who her father was talking to. Dozens and dozens of colourful patches adorned dozens of armours. No wonder people called them the Stitchers. It was said they cut a piece of

clothing from every man, woman, and child they've ever stitched up and wore them as trophies on their chest, cloaks, hoods, and gauntlets. From the look of it, these ones had acquired quite the collection of scraps for their cloaks and scars for their faces—especially the one her father was talking to, he seemed to have an entire dried ear attached to his tunic. There even seemed to be a young boy among them, though he didn't wear any patches or ears—yet, most likely. Remnants of the negotiations going on downstairs penetrated the painted walls; something about old women, horned monsters and cats. Laurelle looked at the wine bottle in her hand and took another swig. It was almost empty again; as if. As if her father were interesting enough for monsters or patient enough for cats—so they were talking about old women; here she had hoped for something interesting.

Even eavesdropping on backyard conversations had paled of charm. The motley parade had promised to be a speck of colour in the constant greyness since the Old Man had burned down. The sun hid beyond thick grey clouds and her happiness hid somewhere at the bottom of this bottle. She lifted it to her lips and let its contents gurgle into her mouth. The Alchemist's face still haunted the inside of her lids. His ugly, bloodshot eyes, the untrimmed stubble on his cheeks, the greasy hair. She clenched her fist around the wine bottle. Oh, what she would give to have him kneeling here before her now. It wasn't fair. It wasn't just. Someday he is going to face a headsman, she will make sure of that; neigh, she will be the headsman. Deliver justice upon him before hundreds of witnesses for the crimes he'd committed, for the pain he'd caused. She needed something to say this moment. Something clever. And righteous. To make the crowd cheer and make things right.

Demon of the sea, I judge thee for the lives taken, the spirits drowned. For the life of my mother and the integrity of my heart, I sentence you to death! Never again I will suffer thy kind upon my lands! I am the golden mistress and slave to none!

Her imaginary sword struck down from the heavens on the Alchemist's head. The bottle in her hand shattered, spilling wine and glass shards against her face. A piercing pain flashed in her wrist. When she opened her eyes again, the hall looked like a murder scene; splashes of red across the floor and walls. The bust in front of her caved in and shattered, drenched in red. Laurelle grinned. And then the screaming started downstairs. She pressed against the wine-stained wall under the windowsill. Not even a tiny moment of counterfeit triumph could be granted to her. And the dread crawled up her spine anew. Through the milky glass, her father's voice screamed something about better making sure the young lady was confined to her room and that she better not gotten hurt again. As if he cared. She looked at the green and yellow bruises around her wrists where the pirates had restrained her. They hadn't even really hurt. Not even close as much as being forced to witness her date being kidnapped by these filthy men. Forced to relive the last day she'd seen her mother. Forced to watch. So helpless. She had gotten hurt. But not in a way he saw, not in a way he cared for. She smashed the stump of the wine bottle next to her into the floorboards. This time, the pain was more than just a pinch. Thick crimson dropped from her fingers. But she did not scream. Or whimper. Or flinch. She was not as weak and frail as everyone thought. This would make her first battle scar. She was strong. And yet she felt so helpless. Helpless to protect what she actually cared for. Her date on the pier. A little overconfident at first, a little shy after that, but nice, maybe even a little cute. He had cared for her. He had believed that she was strong. And he had allowed her to be weak. And then the sea had taken him all the same. Her date on the pier. She hadn't even gotten to ask him for his name. He just left her there alone, with bruises, a bleeding heart, an empty bottle, and a bag of sweets. How her heart was bleeding over the yellow of the bruises, the refilled bottle lied there spread across the floor in pieces. The only thing left was the bag of overly sweet pastries in her pocket and a burning desire

to stake the Alchemist alive. She needed some quiet, some peace, some fresh air or she would wither away in here.

As she darted down the stairs, startled servants reminded her again and again of her name and how she had to feel.

"Lady Laurelle, you're hurt! Don't be afraid of the blood! Come to your room! You need rest and the company of your father, he is searching for you."

She slammed the door shut behind her but the noise still persistent. Just a little peace and quiet. That's all she wanted.

"Laurelle! Where do you think you are going? You are to stay in your room until you've thought about what you've done, young lady!"

Her father towered over her against the pale grey sky.

"Do you hear me? Laurelle! Look at me when I am talking to you!"

"Screaming at me..."

"Have I raised you so poorly that the only thing you do is talk back at me? At least have the decency to speak up!"

He grabbed her by the arm. She tried to wiggle free, but his grip only tightened.

"Look at yourself! You don't get attention and supervision for two minutes and you've already bloodied yourself. Show me your hand. Show it to me!"

Reluctantly, she reached out her hand. It was not as unbearable when she didn't look him straight into the eye.

"That's not even a deep cut. Go back to your room and get this bandaged and...Hey! What did I tell you about looking at me when I talk to you? Do you have no manners? Oh, and wipe that brash look off your face, I did not raise you to be an arrogant brat. Someday you are going to learn that the world does not revolve around you! "

Laurelle stared back into her father's eyes. So close and yet so distant. How can you not see how hurt I am? That all I want is not be screamed at; is this truly too much to expect? I don't want to hate you, but you just make

it impossible. I never want to see you again. I never want you to see me cry again and not care. Never. Never again.

"I hate you. And mom would hate you too."

He looked at her in disbelief.

"I grant you a single chance to apologize right now or you will regret this dearly, young lady. I am your father—your father—and you will not disrespect me like that."

The storm raging in his eyes scared her almost as much as the composed demeanour hiding it away. She pried her arm from his grip, looked him into his unloving eyes one last time and darted for the garden gate.

"Yeah, run away like you always do! Run away from your problems! Run away from the only people who still care for you! Run away to your dead mother, you ungrateful brat!"

Her father screamed after her, as ran past apricot trees and through tightly trimmed shrubberies; screamed after her, as the first stray raindrops hit her cheeks; screamed after her, as the army of marble statues passed by her. The Collector. That's why they called her father. She goddamn piece to be collected, to be shouted into submission like a dog. She wanted to scream sense into him, but could not muster the strength or the patience; he would neither listen nor understand anyway. By not screaming she could prove that she was not as weak as he was.

"Lady Laurelle, return home with us to your father! It is cold and crap outside! He'll calm down eventually. Lady Laurelle!"

She was no lady. Ladies didn't have battle scars. She trotted down the winding alleys towards the harbour and tried to clench a fist, though her fingers only trembled and the cut ached and burned. A battle scar. Just a moment ago, she had felt so proud and mighty, now she only felt pathetic and alone. Alone. From up here on the hill, she could see the waves glistening through the mist. Waving, wavering, without regard for the pain they've caused. If only she could break the sea. She looked at her bleeding

hand. She would only break herself. But something had to give. Something. Anything. To make things right. Be it impotent blows against the waves.

Thick fingers of mist crawled like hundreds of fat worms through the empty streets. Through the walls of haze, the masts of ships were the only sign of the pier, sticking out like the ribs of a rotting cadaver. The stench of rotting wood and fish crept up the serpentine alleyways. Faint thunder rolled over the mountain tops and the cold wind cut on her skin like a thousand frozen knives. Her stomach turned at the thought of returning there. She wasn't ready to meet death again so soon; she just wanted a little quiet. Her eyes wandered up to the hills, the mountains adorning the horizon.

No human walked the Bog of Nooks and Crannies in this weather, where the cliffs were steep and willows old. That's where she would hide and wait out the storm.



Right lightning illuminated the cargo hold. The slim silhouette of the Queen of the *Rainbow Serpent* was set against the orange of lantern light and the sun setting behind thick, black clouds. Her slender arms jingled and rang with golden rings and bejewelled chains. Her silk dress seemed almost invisible in the faint evening light. She waited out the rolling thunder before raising her voice.

"Now where is this maverick guest of ours? Herald your Queen has arrived and offers him audience. She demands to know his name and purpose. Furthermore, bring some light and exorcise this darkness. It is unbecoming of your Queen."

...one could not marvel at her glamorous garments and beauty in darkness.

"The Queen has arrived to see you, prisoner. Present yourself!"

Oh, you sweet, sweet dimwit, that was not what she had said at all. She merely made me the offer to beg for her presence. He would not beg for her, quite to the contrary and this meathead was just the useful idiot he need to undermine even last bit of miniscule power she held over him. She had come this far. *To see the man in love with his cage.* The most degrading role he had ever played but it had worked out for him this far. He had made her come this far to see him—she had not let him be dragged to her quarters—he would make her take these last few steps for him, as well.

"I suppose. If she cares this much for me."

"She sure does. You think she's here to—"

"*Out!* All of you! Your Queen demands it! This quandary requires four eyes and no more! You will return to your posts and fulfil your duties. Your Queen will punish this fool herself. *Out!*"

The confused crew of the *Rainbow Serpent* scattered through the hatch to their posts on deck. Anxious whistling chimed from above from the sailor's, at least from the ones still in possession of their tongues. Things were about to turn bad and they had no interest in getting their necks caught in someone else's noose. They were not wrong in their suspicion: things were about to turn bad, but not for the prisoner, oh no, to the contrary. The hatch shut after the last crew member; the crashing of the waves against the hull drowning out the raging of the storm outside again. Only the flickering light of lanterns, torches, and the Queen remained. This was his time to rise.

"Who are you, prisoner?"

The Queen approached his little, rusty prison. Lifting her silken dress to protect it from the filth swimming across the floor in one hand, wielding a slender blade in the other, its keen edge glinting in the lantern light.

"And how dare you address me in ways so very unbecoming of your Queen? I should skewer you right this very moment with my own hands for your indecencies."

"*Indecencies?* Oh, you clearly have not even the slightest grasp of my potential for true indecency. But of all things, curiosity about other people is nothing to be ashamed of, you know? But then again, you seem to have already made up your mind about it qualifying not only as *indecent* but as an offence worthy of capital punishment. I'd be worried, would I not remain unskewered so far."

"You watch your tongue, prisoner. Loose tongues tend to fall prey to freewheeling blades. They told me you could barely construct a sentence from start to finish and now I witness this eloquence from a farm boy gathered off the streets. What vile games are you playing, boy? And what do you know of my Alchemist and his whereabouts? *Who* are you?"

"These are a lot of questions for a Queen devoid of curiosity. Is it true that your Grace is married to the sea?"

"I am the one posing the questions."

"So it is true. Shame really. It's been going so well between us two this far, wouldn't you agree?"

"You truly elected *these* to be your last words?"

She took a step towards him, the sharp point of the blade glistening in her hand. He could not let his arrogance get the better of him, not again. This time had to show restraint. His life depended upon it. He looked into her eyes, blue and cold like frozen lakes. She was a beautiful woman, a marble statue come to life. Not even he could deny her beauty. She exuded power. With eyes of someone who commanded respect wherever they went. Cruel eyes. Lonely eyes. *Untouchable*. He would forge himself anew, just for her; transform himself into a weapon. A weapon to rival her beauty. A weapon even deadlier than the slender blade glistening in the candlelight. A weapon to *touch* her.

"My time has not yet come, your Grace."

"I fear you lay mistaken there, prisoner."

"One of us certainly is."

With a rattling bang, he kicked open the door of his cage, the picked lock skidding across the flooded floor. The hunger had not left much of him but when he stepped out of his cage, he still towered a few inches over her; an impotent sword trembling between the both of them.

"What do you say we quench your curiosity about my person and my thirst? Appease this unnecessary fight and my hunger, over dinner?"

"Who let you out of your cell? *Who...are you?*"

"Just someone who doesn't wish to be skewered on an empty stomach. If I must sully this fine dress of yours with my blood, the least thing I can do to honour it, is burst and not simply deflate."



Waves were breaking on the cliff beneath. Her feet dangled over the edge. The air smelled of salt, dirt, and the sweet anticipation of rain. A flash of lightning on the horizon over the ocean. When the thunder finally rolled over the shore, Laurelle had already given up counting. This spot was quiet and safe for now. It was hers and hers alone. Here, beneath the ancient willow trees, in the hills, the cliffs to the Scyllic Sea. It was peaceful here. Only the birds in the willows and the crashing waves beneath. They could not hurt her here, only tingle her feet. No one could hurt her here. In the distance, the city huddled against the shoreline, but out here, no one in the city could see her. She could scream and no one would notice; she could exist and no one would try to scream the flesh at her bones into marble.

She pressed her clenched fist into the mud beside her, but it buried not even half an inch deep into the dirt. The cut ached again. So weak. The earth would not make way. She kicked the air in front of her and her shoe flew in a high arc into the approaching rain, tumbling and turning like a dead bird before it vanished in the swirling mist of crashing waves. A clump of moss followed the shoe into the sea shortly after. She kicked her other leg as hard as she could, but the leftover shoe refused to follow. It clung to her foot, even when she kicked again, again and again. She took a shallow breath and let out a harrowing scream against onsetting rain. Even

her scream was meek and feeble, unlike the waves crashing against the cliffs, ferocious, captivating, and sourly uncaring. They crashed and raged with uncaring ferocity against the cliffs, their watery innards sprayed towards the heavens and drenched Laurelle in a cold, salty shower of sea guts. First, Laurelle shrieked, then she laughed.

"You want to take me, as well? Then come get me! I've had baths more dangerous than this!"

She jumped to her feet and assumed a sloppy boxing stance.

"You won't get anything but wet shoe leather, foul sea monster!"

Another wave crashed against the cliff and exploded into the air. This time, Laurelle braced herself and threw a misdirected punch into the rain of foam and salt.

"You cannot drown me when I am on top of the world! I am the golden mistress and slave to none!"

She spat into the water and left out a chuckle that faded into a sigh. At least she could still find some joy in her little acts of defiance, even when plagued by a sour mood. Though now she was drenched and cold and the rain had started falling in big droplets from the bellies of thick, grey clouds pregnant with a livid summer storm. She took a deep breath. The air smelled of damp moss, wet leaves, rot, and earth. Under the old willow trees, she found some cover from the onsetting rain, though the wind still bit into her wet garments and chilled her to the bone, so she pressed on deeper into the Bog of Nooks and Crannies. The rain pattered against the leaves and the wind raged against the cliffs and bent the ancient trees but could not reach her here, in the heart of the swamp. Laurelle slumped with her back against a willow thicker than she was tall with small, red leaves. The bag of sweets was still in her pocket. She took one of the pastries and let it melt in her mouth. Her teeth tingled from the sweetness and her nose itched, but it was an almost pleasant sensation. She closed her eyes to finally enjoy her moment of peace and quiet. Only the pelting of the rain, howling of the wind, chirping of the birds, croaking of the toads, and the

occasional thunder. This was nice. Just...this. She hugged her knees and finally let the tears flow which had been building up for days on end. And she sat there, sobbing softly. Until something furry brushed against her leg and meowed.

A cat as black as night licked the sugary remnants off her fingers, its rough tongue tingled against her skin. It was scrawny and one of its legs looked hurt, but in this cold storm, it was warm and dry. When it had licked the last bits of sugar from her hands, it carefully jumped onto her knees, sat on its hind legs and meowed expectantly, its deep orange eyes scrutinizing her every move.

Laurelle blinked in disbelief. A cat—a black cat right in front of her eyes. She looked around, in search of a swamp witch to whom the cat belonged, but there was no one else, only the croaking of frogs and the ghosts of the wind, so she snatched the black cat from her lap before it could run away. A black cat! It meowed in her arms but she did not let it go. Truly, a black cat! What magic this one wielded—what magic only waited to be wielded by a witch...a black cat in her very arms! She made a little leap and rejoiced, seeing herself again in front of the crowd; the Alchemist in front of her on his knees, the black cat at her side and she passed her judgement again, only this time there was no need for a clunky sword in her fantasy. She pressed a smooch on the cat's forehead and it hissed in response. Never again would she be helpless. Never again would she run away in fear. Never again.

"Stop fidgeting so much, you little demon, you. You're mine now. I will care for you and you'll make me a witch. A witch!"

She danced from leg to leg and kissed the cat all over its shiny, black fur, but it would not stop fidgeting until it wriggled itself free from her grip, darted around her feet and fled up the big willow's stump into its sea of red leaves where it perched itself on a thick branch high above the ground.

"No, bad kitty, come down from that branch. You came to me, you are mine now! Kitty...why?"

She took a deep breath and sighed. The air smelled of damp moss, wet leaves, rot, earth, honey, and sweet pepper—and disappointment. Before she could call herself a witch, she would need to learn to control this little beast. But after that, nothing would be able to stand in her way. Nothing!

"Come down, kitty, come on. What do I need to do to get you down from there?"

The cat only hissed from its branch, its back arched in anticipation, deep orange eyes fixed like fiery gemstones in the dark.

"What do you want?"

"More."

The stench of dried blood and rancid sweat drowned out the scent of salt and rain. Rattling, wheezing and startled hissing joined the crashing waves and distant thunder.

"Give. More."

From the undergrowth, a hulking, towering creature emerged and approached the ancient willow. It limped on one leg, a crust of blood on its chin, arms, and horns sprouting from a thick mane of maroon hair. Its freckled face resembled that of a woman, were it not for those dark, hateful eyes. The cat hissed from the height of the willow branch, embers sparking from its pitch black fur. The horned beast flinched at the sight of the black ball of fur in the treetop. It was ugly, deformed, and its hateful eyes froze the blood of anyone they found in its bloodshot gaze.

"I...I don't have anything to give."

"Give. Me. More."

Laurelle slowly backed away and found herself cornered between the wheezing creature and the ancient willow tree. Sparks jumped from the fur of the black cat and hissed as they extinguished in the heavy rain.

"I...I have a spare shoe I don't need anymore. You can have it...if you want."

The horned beast took a heavy step closer, breaking branches and rotten wood, its foul breath stank of honey and sweet pepper. It was clearly not

interested in solitary shoes. The cat had long since jumped to another branch when the creature clutched the tree limb it had been sitting on and ripped it off with a frustrated, bellowing howl. Laurelle flinched and retreated the only way she still could; down—down down down, into a small ball with her hands over her head. The stench of blood and sweat and mud everything but the fear. The fear. The creature lifted one of its giant paws to strike out. When it threw the weight of its hunched form against the willow, the wood groaned and creaked. The cat cried out loud as it held on for its tiny, little life. The second time the horned beast crashed into the tree, moist dirt exploded from the ground, as the willow was nearly uprooted by the impact. The cat jumped into the thicket and vanished in the blink of an eye. Blinded by rage, the horned beast punched the tree so hard, wood splintered and with a horrendous crack, the battered tree snapped in half like brittle bone. Laurelle dared not think about what these enormous hands might do with her spine when it was so thin and small. The hateful eyes turned from the wooden corpse to her. The rumbling of distant thunder drowned out by the pounding of her heart. The creature reached with its mighty paw for her tiny head. She didn't want to die. Not now. Not ever. She had yet to become a witch. Make things right.

"I am the golden mistress and slave to none and you will KNEEL!"

Thunder cracked over the cliffs like a whip and the horned creature dropped to its knees, screaming, roaring. Bloody spit ran down its chin and its eyes, filled with even more hate than before, bellowed louder than her roars. Laurelle was still paralyzed with fear. Then she crawled as fast as she could away from the willow tree and the awful creature.

"Don't you dare touch me! I said kneel! KNEEL!"

But the creature did not listen this time and rose again to its towering height, drowning out the last bit of light. Laurelle crawled as fast as she could, her eyes fixed on the approaching creature, but it was not fast enough. With every heavy step, it drew closer. Her hands grabbed for

anything they could find. She ripped out moss and stones from the ground and mud from the earth and threw at the creature, but it flinched not once.

"Please. Please. Let me live. Kneel..."

But the creature did not care for her grovelling and grabbed for her leg. She kicked and screamed and spit and cursed but the meaty fingers still dragged her closer to the creature, its uncut nails scratching into her flesh. The stench of sweat and blood and honey and sweet pepper clouded her senses again. Laurelle clawed for the bag in her pockets and presented it to the hateful eyes.

"I have...sweets...sweets to eat. Is...is that...more?"

The bag was soggy and dirty now. She threw it to the monster's feet. The creature stared at the small thing. In comparison to its enormous form, it was barely noticeable.

"Please...please let me go...You're hurting me..."

The creature extended its other, mighty hand and picked up the small, linen bag, holding it to its freckled nose. A glimmer in its hateful eyes. It opened the small bag and held one of the sodden pastries between two meaty fingers. A flash of lightning illuminated the bizarre scene, followed by a low, grumbling sound escaping the creature's throat, as the small pastry disappeared in its might jaw. It closed its eyes.

"Mmmmhhh...Scintilla Bread."

Laurelle pried her leg from the creature's grasp and kicked its ugly face as hard as she could.

"You will kneel before me! Do you hear? KNEEL!"

A whip of thunder cracked through the bog and brought the horned woman to her knees, screaming, crying. Laurelle darted for the underbrush, ignoring the stabbing pain in her leg. Run. Run! RUN! Run for her tiny, little life.



Something poked him in his chest. He was bruised and broken. Everything was dark. Everything hurt. He gasped for air. The air was thin. He gasped again. A burning pain shot through him. Where was the light? He tried to open his eyes. Nothing happened. Everything stayed dark. He tried again. There was nothing to open.

Help.

The faint rattling he mustered scratched in his throat. He coughed. The stench of smoke and blood and vomit bit his nose. There was no one there to help. Sharp rocks pressed against his back. They hurt. But not nearly as bad as the pain in his head. In his chest.

Helpless.

Something poked into his side. There was the pain again. Another poke. What had happened? Was he dead? He remembered standing on the *Rainbow Serpent's* railing. Another poke. He had imagined death to be without pain. Another broken promise. Another poke. *Where was the light?* He lashed out at the thing poking him. A frightened squeak answered from the darkness. In his fist: a wooden stick. Squeaking wood. Marvellous. He broke the thing in two. No squeak. Only a pain in his chest. He threw the broken pieces away. Another squeak. Another pain in his chest. He gasped for air. This was not death.

This was hell.

What squeaks there in the darkness?

Silence. Then distant thunder. A raindrop on his forehead. Marvellous. Rain and squeaky sticks. Was this the gods' punishment for his betrayal? For his dissidence. For his impiety. He had tried. He really did. To be all what they demanded of him. Another drop. And then...then he had given up. Until the news of the black cat. The cat. Memories came back to him. An old woman. A shadow. A beast. Pain. And distant smell of fire. Then only darkness. The cat. He had to find it. *Why?* He was dead. He had no need for rabid cats. No need to get up. Just lay here. Await the rain.

He laid a hand on his chest. His fingers pressed into his side. A pleasant pain. Piety was no match for piteousness. Another of the Queen's words. Had she already uncovered his betrayal? Probably. She was an intelligent woman. And he knew she could not forgive him. Even if she wanted. He wondered if she did. He certainly deserved no forgiveness. Yet he feared she might carry it within her heart. Despite this, she would still deliver justice unto him. What admirable strength. And he did not even manage to claim the cat for himself. Her anger would strike him swift and hard. Her disappointment even swifter and harder. He managed to raise himself from the ground. Merciful justice seemed a much better death than to be drowned in the rain. Everything still hurt. And everything was still black. But that was fine. Justice was just as blind and painful.

His legs hurt not quite as much as the rest. He rolled on his knees. And lifted his head to the sky. A raindrop landed in the hole where his eyes had once been. It was a weird feeling. When he finally stood on his own two feet again, the world was still black. He extended his hands outwards. Trying to feel what was around him. *Nothing.* There was no reason. No meaning. *Lay back down. Go back to sleep. Why even try?* He took a small step. A aching tremor in his chest. He took another painful step. And felt vindicated. *There was a reason.* His next painful step slipped on loose gravel. His chest almost burst when he hit the ground. All air escaped his lungs.

Give up. Stay down. The only thing more painful than lying down was getting up again. So he got up again. It was just. It was fair. It was what he deserved. He took another step.

"Don't leave me here."

There was the squeak again. Farther away this time. He turned his head. Searching for something that might squeak. No matter how hard he tried. There was still no light. No sight. No path. No source of the squeaking. He turned back around. His feet could barely carry himself. He needed no further baggage.

"Please."

His next step hurt even more than the last. He took another one. Slowly. Very Slowly. He could not be far from the harbour. Not far from the *Rainbow Serpent*. He would deliver himself onto the Queen. To face her justice. He would bring his plan to a close. The plan he had finally found the conviction for that day. Before the black cat had interfered with his determination. Before he had held onto false hope. Again. He would go to face his Queen. And suffer every step. Alone. He took another painful step.

"Help."

The squeak echoed in his head. There was no sugar left. No sugar left to give. *Didn't you listen?* The echo in his hurting head. He turned around.

Squeak in the darkness, show yourself! There is nought left of sugar. I have nothing left to give but salt.

Silence. Again. Not so distant thunder.

"Please. Help me."

He tried locating the Squeak in the void. Only the echo in his head. He took a step into the void. Another one. Gravel shifted under his boot. He kept his balance. Another one. But his foot found no ground. He tripped into the darkness. The fall was even harder than the first one. His lungs were empty. His chest was screaming. He lied there. Wincing.

"There...there is...don't walk into the holes. There is another one right there. Follow...my voice. Please. I cannot move. My leg is broken. Help me."

He got up again. Not for himself. His chest throbbed in agony. Echoes in his head. He followed the Squeak. The ground fell off to his side. He kept his balance. His arms extended. He could barely feel where he was going. Finally, the Squeak was right before him. Right beneath him. His hands searched for the Squeak in the darkness. They found a skinny neck. The Squeak went silent. Memories of a room. A black cat in the woodwork. He could not carry the Squeak by the neck. He could not carry it at all. He could not carry himself. He dropped to his knees.

Squeak, I am broken, you must climb on my back with might of your own.

The Squeak hesitated. Raindrops fell on his neck.

"Please. Don't hurt me."

I won't. I promise. There is no need for more pain.

Skinny hands grabbed for his shoulders. He felt a painful tremor as the Squeak lifted itself from the ground. Its wispy arms wrapped around his neck. Thunder grew closer as the raindrops multiplied. He stemmed one foot into the ground. His chest pulsed as her weight pressed against his ribs. He pressed on. When he finally stood somewhat upright again, darkness was still around him.

Where do we go?

"I see...I see a grove. Follow...follow my voice. I might find shelter there. Be careful. *Please.* Heed my broken leg."

He pressed onwards. Past the sinkholes. Over gravel. Through the rain. He felt the Squeak's little heart pounding against his chest. It was afraid. He was not afraid. He was not sure what he was. Barely alive. Not dead. The steps did not hurt as much this time. He almost tripped once. But he kept his balance. The Squeak had squeaked. But he did not fall. The raindrops dwindled in numbers when the sound of them on foliage grew prominent. The scent of summer rain drove the stench of smoke and blood and vomit away. He dropped to his knees. Carefully. His chest nearly burst.

"Thank you."

The words echoed in his head.



...noch nicht fertig



In the distance, through the mist, the sea glistened in the storm. Irregular flashes of lightning reflected on its wavering surface. Thick raindrops fell from even thicker clouds; she was drenched and freezing in her place under the trees on the mountain. Irony, she would be so wet and yet so far from the waters, far from the harbour, far from the ships, but at least she was safe—somewhat. The Alchemist laid a few feet away from her on the ground. If only he were commanding over enough decency to hide his mutilated face, but it lay there in the open, exposed to the heavens. The sight still sent shivers down her spine. Though their severity paled next to the terrors the image of his unscathed face evoked in her mind. The bruising on her neck still hurt. At the very least her leg only throbbed and pulsed—barring the occasional stabbing ache—at least as long as she did not move it. Stranded. Alone. With this...monster of a man. And the worst part was she needed his help, if she didn't want to starve here under her tree. She had not yet made up her mind, if she didn't prefer starving after all. Even though he had already carried her a few yards, she neither trusted his ability nor his willingness to continue to do so any further. He might change his mind any second and simply throw her down the mountain, if she made a wrong sound. *Break her other leg.* How many feet was she above sea level? Too many, no doubt, especially too many to descend on broken limbs. She looked at the man again.

"Would...would you mind...covering your face?"

The ragged man answered only with a hoarse grunt.

"It's...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you...thanks. *Don't hurt me.*"

"The Squeak already says the thank."

"It's just...I—"

"The Squeak is afraid. Is that it?"

With a pain-stricken face, he lifted his head from the rocky ground. His grimace stared past her; one eye only a black hole of nothing, the other a tattered mess of bloody skin. Somewhere in there, one might even find the sorry remnants of a former eyeball. Sickening rumbles seized her stomach and terrifying memories seized her mind.

"The Squeak is afraid of my face. How bad is the sight?"

"It's...it is...tolerable."

"*Tsk.* Lying not what the Squeak does best."

He groaned as he placed his head back on the stony ground to continue his dead stare towards the heavens. Did he even remember her? The old woman in the *Old Man*? If he did, would he not have strangled her already and asked for her cat? The *bloody* cat. Look what mess it had made.

"How far the way to the harbour is? I need to return to my ship."

"The...the harbour?"

"Yes. The harbour. My face must hold the terrors of the burning worlds. When the Squeak can only squeak and stutter."

"I...I just fear you might carry it...in your heart to...to hurt me...I'm sorry. Please don't take this the wrong way. I'm not very good with words. Well, people really. I...I am just adding insults to injuries. I don't mean you any ill. The harbour...it might be off quite a bit—"

"*Might?* Where is this place? Are we not near?"

"I...I don't know. Somewhere in the mountains. Though the sea...it's still down there. I can see it. We might not be too far off. But..."

"Mountains? *Mountains?* Where do *mountains* come from to press against my hurting bones? Carry the wind me here to rot and die?"

"No...Yes. Well...not really. It's...it's actually quite fascinating. It involves a spell—a bottled spirit to be precise—which...or who carried us—you—I mean carried you away on the wind."

"What care a spirit for me? Why carry me on the wind? Is it a spirit of the gods?"

"No...no it is an ancient spell but no divine magic. The spirit is old and vengeful and therefore...therefore one must pay him in...in incantations and...time."

"*Time?*"

"Yes...it...it carries you someplace else and takes as much time...as much time from your life as it sees fair for its services from you, so...so you arrive a few days...thereafter...however much time it took. It's archaic and clunky but also so incredibly interst—no, it's...it's archaic."

"I cast no spell. Yet am I here."

"Some...someone else must have..."

"Someone cast spell of the wind on me. To spite me. And now I linger in place I wish not to reside. And I paid with...*time* for all the trouble?"

"Yes...*someone*..."

"Marvellous."

"That...that's a nice word. I didn't expect you to...Where did you learn—"

With a strained grunt, he struggled into an upright position. Her words wilted in her throat. He stood and screamed to the heavens. His mutilated grimace stalked on shaky legs towards her. What was he doing? Someone. *Someone*. How could she be so stupid? He most likely knew she had released the spirit, that she was to blame for this whole situation. No! *He* was to blame. *He* was the one who had invaded her room. *He* was vile and disgusting. *He* cared nought for justice, not her, and yet she was exposed to his sickened rage. She pressed her back against the tree, her leg responded with agonizing screams of protest. *Please. Don't*. When he sank to his knees next to her, she could still smell sharp spices on his breath. His arms

searched for her, undirected and calloused. They found her shoulder, she suppressed a terrified squeak.

"Squeak, listen to me. I carry harm within my heart. You speak truth. But you have no need of the fear. You are not the one its eye rest on. You say your leg is broken. There must be reason the gods sent me. Cursed with with a spell of the wind. I must repent before I perish. I need to reach the harbour. I need eyes. You have need of legs. I might carry you. If the stars align. Maybe more than half the way. This journey is the last I take. So follow only if you do not fear death. Or desolation. Or death all desolate. I might not make...the way...Where your heart desire to be?"

She didn't know what to respond, so the first thing on her mind crossed her lips.

"I...I always wanted to sail the seas on...on a boat. It's...it's a stupid..."

"Boat. Marvellous. Then we have similar goal. Take the way down the mountain. And if we find the *someone* who released the bottled spirit of the wind on me. We help him take the way down the mountain the fast way."

His ugly holes almost looked at her.

"Now I am tired of using the words. I need the embrace of the silence. We go when rain did pass."

"Why...would I not fear...who...who does not fear death?"

The holes stared right through her. So ugly. So ugly and so sad.



They had him beaten, shaven, washed, and tied up. Unfortunately not in that order. The trail of dried blood on his temple itched like hell but his hands were tied behind his back; at the other end of the world. And yet it cost him all his acting talent to stifle a shit-eating grin. The Queen surely wouldn't tolerate such *indeencies*. She would have had his head—or his tongue, or whatever body part she was fond of fetishising—for his utter lack of respect and humility in the face of her presence—and the presence of her face. What a joke.

The Queen's personal chambers were decorated fitting for such a pretentious personality; ornate carpets adorned the walls and floors, busts of the finest wood and rare marble guarded even rarer treasures stowed and locked away in decorated chests. The ceiling was one enormous painting: a glamorous ship caught between a raging whirlpool and a frothing multiheaded beast, its harpoon buried in some sort of sea creature with the head of an old man. *Quaint*.

He leaned back in his cushioned chair. Much nicer than the cage below deck, no doubt, but not much more comfortable. At least as long as he was still tied and bound. The rope they had used this time was at least not as dirty and rotten, but it cut into his skin just as deep. The queen meanwhile was seated on the other end of the room, a giant table stacked with the finest treats and delicacies—placed beyond the reach of even his mightiest

efforts. Roast meat, figs, dates, grapes, fruits he had never even seen, there was honeyed chicken, grilled fish as big as his famished thighs, and bottles full of sweet sweet wine. The water rising in his mouth might have sunk the ship, had he not kept it shut.

"That is quite an extravagant portion for a lady of your stature. I admire your bravery on display—truly. The pounds on the hip are not an enemy one faces so easily with the sword. What would your crew think of—"

"You are to speak when you are spoken to, prisoner, and keep your tongue in rein when not. You are among the living as I have granted you life. Don't flatter yourself. I don't intend you to leave these quarters still with it in your possession. Consider this your last meal before I put you out to sea—if you behave and answer my questions that is."

"*Ouch*. I hope your stomach can extend to a size comparable to the extent of your vocabulary, or I fear you might explode by sunrise. Which—again—might not please your crew."

She met his eyes with startling intensity but continued chewing her small, yet lavish bite. When she was finally done, she delicately placed the silverware on the table next to her plate and wiped her mouth with a soft, white kerchief, naturally embroidered with needless splendour.

"I am afraid I cannot share the admiration you uphold for yourself. But then again, you seem to spare to respect for me, so I suppose it is a feeling of mutual nature. Even though my heart aches at the thought of having to inform you of the tragic reality: your whole act suits you rather ill. Now, listen closely, for the question boggling my mind is quite rudimentary in nature, you should have no troubles keeping up and keeping your answers concise and to the point—which might run contrary to the boorish attitude you thought wise to employ thus far. If you require a demonstration of the nature of a point again, few matters would fill my heart with such joy or delight."

She placed a hand on the engraved hilt of the blade on her side and smiled a polite yet cruel smile from ear to ear. He could still feel the

throbbing on his chest, where her blade had cut him after his audacious proposal for dinner. *Stupid bitch*. If she wanted to skewer him, she had to dine him first. He retorted with his own, cocky smile.

"So I advise you to listen carefully now, prisoner: what is this game you are playing? You might think yourself some great hero with your petty escape, yet even beyond any benefit of the doubt, you are still a prisoner, a captive—*my* prisoner. And what you elect to pursue, with your limited freedom, is chewing away at the dwindling rope still holding your neck above the water. Are you so weary of life and its wonders that you would throw it all away for a few words of vitriol to get a rise of a superior of yours, or are you simply daft and stupid?"

She rose from her throne of oak and velvet and gracefully stalked around the overburdened table to present herself in all her beauty and glory before him. He could make out just about everything beneath the thin silk in the soft candlelight; her slender form, how it curved and breathed—calm and composed, so soft and positively out of reach. He had been locked up for so long in his little cage under deck...*if only he could*—no, he must not fall under her spell. *Resist!* It would be the end of him, he had to rise above his earthly desires, at least for the little time his performance still required to conclude. Boiling blood rushed through his body and pierced every bruised and tired limb. Damned be the gods, this turned out be much harder than he had anticipated. He leaned forward, as far as he could reach. *Speak now or just hand in your tongue on a silver plater yourself!*

"I fear for your life, my Queen."

"See here, see here, he is not only a charlatan, a prisoner and a loudmouth, but one posing as a physician, is that what I am supposed to believe? Or is my heart still too charitable and kind, perverting what my ears perceived, for it was but a base threat against my life?"

With a shrill scrape, she drew the slender blade at her side. The revealed edge glinted in the candlelight; once more two slender shadows impended over his tied up form. But even through her dazzling confidence, he could

make out cautious hesitation, after all, he had already escaped certain imprisonment once before.

"My Queen, you may not have much knowledge of the games I play, but I know of the game you play. One would need to sail a million miles to find a man who could resist your beauty, your grace, your promise, who would not fall for you, and yet here you are, untouchable, unattainable, alone, married to the sea. If there is a thing that breathes, it seeks your gaze upon its humble flesh, it seeks the gift of your love. Yet if you showed any of your followers more attention than any of the others—well, jealousy makes people to all sorts of wicked things...even to their Queen. So you divide your love among them equally—none receives any at all. After all, you have to remain unattainable. No other woman could not strut half-naked across a ship of drunken pirates and call herself *Queen* and wish to remain untouched. You play a cruel game, I can admire that, but it is a dangerous game indeed. And I fear for your life. The years will not be kind to you, the mounts of food which you are served, well—"

"Enough!"

She stared him right in the eye, before she took a sudden step forward. A sweet cloud of enthralling perfume enveloped him. Vanilla. And lavender...or some other expensive shit. She stood so close above him. So close, he could see tiny, glistening droplets of sweat through the translucent fabric on her perfect skin. *So close*. The blood rushed even faster, his mind clawing to keep control. Her face hovered over his, so close, her silken hair fell into his face and tickled his cheeks.

"You are quite the talker. Even after I've explicitly requested an answer concise and to the point."

"There...there are matters complex enough in nature their...their description seldom emerge concise when...sharpened to a point."

"Well, well, well. Finally I managed to witness you stumble in this little dance of ours. I had feared I might never see you falter. I will cherish this memory until the last of my days. If the stars align, I might even remember

having at least a little fun while it lasted. Save yourself your sorry solace; it might yet keep you afloat after you've been thrown overboard. Perhaps even for days."

A crooked smile manifested on her luscious lips, though her face hardened again as quickly as the small glimpse of twisted humanity had appeared on its chiselled features.

"So, for the sake of argument, let's suppose someone—anyone really—might play such a game as outlined by this little description of yours. What would you propose? Do you truly have it in your heart to display such arrogance to assume a witless boy such as you could grasp—not to mention understand—even a slight of this...this *game*? You talk big words but deep down you have not a clue of what you speak. Is your heart so arrogant, you could think I would spare you simply for pretending to be reading me like some open book? I have yet to meet the poet impressed with children for reading his work when *she* was the one who *willed it into existence*. I possess ears, am I supposed to be impressed with your illusions of empathy? Look...look at yourself. Oh, just look at yourself. You do, you really think you understand. You really think you know me...You...Even if you understood but a spark of what I endure, what I created, what I sacrifice...*How dare you*? You invite yourself into my quarters for...for what? What game do play, prisoner? Answer my question! What do you want from me?"

"How about a date?"

Her face froze to an expressionless facade. For short moment, she remained there, frozen in place. Within the next blink, the edge of the sharpened blade rested against his throat. A final, fatal verdict on her lips, for no longer than the blink of an eye. Even against the rushing tide of boiling blood in his head, he managed a few extra words.

"A date. Or two. Maybe a fig. Some chicken. I am starving."

Dead thunder cracked over the ship. She held the slender in her hand under his chin. The cold steel scraped over his scrubby throat, before the

point travelled down his chest. It tore through his tattered rags, dancing around the ropes cutting into his flesh, leaving a tingling trail on his skin. The edge made its way further downwards, across his famished belly, further down still. She raised an eyebrow as she continued to stare him into the eye. Her eyes cold and blue like frozen lakes. Her silken hair caressed his stubbly cheeks as she condescended her face even lower. *So much closer.* The blade came to a rest. He was sweating, pulsing, trembling, oh so so afraid, oh so so aroused. With a swift motion, she drove the blade forwards, he closed his eyes in painful anticipation, as the tightness across his chest released and heavy ropes fell cut to the ground.

"I admire the *balls* on you...Fine. Then we have a deal. A date...for your servitude."

A storm of relief escaped his tensed up lungs and blew her soft, silken hair from his cheeks.

"Would...would you mind cutting these manacles as well? It...it'd be awfully awkward if—"

"Indeed it would. And yes, I would mind I'm afraid. *Eat.* It is a gross offence to refuse a Queen's invitation to dinner. And please, promise you mean to struggle with utmost awkwardness—I intend to watch."

Despite her smug grin, his stomach rumbled louder than the thunder outside. Despite the humiliation, despite the indignity, he ate as much and fast as he could manage, shovelling food with his bare hand into his squalid face, spilling sauce and wine and the lust for life and all its wonders over himself. When he was finally finished he leaned back in the cushioned chair and let his eyes wander over the vast painting adorning the ceiling. *He did it. He survived. He remained yet unskewered.*

Eventually, she broke the silence.

"Marvellous, isn't it?"

"*Mmh...* I suppose you hope me to follow you as your inferior now?"

"*Now?* Was there ever a time you were anything but my inferior? You are now and you have been, ever since you've first stepped foot on my ship—

as a prisoner. And worry not—you remain my prisoner still. A simple look in the mirror would suffice to answer all your piteous questions. It must be dreadful; not indulging in the pleasures of superiority for once."

"I could be if you want me to. Just call me *Sir* and—"

"And perhaps I have not yet discarded the idea of simply cutting out your tongue and to feed you to the creatures of the sea. Legends tell of men who survived for days in the waters, whilst being eaten alive, of course. The longer I revel in this thought, the firmer it entwines my heart. I really hope, for your own sake, you know how to behave, or I foresee a dark future for you on the bottom of the Scyllic Sea."

"I'd be worried, had you not already shown your unwillingness to entirely follow through on your gruesome and yet imaginative threats—at least against me. Oh, I like that ferocious look of yours, you should keep it, it suits you. Come one, we both know I am way more useful to you alive than dead. And oh so much more entertaining. In more way than you might think...the night is young, you are already half undressed, I feel at least a little tipsy, who knows what—"

"Are you daft? This is no way for someone in your position to conduct himself in front of your Queen! Our little play has concluded, I've won, you've lost, know your pla—"

He abruptly rose from his seat, staggering—his dinner swashing in his overstuffed belly. Her pristine eyes followed him, studying him carefully, as he swaggered around the table towards the end she was seated on. She rose to meet him eye to eye, as he approached, a hand on the hilt of the sword at her side.

"*I know.*"

His voice was but a faint whisper.

"I imagine no one has ever regarded you as anything but their superior, anything but their *Queen*. I wonder if anyone but you survived your childhood; the other children, your mother, your father. Or if you've impaled their heads on spikes along the way and left them there to rot. Or

their tongues. I'm not going to judge your personal style. Ah yes, always so quick to draw your sword...but I have to admit: you look quite beautiful when you feel threatened. So...*perky*. Has anyone ever told you that? Mmh, most likely not, or you would have had their tongues and probably their heads, to put them next to ol' mum and dad. It must be terrifying to not stand amongst someone who is not your inferior. What agony it must be, to sail a million miles, always at the top—always *alone*—when everyone else is among their equals."

He lifted his bound hands to stroke her flawless cheek. She flinched from his fingers, only a hair, not enough to deny his touch. Before he managed to reach her chin, she grabbed him by the wrist to thwart any and all further attempts of intimacy. Their eyes locked while the storm raged outside the cabin windows, studying, scheming, longing. *A weapon to rival her beauty indeed*. Before she could muster a clever response, he turned on his heel and strode away towards the cabin door.

"Where...where are you going?"

"Back into my cage, of course! After all, I am your inferior—your prisoner. And besides, I do not intend to be knifed in my sleep by jealous pirates for sharing the bed with their Queen. Have a good night!"

He slammed the door behind him. Cold summer rain pelted on his face. With a deep exhale, he exorcised the tension torturing him from within. *Pure, ecstatic relief*. He did not look forward to returning to the small cage they called his prison—oh, how he wished he could return to her chambers—but the cage was the only place where he was safe now on this godforsaken ship; the only place she had control over him. He took another deep breath. The image of this singular Queen would haunt him in his dreams tonight—oh, for so many nights—but if went back, there was no coming back alive. *Alive*. For now. But the events he had just set in motion could only entail catastrophe. Ill fortune would strike down one of them, so much was certain. And he had no intention to be the one stricken down.

No god can save this Queen.



...noch nicht fertig