STORMCASTER

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CINDA
WILLIAMS
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STORMCASTER

A
SHATTERED REALMS
NOVEL

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For Jess—thank you for wading into this family, hand in hand,
eyes wide open. We love you.

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A MEETING AT SEA

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Evan of Tarvos stood at the stern rail, his eyes fixed on the ship that had been following them for the better part of a day. The sleek three-master stayed just at the horizon, neither approaching nor losing ground. Strange. Most ships fled in a hurry when they spotted Captain Latham Strangward's stormlord standard.

People said that all of the Strangwards were true stormcasters—weather mages—though Evan had never seen his captain conjure up so much as a shower. People said a lot of things, so maybe it was just a tale. Or, maybe, as he got older, Strangward's magery was fading.

Evan should have felt lucky to be crewing for a pirate whose reputation kept trouble away. But trouble looked a

lot like a chance to make his name, since he'd never had one of his own. *Cloud Spirit*'s hold was already overflowing with stolen goods, but he was still salivating for a fight.

Evan had been sailing before the mast for three years, since he was a ten-year, by his best guess. This year, for the first time, he'd been given a share of the takings. Captain Strangward had watched with a faint smile as Evan pawed through the long strands of Sand Harbor pearls and Tamric gold glitterbits, holding them up so they caught the light, sliding rings onto his narrow fingers, slipping the gold cuffs onto his wrists. Evan favored wearables and coin—portable wealth. He had no use for silver goblets or candlesticks.

When he'd made his choices, he tucked them under his roughspun shirt and jammed them into his breeches pockets. He tried not to think of all the books he could buy with his portion.

You can't spend it all, he thought. You've got to save enough to buy a piece of a venture. And go on from there. Ships were the key to a future in which he could buy all the books he wanted.

"You might want me to hold your share for you," the captain said, frowning, as if now reluctant to let it go. "There's plenty in this crew would be happy to win that lot from you at cards or nicks and bones before we get to port. Or club you over the head and take it outright."

Evan pressed one hand against his shirt, protecting his

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stake. "Tully says that a shiplord always wears his wealth. That way, anyone who means to take it has to fight you for it."

"Tully is a man who's always looking for a fight," Strangward said. "A man who's looking for a fight will usually find one."

Strangward was a peace-loving sort. For a pirate.

"*Ev.* Look alive."

Startled out of his reverie, Evan turned, and Brody Baines slapped the spyglass into his hand. "Captain says to lay aloft again and have another look at the ship that's been eating our wake."

"They've kept their distance so far," Evan said, rolling his eyes. "Besides, we're almost home." He nodded shoreward, where the high cliffs of Tarvos smudged the horizon.

Brody was two years older than Evan and more than a foot taller, with broad shoulders, muscled arms, and a growing collection of tattoos. Evan envied Brody's shoulders, his muscles, and his burnished skin, the color of coppers that had passed through many hands. Evan felt pale as mare's milk by comparison.

Maybe it wasn't exactly envy. More and more, Brody stirred feelings in Evan that were hard to ignore on a small ship during long days at sea. Captain Strangward frowned on shipboard romances because they stirred up trouble. That was not to say that they didn't happen—but if the

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captain got wise to it, the least valuable party would be put ashore. No doubt that would be Evan, the skinny-shanked harbor front foundling.

Which would be a waste, since Brody had made it clear that Evan's feelings were not reciprocated. *Reciprocated.* Evan had come across that word in a book, and now worked it into every conversation. That and *proclivities.*

"*Ev!*" Brody said, poking him. "You ain't paid to daydream. Captain thinks it's the *Siren*, by the way she's rigged. Either that or the wetland navy's got itself a better shipbuilder."

"The *Siren*?" Evan's heartbeat accelerated. He had heard stories about the flagship of the empress of the isles. It was a legend along the Desert Coast, though nobody had seen it for years. But. "What would the empress be doing this far south?"

"That's what the captain wants to know," Brody said, winking at him. Brody knew Evan itched for action. "Now step lively."

Captain Strangward had an agreement with Iona, the Nazari empress of the isles. She sailed out of the Northern Islands and raided wetland traffic from Middlesea and northward, while the stormlord sailed from Tarvos and hunted from Baston Bay and southward. Deepwater Court was a free port, open to all.

Agreements between pirates never lasted very long, and, truth be told, Strangward hadn't always followed theirs to

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the letter. Especially since Iona was rarely seen these days anywhere along the Desert Coast.

Stuffing the glass into the waist of his breeches, Evan trotted forward to the mizzen and began to climb, his bare feet finding the ratlines as they had a hundred times before. Below, on the quarterdeck, he saw Captain Strangward conferring with Abhayi, the helmsman.

Evan climbed past the topgallant to the royal, straddled the empty yard, put the glass to his eye, and looked astern.

The other ship was a pretty thing, her lines clean and fine as those of their own *Cloud Spirit*. As he watched, he could see her crew scrambling over the decking, working the halyards, shaking out more sail. The mains'ls luffed at first, then swallowed the wind, and she surged forward, splitting the swells like a sword through silk. It *could* be the *Siren*, Evan thought. There weren't many other ships on the Indio that could match their speed. If she kept to her course, she'd be coming up on them before long.

"Still no colors, Captain," Evan called down. "But whoever she is, we'll know soon enough. She's making her move now."

Strangward planted his hands on his hips and scowled. It was not a good day for a hostile meet-up. They'd taken a fat merchant schooner off Baston Bay. Because of that, and their other takings in the wetlands, the *Spirit* sat low in the water—so low that in heavy seas her gunwales were all but awash. Too tight a turn might cause them to founder.

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They were thinly crewed as well. The quarrelsome quartermaster, Tully Samara, had chosen out some of their best sailors to take their prize around the Claw to Hidden Bay. There he'd find a willing buyer, no questions asked, and add hard money to the split for the crew. Evan fingered the movables around his neck, wishing he had the coin to get in on the bidding.

One day, he thought, I'll have my own ship, and I'll be giving the orders. He kept his lofty perch, high above the deck, the wind whipping his hair around his face. As he watched the other ship come on, he debated what his orders would be.

"Come about," the captain called to Abhayi. He looked up, searching until he found Evan still clinging to the rigging. "Boy, go down and help Samuel ready the twenty-four-pounders so we can give them a proper welcome if they go foolish on us."

Strangward always called him "boy," and this was beginning to get under Evan's skin. I'm not a boy, Evan thought. I'm nearly grown.

Besides, the gunnery deck wasn't his favorite. He preferred to be above decks. Though Evan was agile and quick, and fair with a curved Carthian blade, Strangward never allowed him to join the boarding parties that followed their grappling hooks onto the enemy decks and fought hand to hand if the crew declined new management.

"If a gale came up, you'd blow away," the captain always

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said. "Wait till you muscle up."

Evan was strong and wiry from climbing in the rigging, furling sail and hauling lines and scrubbing all the things on a ship that seemed to need scrubbing. Still, he'd not got his full growth yet, and he had a slender build. Given his years of starving on the streets of Endru, he worried that he would never "muscle up." Why couldn't he at least stay on deck with Brody and the others and get an up-close taste of the fighting? How could he improve if he didn't get to practice?

If he couldn't get in on the hand-to-hand, his second choice was to serve as lookout in a pursuit, calling out to the helmsman from a perch high in the rigging. That always provided an excellent view of the goings-on, even if it made him a target.

For sure, he'd rather play powder monkey than swab decks or repair sails or polish the brightwork. But it was hot work in the thick air belowdecks, where they had to blindly follow orders without really knowing what was going on. His ears rang for days after a watch on the gunnery deck. Plus there was always the danger of a misfire that would leave him a smear of blood and powder on the wall.

Still, orders were orders. Evan scrambled down the shrouds, dropping the last ten feet to the deck. He swung down the ladder to the gunnery deck, where the master gunner Samuel and his crew were already hard at work

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preparing the guns. Evan joined in, running sacks of powder and wad to each of the cannon. He'd had enough practice that he could do it in his sleep. First the powder, then the wad, then the cannonballs. Then it was down to the magazine, back to the gunnery deck, his thighs complaining about the extra weight of powder and shot.

There were eight twenty-four-pounders. The gunners could prep all eight, but once they touched the match to the lot, it would take time to reload, especially with the guns hot from firing. Speaking of heat, the back of his neck burned as if a bit of match might have fallen in somehow. Evan slid his hand under his collar, groping for the cause. When his hand touched metal, he ripped it away and sucked at his fingers, swearing. It was no wonder his neck was burning. The medallion embedded in the back of his neck was blazing hot. Cautiously, he brushed his fingers over it again.

Captain Strangward called it a "magemark," and it had almost cost Evan this job. "I'll take you on," the pirate had said, after plucking him off the streets in Endru, "but you need to keep that thing hidden. Sailors are a superstitious lot, and I don't want them getting worked up about it. The next thing you know, someone will be pushing you overboard or trying to slice it off you."

Evan hadn't made a fuss. He knew he was damned lucky to be chosen to crew with a master like Strangward, and keeping secrets was a small price to pay.

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People said that magemarks were a sign of royal blood and magical power. If so, Evan was still waiting for that promise to be kept. Right now, his biggest worry was that he might start shedding sparks and set the powder off.

"I'm going topside for a minute," he said to Samuel, the gunner's mate, and skinned up the ladder before he could say no.

Cloud Spirit had come about to windward and shortened sail in order to hold her position. Captain Strangward stood on the quarterdeck, his glass trained on the challenger, which by now had come within shouting distance. Even without the glass, Evan could make out the figurehead now—a nude woman with long, webbed fingers, erupting out of a rock. Underneath was emblazoned: *The Siren*.

Evan turned away before he could be spotted, all but running into Brody.

"Aren't you supposed to be below?" Brody said, clapping his big hand on Evan's shoulder and spinning him back toward the stairs.

"Latham Strangward!" a voice called, clear and cold as the snowmelt that ran down off the Dragonback Mountains in spring. "Are you really going to turn your guns on me?"

Evan and Brody swung around in unison, as if they were chained at the hip.

A woman—or maybe a girl—stood in the bow of the

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other ship, like a second figurehead in loose breeches and a white linen shirt, a fine gold belt at her waist. She glowed with a brilliant blue-white light that burned so brightly that it hurt Evan's eyes. Still, he couldn't tear his gaze away.

"She's beautiful," Brody whispered, his voice thick with longing. He was gazing at the young captain in a way that he'd never looked at Evan.

Her hair was silver—not the dull color that comes with age, but as bright as a merchant's tea service. It whipped around her head like a halo of snakes. Two locks—two streaks of bright color—had been braided and beaded. Red and blue. Her eyes were a pale purple—the color of sea thistle.

She couldn't be much older than Evan, and she was already a ship's master. She was also a mage, from the shine on her. People claimed you couldn't throw a rock in the north without hitting a mage, but they were rarely seen this far south. Her crew glowed, too, but in a blue-purple color, like a bruise. They lined the decks, blades in hand, as if they'd come looking for a fight. Automatically, he counted. She had double their numbers.

A ship crewed by mages—that had to be bad news.

Apparently, Captain Strangward agreed. He had a good battle face, but right now he looked like he'd opened a hatch and found death waiting below. Instead of answering back, he turned and scanned the open deck, as if looking for someone. Evan slid behind the mizzenmast to avoid

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being spotted and dismissed. Finally, Strangward turned back to face the girl who'd called to him.

"Celly!" Strangward said. "Bloody hell, girl—is it really you? What's it been—five years?"

"Five very long years," she said, planting her hands on her hips. "Longer for me than for you, I'll wager."

"Let me come around, so we can talk," Strangward said. Evan knew he was buying time. "Abhayi, I'll take the wheel for the moment. You ready the crew."

With Strangward at the helm, Abhayi walked the deck, swinging his big head from side to side, speaking to one crew member, then another, descending the ladder to the gunnery deck.

Brody was still staring at the other ship, looking a little more wary, a little less starstruck. But only a little.

"Who is she?" Evan whispered.

"Celestine Nazari. Firstborn daughter of the empress Iona."

"I didn't know she had a daughter."

Brody snorted. "Why would you know?"

He had a point.

"Celly was on her way to becoming the most powerful pirate mage on the Desert Coast, but she disappeared five years ago—when she was thirteen."

So she was the age I am now when she disappeared, Evan thought. He did the figures in his head. "So she's eighteen now?"

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Brody shrugged. "She must be."

"Then she's too old for you," Evan said, sliding a look at Brody.

"Maybe," Brody said, pushing back his shoulders and drawing himself up, but not quite pulling off the display of confidence. "And maybe not."

Evan could understand Brody's fascination. He was drawn to the girl, too, though for different reasons. It was as if, when he looked at her, he saw some version of himself reflected back.

The two ships had been maneuvering so that the captains could converse from a safe distance. The closer the *Siren* came, the more painful the burning on the back of Evan's neck. Yet curiosity kept him on deck.

"Look at that silver hair," Brody said, with a shiver. "She must be a blood mage like Iona."

"Blood mage?" Evan blinked up at Brody. "What do you mean?"

"They make people drink their blood, and turn them into slaves."

"Well, I wouldn't drink it," Evan said.

"Yes, you would. She'd make you. See those streaks in her hair?" Brody pointed. "Magelocks. All of the Nazari have them. Each one represents a kind of magic. The more, the better. In the old days, the Nazari had a hundred colors in their hair."

Evan reached up and fingered his own hair, finding the

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smooth, metallic strands by touch. They were silver and blue, barely visible against his white-blond hair. Though he scrubbed at his hair to mingle them in with the rest, they always seemed to slide free.

I'm magemarked in more ways than one, Evan thought, puffing out his chest. In a story, that would mean that he was destined for greatness.

"Captain Strangward knows her?" Evan said.

"He's her uncle, sort of," Brody said. He loved being in the know. "The empress Iona goes through husbands like a dose of salts through a sailor. Harol Strangward was the last of five—the only one that stuck. Harol and Iona agreed to split the Desert Coast between them. Now Harol's dead, and our captain took over."

"What about the purplish people?" Evan asked, pointing at the crew on the *Siren*'s decks. "Are they mages, too?"

Brody looked at him like he was sun-touched. "What purplish people?"

"The ones that—"

"Shhh," Brody said. "I want to hear this."

"And now, here you are, a woman grown," the captain was saying. "If I'd known it was you, I'd have tapped my best barrel and welcomed you properly." The stiffness in the captain's posture, and the tension in his face and shoulders, told a different story.

Celly wasn't fooled. "If you'd known it was me," she said, "you would have found a hole to hide in."

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Strangward chose not to respond to that. Instead, he shaded his eyes and scanned the *Siren*'s decks. "Isn't Iona with you?"

"My mother is dead."

This news seemed to knock Captain Strangward back on his heels. Again, he took a quick look over his shoulder, scanning the deck; then he turned back to Celly. "I am so sorry to hear that. When did this happen?"

"A year ago."

Strangward went ashen under his sun weathering. "I wish I'd known. I would have liked to pay my respects and—"

"Telling you was the last thing on my mind," Celestine snapped, "though I'm sure you'd have liked more warning. After Mother died, I found the strength to break out of the prison you built for us, only to find that your gutter-swiving stormcaster brother had surrounded the Sisters with a wall of storms."

Evan knew she must mean the Weeping Sisters, three small islands, in the Northern Islands chain, that spewed steam and flame and hot-spring water the year round. He'd never gone there—nobody did, these days. They were always shrouded in cloud and battered by wind and wave.

"Celly, you can't assume that—"

"I can assume whatever the hell I want! I'm empress now. My mother was too weak to rule the coast, but I am

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not. Harol stole what belonged to me, and trapped my mother and me on the Sisters with his stormlord magic."

"Your mother wasn't—" Captain Strangward seemed to reconsider finishing that sentence. "It wasn't like that," he said.

"My mother loved me!" Celestine cried, blotting at her eyes with her gauntleted forearms. "But your thrice-damned brother turned her against me after Jak died."

"Your mother loved you," Strangward conceded. "I'll not deny that."

By now, Evan and Brody were getting fidgety, despite the drama going on before their eyes. They'd walked into the middle of it, after all, they didn't know any of the characters, and it seemed to have very little to do with them.

"Five years you've prowled the Indio at will," Celestine said, "naming yourself the lord of the ocean and building an empire at my expense. Now everything changes."

"The only way to make a name is to earn it," Strangward said.

"As I intend to do," she said. She leaned forward, her grip tightening on the rail. "Only a *fool* gets in my way," Celestine said. Reaching into her carry bag, she pulled something out and held it up.

It glittered in the sunlight—a small object dangling from a chain. Evan's heart spasmed, leaving him breathless. It matched the broken pendant he'd worn since a time before memory. He pressed his hand against his shirt,

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relieved to feel the jagged shape through the linen. More than anything, it resembled the broken innards of a clock, but it had always been his most precious possession. His only possession from a past shrouded in mystery.

Evan's skin prickled, and his magemark burned as he realized that he himself was tangled up in this sailor's knot of secrets. Maybe this girl was the key to untangling it.

Clearly Strangward recognized the pendant, too. "Where did you get that?" he said, as if he didn't really want to hear the answer.

"Claire gave it to me," Celestine said. She gave it a shake, setting it to swinging. "If I'm not mistaken, it's another piece of that medallion Jak used to wear."

Who were Claire and Jak? Missing pieces of the puzzle that had been his life so far? Hope kindled within Evan that he was not just a castaway orphan but a part of something powerful and grand. Someone with a history and a future.

Strangward closed his eyes, swallowed. "Claire," he whispered. "You found Claire."

"Get off your high horse, Uncle," Celestine said, her voice sending shivers up Evan's spine. "They're *mine*. They are a part of the Nazari line. They were created for a purpose, and it's time they served. Harol should have been straight with my mother from the beginning."

"How do you know he wasn't?" Strangward said. "They were in love, Celly."

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"Love? Is that what you call it?" Her jaw tightened. "I don't care how charming he was, she would not have traded away my legacy." Celestine rested her forearms on the ship's railing.

"Harol tried to save you, too," Strangward said.

"You call that salvation? It was more like hell, Uncle." Celestine brushed at her clothing. "I will never wash the scent of sulfur and smoke from my skin. No, it was my mother who saved me. She *loved* me."

She already said that, Evan thought, and Captain Strangward said it. Who is she trying to convince?

"If you meant to start a war with me, you should have destroyed them all when you had the chance," Celestine said. "Now. Where are the rest of them?"

"I have my faults, Celly," Strangward said softly, as if confessing in the temple, "but at least I don't make war on children."

That seemed to infuriate the young empress. "A war your brother forced on me! It didn't have to be that way! It has *never* been that way." Raising her hand, she pointed at the mainmast. As Evan watched, wide-eyed, flame jetted from her fingers and engulfed it. A fine white ash settled onto the deck, powdering Evan's hair and clothing. Bits of flaming wood dropped onto the quarterdeck, leaving scorched spots on the planking.

Captain Strangward stared up at the blazing mast as if stunned. All around them, the crew of *Cloud Spirit*

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muttered mingled oaths and prayers.

Celly laughed. "Behold Claire's other gift to me."

"Whatever you think I've done, I didn't," Strangward said, sounding tired more than anything else. "Whatever you think I know, you're wrong. I told Harol that he was playing with fire, but he wouldn't listen. He was madly in love with Iona, and she with him. Now. I've been at sea for weeks and I'm going home." He went to turn away from the rail.

"Let me save you a trip," Celestine said, her voice like a cutlass. "There's nothing left of Tarvos. I've burned out that nest of vermin and driven your crew of wharf rats into the sea."

Tarvos is gone? Evan's gut clenched as images swam through his head. There was the small room in Strangward's compound where Evan stayed while in port. It held nothing more than a rope bed and a trunk with his belongings, but it was his. It looked out onto the courtyard, so he could hear the splashing fountain from his bed. The deep-blue harbor surrounded by sand-colored cliffs. The weekend markets filled with fish and bright rugs and candies made with piñon. Plenty to eat, every day.

Tarvos had given him a name and a safe harbor when he'd needed one—and now it was gone.

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Strangward stared at Celestine for a long moment, then said, "You shouldn't have done that."

"*You* should have left well enough alone," the empress said. "Better men, and more powerful mages, have accepted the cards dealt to them with a lot more grace. You call yourself a stormlord, but your dead brother was the one with the talent." She straightened, resting her hands on the rail. "Surrender, Strangward, and I'll let your crew be. They can continue on with *Cloud Spirit*. I'll simply send over a new captain."

With that, someone emerged from the shadow of the wheelhouse and came up to stand next to the empress. Someone with a familiar swagger and stance. And, behind

him, the handful of *Cloud Spirit* crew who'd sailed off with him.

"Tully!" Evan and Brody said in unison, as surprise and dismay rumbled through the deck crew.

Celestine ran her fingers down Tully's arm. "I told Captain Samara he could have *Cloud Spirit* if he could arrange this meeting," she said. "He's done his part."

"Lay down your weapons," Tully called. "There's no need for bloodshed. Here's a chance to sign on with the new ruler of the Desert Coast."

Tully had always been ambitious, but this took ambition to a new level. Evan noticed that he didn't glow purple like the rest of the empress's fighters. Like their former shipmates now did.

Brody noticed, too. "So you sold us out for a ship, did you?" he shouted. "Maybe we don't want to be blood slaves."

The crew grumbled agreement. Not one of them laid down his weapon. Tully flushed with embarrassment and slid a look at Celestine. So much for showing off in front of your new boss, Evan thought.

Shaking her head as if disappointment was nothing new, the empress gestured to her crew. Grappling hooks arced through the air, trailing lines, and thudded onto the deck.

Despite the numbers, *Cloud Spirit*'s sailors went at it with a will, manning the rails to drive off the swarms of Celestine's fighters who were attempting to board. They

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swung their blades and cut the lines that came snaking between the two ships. Blood spattered the deck as they cut down the pirates who made it as far as the railing. Yet the purple-shrouded crew kept coming, even when seemingly mortally wounded, as if they'd lost their fear of dying.

Nobody was paying attention to Evan, so he pulled a watch cap down over his head, lifted a sword from a dead man, and joined in the fighting.

By the time the ship's bell sounded the half hour, there were only a handful of *Cloud Spirit*'s crew left. Strangward still stood exposed on the quarterdeck, chin up, a blade in each hand, cutting down any who came too close. Evan couldn't help wondering why the empress hadn't flamed him and put an end to the standoff.

Then it came to him. He's protecting the ship by standing in the line of fire. He knows that the empress wants to take him alive, that he has information she wants. That's another reason she hasn't fired on us. She's worried she'll kill him and the information will die with him.

But that protection didn't extend to everyone, and the empress seemed to be losing patience. Celestine lowered her arm so that she aimed directly at Brody. "I'm weary of this game," she said. "Now, surrender, or I'll incinerate what's left of your crew, one by one, starting with this handsome sailor."

Brody froze like a rabbit under the eye of a snake.

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"No!" Evan shouted, leaping forward so he stood next to Brody, even though his neck burned like fury. "Captain Strangward said to shove off. You'd better do it or your fancy ship'll be nothing but splinters on the beach." To his mortification, his voice cracked and trembled.

The empress crowed with laughter. "Who's this, now, Strangward? Your smallest bodyguard? Someone with a harder spine than you?"

With that, Evan drew his throwing knife and sent it flying. It was a good throw, and it would have hit *Siren*'s deck, anyway, had it not slammed into the empress's invisible barrier and gone pinging off into the sea.

Strangward was not amused. "Get below, boy, before I break every bone in your body," he roared, backhanding him across the face. "Abhayi! Get this whelpling out of my sight."

Somehow, Evan was back on his feet again, seized with a cold fury. He could feel blood trickling down his chin, his lip swelling, his magemark ablaze. None of it mattered. Raising his curved Carthian blade, he adopted a fighting stance.

The empress stood, head cocked, like a patron watching a disappointing act at the fair. Then sent flame roaring straight at him. Evan lifted both his hands and desperately pushed out, as if he could shove death away.

As it turned out, he could. The torrent of flames slowed, like a ship sailing into a stiff opposing wind. They piled

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higher and higher, then crested and flooded back toward the *Siren*, grazing her side and setting her rigging on fire. Her crew stood frozen, gaping, then rushed to quench the flames before they spread.

Celestine stood, eyes wide, seeming more intrigued than frightened. "I'll be gutter-strummed," she said. "There's more to you, boy, than meets the eye." She looked from Evan to Strangward and back again. "Ah," she said. "I see it now. I should have known you'd have at least one of the ratlings with you." She motioned to Evan. "Come here, boy, and let me have a better look at you."

Evan stood, shaking his head, and the medallion on the back of his neck seethed and burned. He raised his blade again. "You come here, and get a taste of this, witch," he said.

She laughed. "Magelings should never throw stones at witches."

The tip of Evan's blade dropped a little. *"Mageling?"*

"Didn't you know? There's magic in you, boy."

Evan was so flummoxed that all he could come back with was, "I'm not a boy. You're not much older than me."

"That's true," she said. "We should be friends, not enemies. What's your name?"

"Don't listen to her," Strangward said. "They don't call her the Siren for nothing."

But Celestine stayed focused on Evan. "What's the matter? Has Captain Strangward been holding out on you?

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He hasn't told you his real reasons for bringing you on and keeping you close? He hasn't told you who you really are?"

All of the questions that had been seething deep inside Evan came boiling to the surface. Such as why he'd been chosen over bigger, stronger street-rats. Why his captain always sent him belowdecks when they encountered another ship. Why he'd never been allowed to join in the fighting.

"At least I'll tell you the truth," Celestine said. "You carry Nazari blood—the heartsblood of the empire. You have a magical heritage that goes back centuries. Strangward wants to keep you to himself, but you belong at my side."

"Maybe he carries your blood, Celly," Strangward said, "but he's my blood, too."

Now it was Evan's turn to look between his captain and the empress. No. It wasn't possible. Strangward had plucked him off the streets of Endru, ganging him onto his crew. Evan had gone along, because it was, after all, a bed, and a roof, and food in his belly, with the promise of shares later on.

He'd started out an orphan, and now he had two of his relations fighting over him.

If I'm his blood, why did he never tell me? Did he not want me to make any claim on him? And how, exactly, are we connected?

More importantly, if he had royal blood, and Strangward knew it, why had he kept it secret?

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Celly crooked a finger at Evan. "Come here. Let me see how you're marked."

Involuntarily, Evan reached for his neckline. Then forced his hand away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't. Captain Strangward has lied to you, and betrayed you. Come serve me, and I'll teach you all about how to use your magic."

Evan took a tentative step forward, as if pulled by an invisible tether. Then somebody wrapped a muscled arm around him, pinning his arms to his sides, lifting him so his feet barely touched the deck. He felt the bite of a blade at his throat. It had to be Abhayi, but he couldn't fathom why.

"No!" Celestine said, panic flickering across her face. The empress extended her hands as if she could reach across the water between them.

"Leave off, Celestine," Strangward said, his voice flat, "or the boy dies."

"You wouldn't dare!" Celestine said, licking her lips in a way that suggested she thought he just might. "You wouldn't murder a child."

"I would, to keep him out of your hands," Strangward said.

Evan hung there, frozen, thoughts thrashing around in his head. Was Captain Strangward protecting him from Celestine, or was Celestine rescuing him from Strangward?

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Right now, he felt like he needed to be rescued from the both of them.

No. He didn't need rescuing. He needed to rescue himself. He slammed both heels into Abhayi's knees, hearing a crunch when they connected. Howling, the big man fell forward, his grip loosening enough that Evan was able to roll out of the way before he was pinned underneath. Pushing to his feet, he scooped up Abhayi's blade and ran forward and up. He swarmed up the sheets onto the foremast, swinging the blade, recklessly slicing lines along the way, climbing higher and higher until he found a stable perch astride the tops'l yard.

"Hold your fire!" the empress shouted at her crew. "If the mageling gets hurt, you'll answer to me."

Now everyone was shouting at him—Strangward, Abhayi, the empress. The remains of the crew crowded toward him—all people he knew. Zalazar, who'd shown him the ropes. Entebbe, who'd taught him to swim. Akira, who'd covered for him in the early days, when he thought he'd heave his guts out on his first blue-water crossing. Brody, who'd begun climbing the mast toward him, his face set and grim.

Even Brody.

"Stay back," Evan warned, thrusting both hands toward them.

They shrank back, raising their arms in defense. Brody

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stopped climbing and clung there, pressing himself against the mast.

They know, Evan thought. They know part of this story, anyway. They've all been keeping secrets. He owed them nothing.

Changing tactics, he took aim at the *Siren*. He extended both hands, palms out, and made a pushing motion, in the hope that flames might shoot out of his palms. Instead, the *Siren* shuddered as her mains'l went taut, the masts creaking and complaining as if under the pressure of a violent squall. With the sudden beam reach wind, the vessel heeled over until seawater slopped over the far rail and the empress had to grab hold of a capstan to keep from sliding across the deck and dropping into the ocean.

Just when Evan thought she might capsize, the crew managed to douse the mains'l and the ship righted herself.

Evan stared at his hands, working the fingers, feeling the texture of the air in his grip.

Celestine pulled herself to a standing position, her lavender eyes wide with surprise, her face a mask of startlement. "Who knew?" she breathed. "We have another stormcaster."

Evan stared down at the crowd of upturned faces, his head a jumble of questions, his heart bruised by lies and betrayal. A stormcaster, was he? He'd give them a storm, then.

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Before, Evan had reached for air. This time, he reached for water. He dug a canyon beneath the *Siren*, building a wall of water between them as she sank out of sight. And then he let it go.

He hadn't anticipated the backwash. *Cloud Spirit* bucked and rolled, and he lost his grip on the rigging and fell, screaming, into the sea.

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3

POLITICS IN PORT

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Evan leaned against the bollard, watching as the last of the cargo was unloaded from the *New Moon* and transferred to the dockside warehouse.

New Moon was a sturdy, low-slung, single-masted craft built for the coastal trade—one that Evan could pilot with one foot, in his sleep. Each little realm along the coast had its tariffs and fees—costs that could be avoided by a pilot who knew these waters intimately. Evan did.

It had been two years since he'd fallen into the sea off Tarvos. Two years he'd spent schooling himself while crewing for others.

Kadar, the dock boss, strolled over, his thumbs tucked under his purple suspenders. "A good run, Faris," he said,

pulling out his pocket watch as if it counted days as well as hours. "You must've had the Breaker on your heels."

"The wind was with us several days running," Evan said. Fair winds and following seas—the life of a stormlord mage.

"Must be why they call you Lucky," Kadar said. His broad smile exposed the gold slides on his teeth.

"Lucky Faris" was the public name Evan had used since he'd left *Cloud Spirit*. It was a kind of personal joke. Not very funny.

Evan had little memory of how he made it to shore after his long fall from *Cloud Spirit*'s foremast. It was lucky he'd hit the water instead of the deck. Lucky that they were close to shore when it happened. Lucky he'd been a strong swimmer for as long as he could remember.

No. Lucky would be if none of this had happened. He wasn't lucky, but he was a survivor, and so somehow he kept swimming, finding a place where the high cliffs gave way to a rocky beach. From there he'd continued south, following the coast back to Endru, where Captain Strangward had plucked him from the streets. He knew that neither Strangward nor the empress was likely to come there. The harbor wasn't deep enough to handle blue-water ships.

Evan had spent a year hiding in Endru, working odd jobs in the port, piloting shallow-draft vessels when he could get that work, struggling between the need to stay

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dead and the desire to find out his history. Dead was easy. Dead was safe. But it wasn't enough.

The empress had said that he carried Nazari blood. That should make him a princeling. Instead, it seemed to have made him a target. There weren't many bloodsworn this far south, but now and then he'd see them in the taverns on the waterfront. Were they looking for him? Or had the empress moved on, assuming he was dead?

A year ago, he'd risked returning to Tarvos, to find better work and the answers he'd craved. He'd been worried that someone might recognize him, but that wasn't a problem. The compound where he'd lived was gone, replaced by dockside warehouses.

Kadar and his crew had muscled into the port right after the empress destroyed it. He'd bought up all the prime real estate, rebuilt some of it, and gotten his fingers into all the local commerce. No deal was done, no crew was hired, no money came and went through the port without Kadar getting a piece of it.

In Tarvos, people said that Captain Strangward was dead and *Cloud Spirit* sailed for the empress now, with Tully Samara at the helm.

Evan's heart twisted when he heard this. Strangward had been a tough master, but Evan had trusted the bond between them—the unspoken promise of honesty. He'd trusted the crew of *Cloud Spirit*—Brody and the others—and they had betrayed him. He was done with that. He

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would not give his trust again so readily. The problem was that not even a stormcaster could sail a blue-water ship on his own.

During his year in Tarvos, Evan had been given a few contracts to crew on blue-water ships, but Kadar mainly assigned him to *New Moon*, the one ship the dock boss owned outright. Kadar had learned that with Lucky Faris aboard, cargoes got delivered and goods got smuggled in record time, which put more money in the dock boss's pocket.

Evan still had the share that Strangward had given him. Since arriving in Tarvos, he'd taken all the work he could get, but at this rate, given Kadar's stingy wages, he would be old and gray before he built a stake large enough to buy the kind of ship he wanted.

There was also his addiction to books.

"The packages you brought ashore for me?" Evan said. "Where are they?"

Kadar tipped his head toward the warehouse. "They're just inside the door."

"Thank you." Evan turned back toward the warehouse, but Kadar dropped a hand on his shoulder.

"Look, Faris. I'm having a little gathering at the Windfall later on. I hope you'll join us."

Kadar owned the Windfall—a combined tavern/clicket-house/company store for sailors. He liked to run a

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tab for his crews so that he could part them from their pay before they found somewhere else to spend it.

"Lucky Faris" might sound like a name a gambler would use, but Evan had no intention of leaving his earnings on the tables at the Windfall, or getting deep in his cups and deeper in debt and spilling secrets that were better kept close.

Kadar owned everything in Tarvos worth having, but he didn't own Evan—not yet—and that grieved the dock boss.

"Thank you," Evan said, "but I need to get home."

"C'mon," Kadar said. "Be sociable for once. Don't you want a night out after so long at sea?"

It's hardly *at sea*, Evan thought, when I could jump off the boat and swim to shore anywhere along the way.

Evan shook his head. "Not tonight."

"First round's on me."

And that would be watered-down piss. Or the full package—turtled belch, empty pockets, and a knife in the back.

No. Kadar was making too much money off his sweat right now. Plus, Kadar never did anything without an agenda of his own.

"No, thanks. I've got some reading to do."

Kadar cocked his head. "How old *are* you, anyway?"

Evan had to think about it. Had it really been two years

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since he'd left Strangward's service? That would make him fifteen. "Seventeen," he said, adding two more years for good measure.

"Seventeen?" Kadar said. "Then you ought to be making the acquaintance of the handsome lads and ladies upstairs. Surely there's somebody to your liking." When Evan shook his head, Kadar's eyes narrowed. "You might as well be a monk. You didn't catch the wetland religion, did you?"

"No," Evan said, an edge to his voice now. "I'm not a monk. I'm just careful with my money." *And my heart.* The last thing he needed was to get entangled with one of Kadar's courtesans. He stuck out his hand. "Speaking of money, if you'll pay off the last of my contract, I'll be on my way."

Kadar scowled. He really, really, really hated parting with money. "Suit yourself," he said, plunking a bag of coin into Evan's waiting hand. His expression grew even darker when Evan proceeded to count it. And count it again. When Evan looked up and opened his mouth to speak, Kadar said, "You might've noticed that it's less than what you're used to."

"It's not that it's less than what I'm used to, it's less than we agreed on," Evan said, looking the boss in the eye.

"Times are hard," Kadar said. "The empress in the north is making life miserable for all of us. A man never knows if his cargo'll get to where it's going these days."

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Evan wasn't buying. "So prices of goods are up," he said. "I travel with a full hold and I get it where it's going on time. You should be making more money than before. *I* should be making more money than before."

"I've got more expenses than ever before," Kadar said. "Everyone's taking a pay cut."

"*Every*one?" Evan folded his arms.

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

"If you're going to change the agreement, you should do it before I sign and not after," Evan said. He stuck out his hand again. "Now pay me the rest."

Kadar eyed him for a long moment, as if debating what move to make. Evan knew he was the best pilot sailing out of Tarvos, which was why Kadar routinely put him at the helm of the *New Moon*. Finally, grudgingly, Kadar paid him the balance. Evan counted it again, then put it away. He was turning to go when the dock boss called after him, "Just so you know, I won't have any work for you for a while."

Evan swung back around. "Is that so?" He struggled to control the storm of anger rising inside him. "Why? Are you taking the season off?"

"*New Moon*'s going to be in dry dock for a while," Kadar said. "We're reconfiguring her belowdecks, expanding her hold, making room for more cargo." He clapped Evan on the back. "Don't worry, soon as she's up and running, I'll call on you."

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The wind came up, setting *New Moon*'s rigging to flapping, sending a miniature squall line across the water in the harbor. The air thickened, picking up moisture and energy from the sea.

No, Evan thought. The last thing I need is for people to be talking about a sailor who can make weather. He breathed in, then released the air slowly, feeling the tingle in his fingers diminish.

"You know I'm happy to crew on any ship, in any role," Evan said. "Rupert Fry said he'd be glad to have me back soon as—"

"If Rupert Fry wants to hire you on permanent, then let him," Kadar said. "I've got men who've been with me for years that I need to go to first. You'll get your turn, just not right away." He waved at Evan's packages by the door. "Cheer up. You can get all those books read."

The dockmaster strutted away like the cock of the yard, which was exactly what he was, here in Tarvos.

Evan knew he was being taught a lesson. It didn't matter to the dock boss if somebody else's cargo took a little longer to get where it was going—it wasn't money out of his pocket. So he'd put Evan back to work when his own ship was back in business. But if Evan spent all his time crewing on *New Moon*, he wouldn't have the chance to show other ship's masters what he could do.

He was damned by his own success.

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By now, the sun was low in the sky, burning a bloody path from the harbor mouth to the dockside as it sank into the sea. Evan scooped up his books and shoved them into his carry bag.

The traditional path to ownership by a Desert Coast pirate was to take a ship from someone else. But he couldn't manage that all by himself, and certainly not with *New Moon*.

One thought kept surfacing, like a bloated corpse. *If you want to sail the blue waters, you'll need a crew you can trust.*

Good luck with that.

Shouldering his carry bag, Evan walked away from the waterfront, following a roundabout path to the stable, careful not to be followed.

Djillaba lifted his head and snorted when he heard Evan come in. The stallion was his only other indulgence, beyond books, and this one he kept secret from Kadar and his crew. Celestine might have claimed that Evan had royal blood in his veins, but Djillaba's bloodlines were older and no doubt finer.

"Hello, there," he murmured, stroking the horse's velvety nose. He eyed the bedding in the stall, checked the feed box, and examined Djillaba's hooves and coat to make sure the stable man had kept up with his grooming. Working methodically, he draped the blanket over the stallion's back and followed with the lightweight saddle.

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Evan didn't have a ship—not yet—but he could have this, at least.

For a while. But he needed work, and that was going to be hard to find in Tarvos.

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